

8. Intrinsic Value

8.1 Introduction

Many theories of value are theories of intrinsic value. For example, hedonism says that pleasure is the only thing with positive intrinsic value and pain the only thing with negative intrinsic value. Critics of hedonism reply either that some pleasures are not intrinsically worthwhile—e.g., malicious pleasures—or that things other than pleasure are intrinsically worthwhile—e.g., knowledge and justice.

In this case, the disputants agree that all value is either intrinsic or derivative from intrinsic value. Indeed, agreement on this point is sometimes even built into the definitions of key terms. According to an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ‘An intrinsic good is something valuable in and of itself; a nonintrinsic good is something valuable by virtue of its relationship to an intrinsic good (Olson, 1967, p. 367). Similar accounts occur in Hospers (1961, pp. 104-5), Frankena (1963, p. 67), and Brandt (1963, pp. 18-20, 1959, p. 302).

Notice that this rules out by stipulation the possibility of a nonintrinsic good that is valuable by virtue of its relation to something else, but not by virtue of any relation direct or indirect to an intrinsic good.

Many writers distinguish intrinsic value from *instrumental value*, the value something has because it may prove useful in obtaining other things of value.

Others allow also for *contributory* value.

Something, such as a dissonant chord in a symphony, whose value depends upon being a part of a whole, is frequently called a contributory good (Olson, 1967).

Olson (1967) holds that the value of a contributory good derives from the intrinsic value of the whole to which it contributes. Similarly, Brink (1989) explains, ‘Intrinsic goods are to be contrasted with things that are *extrinsically valuable* and

things that are *necessary conditions* of realising intrinsic value'. In these views, intrinsic value is the source of all other value, so, if nothing were of intrinsic value, nothing could have any value at all. But it is also possible to hold that all value is instrumental and that there is no such thing as intrinsic value (Beardsley, 1965; Dewey, 1922, 1939).

In Essay 6 I discuss the idea that intrinsic value serves as the source of all other value. I begin with the hypothesis that there is a way of assigning intrinsic value to states of affairs allows an all value to be equated with 'expected utility' as defined in standard decision theory, with intrinsic value being the 'utility' being expected. (Actually, as I will explain, 'utility' is a poor word for the relevant concept. However, 'utility' is the word used in decision theory.)

I note that this first hypothesis must fail because it leads to overcounting. Whatever intrinsic value is possessed by a state of affairs *S* will also be possessed by any 'larger' state of affairs *T* that includes *S*. Suppose that an event *E* brings about *T* (and so brings about *S*). If an event is credited with the intrinsic value of all the states of affairs that event serves to bring about, *E* must be credited with the value of *T* and the value of *S*. But the value of *T* derives entirely from its containing *S*, so the value of *S* is incorrectly here counted twice. (Indeed, it is evident that there will be infinite overcounting, not just double counting.)

I then note Robert Nozick's suggestion (personal communication) that the difficulty might be met by appealing to a notion of 'basic value,' or 'basic intrinsic value.' If *T* contains *S* and *S* has basic value, *T* has intrinsic value by virtue of containing *S* but *T* does not inherit basic value from *S*. Decision theoretic 'utility' is equated with basic intrinsic value and then value is identified with 'expected utility,' as before. The intrinsic value of a situation is taken to be equal to the total basic value contained in the situation.

The proposal is that there is such a thing as intrinsic value if and only if there is a way to assign basic value to situations in such a way that everything comes out right in this way.

Quinn (1974) observes that this proposal gives incorrect results about the intrinsic value of disjunctive situations. Suppose that S and T are situations with their own distinctive basic values. For example, let S be that a certain person, Jack, is happy to exactly degree D and let T be that a different person, Jill, is happy to exactly degree D . Then consider the disjunctive situation that obtains if and only if either S or T obtains. This situation, S/T , in which either Jack or Jill is happy to degree D , contains (entails) neither S nor T nor (let us suppose) any other situation with basic value. Then S/T has no intrinsic value according to the suggestion, a counterintuitive result, for surely there is intrinsic value in any situation in which either Jack or Jill is happy to a given degree.

