

Some Important Distinctions in Ethics*

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Permissible / Obligatory

When we say an action is *morally permissible* or *morally permitted*, this means that performing this action is not morally wrong. The opposite of *permissible* is, naturally, *impermissible*. If an action is morally impermissible, an agent acts wrongly by doing it.

Certain acts are *morally obligatory*. For example, all else being equal, it is morally obligatory to save a drowning child when you can do so at no cost to yourself. To fail or omit to perform morally obligatory acts is to act morally wrongly.

These two concepts are inter-related. First, obligatory acts are also permissible.¹ If you are obligated to save the drowning child, it must also be the case that you are permitted to do so. Furthermore, if a certain action is impermissible, then it is obligatory not to do it.²

Good/Bad vs. All-things-considered Good/Bad

Some things are good, but not all-things-considered good. This just means that the thing in question has some good-making features, but these features are outweighed by the more numerous or more heavily-weighted bad-making features that are also present.

For example, it might be bad to die, since this deprives the person of experiencing future goods in their life. However, if the person is suffering from some irreversible condition, it might be all-things-considered good to die. In this case, we could say that there are some things that count against dying and some that count in favor of it. In the end—that is, with all things considered—it is good to die.

The previous example concerns the concepts of good and bad, but it could also be applied to the concepts of right and wrong. For example, you might say that a rights violation is wrong, but if it's done to prevent some catastrophe from occurring, it wouldn't be all-things-considered wrong. However, it doesn't make sense to say that something is permissible, but not all-things-considered permissible, since judgments of permissibility have already taken all factors into consideration—that is, such judgments are already at the all-things-considered level, as it were.

* And, well, lots of other areas of philosophy too.

¹It's worth mentioning that we generally use the term *permissible* in the weaker sense—namely, as a synonym for *merely permissible*.

²Furthermore, basic permissible actions are *not* obligatory *not* to do. Of course, this is only true if the permissible action in question isn't also obligatory, as I just said.

Descriptive / Normative

Descriptive statements concern the way things *are*. Normative claims, by contrast, concern how things *ought to be*. So, for example, “Walter White cooks meth” is a descriptive statement, but “Walter White shouldn’t cook meth” is a normative claim, since it concerns what he ought to be doing (or, in this case, *not* doing).

Many normative claims will feature words like ‘should’, ‘ought’, or ‘must’ (or other related terms), but not all of them do. For example, “Walter White cooks too much meth” is normative, since the idea of what constitutes “too much” is, at least in this context, dependent on an idea of what one judges to be the *right* amount of meth to be cooked. And this idea in turn involves making normative judgments.

Wrong, Blame, and Excuse

Most ethicists think it is important to distinguish between an act being wrong and an agent being blameworthy for having performed that wrong action. It would therefore be consistent to endorse the both of the following claims: (i) A acted wrongly, and yet (ii) A is blameless for having acted wrongly.

Whether or not A is a proper subject for blame is usually thought to be a function of the degree to which A was excused for performing the wrong action. For example, most people agree that if I were to flip a light switch that, unbeknownst to me, is wired to set off a bomb that kills twenty people, this would constitute a wrongful act. But since there is no way I could have known the scenario that my flipping the light switch would set off, I am in possession of a full excuse for having done so, and therefore am not blameworthy.

This sort of entirely blameless ignorance provides a *full* excuse, but other circumstances might offer *partial* excuses. Some plausible factors that provide partial excuses are (i) cases in which my ignorance is partially or fully blameworthy, (ii) cases of considerable duress, (iii) panic or considerable stress, (iv) the extent to which my actions might have been outweighed by other moral considerations, and so forth.

Prudence/Self-interest vs. Moral

Whether or not something is good from the standpoint of self-interest is, most philosophers think, a separate question from whether or not it is morally good.

An act can rate highly along the metric of prudential value (one’s self-interest), but rate very low along the metric of moral goodness. (An example is stealing something you want and getting away with it.) By contrast, there are also actions that are very prudentially bad but morally good—for example, keeping costly promises or sacrificing one’s own life for the sake of a stranger.

Necessary/Sufficient Conditions

This is an important distinction throughout all of philosophy, and ethics is no exception.

Here are the somewhat technical definitions:

1. Necessary condition: A is a necessary condition for B if and only if A must obtain in order for B to obtain.

2. Sufficient condition: A is a sufficient condition for B if and only if the fact that A obtains guarantees that B obtains as well.

So, for example, it is a necessary condition for being President of the U.S. that one be a natural-born U.S. citizen. That is, if one is not a natural-born U.S. citizen, it cannot be the case that one is or will be the U.S. President (at least under current law). But of course, this condition is not a sufficient condition. That is, being a natural-born U.S. citizen is not enough to make it the case that one is the President. One must also be elected, be at least 35 years old, and so on.

Something's being a necessary condition doesn't entail anything about whether or not that condition is also a sufficient condition. In other words, it's possible (indeed, quite common) that something is a necessary condition without also being a sufficient condition, and vice versa. Here's an example of the former: a necessary condition for something being a square is that it has exactly four sides. But notice that this isn't sufficient: rectangles have four sides, and rectangles aren't the same as squares. And here's an example of the latter: being in Toronto is sufficient for being in Canada. But being in Toronto isn't necessary for being in Canada. One could instead be in Vancouver, Montreal, or, perhaps regrettably, Hamilton.

We sometimes talk of a 'set of jointly-sufficient conditions'. This just means that if each of these conditions obtains, then that is sufficient for some state of affairs or condition to obtain. (Consider again the many requirements for being President of the U.S., for example. If one has satisfied all of them, then this set is jointly-sufficient.)