

Intrinsic Value

Word count 3835

Intrinsic value is the central concept of *axiology*, or the philosophical study of value. To say that something is intrinsically valuable is, roughly speaking, to say that it is valuable in itself, or for its own sake – as opposed to, e.g., money, which is valuable only for the sake of something else (see INSTRUMENTAL VALUE). But what is it for something to be valuable “in itself”? Is it the same as to be valuable for its own sake? Is it possible for something to be valuable in such a way? If so, what things are intrinsically valuable? More generally, what *kinds* of things (people, objects, properties, facts) are intrinsically valuable? Is the intrinsic value of something determined by the values of its parts? Why should we care about intrinsic value? These are the fundamental questions of axiology.

The Importance of Intrinsic Value

G.E. Moore placed intrinsic value at the heart of his moral theory, defining concepts such as moral obligation and virtue in terms of it (see MOORE, G. E.). According to Moore, to say that an act is morally obligatory is to say that no alternative produces as much intrinsic value as it does (1903: 148) (see CONSEQUENTIALISM). To say that a character trait is a virtue is to say that it is a disposition to perform intrinsic-value-maximizing actions that are hard to perform (1903: 172). These consequentialist

accounts of obligation and virtue are not widely accepted. But even those who reject these accounts will need a way to evaluate the intrinsic values of consequences in order to explain, for example, what the *prima facie* duty of beneficence amounts to, or why beneficence is a virtue (see ROSS, W. D.; PRIMA FACIE/PRO TANTO “OUGHT”).

Intrinsic value has also played a very different kind of role in moral theories. Immanuel Kant bases his account of moral obligation on the idea that the good will is the only thing good in itself (1785: 7; see KANT, IMMANUEL). Some contemporary philosophers have given accounts of virtue according to which to be virtuous is to love what is intrinsically good and to hate what is intrinsically bad (Hurka 2001; Adams 2006).

Intrinsic value has recently played a central role in debates in environmental ethics (see ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS). In particular, environmental philosophers have been concerned with the question of whether there is intrinsic value in non-human and non-sentient nature (O’Neill 1992).

A notion of intrinsic value is involved in the attempt to say what makes someone’s life go well or badly for her (see WELL-BEING). The first distinction we must make when we engage in this project is the distinction between things that are intrinsically good for someone and things that are good for her merely as a means. Note that to say that something is intrinsically good *for* someone is not necessarily to say that it is intrinsically good *simpliciter*; some say that pleasure enjoyed by an evil person is good for that person but not good *simpliciter* (see GOOD AND GOOD FOR).

\ These are just a few examples. Suffice it to say that appeals to intrinsic value are ubiquitous in moral theories about right action, virtue, and the good life.

Skepticism about Intrinsic Value

Moore claimed that if a kind of value is intrinsic, then it must be *objective* (1922: 255). A *subjectivist* will insist that if Moore is right, then nothing can be intrinsically valuable. Subjectivism might be pushed on the grounds that objective intrinsic value would be metaphysically “queer,” and that even if there were such a thing, we could never know it (Mackie 1977; see MACKIE, J.L.; QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM). If Moore is right, the defender of intrinsic value must respond to these arguments. But even a subjectivist will need to make a distinction between things that are valued *for themselves* and things that are valued merely as a means, so subjectivists need intrinsic value too. Subjectivist skepticism about intrinsic value is really just skepticism about the existence of *objective* moral or normative properties, not about intrinsic value *per se* (see SUBJECTIVISM, ETHICAL; REALISM, MORAL).