This last way of putting things points to what is basically Quinn's own proposal, which I will describe rather loosely. The idea is that our judgements of intrinsic value are tied to actual situations. In any actual situation in which S/T holds, either S holds or T holds, so there will be intrinsic value in any such situation. When we judge that there is intrinsic value in the state of affairs, S/T , we are (in this view) thinking that there is intrinsic value in a realisation of that state of affairs.

Things get tricky because any state of affairs can be treated as a disjunction of more finely grained states of affairs. In the extreme, a state of affairs might be treated as an infinite disjunction of the possible worlds in which that state of affairs would hold. In that case, we would have to identify the intrinsic value of the state of affairs with all of the intrinsic value that actually obtains, which is also counter-intuitive. Quinn sketches a method for avoiding this result, but it is not clear that his method can be made to work.

In any event, Quinn's point about disjunctive situations indicates one way in which the proposal in Essay 6 is inadequate as an account of intrinsic value. But Quinn agrees that the important notion is that of basic intrinsic value. Traditional theories of intrinsic value are best interpreted as theories of basic intrinsic value.

A second weakness in Essay 6 arises from its treatment of expected utility. I will postpone discussion of that for the time being.

A third inadequacy in Essay 6 (and in discussions by others) is a terminological laxity that treats as equivalent various expressions that are not equivalent— x is valuable, x is of value, x is worthwhile, x is good, x is desirable, x has utility, etc. As indicated in Essay 7, this will not do. A good painting is not always a valuable painting and a valuable painting is not always a good painting. Furthermore, and more important, what one values is not the same thing as what one takes to be desirable. Value may well be always either intrinsic, instrumental, or contributory, but (as we shall see) desirability is not. Something can be desirable without being desirable for itself, as a means to something else, or as part of a larger desirable whole.

But before we say more about the concept of (basic) intrinsic value, we need to remind ourselves what role this concept plays in actual philosophical arguments. In particular, let us briefly review some of the disputes in the theory of value with respect to hedonism.

8.2 Malicious Pleasure

One familiar objection to hedonism claims that hedonism cannot give a good account of what's wrong with torture. The hedonist must treat it as an open question whether it would be worthwhile for Jack to torture Jill, just for the fun of it. On the one hand, Jane suffers; on the other hand, Jack gets pleasure. Hedonism must conclude that torture is worthwhile whenever the pleasure Jack gets is greater than

the pain Jill suffers. But, that would seem to be an objectionable result. It would seem that Jack's torturing Jill just for the fun of it can never be worthwhile, no matter how much pleasure Jack would get from it.

Indeed, any pleasure Jack gets from torturing Jill only makes things worse, not better. Suppose Jack tortures Jill in order to extract information from her about some vast criminal conspiracy. It may or may not be true that circumstances justify this torture, if the information is sufficiently vital. But one thing that won't make things better (according to this objection) is that Jack should enjoy what he does to Jill in order to get her to reveal her information. Any pleasure Jack gets from torturing Jill under these conditions only makes things worse, in this view.

We can extend the objection by supposing that Jill is tortured, not for the sake of information she can supply to authorities, but simply in order to make a film. Suppose that the resulting film is watched by George, Herbert, and others, all of whom enjoy watching this depiction of Jill's suffering. It seems the hedonist must agree that some good has come out of Jill's torture, namely, the enjoyment that so many people get from the film. It will be objected that such a conclusion is simply wrong: the pleasure received from watching films of torture is never of any value.

A standard hedonistic reply agrees that malicious pleasure is a bad thing but denies that this shows malicious pleasure to have no intrinsic worth. The hedonist argues that the badness of malicious pleasure is *extrinsic* to the pleasure, having to do, for example, with the undesirable behaviour that might be expected from a person who takes pleasure in another person's suffering. Such a person is likely to treat other people badly and that expected badness is one of the things what makes their malicious pleasure bad. Furthermore, the fact that people like George and Herbert enjoy watching films of torture creates a market for such films that may encourage the making of such films, involving the torture of other women, in

addition to Jill. (This possibility is discussed in MacKinnon, 1987.) If so, that is a further way in which malicious pleasure can be bad without being intrinsically bad.

