



Evaluative vs. Deontic Concepts

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Ethical thought is articulated around normative concepts (*see* **NORMATIVITY**). Standard examples of normative concepts are *good*, *reason*, *right*, *ought*, and *obligatory*. Theorists often treat the normative as an undifferentiated domain. Even so, it is common to distinguish between two kinds of normative concepts: evaluative or axiological concepts (from the Latin *valores* or the Greek *axios*, both meaning that which has worth), such as *good*, and deontic concepts (from the Greek *deon*, meaning that which is binding), such as *ought*. The basic idea behind the distinction, which is a generalization of the traditional opposition between value and duty, is that there is a difference between terms that are used to assess the worth of things and to express states such as approval or disapproval, on the one hand, and terms that are used to tell us what to do and not to do, on the other.

Interest in this distinction comes from both normative ethics and metaethics (*see* **METAETHICS**). A better understanding of the kind of concepts involved can be expected to throw light on the nature of ethical reasoning, and more specifically on how claims about what we ought to do relate to claims about the good. One question which opposes consequentialism (*see* **CONSEQUENTIALISM**) to deontology (*see* **DEONTOLOGY**) is whether what we ought to do is prior to the good or whether what we ought to do depends on the good. This question is closely related to the metaethical debate about the nature of evaluative judgments. Standard versions of fitting-attitude accounts of evaluative judgments (*see* **VALUE, FITTING-ATTITUDE ACCOUNT OF; BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNTS**) claim, roughly, that something is good if and only if it is fitting to approve of it, where *fitting* is usually taken to be a deontic concept. Such theories are thus frequently seen as proposing a reduction of evaluative judgments to deontic judgments. The reverse reduction of deontic judgments to evaluative judgments, such as when one claims that the right can be defined in terms of the good, has been envisaged by G. E. Moore (*see* **MOORE, G. E.**). These reduction strategies are controversial. To assess them, a better understanding of the concepts involved is necessary.

The primary question is whether or not there is a significant distinction between evaluative and deontic concepts. This has been disputed. A uniform treatment of normative concepts and judgments has proven especially attractive to advocates of prescriptivism, the view according to which moral judgments' function is to issue prescriptions (*see* **PRESCRIPTIVISM**). Thus, Richard Hare considered that there were sufficient similarities between 'good', 'right', and 'ought' to count all of them as evaluative terms, and he classified both imperatives and value-judgments as "Prescriptive Language" (1952: 3, 153). Rudolf Carnap claimed that the difference between evaluative judgments and norms is merely one of formulation; both have in fact an imperative form, so that "actually a value statement is nothing else than a command in a misleading grammatical form." (1935: 24).

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Although little systematic work has been done on this issue, a number of philosophers have explicitly embraced the claim that there is a significant distinction between evaluative and deontic concepts as well as the corresponding judgments (von Wright 1963; Wiggins 1976; Heyd 1982; Mulligan 1998; Smith 2005; Thomson 2008; Ogien and Tappolet 2009). This entry surveys and assesses the main considerations that speak in favor of the distinction.

There is no agreement on what terms are evaluative and what terms are deontic. Given this, the best strategy is to focus on paradigmatic cases, such as *good* and *bad* for the evaluative, and *obligatory* or that which we *ought to do* for the deontic. It is only with an account of such cases that one can answer the question of whether concepts such as *reason* or *right* are evaluative, deontic, or belong to some further category.

Two conceptual families. A first reason to contrast evaluative and deontic concepts is that they appear to form two distinct conceptual families. On the one hand, there is the family organized around *good*, and which includes *bad* and *indifferent*. On the other hand, there is the family, composed of *obligatory*, *permissible*, and *forbidden*, which constitutes the main concern of deontic logic (see DEONTIC LOGIC). Each of these families is connected by inferential ties. If something is good, then it follows that it is not bad. In fact, the three more general evaluative concepts appear to be interdependent. What is good is neither indifferent nor bad, what is indifferent is neither good nor bad, whereas what is bad is neither indifferent nor good. Similarly, the three main deontic concepts appear to be inter-definable. Any of the three concepts can be taken to define the two others. For instance, if *permissibility* is considered to be basic, one can define what is forbidden as what is not permissible, and what is obligatory in terms of what it is forbidden not to do.

