

“Values”: A working definition and further explications

Values are reference points for evaluating something as positive or negative. Values are rationally and emotionally binding and they give long-term orientation and motivation for action.

Further explication:

a) Connection to agents. Values are held by agents, both on the individual and collective level.

b) Connection to value sets. Normally an agent does not only affirm a single value, but rather he or she affirms multiple values. Agents typically group these multiple values as specific “value sets”. An agent may for example affirm a set of values comprising the values “autonomy”, “efficiency” and “welfare”. The same value, e.g. “autonomy”, can occur in different value sets and take on different priority and meaning when it is connected to various other values.

c) Connection to identities and practices. Values and value sets are closely connected to the agent’s identity. By holding something as a value an agent imbues it with meaning and importance. At the same time roles and practices are centred around certain values and value sets. The sciences, for example, stress different values, and different prioritizations between values, from religious practices or family life. Thus we can talk about “scientific values”, “religious values”, “family values”, “political values”, etc. A person has several roles and value sets. Different contexts may trigger the importance of a particular value set for the person or the group.

d) Contrast to preferences and attitudes. Although values, attitudes and preferences are often used synonymously, we see values as something connected to, but distinct from attitudes and preferences. Attitudes refer to a tendency to evaluate things in a particular way. To have a preference is to have a greater liking for one alternative over another. We attribute a higher importance and meaning to values than to preferences and we use values to evaluate both preferences and attitudes. Values have a prescriptive dimension which preferences lack. When we affirm something as a value we want others to see it as a value too.

e) Contrast with norms. Values do not directly prescribe or proscribe actions, as norms do. Values give motivation and rationale for action without demanding a specific (course of) action.

f) Connection to beliefs. Beliefs about what is the case in the world influence our value judgements. For example, whether one judges that biometric technologies are or are not in conflict with (some of) one's values will be influenced by one's belief about the likelihood of the misuse of biometric information.

g) Reflexive, rational and emotional dimensions of values. We assume that our values can withstand criticism and we are willing to give reasons for them. Thus they have a reflexive, rational and hermeneutic dimension. We are also emotionally attached to our values, this is particularly evident when our values are threatened. As reference points of evaluation, values are relatively stable. However, we can be led to see that affirming certain values is wrong, or to see that our value sets are inconsistent and therefore modify them. Values are thus neither always fluctuating, nor given once and for all.

h) Expressed values and revealed values. In the study of values it is sometimes useful to make a distinction between "revealed values" and "expressed values". Expressed values are values that people explicitly affirm. Revealed values are inferred from actions and preferences.¹

¹ This definition does not address methodological questions of properly identifying and separating the two value types and the issue of whether values or preferences are at stake in social science surveys.