SUMMARY. What is the difference between the just and the unjust, the courageous and the cowardly, the ethically valuable and the ethically not valuable? To answer these and similar questions, a critical theory of ethical value is advanced. Using sample sentences that include ethical value terms, normative and descriptive components of the theory are identified, and the normative component is developed in some detail. Three levels of normative ethical discourse, adapted from Laudan's levels of scientific discourse, are then distinguished: descriptive, methodological, and axiological. Each sample sentence is assigned to a level, and the subsequent discussion illustrates how to proceed rationally at that level. The rational techniques appropriate to each level include inductive inference, falsification, and causal inference. These techniques are likewise appropriate to the corresponding level of the sciences.

Key words: Ethical value, science, vagueness, induction, eduction, wide reflective equilibrium, falsification, utilitarianism, deontologism, ethical description, ethical methodology, ethical axiology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word "value" is a workhorse, outside ethics as well as in. Not only is it much used, however; it is variously used. Within ethics alone we find it as a verb ("to value"), a concrete noun ("the value of an honest report"), and an abstract noun or adjective ("theory of value", "value terms"). Accounting for these uses is a formidable task for any theory of ethical value. Likewise for the uses of ethical value terms themselves ("just," "courageous," "worst," "the highest good," and so on). A theory that could clarify our usage of these terms would not only be descriptive; it would draw the lines, at least in principle, between legitimate and illegitimate uses of the terms in its domain. The theory, that is, would be critical.

To draft such a theory – a critical theory of ethical value – is the object of this study. I will argue for a use of reason in ethics that parallels the use of reason in the sciences. I will not claim, however, that ethics should somehow be made scientific; we have every reason not to confuse the two. The claim is that scientific reason and ethical reason, by virtue of being reason, have a great deal in common. Just what that is I hope to flesh out in the following pages.

Part 2 establishes some working distinctions to be used in articulating the theory. Part 3 identifies, with the help of some recent work in the philosophy of science, three levels of ethical discourse. These levels become
the scaffolding for a normative theory of value, whose contours emerge in Part 4.

Before proceeding, I want to say something about what the theory articulated here is not. It is not ontological in the sense that it tries to determine what ethical values really are. The theory, rather, is linguistic: though we use these terms all the time, how do we make sense of them? Moreover, the theory falls well short of a full-fledged theory of value. It is not literally a theory of value, first of all, for nonethical values (scientific, political, aesthetic, legal, religious, logical, medical, ludic, etc.) are not actively considered. And it is certainly not a full-fledged theory; it concentrates on overall structure, leaving many matters of detail to be filled in. The idea is to present the big picture in a few strokes.

2. SOME PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

Let us take sentences like the following as representative of the uses to be accounted for by the theory.

1. She values friendship above all else.
2. The present policy is unfair.
3. That shows the value of courage.
4. Be honest so that people will respect you.
5. The highest good is the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
6. Never be unjust.

From this small sample, we can draw three preliminary distinctions.

The first is the distinction between values as means and values as ends. (3) and (4) point out, though in very different ways, that there is something that courage and honesty are good for; their value, that is, is as means to ends. But (1), (5), and (6), again in distinctive ways, handle friendship, the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and injustice not as means but as possible goals or ends. Friendship, for the person described in (1), is the supreme end; that person is mistaken, according to (5), for the supreme end is the greatest happiness for the greatest number; and injustice, according to (6), should not be an end at all. Observe that the terms of this distinction are not mutually exclusive, since something can be valued as both a means and an end. Take the money for which one works as an end but which is also a means for feeding one’s family, for instance. Or the plumber who is both a means for fixing a broken pipe and a Kantian end in oneself. By contrast, though, the terms of the two working distinctions that follow are mutually exclusive.

To distinguish between value judgment and value direction, let us key on what speech act theorists call the illocutionary act performed by the speaker of the sentence. Value judgments simply affirm that something does or does not possess some evaluative property. (2) asserts that the present policy does not have the property of fairness; (3), that something shows courage has value as a means; and (5), that the referents of the definite