Peter Geach argued that when we call x a good person, we cannot divide this claim into the distinct claims ‘x is good’ and ‘x is a person,’ just as we cannot divide ‘x is a small elephant’ into ‘x is small’ and ‘x is an elephant.’ Like smallness, goodness is relative to a kind; thus it is nonsensical to say that something is *intrinsically* good (Geach 1956). Similarly, Judith Thomson argues that when we say something or someone is good, we always mean either that it is a good member of its kind (a good knife, a good politician), or that it is good for something (good for cutting), or that she good at something (good at dancing). It makes no sense to say that it is just plain good; all goodness is goodness *in a way* (Thomson 1997). Of course, even if ‘good’ is used in the

ways described by Geach and Thomson, as it surely is, it might also be used in other ways. And Thomson's arguments seem to be directed at the notion of "just plain goodness," which is not the same thing as intrinsic goodness; perhaps one way to be good is to be intrinsically good (Zimmerman 2001: 22-27). It seems doubtful that facts about the way we use language will show that we never use the term 'good' to pick out intrinsic goodness. The points made by Geach and Thomson might most charitably be seen not as providing an argument against intrinsic value, but as a challenge to defenders of intrinsic value to give a positive characterization of intrinsic value and to say how it is different from other, apparently less problematic sorts of value. For more arguments against intrinsic value, see Dewey 1981: 210-219, Beardsley 1965, and Bernstein 2001 (see DEWEY, JOHN).

The Nature of Intrinsic Value

The nature of intrinsic value is not easy to pin down. In *Principia Ethica* Moore argued, using his famous "open question" argument, that intrinsic value is simple and undefinable (1903: 15-17; see OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT). But he did offer a criterion for determining whether something is intrinsically good: the "isolation test". To apply the isolation test is to imagine a thing existing entirely by itself (1903: 187). If it would still have value under such circumstances, then its value is intrinsic; otherwise it is extrinsic. The isolation test seems imperfect, because it is impossible for certain things to exist by themselves. In order to apply the isolation test to pleasure, we would have to

imagine pleasure existing all by itself, but surely pleasure must have a subject. It cannot be isolated (Lemos 1994: 10-11).

Later, in “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” Moore offered the following supervenience principle about intrinsic value: something has intrinsic value if and only if it has a kind of value that depends solely on its intrinsic nature (1922: 260). The supervenience principle seems plausible; in many cases, when we wish to deny that something has intrinsic value, we point out that the thing’s value depends entirely on its extrinsic properties. For example, we might explain money’s lack of intrinsic value by pointing out that whatever value money has depends on its being valued by people. But the principle has been questioned by those who argue that there are cases in which something is intrinsically valuable in virtue of its extrinsic properties. For example, Shelly Kagan argues that the pen used by Abraham Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation might have intrinsic value in virtue of its causal history, even though it is intrinsically identical to some other pen that is intrinsically worthless (Kagan 1998; also see Korsgaard 1983 and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 1999). The supervenience principle has been defended against such arguments by, e.g., Zimmerman (2001) and Bradley (2002, 2006, 2009).

While the isolation test and the supervenience principle might offer some help in distinguishing intrinsic from extrinsic value, they do not explain or analyze intrinsic value in terms of non-axiological concepts. There are at least two ways we might attempt to do this. First, we might explain intrinsic value by appeal to psychological concepts. For example, we might say that to be intrinsically valuable is to be valued or desired by someone for itself. This view faces the obvious objection that people often value and

desire what is bad. Instead, we might say that to be intrinsically valuable is to be the sort of thing that someone with full factual information would desire for itself (Griffin 1986: 11-15). But we might wonder whether this solves the problem; why would having full information ensure that one's desires were directed towards the good?

