



Living your values

Introduction

How should we live? This may sound like an abstract question that we don't often need to consider, but our values affect a significant proportion of our waking lives, whether we realise it or not. We are constantly evaluating how we feel about different things, what we should do and how we should behave.

Our values can affect a lot of our actions, choices and behaviour in a range of areas of our lives – from relationships to work to shopping choices. For example, if you care about the environment you might decide to use your car less, or because of your value of caring for people you may decide to call your friend to check that he's OK.

This article examines a few of the questions that often crop up when we are trying to live in line with our values. We have not seen answers to these questions anywhere else, so we hope that this article will be useful and make it easier for you to live both more in line with your values and happily with them, rather than feel guilty or anxious that you're not doing enough.

What are values?

Values are abstract concepts that we use to guide us as to how to behave. They make judgements about what we should do and what we shouldn't.

Values can arise for different reasons. Some values may have emerged as a result of our biological makeup - for example, the desire to survive or protect our children. Others have perhaps emerged as a result of trying to achieve a particular practical goal - for example, having environmental values so that we don't live in a degraded world, or setting up an informal 'social contract' as a society so that people have some basic rules as to how to treat each other to enable us to live alongside each other without too much conflict. Additionally, further ideas of how we should behave might have been made up to support religious ideas, maintain power or support prejudices.

These judgements about what we should or should not do could therefore have arisen for various reasons. We may feel some of these values deeply (for example, a desire to protect our children) but it is also quite possible for us to become indoctrinated with values from other people that we don't really feel. One important lesson here is therefore to be careful about the values you choose to adopt. Think for yourself about values, and try to identify those that you genuinely feel rather than those that others might be trying to instil in you.

What are my values?

It is easy to reflect on what your values are and identify them. You just need a bit of quiet time to think about it. There is advice in a number of Life² courses and publications of how to do this,

including in the free '[How to live ethically](#)' booklet or our '[Just think...](#)' course (either the full version or the free, short version).

How can I live in line with my values?

One point that you might have already noticed in your life is how hard it can be to live perfectly in line with your values – for example, how to behave in a way that is perfectly consistent with your environmental values. Would you have to stop consuming anything and only eat windfall apples? This is a problem that can make life difficult for values-conscious people all the time and cause them a lot of guilt and confusion - how do you try to live in line with your values whilst not feeling guilty that you're not doing enough?

The important point is that, once you've identified your values, working out how to put them into practice can be tricky. Values don't come with a user manual or a clear set of rules to tell us how to put them into practice. For example, there could be a limitless range of actions we could take to live in line with the value of 'caring about other people' - from being kind to strangers to giving more time to our families through to giving 50 per cent of our income to people living in poverty.

The list of actions that you need to take to live consistently with each value can therefore be never ending. In addition to this, the actions you need to take can be constantly changing – according to the situation and environment you are in – for example, the advent of a new piece of technology may require you to take new actions to behave in line with your environmental values.

Additionally, even when you do select some actions that could be consistent with your values, there are no rules on where the line should be drawn on the strength of each of these actions. For example, how do we know that giving 50 per cent of our income to people living in poverty is consistent with our value of caring about other people? Should it be 70 per cent? Or would 20 per cent be acceptable? Again, there are no rules for this.

In conclusion, there is no simple rule that can tell you how you should live in line with your values. There is no definitive list of actions to take or clear place at which to 'draw the line' for each action. You can learn about what scholars and religions have said about how to live in line with your values, and you can do some research and reflect on it yourself, but ultimately everyone (including religions and scholars) is making up the list of actions they take as well as where they draw their 'line' on each of them, so you will need to do the same.

Our other tools such as the '[How to live ethically](#)' booklet or our '[Just think...](#)' course can help you think about which rules you want to apply, which actions you want to select and where you want to draw the line for each of your values. In other words, how to manage your values so that you can not only be effective at ethical living but also happy at the same time.

There are some other conclusions we can draw from the discussion above. Firstly, it shows the importance of thinking for yourself about values, and realising that these judgements are up to you. When anyone tells you something is right or wrong, you should not take their word for it but make your own decision.