By contrast, the relation between evaluative and deontic concepts appears looser. There is certainly no agreement on the question of whether one can infer deontic propositions from evaluative propositions, or vice versa, evaluative propositions from deontic propositions. Against this, it can be argued that evaluative concepts can be analyzed in terms of deontic concepts, or else that both evaluative and deontic concepts can be analyzed in terms of some other, more fundamental normative concepts. But it has to be acknowledged that the present considerations give strong *prima facie* grounds for the distinction.

Variety versus uniformity. A second set of considerations has to do with the number of items in each category. As has been underlined, both 'good' and 'bad' allow for a variety of usages (see GOODNESS, VARIETIES OF) (Ross 1931: 65; Wright 1963: 8-12). Something can be said to be good *simpliciter*, such as when we say that knowledge or pleasure is good. When we do so, we use the term 'predicatively', as a genuine predicate, and not 'attributively', as predicate modifier. 'Good' also allows for attributive uses, such as when we say things or persons are good as a kind, such as when we say that Sam is a good poet, something which does not entail that Sam is a good cook. In such cases, the term is used attributively (Ross 1931: 65; Geach 1956: 33). Things can be good in yet other ways. We say that things are good *for* something or someone, that a thing is good *to*

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3 do something with, that someone is good *at* something, or good *with* something. In each
4 of these cases, it follows that the thing or the person is good in a certain respect
5 (Thomson 2008: 6).
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8 The evaluative family also includes more specific concepts, such as *desirable*,
9 *admirable*, *fair*, *generous*, *honest*, *kind*, and *courageous*, and *undesirable*, *contemptible*,
10 *unfair*, *mean*, *dishonest*, *cruel*, and *cowardly*, to pick out a few terms central to moral
11 assessment. Such concepts are used to express moral praise or approval, or moral blame
12 or disapproval, respectively. An important point is that these concepts are inferentially
13 related to the more general evaluative concepts; to say that something falls under a more
14 specific concept commits one to saying that it falls under one of the three general
15 evaluative concepts, *good*, *bad*, or *indifferent*. One way to understand the relation
16 between the more specific and the more general evaluative concepts is to claim that it is
17 of the same kind as the relation between terms referring to specific colors and *colored*, or,
18 more generally, between determinates and determinables. In any case, that something is
19 admirable or courageous, for instance, entails that it is good. More precisely, since that
20 same thing could also have negative features, it entails that it is good in a certain respect
21 (Thomson 2008: 6).
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26 There is thus a wide variety of moral evaluative concepts, ranging from the more
27 specific to the more general. And this variety is even greater if one takes into account the
28 evaluative concepts used in other domains of human interest, such as aesthetics or
29 epistemology. In contrast, the deontic family is much poorer. There seems to be no
30 specific respect in which something is obligatory, permissible, or forbidden. It could be
31 objected that one can distinguish between different kinds of obligations, such as moral,
32 legal, and prudential obligations. However, even if these are taken to be ways of being
33 obligatory instead of being considered as an application of the same deontic concepts to
34 different domains, the deontic family is nonetheless much poorer, compared to the
35 evaluative family.
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39 A closely related way of contrasting the evaluative and the deontic is based on
40 Bernard Williams' (1985) distinction between thick and thin concepts (*see* THICK AND
41 THIN CONCEPTS). The idea is that evaluative concepts include both so-called thick and
42 thin concepts, whereas this does not seem to be the case with the deontic concepts
43 (Mulligan 1998: 164-5). Thick concepts, such as *cruel* or *courageous*, are more specific
44 than thin ones, such as *good*. What is distinctive about judgments involving thick
45 concepts is that they are both action-guiding and world-guided. Accordingly, thick
46 concepts have sometimes been taken to involve both descriptive content and normative
47 content. In any case, the ascription of thick concepts, such as courage, appears to involve
48 the attribution of non-normative features, such as the ability to face danger, pain, or