Second, we might explain intrinsic value by appeal to deontological concepts such as requirement. Contemporary attempts in this vein are derived from Franz Brentano, and have been called Fitting Attitude accounts (Brentano 1902: 16; see VALUE, FITTING ATTITUDE ACCOUNT OF; BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNT; BRENTANO, FRANZ; EWING, A.C.). According to such accounts, to be intrinsically valuable is just to be the sort of thing towards which one is required to have a pro-attitude for itself, or towards which such an attitude is reasonable, fitting, or appropriate. Brand Blanshard rejects the Fitting Attitude account on the grounds that it gets the order of explanation backwards; it is fitting to value something because it is valuable, not the other way around (Blanshard 1961: 284-6; also see Ross 1939: 276-8, Ewing 1947: 172, and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004, 395-6). Blanshard also argues that it may be reasonable to care less about the suffering of distant strangers than about the suffering of one's own kin even though the instances of suffering are equally bad (1961: 287). Recent discussion of the Fitting Attitude account has centered around the "Wrong Kind of Reasons" problem (see WRONG KIND OF REASONS PROBLEM). The problem is that it seems that one might be required to have a pro-attitude toward something despite the fact that it is worthless. For example, suppose an evil demon threatens to punish you unless you have a pro-attitude towards a saucer of mud. You have good reason to like the

mud, but that doesn't seem to make it the case that the mud is good (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004).

Theories of Intrinsic Value

Having discussed attempts to analyze intrinsic value, we now must consider attempts to say what things are intrinsically valuable, and to formulate principles that determine the intrinsic values of complex things we are interested in, such as possible worlds and consequences of actions.

Discussions of theories of intrinsic value typically begin with hedonism (see HEDONISM). According to hedonism, pleasure is the only thing that is fundamentally intrinsically good, and pain is the only thing that is fundamentally intrinsically bad; the intrinsic value of any complex thing is determined by adding the intrinsic values of the pleasures and pains in it. Hedonism was a common topic of discussion in ancient philosophy, and in modern times has been championed by Bentham and Mill (see BENTHAM, JEREMY; MILL, JOHN STUART). It is hard to resist the claim that pleasure is intrinsically good and that pain is intrinsically bad. But hedonism faces objections of several sorts. First, there are some pleasures that do not seem valuable. These might include sadistic or immoral pleasures, such as those a psychopath might experience while torturing his victims, and “artificial” pleasures such as those experienced by someone who spends her whole life hooked up to an experience machine (Nozick 1974: 42-45). Second, it seems to matter how pleasures are distributed to people; it seems better if the virtuous get pleasure and the vicious do not than vice versa.

Third, many have thought that there are things that are intrinsically good but do not necessarily involve pleasure at all, such as virtue, knowledge, achievement, and friendship. Fourth, some have objected to the additive principle, arguing that the value of something cannot be determined by adding the values of its constituents.

Fred Feldman has suggested ways for the hedonist to respond to some of these objections with a more complex form of hedonism. To reply to the problem of pleasures that seem worthless because they are sadistic or false, Feldman suggests that we adjust the value of a pleasure depending on the truth-value and pleasureworthiness of its object. To reply to the distribution problem, he suggests we adjust the value of a pleasure depending on the worthiness of the individual receiving it (Feldman 2004).

It is sometimes thought that pleasure is good only if it is desired, and that it can be good to receive things other than pleasure when we desire those things. This leads us to desire fulfillment views (see *DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD*). According to a simple desire fulfillment view, what is intrinsically good is a state of affairs consisting of someone wanting that P and P being true. This is not to say that to be good is to be desired, as in the analysis of value in terms of desire discussed above, but rather that desiring something and getting it is good. Although it is a distinct view, it faces similar problems, such as problems involving desires based on ignorance, desires for what is bad, or other desires that seem in some way defective. Defenders of desire-fulfillment views employ much the same array of maneuvers as defenders of hedonism: either they explain away the apparent problems (Heathwood 2005) or they place some conditions on desires, such that only those desires that meet the conditions are good to satisfy (Griffin 1986: 11-26).