Nozick (1974, pp. 42-5) raises a different sort of objection to hedonism. Consider two possible situations in which a person has the same subjective experiences, and so the same pleasures and pains. In the one situation, a person is a respected member of society, loved by his or her spouse and children, with accomplishments in business and civic life. In the other situation, the person is laughed at behind his or her back, despised by his or her spouse and children, with what seem to him or her to be accomplishments but are really the work of others.

Which life would you prefer for yourself? If the first, why, if all that matters is subjective pleasure and pain. Why not a life on drugs? Or hooked up to an 'experience machine'? Most people would rather not have such lives even if pleasant experiences could be guaranteed. Nozick argues that this shows that most people assign basic intrinsic value to more than just experience.

In response the hedonist might argue that we value a life of activity, close personal relationships, and solid accomplishments only because such things are regular means of obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain. Our reaction to Nozick's examples is similar to the reaction of a miser who continues to want additional money even after he has more than he can ever use in life.

8.3 Defining Intrinsic Value

With these sample arguments in mind, let us return to the question of defining intrinsic value. Something x has intrinsic value to the extent that x has value that is due entirely to what x is intrinsically and apart from x 's relations to other things.

Certain issues immediately arise. First, there is a serious obscurity in the notion of what is intrinsic to x (Lewis 1983a, 1983b). And even if the notion of an intrinsic property is fully intelligible, it is debatable whether objects have any intrinsic

properties. Secondary qualities, like colour, are not clearly properties that an object has apart from its relations to perceivers. Whether so-called primary qualities are intrinsic to an object would seem to be a scientific issue without an obvious answer. An object's position and shape are treated as relative to a spatio-temporal framework in contemporary physics. An object's mass may or may not be intrinsic; it may for example have something to do with the object's relation to fixed stars.

If x is a state of affairs, situation, or fact, what is intrinsic to x is (I suppose) whatever is entailed or necessitated by x . If so, scepticism about entailment or necessity carries over to scepticism about intrinsic aspects of states of affairs, situations, and facts. Physical necessity does not seem to be sufficient. The fact that x together with the laws of physics implies that y happens in one hundred years, does not mean that y is intrinsic to x . But then the problem arises of distinguishing the right sort of necessity from physical necessity and I myself am doubtful such a distinction can really be made out (Harman, 1973, 1986).

So that is one preliminary issue, concerning what makes something intrinsic to something else. I won't press the issue further here. A second issue is raised by the familiar suggestion that something has value only to the extent that it is or would be valued by someone, as in, for example, impartial spectator theories of value (Essay 11). Should we understand the suggestion to imply that nothing has intrinsic value since what value it has depends on its relation to an actual or possible valuer?

If some version of an impartial spectator theory is accepted, we can agree that there is an important respect in which value is never intrinsic. But we can nevertheless go on to consider whether there are things that are or would be valued intrinsically, that is, valued for the way they are intrinsically and not for their relations to other things. If so, we can still allow for a kind of intrinsic value, namely, value that is due to intrinsic valuing. Something has intrinsic value in this second respect to the extent that it is (or would be) appropriately valued intrinsically.

A third worry is that it is unclear what is meant in saying that value ‘depends on’ or is ‘due to’ something that is or is not intrinsic to the object or state. What sort of dependence is this? We might consider a counterfactual test for determining whether a certain part of the value of x depends on something else y : consider whether x would have that value if x were there but y were not there. But any change like this might affect the overall value of x in various ways. How can we determine whether that would involve a change in the particular part of the value of x ?

If value derives from actual or possible valuing, it is relevant why x is or would be valued. Whatever it is about x that is or would be valued is what x ’s value ‘depends on’ in the relevant sense.

8.4 Instrumental Value

We can suppose that x has instrumental value to the extent that x has value that is due to x ’s being possibly instrumental in bringing about something else. Or, in terms of valuing, x is valued instrumentally to the extent that x is valued because x is (or would be) instrumental in bringing about something else.

