Michael Zimmerman's The Nature of Intrinsic Value

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The concept of intrinsic value is central to ethical theory, yet in recent years high-quality book-length treatments of the subject have been scarce.[1] This makes the arrival of Zimmerman's book quite welcome. Zimmerman takes up several of the themes Moore was concerned with in *Principia Ethica*, but often reaches different conclusions; for example, Zimmerman argues that intrinsic goodness can be analyzed, and rejects Moore's principle of organic unities. The book is rich with arguments, and I can mention only a few of them in this space.

Zimmerman begins with a defense of intrinsic value against a line of argument made famous by Peter Geach and developed further by Judith Thomson, according to which talk of intrinsic value is literally nonsense. Thomson claims that all goodness is goodness "in a way," and that non-derivative (or non-inherited) goodness is not a way of being good. Zimmerman thinks Thomson conflates intrinsic goodness and "generic" goodness; her claim that all goodness is "goodness in a way" appears to apply only to generic or "pure, unadulterated" goodness, not intrinsic goodness. He then claims that she conflates intrinsic goodness and non-derivative goodness; to be intrinsically good, Zimmerman claims, is just one way to be non-derivatively good, and in fact, many intrinsically good things are derivatively good. Zimmerman's arguments here are quite compelling.

In Chapter Three, Zimmerman argues that the bearers of intrinsic value are not abstract entities such as propositions, nor concrete individuals such as persons, but rather

concrete states of individuals roughly as conceived by Jaegwon Kim. States are exemplifications of properties by individuals; they are concrete in virtue of having spatiotemporal location and being non-recurrent. States are individuated finely, enabling us to distinguish between, for example, *John's being pleased* and *John's being pleased at Mary's pain*.

Zimmerman's argument against *abstract* states (or propositions) as value bearers is somewhat thin. There is an apparent problem with such a view due to the fact that abstract entities exist necessarily. (Zimmerman assumes without argument that abstract entities exist necessarily.) If abstract entities exist necessarily, and if a thing's intrinsic value is essential to it, then intrinsically good entities are intrinsically good in all possible worlds; thus, if the state that everyone is happy is intrinsically good, it is intrinsically good even in the actual world, where everyone is not happy. This does not present a problem in itself, since we can just say that states fail to contribute value to a world by merely existing there; they contribute to the value of a world only if they *obtain* there. But Zimmerman thinks this is unsatisfactory:

"But this still leaves us with the problem of saying that states of affairs (including worlds) themselves have final value, even when they don't obtain. And surely Chisholm is right: everyone being happy *is* not a good thing" (48).

This does have an odd ring to it, but of course it's possible that what sounds wrong in English could nevertheless be true. And as Zimmerman himself notes, the believer in concrete states will have to do some translations of his own when it comes to talk of universal happiness. It sounds natural in English to say, of the abstract state consisting of everyone's being happy, that *it*, everyone's happiness, would be good if it

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[1] The notable exception is Noah Lemos' <u>Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant</u> (Cambridge, 1994).

were to obtain. But the closest Zimmerman can come to saying such a thing is that if everyone's being happy were to obtain, then there would exist a good concrete state consisting of everyone being happy. Since both abstract and concrete views require us to construct translations of some ordinary English sentences in order to speak the literal truth, it's hard to see much of an advantage for the concrete view here.

Zimmerman's commitment to the view that intrinsic value bearers are concrete states impacts his conclusions in later chapters. For example, in Chapter Four Zimmerman considers and rejects the following analysis of intrinsic goodness:

Definition 1: S is intrinsically good =df. S ought to exist. (80)

Zimmerman rejects Definition 1 for several reasons. One reason is that it seems best interpreted as saying that *abstract states of affairs* are intrinsically good provided they ought to obtain. Definition 1 does not seem to apply to concrete states, which exist only when they obtain; there simply are no concrete states that ought to exist but don't exist (81). But we might take this instead as evidence that Zimmerman is too hasty to reject the view that abstract states are the bearers of intrinsic value.

