The public interest (notes)
By Alan Bailey
'Value' is what *value-judgements* are about.

Value-judgements have the same grammatical structure as factual statements. But the use of factual statements is to convey information, fixed by the truth-conditions (meaning) of the words used. The use of value-judgements is to promote/recommend/commit to *actions.* (Some forms of words – Simon Blackburn's 'loaded' words – can function both to convey information and to recommend action).

Commands also promote actions. But they do not imply that there are any general grounds for this, beyond the authority of the speaker (cf. parent/child: "Why should I?" – "Because I say so").

For some value-judgements, the implication that there is some general standard is rather weak – phrases like "a good bloke" or "great music!" hardly say more than "I like…" – but the use of the impersonal form suggests that there is some general feature of what is being commended that makes it worth pursuing if it occurs again.

This 'universalisability' is more strongly evident in *moral value-judgements* (the category which traditionally has most interested philosophers). These imply that there are (impersonal) *valid arguments* for the actions commended. Understanding such judgements requires understanding which arguments are (to count as) valid.

So how do we know what arguments are to count as valid? This talk takes political arguments (what government should do) as a sub-set in the moral category, as a useful example given that they have to be publicly articulated (in political speeches, newspaper commentaries, briefings to Ministers).

The phrase 'public interest' is not itself an argument, but a conclusion to argument about what government should do.

It excludes sectional (personal, party-political) interests. (These may loom large in politicians' minds and in private discussions, but when they come to defend their decisions and justify their actions in public, they have to rely on impartial public-interest arguments).

So here is a list of valid public-interest argument, under broad headings:

i. "Not fair" (equity)
ii. "Greatest net benefit to greatest number" (consequentialism)
iii. "Later costs/benefits count less than sooner" (discount for alternative use of capital/increasing uncertainty of predictions over longer periods)
[i.- iii. belong together, as overlapping 'welfare' benefits.]
iv. "Owing what is due" (deontology, eg manifesto commitments, 'absolute' rights)
v. "Absolutely unacceptable" (moral intuition, beyond 'humanist' values, eg extinction of species, or national prestige)
vi. "People should be free to choose for themselves" (libertarianism)

The 'welfare' arguments admit a range of political benefits/disbenefits (happiness, security, privacy, free speech, due process etc).

The main point to note is that these arguments are incommensurable and tend to conflict in practice (indeed such conflicts are typically what raises an issue from the 'technical' to the 'political' level). Facts, and in some cases monetary 'valuations', are relevant. But ultimately, what weights to give to the various considerations, and hence what action to take, are for the accountable Minister, who will then have to defend them, when the decision is announced and later when it has been implemented.

The interesting question (philosophically) is: How do we know whether an argument is (to count as) valid? The simple (and perhaps right) answer is that this is a matter of convention, learned (like a language) partly from explicit rulings, but mainly from picking up by example what is accepted in practice as appropriate usage in this form of discourse. Indeed arguably this is not just an analogy – we learn the conventions of valid arguments as part of learning the functions of value-judgements

as a use of language. John Searle (eg in ‘Making the Social World’, 2010) constructs an elaborate theory of language as an essential feature of human social activity, with ‘collective intentionality’ and ‘status function declarations’ (‘X is to count as Y in context C’) as a basis for analysing ‘institutional facts’ and ‘social ontology’ generally. Anyone interested in this new branch of philosophy (‘philosophy of society’) will need to decide for themselves whether they find Searle’s contribution illuminating – personally, I need to read the book again!