This definition does not require that what is brought about have intrinsic value. Money has instrumental value because it can be used to purchase things; we can suppose this without having any particular purchases in mind and without supposing that the items that may be purchased are valued intrinsically. Many of these items—food, shelter, medical care, transportation, and clothing—are themselves highly valued; but it would seem that they themselves are valued instrumentally rather than intrinsically.

Now food is valued in part because it tastes good and it is plausible that the experience of eating tasty food is intrinsically good. If so, money leads indirectly to something of intrinsic value. As we have seen, many philosophers assume that instrumental value is always in this way derivative of the expected intrinsic value to

which something might lead. In what follows we will consider whether this is a defensible assumption.

8.5 Good News and the Value of Information

You want very much for the doctor to say that you are in good health. This is not something you want intrinsically, but it also does not have to be something you want for its expected effects either. It need not be an instrumental desire on your part.

You want the doctor to say you are in good health because you want to be in good health, but you do not expect the doctor's saying so to have a beneficial effect on your health. Rather: you take what he says as a sign or indication of the state of your health.

So, something can be desirable not only intrinsically, for itself, and instrumentally, for what it might lead to, but also evidentially, because of what it indicates.

Many writers call this sort of desirability a kind of 'utility.' That can be misleading, given that the ordinary meaning of 'utility' is usefulness. Good news is not the same thing as useful news. It's goodness or desirability as news is not a kind of utility in any ordinary sense of 'utility.'

Contrary to what I assume in Essay 6, this sort of desirability is not a kind of value. You want the doctor to say that you are in good health, but you do not exactly value the doctor's saying that. What you value is the doctor's telling you the truth. You value: the doctor's saying that you are in good health only if in fact it is true that you are in good health.

The doctor's telling you that you are in good health is good news, desirable news, news you want to hear, but it need not be valuable news.

Now, suppose that the doctor is busy. Patients are given tickets when they arrive at the office and are seen in the order of their tickets. When you arrive at the office, all the tickets for today have been distributed. One of the patients ahead of you

offers to sell you her ticket. You purchase the ticket for fifteen dollars. It would seem that you value having that ticket and, furthermore, that the value of the ticket to you is instrumental. But is this because you anticipate that the ticket may enable you to obtain something of intrinsic value? Well, the ticket might enable you to hear the doctor say that you are in good health. But, although hearing that is something you desire, it is not something you value.

The value of the ticket arises from its making it possible for you to get information about whether you are in good health. You *do* value getting this information, even if you do not expect to act on the information.

Suppose you get information when the doctor says, 'You are in good health.' What makes his saying it information that you value is the connection between his saying it and the state of your health. What you value in his saying it is not intrinsic to the event of his saying it; you value it only because of the way it is related to the state of your health. So, his saying it is not of intrinsic value to you. Nor is it of value because it might lead to something else that you value. Does that mean it is not of instrumental value, either?

No. You value finding out that you are in good health. The doctor's saying that you are in good health brings it about that you find out that you are in good health. So it does have instrumental value after all.

You value finding out that you are in good health even if this information is not useful to you. Is finding out that you are in good health then something you value intrinsically? No. For consider what is it to find out something. One familiar answer is that to find out something is to acquire a belief that is connected in the right way to what is actually the case. In this instance, the doctor says, 'You are in good health' and that leads you to believe that you are in good health. Your belief has the right sort of connection (via the doctor's investigation) with your health, so it counts as knowledge.

What you value in this occurrence (coming to believe that you are in good health) is not completely intrinsic to that occurrence. You value the occurrence in part because it is related in a certain way to the state of your health (although you do not intrinsically value this other thing, your health).

It is plausible that your forming that belief is of *contributory* value to you; it is part of a larger situation or event that is of value, finding out that you are in good health, a situation which includes your actually being in good health and a certain connection holding between that situation and your belief.