49 opposition. Now, there are a great many thick evaluative concepts, but there seem to be
50 no deontic concepts that are both action-guiding and world-guided in this way.
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54 Again, enemies of the distinction could resist these considerations and argue that
55 evaluative concepts of all kinds can be analyzed in terms of deontic concepts, or else in
56 terms of some more fundamental normative notion. However, it has to be underlined that
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3 it would nonetheless remain true that the family of evaluative concepts is much more
4 populated than the deontic family.
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7 *Response-dependence.* A third contrast between evaluative and deontic concepts concerns
8 their relation to emotional, or more generally, to affective states (*see* EMOTION).
9 Evaluative concepts appear to have a much closer relation to such states, compared to
10 deontic concepts (Mulligan 1998: 166). This is particularly obvious in the case of specific
11 concepts such as *admirable* or *contemptible*, which are lexically connected to emotion
12 terms. Such concepts wear their response-dependence on their sleeves (*see* RESPONSE-
13 DEPENDENT THEORIES). In fact, all specific evaluative concepts appear closely
14 connected to affective states. It is plausible to claim that what is courageous makes
15 admiration appropriate, while what is unjust makes indignation appropriate. Furthermore,
16 more general concepts also seem related to affective states, be they states such as
17 approbation or disapprobation, or sets of more specific states, such as positive or negative
18 affective states. The appeal of fitting-attitude analyses, according to which evaluative
19 concepts are conceptually tied to affective concepts, bears testimony to the intimacy of
20 the relation between evaluative and affective concepts. Whatever the exact relation, it is
21 plausible that evaluative and affective concepts are intimately connected.
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26 By contrast, it is far from obvious that deontic concepts and affective concepts are
27 closely related. There are no lexical connections between *obligatory*, *permissible*, and
28 *forbidden*, on the one hand, and affective concepts; more generally, there are no obvious
29 pairings with affective states, for there appears to be no emotion kind dedicated to what is
30 obligatory, permissible or forbidden. But this does not entail that no such connections
31 exist. One possibility is to tie deontic concepts to emotions involved in blame or praise.
32 Thus, it has been argued that the concept of what is wrong or forbidden can be reduced to
33 the concept of what it is rational to resent or feel guilty about (Gibbard 1990: 45). The
34 question of whether evaluative and deontic concepts differ with respect to their relation to
35 affective concepts depends on whether an analysis along these lines is feasible. But it also
36 depends on how we understand the connection. Suppose, as is plausible, that acting
37 impermissibly is acting in a way that makes resentment or guilt appropriate. If so, it could
38 be argued that it is because such action has evaluative properties, which are correlated to
39 blame or guilt responses, that it is connected to affective concepts. In contrast to the
40 evaluative case, the connection between deontic and affective concepts would thus be
41 indirect.
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46 Either way, it should be noted that given the further thought that resentment and
47 guilt, which are typical examples of what have been called “reactive attitudes” (*see*
48 ATTITUDES, REACTIVE), are connected to responsibility (*see* RESPONSIBILITY), it
49 would follow that deontic concepts such as *wrong* or *forbidden* are related to
50 responsibility attributions. That would explain the intuition that, in contrast to evaluative
51 claims, deontic judgments entail the possibility of holding agents responsible (Smith
52 2005: 10).
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55 *Degrees.* Another striking contrast between evaluative and deontic concepts is that the
56 former but not the latter have comparative and superlative forms (Hare 1952: 152). Thus,
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3 we say that something is more or less admirable, or that it is most admirable, allowing for
4 degrees of values. Evaluative judgment can also take the form of comparisons, as when
5 we say that something is more admirable than something else. By contrast, ordinary
6 language does not allow for comparative and superlative forms of deontic concepts. As
7 Hume noted, we do not say that something is more obligatory, or less obligatory, or that
