

I'm not a bot































ImportanceImportance is a property of entities that matter or make a difference. For example, World War II was an important event and Albert Einstein was an important person because of how they affected the world. There are disagreements in the academic literature about what type of difference is required. According to the causal impact view, something is important if it has a big causal impact on the world. This view is rejected by various theorists, who insist that an additional aspect is required: that the impact in question makes a value difference. This is often understood in terms of how the important thing affects the well-being of people. So on this view, World War II was important, not just because it brought about many wide-ranging changes but because these changes had severe negative impacts on the well-being of the people involved. The difference in question is usually understood counterfactually as the contrast between how the world actually is and how the world would have been without the existence of the important entity. It is often argued that importance claims are context- or domain-dependent. This means that they either explicitly or implicitly assume a certain domain in relation to which something matters. For example, studying for an exam is important in the context of academic success but not in the context of world history. Importance comes in degrees: to be important usually means to matter more within the domain in question than most of the other entities within this domain. The term "importance" is often used in overlapping ways with various related terms, such as "meaningfulness", "value", and "caring". Theorists frequently try to elucidate these terms by comparing them to show what they have in common and how they differ. A meaningful life is usually important in some sense. But meaningfulness has additional requirements: the life should be guided by the agent's intention and directed at realizing some form of higher purpose. In some contexts, to say that something is important means the same as saying that it is valuable. More generally, however, importance refers not to value itself but to a value difference. This difference may also be negative: some events are important because they have very bad consequences. Importance is often treated as an objective feature in contrast to the subjective attitude of caring about something or ascribing importance to it. Ideally, the two overlap: people subjectively care about importance relative to someone and absolute or unrestricted importance. The concept of importance is central to numerous fields and issues. Many people desire to be important or to lead an important life. It has been argued that this is not always a good goal since it can also be realized in a negative way: by causing a lot of harm and thereby making an important but negative value difference. Common desires that are closely related include wanting power, wealth, and fame. In the realm of ethics, the importance of something often determines how one should act towards this thing, for example, by paying attention to it or by protecting it. In this regard, importance is a normative property, meaning that importance claims constitute reasons for actions, emotions, and other attitudes. On a psychological level, considerations of the relative importance of the aspects of a situation help the individual simplify its complexity by only focusing on its most significant features. A central discussion in the context of the meaning of life concerns the question of whether human life is important on the cosmic level. Nihilists and absurdists usually give a negative response to this question. This pessimistic outlook can in some cases cause an existential crisis. In the field of artificial intelligence, implementing artificial reasoning to assess the importance of information poses a significant challenge when trying to deal with the complexity of real-world situations. Importance is a property of entities that make a difference in the world.[1][2] So for something to be important, it has to impact the world around it. For example, World War II was an important event in history both because of the suffering it caused and because of the long-term political changes it affected.[3] or in the field of medicine, Alexander Fleming was an important person because he discovered penicillin and thereby made a difference to the health of many people since then.[4] Things that lack importance, on the other hand, could be removed without affecting any significant change to the world.[5] Nonetheless, it seems that making a difference is not sufficient: even unimportant things usually make differences, however trivial they may be. An uncontroversial but circular definition holds that something is important if it makes an important difference.[1][2][6] Various suggestions have been made to give a more substantial account of the nature of this difference. This is necessary to give a precise definition that can distinguish important from unimportant things.[7][1][2] The idea behind such an approach is that there are many ways to make an important difference and there should be some element they all share in common.[7][1][2] According to the causal impact view, all that matters is the extent of the causal impact a thing has in its domain or on the world at large.[7] Many theorists require as an additional element that this impact affects the intrinsic value of the world, often in terms of promoting someone's well-being.[8][9] The difference between these views matters for various issues. For example, it has been argued that human life lacks importance on a cosmic level when judged based on its causal impact but has it in relation to the value difference it makes.[7] Other central aspects of importance are its context-dependence, i.e. that importance claims usually assess the significance of something relative to a certain domain, and its rationality, i.e. that the extent of the impact is usually assessed relative to the impact of other entities within this domain.[7][6] Importance manifests in degrees: the more important something is, the bigger the difference it makes.[7][8] According to the causal impact view, a thing is important if it has a sufficiently big causal impact on a large scale. This view has a strong initial plausibility since it is true for many events we experience. It is reflected in the intuition that, to become important, one must interact with the world in a way that has a significant impact on it.[7][8] Many theorists combine both views in their conception of importance: things are important to the extent that they cause value differences. Some theorists, however, defend a pure impact account but not including causation as a requirement.[7] A central aspect of the value impact view is how intrinsic or final value is understood. Many theorists in this field have argued for some form of wellfaim.