

Values: what they are and why they are important (notes)

by Marianne Talbot

Values are qualities that command our respect

(Values are not just *personal preferences* – liking kindness is not like finding sardines tasty – we have *reasons* for respecting our values – what would happen if we couldn't expect most people to tell the truth most of the time? Values *matter* to us in a way that personal preferences don't – this is why we *argue* about values.)

Values are either intrinsic or instrumental

(intrinsic values are qualities that we value for their own sake e.g. love, instrumental values are qualities that we value for the sake of something else e.g. we might value precision as a means to accuracy).

We can get our values wrong

(By valuing for its own sake something that is not valuable for its own sake (e.g. money) or by valuing as a means to some end something that is not a means to that end (e.g. valuing wealth as a means to love)

Values generate principles that guide our thoughts and actions

(if we value truth then we will believe we *should* be honest – this doesn't mean we *will* be honest, it means only that we believe we *should* be honest – a belief that is manifested in guilt if we are not honest)

Values generate standards against which we judge ourselves, and others

(Because values command respect we will judge *everyone*, including ourselves, against these standards. It is no good telling someone not to be judgmental – if we have values we *must* judge – which doesn't mean we shouldn't temper our judgement with compassion and understanding.)

Values underpin our self-respect

(Because they are ideals that make demands on us, when we live up to these demands we feel good about ourselves, when we don't we feel bad about ourselves)

Values underpin our reputations (the respect others have for us)

(Because our values command respect everyone has reason to pay lip-service to them (hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue). If we want to secure our reputations we must walk our talk.

Values determine our *characters*, the sort of people we are and the sort of people we will become

(Because our values (together with our beliefs) influence every decision we make, our decisions influence our actions and our actions are a major influence on the experiences we have. Our experiences then determine our values and our beliefs....and so it goes on...)

And now for the fact that makes ethics so messy and unsystematic.

It is in the very nature of values to conflict

We do have common values – but agreement on values is consistent with disagreement on:

- the ordering of the values
- the interpretation of the values
- the behavioural implications of the values
- the source of the values

Agreement on values is important because there can be no productive *disagreement* without agreement on *something*.