8 some action is more prohibited compared to another (Hume 1739, III, vi: 530-1). A
9 plausible explanation of the on/off nature of deontic concepts is that such concepts
10 primarily concern things that do not admit of degrees, namely, actions (Ogien and
11 Tappolet 2009: 64-65).
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15 It could be objected that we allow for deontic comparison when we are faced with
16 practical conflicts, such as when we have the choice between either killing or lying. If we
17 conclude that we should lie rather than kill, it might seem that we consider that killing is
18 “more” prohibited than lying, and that the requirement not to kill has more strength than
19 the requirement not to lie. Moreover, these apparent differences in strength manifest
20 themselves in the terminology we use: we distinguish between what *must* be done, and
21 what *should* be done, for instance (Hansson 2001: 131-2; Thomson 2008: 125, 229-30).
22 One might thus claim that deontic concepts allow for degrees, something which ought to
23 be recognized by a realistic system of deontic logic (Hansson 2001: 132-133). In reply, it
24 can be argued that it is possible to understand differences in strength as differences in
25 priority rather than as differences in degree. When we say that we should lie rather than
26 kill, we do not mean that killing is “more forbidden” than lying; what we mean is that in
27 the case of a conflict the requirement not to kill overrides the requirement not to lie.
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32 *Dilemmas.* This last consideration points toward a further difference between evaluative
33 and deontic concepts and their related judgments. In contrast to evaluative judgments,
34 deontic judgments can give rise to dilemmas (*see* DILEMMAS, MORAL), whether these
35 are taken to be insoluble or not. It happens all too often that our different obligations
36 conflict. In such cases, it seems that we ought to do one thing – save one twin – and that
37 we ought to do another thing – save the other twin – but doing both is impossible. In
38 terms of evaluative judgments, such a situation can involve two equally good options.
39 But it might also involve incommensurable or even incomparable alternatives, such as
40 when one option would be unjust, whereas the other would be unkind. Such cases can
41 underlie dilemmas, but as such, they do not constitute dilemmas.
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45 *Logical form.* Another difference between evaluative and deontic concepts concerns the
46 syntactical and, arguably, the logical form of the corresponding judgments. On the face of
47 it, simple evaluative judgments, such as the judgment that this action is admirable,
48 typically have a subject-predicate form, F(x). By contrast, deontic concepts are standardly
49 taken to be propositional operators, so that deontic judgments are taken to have the form
50 O(p) (where ‘O’ stands for obligatory). If this is right, there is an important contrast
51 between the two kinds of concepts.
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54 Things are not so straightforward, however. First, evaluative terms can take the
55 syntactical form of propositional operators, such as when we say that it is good, or
56 desirable, that it rain. Moreover, it might only be on the surface that simple evaluative
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3 judgments have a subject-predicate form. After all, there have been many attempts to
4 show that their structure is more complex, involving a tacit reference to someone (*see*
5 RELATIVISM, MORAL), or a reference to a kind of response deemed fit. Second,
6 deontic judgments can also take a variety of syntactic forms, such as ‘F-ing is forbidden’
7 or ‘A ought to F’ (where ‘F’ stands for an action-verb and ‘A’ for an agent). Some, like
8 Peter Geach (1982: 35), have argued that in fact, the standard parsing of deontic
9 judgments is a mistake, for suggesting that such sentences are about what *ought to be*
10 obscures the fact that obligations essentially concern agents. Geach claims that deontic
11 terms are operators taking verbs to make verbs (1982: 36). When we say that Sally ought
12 to sing, what we say is that *ought to sing* is true of Sally. There are other strategies to
13 catch the agent-oriented character of deontic judgments, such as taking deontic terms to
14 stand for a relation between agents and actions, or else including a reference to the agent
15 in the proposition.
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20 However, there nonetheless appear to be two important facts that distinguish
21 evaluative from deontic judgments. One is that some evaluative judgments seem to resist
22 transformation into judgments involving a deontic propositional operator (or a higher-