[2][9] On this account, final value consists of the well-being of someone and a thing is important to the extent that it affects someone's well-being.[12][13] According to Harry Frankfurt, this can be understood in terms of needs: a thing becomes important because some sentient being needs it. In this context, a person needs something if they will be inevitably harmed unless they have it.[11][2] For example, food and shelter are important to humans because they suffer if they do not have them. Abraham Maslow holds that there is a complex hierarchy of needs. The needs on the higher levels, like esteem and self-actualization, can only be fulfilled once the needs on the lower levels, like food and shelter, are fulfilled.[14][15] A more general definition includes not just negative impacts on well-being, but also positive ones. So a thing may be important either because it harms someone or because it helps someone or is enjoyed by them.[2] A similar connection between being good and being important is drawn by Ernst Tugendhat. He defines "good" as "that which is justifiably preferred. According to him, this can be understood, for the most part, in relation to someone's well-being: a thing is good or justifiably preferable to the extent that it contributes to someone's future well-being. In the case of altruism, for example, an action by one person is good because it aims at improving the well-being of another person.[9][16] The value impact of things is often understood counterfactually: based on how much value would be lost or gained if, hypothetically speaking, the thing had not existed.[7][1][7][18] This value includes both the intrinsic and the instrumental value of the thing. In the former case, some things are important because they are good in themselves, like pleasurable experiences. In the latter case, some things are important because they are useful to other things, like medicine or school books.[19][20][7] The overall degree of importance is then given by the total value difference a thing makes.[7][8] Many theorists agree that importance events in question-dependent. This means that the importance of a thing is relative to a certain domain. For example, preparing for an exam is important in the context of academic success or a revealing slip of the tongue may be important in the context of ruining someone's career. But these events are not important in the context of world history.[7][6][5] Other examples are the importance of physical exercise in the context of personal health or the importance of the Scientific Revolution in the context of technological discoveries.[7] The property of importance has a comparative aspect in this regard: something is important in a domain compared to the other objects within this domain. This is justified by the fact that it can make a bigger difference than most of the other things in its domain.[6][5] Because of this context-dependence, importance may be understood as a relational or extrinsic property: an event may have importance relative to one domain and lack it relative to another domain.[7][6][5] Some researchers also consider the possibility of a form of absolute importance that is not restricted to one specific domain. Things that are important to everything else or the world as a whole may fall into this category. However, various theorists have expressed doubts that anything is significant enough to fall into this category.[2][1][22][5] On the other side of the spectrum, almost anything has importance if a very specific and trivial context is chosen correspondingly.[6][5] One heuristic to determine the importance of something relative to a domain is to ask how detailed this thing would be treated by a textbook on the subject. For example, in the context of the general biography of someone, if a full chapter is dedicated to the description of a single event in this person's life then this event is *prima facie* more important than another event described only in two sentences.[6] Another heuristic is to consider the temporal and spatial dimensions of the event in relation to the size of the domain.[6][23] For example, one reason why global pandemics, like Covid-19, are more important than local epidemics, like the Western African Ebola virus epidemic, is due to their increased spatial extension.[24] Another aspect of importance, besides its dependence on a context, is that it is relational. This means that it involves an explicit or implicit comparison with other entities in the corresponding domain. So to say that stoicism is an important school of Hellenistic philosophy implies a comparison to other schools of Hellenistic philosophy, i.e. that it is more noteworthy or influential than an average school of Hellenistic philosophy.[25][5] This is similar to other gradable adjectives, like "small" or "expensive", which carry an implicit comparison to other entities in the corresponding domain.[26][27][7] For example, a baby whale is small in relation to other whales even though it is not small when compared to other forms of sea life. This comparison can be directly linked to the degree of impact that the entity makes. An entity is important within a domain if it makes a bigger impact than most of the other entities belonging to the domain.[7][18] Importance is a very basic concept and most people have an intuitive familiarity and understanding of it. But it has proven difficult to give a clear and non-circular definition of it.[21] For this reason, many theorists have tried to elucidate the concept by comparing it with various related concepts, such as "meaningfulness", "value", "significance", or "caring".[8] The elucidation happens by pointing out their commonalities and differences. However, such an approach is not unproblematic since these terms are sometimes also used as synonyms.[28][5] The terms "importance" and "meaningfulness" are closely related. Especially in discussions of the meaning of life, they are often used in overlapping ways. For example, the desire to lead a meaningful life frequently corresponds to the desire to live an important life. Nonetheless, it has been argued that the two can come apart, i.e. that there are meaningful lives that lack importance and important lives that lack meaning.[7][8][6][29] One motivation for drawing such a distinction is that seeking deeper meaning in life is usually understood as an admirable goal associated with self-transcendence while craving importance is often seen as a less noble and more egocentric undertaking.[6] There are various accounts of what meaning in life is. Some theorists identify three essential features: life is meaningful if (1) it is guided by purposes that are valuable for their own sake, (2) it transcends mere animal nature by connecting to something larger, and (3) it merits certain attitudes, such as taking pride in it or admiration from others.