Secondly, it shows that 'the right and the wrong things to do' aren't always as black or white as many people believe – there are often many different ways in which we could live in line with each of our values and in which the line could be drawn within each action. Deciding on how best to put our values into action often has to be a process of weighing up the different possibilities to reach the best set of actions you can, and reviewing this regularly in response to changing circumstances. At a societal level, this process of balancing the different arguments as to how we should live is one of the aims of the democratic political process.

Thirdly, and most relevant to this section, the discussion above shows why values can be such slippery things to live with – they often don't give us clear guidance or answers on the actions we need to take. We have to work this out for ourselves.

Where do you draw the line?

We've now established that you need to make your own rules for how you will live in line with each of your values. It can be useful to set some basic rules for yourself for each of your values, as this can make it easier to decide on specific actions to take, and also make it easier to see if you're living in line with your values.

For example, for your value of caring for the environment you may decide to make the rule that you want to live your life within your share of the resources of one planet – rather than the equivalent of 3 planets resources that most of us currently live within. Or for your value of caring for animals, you may decide you're not going to eat or buy any animal products. You may decide to set completely different rules to these – the point is, if you can, set some rules for how you'll live by each value.

This may not be as hard to do as you might think. When you think about your values, you may start to come up with these rules – for example, in your value of caring for the environment you may come up with principles such as 'I want to live within my share of the resources of one planet' or 'I will avoid doing things that harm the environment'.

Dealing with conflicts between values

Another issue that may have come up when you think about the actions you could take to live in line with each value is that an action that is consistent with one of your values may actually conflict with another value. For example, your planned action of visiting your relatives in Canada more often (to reflect your value of caring about people) might conflict with your value of caring for the environment (and the action of taking no flights). These potential conflicts can make people feel anxious or guilty because they don't know how to deal with them or feel they may have made the wrong decision.

Here's how to deal with it. When you see this type of values conflict happening, stand back from it and firstly look at the likely effect the action will have for each of the values. In this case, only you will know what the impact of going to see these relatives might be on your value of caring for people. The impact of the flights on the environment will be very large and negative for your environmental values though.

Once you've weighed up the likely impact of the action, prioritise your values – which of the values matter most to you? Which do you have the strictest rules for? If you prioritise the environment and are quite strict in your rules on it, then this may mean that you can't visit your relatives in Canada more often, unless you can find a more environmentally friendly way of doing it than flying. If you prioritise people above the environment you may decide to take the flights. Or, you may reach a compromise between the two – perhaps by taking far fewer flights than you'd originally planned. Sometimes compromise may be possible, but sometimes it may not, and one action may have to go.

Again, a healthy dose of common sense is needed in these decisions. There are no clear rules that set out how to live in line with your values. Just be honest with yourself about the impact you're likely to have and then make the decision. Often we make these decisions in split seconds in our day to day lives, but we can become better at making them if we follow the steps above.

Living happily with your values

The final point to consider in this article is how you can live happily with your ethical values.

Some people striving to live ethically can find themselves feeling guilty that they are not doing enough or feeling confused about how they should behave. This form of guilt can occur when someone is worried about whether a particular action is consistent enough with their values – for example, whether buying from a cheap clothes shop (and the possibility of sweatshop labour) may be inconsistent with their values about caring for people.

To deal with this situation, work out whether the potential impact of your action is likely to be big or small, and if it's big, decide whether you can make the time to do some more research about the impact to help your decision. In either case, make the decision then move on and don't give yourself a hard time. You've been through a proper thinking process on it and made the decision.

It's not always easy to live in line with our values so don't be too hard on yourself if you can't make the grade sometimes. However, you also need to be honest with yourself. And if you find yourself continually failing to meet your rules, and feeling guilty about it, then perhaps you've set your moral rules too high. In this case, you can either make more effort to uphold them or set the level of your rules lower and don't give yourself a hard time. So, be honest and firm but fair with yourself. Conversely, if you think you've set your rules too low, don't be afraid to try to set them higher and see if you can live by them.

Summary

We each have responsibility for our own values, as well as setting how we'll live in line with them and monitoring how well we are doing this. Taking this responsibility is something that can give us a great sense of fulfilment in our lives and strengthen our sense of our own identity.

Once you've thought about your values, living in line with them may take some changes in your life and behaviour. But don't let this stop you from making the changes - if you want to live the life that's really you.

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