There is a more general worry about Zimmerman's discussion of the bearers of intrinsic value. Must we accept a Kim-style ontology to believe in intrinsic value? Must nominalists reject all talk of intrinsic value? What about trope theorists? Or couldn't we have an ontology that includes universals (and an intrinsic goodness universal), but does not include concrete states as conceived by Zimmerman and Kim? There is good reason for Zimmerman to take seriously the metaphysical assumptions he makes when formulating his axiological theory, but there is also good reason for him not to take these assumptions *too* seriously – namely, he runs the risk that those who reject those

metaphysical assumptions will therefore reject his entire theory of intrinsic value. One wonders whether many of the theses he holds about intrinsic value could not be translated into, for example, nominalistic language that makes no reference to concrete states of individuals.

Chapter Four is the heart of the book, where Zimmerman defends the possibility of analyzing intrinsic value against Moore's famous arguments, and presents his own Brentano-style analysis of intrinsic value. Here is a simple statement of his proposal:

Intrinsic Goodness 1: S is intrinsically good =df. S is such that the contemplation of it requires that one favor it. (86)

The crucial notion here is Brentano's notion of requirement (or "correctness"). Zimmerman subjects this analysis to several rounds of revision, but retains the notion of requirement throughout. It is not entirely clear that Intrinsic Goodness 1 or its descendants accomplish what one wants from an analysis, because it is not clear that the notion of requirement is any better suited than intrinsic value to be treated as primitive. But Zimmerman's analysis could provide enlightenment concerning the relationship between goodness and requirement even if he is mistaken in thinking that requirement is the more fundamental concept.

Chapter Five is mainly concerned with Moore's famous "principle of organic unities," which Zimmerman rejects. Here Zimmerman introduces the concept of virtual intrinsic value, in order to help explain a sense in which certain states, such as evaluatively inadequate states, might be intrinsically valuable. He defines virtual intrinsic value as follows:

Virtual Intrinsic Goodness: S is virtually intrinsically good to a certain degree =df. for some state S', (a) S' is actually intrinsically good to that degree, (b) S is a part of S', and (c) S has no actual intrinsic value. (148)

Thus, if we stipulate that it is actually intrinsically good that John is pleased to degree 10 at time t, *John's being pleased* (full stop) is virtually intrinsically good. *John's being pleased* is an evaluatively inadequate state, since no degree or duration of the pleasure has been specified. Thus it has no actual intrinsic value, but it is virtually intrinsically good in virtue of being part of a larger state (*John's being pleased to degree 10 at t*) that is actually intrinsically good. Virtual intrinsic badness is defined in the same way, substituting 'bad' for 'good.'

Unfortunately, virtual intrinsic value is not a useful concept. Every state of affairs is part of at least a million actually intrinsically good states of affairs and at least a million intrinsically bad ones. *Mary's being asleep* is part of *Mary's being asleep and John's being pleased to degree 10 at t1*; it is also part of *Mary's being asleep and John's being pained to degree 10 at t2*. Thus every state that is not actually intrinsically good has millions of virtual intrinsic values, positive and negative. Virtual intrinsic value, as Zimmerman defines it, completely fails to draw any value distinctions between states; every state has all the same virtual intrinsic values (as long as it has no actual intrinsic value). Zimmerman should either redefine virtual intrinsic value or scrap it altogether.

Despite these small problems, on the whole this is a well-reasoned, intellectually honest and thorough book. Some of the other highlights of the book are an extended discussion of the intrinsic value of pleasure, an application of recent work in measurement theory to the concept of intrinsic value, and a helpful attempt in Chapter

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Six to clarify recent well-known arguments against the authority of morality given by Susan Wolf and others. Zimmerman says his book is "difficult to read," and indeed there are places where he sacrifices readability for rigor. But it is well worth the effort. It will set the standard for serious discussions of intrinsic value for years to come.