Neither hedonism nor a desire fulfillment view can account for the intrinsic values of such things as achievement or knowledge. Perfectionism offers a way to account for the intrinsic values of such things within a unified account (see PERFECTIONISM). Perfectionism is the view that an individual's well-being is determined by the nature of the kind of thing it is. So, for example, what constitutes a good life for a human depends on the nature of humanity. The most prominent recent defender of perfectionism is Thomas Hurka (1993). According to Hurka, it is intrinsically good to develop those qualities that are both (i) essential to the kind of thing one is and (ii) distinctive of living things (1993: 14-17). For humans, those qualities are practical rationality, theoretical rationality, and certain physical abilities. The best human life would develop these qualities to the highest degree, and so would include both intellectual and physical achievement. But it seems that such a life might well contain a great deal of misery, and it is not clear how the perfectionist can account for the intrinsic goodness of pleasure or the intrinsic badness of pain. Furthermore, Hurka's claims about human nature and essence face daunting objections; for example, it is doubtful that rationality is essential to humans (Kitcher 1999).

Since the unified, monistic theories – hedonism, desire fulfillment views, and perfectionism – seem to leave out important values, many have found it most plausible to endorse some form of pluralism, or “objective list theory” (Parfit 1984: 493; see VALUE PLURALISM). Pluralism is the view that there is more than one kind of thing that is intrinsically valuable. According to Moore, there are many kinds of intrinsically valuable states of affairs, but the most valuable of these consist of someone consciously taking pleasure in friendship or beauty (1903: 188). Ross included four things on his list of

intrinsic goods: pleasure, virtue, knowledge, and the fit between virtue and the receipt of pleasure and pain (1930: 140). Pluralists face the problem of saying what the items on the list have in common, in virtue of which those things and no others are intrinsically good. But if we were to identify some property that all the items on the list shared, perhaps we could just call that the intrinsically valuable property – in which case we would no longer have a version of pluralism. Pluralists also face the problem of determining the relative values of the items on the list. According to Ross, virtue is infinitely more valuable than pleasure; the least bit of virtue is worth more than any amount of pleasure (1930: 150-51). This sort of lexical ordering of goods seems implausible when we consider cases at the extremes; it does not seem better that everyone be tortured than that one person be slightly less virtuous. Other pluralists claim that the values of, e.g., pleasure and virtue are incommensurable. What exactly incommensurability amounts to is a matter of some dispute (Chang 1997; see INCOMMENSURABILITY AND INCOMPARABILITY).

Whichever view we hold about what things are intrinsically valuable, there remains the question of how to get the value of a complex whole from the values of its parts. The simplest view says that we just add up the values of the parts. But Moore claims this is incorrect; the value of a whole need not bear any relation to the values of its parts (1903: 28). Some wholes are what he calls “organic unities”; they have value just from the way their parts are put together (see ORGANIC WHOLES). More recently, the additive principle has been questioned by Noah Lemos, who points out that if pleasure is intrinsically good, there could be a fantastically good universe whose only living creatures are “O-worms,” or creatures that get a pleasant sensation when they reproduce

(and otherwise have no sensations), as long as there are enough O-worms in it (Lemos 1994: 48-66). Since pleasure does seem to have some intrinsic value, yet such a universe does not seem fantastically good, Lemos suggests we abandon the additive principle (see Lemos 2010 for further arguments against the additive principle, and see Kagan 1988 for arguments against additivity of reasons for action).

The Logic of Intrinsic Value

Intrinsic value has a logic. For example, from the fact that x is intrinsically good, it follows that x is not intrinsically bad. Some have attempted to define intrinsic goodness in terms of intrinsic betterness; for example, according to von Wright, to say that x is intrinsically good is to say that x is better than its negation (1963: 34; see GOOD AND BETTER).

Perhaps the most interesting dispute in the logic of intrinsic value concerns transitivity, or the principle that from (i) x is intrinsically better than y, and (ii) y is intrinsically better than z, it follows that (iii) x is intrinsically better than z. Transitivity seems obviously true, but certain examples suggest otherwise. Suppose we have a universe with one million extremely happy people in it (Universe A). Suppose we add one person to that universe who is happy, but not quite as happy as the rest. It seems the resulting universe, B, would be at least as good as A. (the “mere addition” principle). Now imagine a third universe, C, with the same 1,000,001 people who are in universe B, and the same total well-being, but where the well-being is distributed equally. C must be at least as good as B. Thus, by transitivity, C is at least as good as A, though average

well-being in C is ever so slightly lower than in A. If we continue applying mere addition and transitivity, we end up concluding that a universe with a trillion people whose lives are just barely worth living is at least as good as A. This is what Parfit calls the “Repugnant Conclusion” (1984: 381-90; see REPUGNANT CONCLUSION). Many responses have been offered, but one bold solution is to reject transitivity (Rachels 2001).