[6][30][31] These criteria can be used to distinguish meaningfulness and importance. For meaningfulness, it is central that the event in question is guided by the agent's purpose and intentions.[32][33] So in this regard, random events that happen by accident may still have tremendous importance due to their causal consequences, as in the case of unintended butterfly effects. But such events do not make life meaningful. In an example due to Thomas Nagel, the pants of a nobleman accidentally drop the moment he is being knighted. This embarrassment would not make his life meaningful even if it was important by somehow causing a brutal war to end.[6][23] Another difference is that some form of higher purpose is necessary for meaningfulness but not for importance.[34] It has also been argued that meaningfulness can be brought about by the mere appreciation of valuable things. This may be the case, for example, by worshipping God. For importance, however, valuable things must be created or defended and not just admired.[6] Another distinction is based on the relation to the quality of life. Finding meaning in life contributes to the quality or final value of that life. Being important, on the other hand, carries with it various instrumental values but need not improve the quality of the life in question. In the ideal case, the two coincide in a life that is both meaningful and important.[6] But not everyone agrees with the distinction between meaningfulness and importance. Some consequentialists, for example, hold that "a life is meaningful to the extent that it makes the world overall better" without a direct reference to the agent's intentions or a higher purpose.[6][35] Some theorists treat the terms "important" and "valuable" as synonyms. This way of speaking works in various cases but is not generally accepted. Importance is a more complex concept since it depends not just on the value itself but also on the domain of evaluation and on the counterfactual comparison to what would have been the case otherwise.[7][8] So in this regard, it has been argued that there are cases of valuable activities without importance and maybe even of important activities without value. According to Robert Nozick, the game of chess is an example of value without importance. It has value because of its beautiful and intriguing structures even though it is not important since it does not have a significant impact beyond itself. Chess differs in this aspect from mathematics: both activities have occupied some of the brightest minds but only the insights discovered in math, on this inquiry have had important implications beyond themselves in the form of scientific and technological developments.[8] This distinction is also central to Nozick's thought experiment of the experience machine.[36][37] This machine is similar to the Matrix in the Matrix movies.[38] It provides a permanent simulated reality and can offer its subjects a life filled with joy and well-being. Such a life is full of value but lacks any wider importance, which is why Nozick recommends against entering this fictional device.[8][36][37] Although the two can come apart, ideally they manifest together as a life that has both importance and value.[8] There is an intimate connection between the importance of something and the attitude of caring about this thing. One way to distinguish the two is to see importance as an objective factor in contrast to caring as a subjective attitude. The attitude consists of ascribing importance to something, paying attention to it, and treating it accordingly. A person who cares about something is thus not indifferent to this thing.[1][2][6] However, it has been argued that people very often care about things that lack independent or objective importance. For example, a person with the obsessive-compulsive disorder may care a lot about things like not stepping on a crack in the sidewalk even though this is objectively unimportant.[11] A similar issue may concern the importance some people invest in a computer game or their favorite sports team.[1][39] Usually, a certain primacy is given to objective importance, which is seen as an independent factor. In this view, the subjective attitude of caring should track this objective factor. Nonetheless, some theorists have argued that this is not may not always be the case. According to Harry Frankfurt, for example, caring about something makes this thing important to the person. The idea behind this is that, by starting to care about something, the person becomes important to the person before. This means that the caring attitude precedes the importance and thereby ties the thing to the person's well-being.[1][12][40] A similar view is defended by Matthew Smith, who argues from a third-person perspective that a thing becomes important or morally significant if someone cares about it. This caring attitude by one person then acts as a reason for other people to change their behavior towards the thing accordingly.[41] Yitzhak Benbaji agrees that this may happen in some cases but denies that it can be generalized. According to him, this type of case contrasts with other cases of things that lack importance to a person independent of the person's conscious attitude towards them. For example, a person might care about their deeply damaged relationship with their spouse. This caring attitude might be based on wrong beliefs about how negatively a split would affect them, meaning that both partners would be better off without it. In this case, the relationship is not important to the person even though they care about it. A similar case involves a person who, following the health advice of a charlatan, starts caring a lot about avoiding a certain type of food. But as it turns out, this food has no health impact whatsoever in this case and is therefore objectively unimportant to the person.[2] This way, it is possible to distinguish caring from importance: a person may care about something even though this thing is unimportant since it has no impact on the person's well-being. 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It consists of a gradual move to a more realistic perspective about the world as a whole.[9][42] According to Bernard Williams, importance is closely related to so-called deliberative priority but not identical to it. Deliberative priority is a form of practical preference: it determines the weight the agent ascribes to different options in the process of deciding in favor of one of them.[21][22] This weight depends not just on the value of the different outcomes but also on the agent's ability to affect these outcomes. Finding something important, on the other hand, does not imply that the agent has any power over it. So a traveler may find it important to have good weather during their trip even though this does not carry deliberative priority for them since there is nothing they can do about this fact.[21] Importance is a broad term with various closely related meanings. 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