23 order operator). This is true not only of judgments like ‘This is a good knife’ or ‘She is
24 courageous’, but also of sentences such as ‘this soup is good for him’ or ‘she is good at
25 singing’. By contrast, it appears that all deontic judgments can be transformed into
26 judgments involving a deontic propositional operator (or a higher-order operator). The
27 other difference is that evaluative terms describing actions, but not deontic terms, can be
28 transformed into adverbs that describe how an action is performed (Ogden and Tappolet
29 2009: 56). Suppose that Sally’s action was both courageous and morally obligatory. We
30 can say that Sally acted courageously, thus describing how she acted; but even though in
31 a sense she might be said to have acted obligatorily, we do not describe *how* she acted if
32 we say this. There thus appears to be a category mistake involved in the sentence ‘Sally
33 acted courageously, energetically, and obligatorily’. Acting in the way you ought to does
34 not appear to be a way of acting. These two syntactic considerations suggest that in
35 contrast to deontic concepts, evaluative concepts correspond to properties characterizing
36 things.
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41 *Domains of application.* This brings us to a last point of contrast, which concerns the
42 domains of application of evaluative and deontic concepts. All sorts of things, ranging
43 from persons and their actions to natural objects and states of affairs, can be the object of
44 an evaluation. This suggests that there is a difference with deontic concepts, for typical
45 deontic judgments concern agents and their actions (Heyd 1982: 171-2). It might thus be
46 thought that deontic concepts only apply to what is subject to the will. As expressed in
47 the principle “‘ought’ implies ‘can’” (see ‘OUGHT’ IMPLIES ‘CAN’), it would be only
48 as far as an agent can do otherwise that she can be subjected to an obligation. In fact, the
49 domain of deontic concepts is broader, for it includes things such as inferences, beliefs,
50 decisions, choices, intentions, emotions, and character traits. But insofar as there are
51 things an agent can do to get rid of some nasty emotional disposition or character trait,
52 this does not contradict the idea that there is a link to what is under the agent’s control. It
53 thus appears plausible to say that deontic concepts are concerned with things that have to
54 be at least indirectly subject to the will.
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One could object that there is an important class of what appear to be *bona fide* deontic judgments that falsifies this claim: judgments about what ought or ought not to be. One strategy to deal with such cases is to allow for two quite different kinds of deontic concepts, one of which would have nothing to do with what is directly or indirectly subject to the will. Another strategy is to deny that *ought-to-be* is really a deontic concept. In fact, given the similarities between this kind of *ought* and *good*, when used in judgments of the form ‘It is good that p’, it might be thought that *ought-to-be* is in fact an evaluative concept. What we mean when saying that something ought to exist is that it is good (Moore 1903: 68). But since *ought-to-be* appears different from both central evaluative and deontic concepts, it is more likely that it constitutes a special kind of normative concept, which differs from both standard deontic and evaluative concepts.

Conclusion

There are, it seems, good reasons to distinguish between evaluative and deontic concepts. Evaluative and deontic concepts appear to form distinct conceptual families. Compared to deontic concepts, evaluative concepts form a much larger family, which includes specific and thick concepts. Evaluative concepts seem more closely related to affective concepts. In contrast to evaluative concepts, ordinary deontic concepts do not admit of degrees. Deontic judgments, but not evaluative judgments, make for dilemmas. Evaluative judgments and deontic judgments appear to differ in their logical form. And finally, the domains of application of the two kinds of concept appear to be different, deontic concepts being concerned with what is at least indirectly subject to the will, while evaluative concepts have no such restriction.

SEE ALSO: ATTITUDES, REACTIVE; BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNTS; CONSEQUENTIALISM; DEONTIC LOGIC; DEONTOLOGY; DILEMMAS, MORAL; EMOTION; GOODNESS, VARIETIES OF; METAETHICS; MOORE, G. E.; NORMATIVITY; ‘OUGHT’ IMPLIES ‘CAN’; PRESCRIPTIVISM; RELATIVISM, MORAL; RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES; RESPONSIBILITY; THICK AND THIN CONCEPTS; VALUE, FITTING-ATTITUDE ACCOUNT OF

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