Final value, derivative value, and the bearers of value

Christine Korsgaard makes a distinction between intrinsic value and “final” value. Intrinsic value is a kind of value something has in virtue of its intrinsic properties; to have final value is, she says, to be valued for its own sake (1983: 170). According to Korsgaard, something might be valuable as an end without being intrinsically valuable, such as a mink coat, which could have final value as a “symbol of aspiration” (1983: 185). So the two kinds of value come apart. Michael Zimmerman has argued that the two do not come apart (2001: 33-46). He claims that Korsgaard’s examples can be accounted for as cases where what is valuable in itself is a state of affairs involving the mink coat, specifically some state of affairs involving the mink coat having the symbolic feature that explains its value. This state of affairs has its value in virtue of its intrinsic nature, which includes the coat and the relevant feature.

Elizabeth Anderson objects to taking states of affairs as the bearers of intrinsic value (1993: 20, 26-30). She claims that a state of affairs involving some object or person can be valuable only if the object or person is valuable; we wouldn’t care about a state of affairs consisting of X getting pleasure unless we cared about X. States of affairs

derive their values from the value of concrete individuals, so it must be the individuals rather than the states of affairs that are intrinsically valuable.

However, from the fact that A derives its value from B, nothing follows about whether A is intrinsically valuable. We must distinguish intrinsic value from nonderivative value (Zimmerman 2001: 23). To illustrate the distinction, consider that an individual's life might consist of many instance of happiness; the value of the life might be derived from the values of the instance of happiness; yet the life itself is intrinsically valuable just as its parts are. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value is not the same as the distinction between derivative and non-derivative value. (Here it is helpful to consider the distinction between basic and non-basic intrinsic value, as introduced in Harman 1967.)

In any case, it is unclear whether there is a substantive dispute here concerning the bearers of value. When formulating axiological principles concerning the value of a world or consequence, it seems best to assign intrinsic value to states of affairs or events; it is hard to see how to state such principles by appealing only to the intrinsic values of individuals. But of course many believe that correct principles about right action appeal to more than just the intrinsic values of consequences; perhaps they appeal also to the values of people and other individuals (as in Kant's appeal to the intrinsic value of the good will). Perhaps there are distinct notions that go by the name 'intrinsic value'. When a state of affairs has intrinsic value, it is the sort of thing that makes the world better and that we have reason to bring about; when a person has intrinsic value, it is the sort of thing that we have a duty to respect. If so, then perhaps some of the dispute over the bearers of intrinsic value is based on terminological confusion. Once the relevant

concepts of intrinsic value have been properly distinguished, some of the disputes just described seem to evaporate (Bradley 2006; for more on the bearers of value see Rønnow-Rasmussen and Zimmerman (eds.) 2005).

SEE ALSO: Bentham, Jeremy; Brentano, Franz; Buck-Passing Account; Consequentialism; Desire Theories of the Good; Dewey, John; Environmental Ethics; Ewing, A.C.; Good and Better; Good and Good For; Hedonism; Incommensurability and Incomparability; Instrumental Value; Kant, Immanuel; Mackie, J.L.; Mill, John Stuart; Moore, G.E.; Open Question Argument; Organic Wholes; Perfectionism; Prima Facie/Pro Tanto “Ought”; Realism, Moral; Repugnant Conclusion; Ross, W.D.; Subjectivism, Ethical; Value, Fitting-Attitude Account of; Value Pluralism; Well-Being; Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem

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Forthcoming in *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* (Blackwell), ed. H. LaFollette. Please use published version for citation when available.

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