8.6 Valuing Retributive Punishment

Here is a related example. Consider someone K who values retributive punishment. K values punishing people for certain crimes quite apart from deterrent or other effect. In a particular case, punishment is not intrinsically valuable, its value derives from an appropriate relation to a past crime. But the value of the punishment does not derive from the value of the crime! What makes the punishment worthwhile is not that it has an appropriate relation to a past event that was worthwhile. On the contrary, what makes the punishment worthwhile is that it bears an appropriate relation to something in the past that was *not* worthwhile!

The punishment has contributory value. It contributes to a larger event with a certain value, namely, the complex event $C \bullet P$, where C is the past crime and P the present punishment. K values P because of its involvement in $C \bullet P$.

At this point it may be useful to make the obvious point that K can take P to be of value because it is part of a valuable larger whole, $C \bullet P$, without supposing that $C \bullet P$ is of positive value. When K says that a certain punishment would be a good thing, K does not mean that the whole situation is a good thing, the crime and then the punishment. It would have been better not to have either. All K means is that, given that the crime has occurred, it would be better that the punishment also occur.

The value of the punishment in this circumstance derives from the intrinsic value of one larger whole when compared with another.

When K considers the value of P , K supposes that C has already occurred. K is therefore comparing the two larger events $C \bullet P$ and $C \bullet \sim P$, where $\sim P$ is the situation in which there is no punishment. In thinking that the value of P depends on its relation to C , K is thinking that $C \bullet P$ is better than $C \bullet \sim P$. On the other hand, K does not suppose that the event $C \bullet P$ is worthwhile. K only supposes that the P part of this event is worthwhile in the sense that it makes the resulting complex event better than it would otherwise have been.

In considering instrumental value, K will allow for the value of punishment, that is, the value of aiding punishment. By bringing about a condition of punishment, K does something that is instrumental in seeing to it that $C \bullet P$ obtains rather than $C \bullet \sim P$, so this action is instrumental in increasing the intrinsic value (or decreasing the intrinsic disvalue), according to K .

There are many other examples of this sort of contributory value. Tom values sitting in a certain chair. Why? Because Freud once sat in that chair. Tom attaches basic intrinsic value to sitting in the chair that Freud sat in. That is, if F is Freud's having sat in this chair and T is Tom's now sitting in the chair, Tom attaches more basic intrinsic value to $F \bullet T$ than to $F \bullet \sim T$. Here T has contributory value, since it makes the difference between $F \bullet T$ and $F \bullet \sim T$.

What Dworkin (1993) calls 'sacred value' is a kind of contributory value. Dworkin observes that to believe in the value of human life is not to be committed to thinking that it would be better if there were more human life. If E is the present existence of a particular human life and F is the future existence of that same human life, this is to say that $E \bullet F$ is intrinsically better than $E \bullet \sim F$, which does not commit one to saying that E is better than $\sim E$.

Classical hedonistic utilitarians can avoid at least one familiar objection if they take happiness to have contributory value rather than simple intrinsic value. They hold that we ought to maximise happiness. ‘Objection: should we maximise total happiness or average happiness? If total happiness is the goal, we should greatly increase the size of the population. If average happiness is wanted, we should eliminate those who are temperamentally unhappy. Neither alternative is plausible.’ Reply: Given that someone exists, it is better if that person is happy. But that is not to say it is good to bring new happy people into existence. In this version, the utilitarian goal is to maximise the happiness of those people who exist.

8.7 Desirability Without Value

Now let’s go back to the case of good news and remove the value of information. Suppose that a question has arisen as to whether you have a dread disease *D*. If you have the disease, nothing can be done for you and you will be dead in a couple of weeks. If you don’t have the disease, no treatment is required. A highly reliable test has been performed to determine whether you have the disease, but you are absolutely not going to be told the results of the test. (The test was performed simply to satisfy the idle curiosity of your doctor.)

Consider your attitude about how the test comes out. You hope very much that the test comes out negative, which means that you do not have the disease. That outcome of the test is a highly *desirable* outcome for you. But you can attach no *utility* to the test’s coming out one way or another.

Nor do you *value* the tests coming out negative. How the test comes out is of no value to you at all. Since you will not find out how the test comes out, it will have no value to you as information. It may have value to your doctor, but (let us suppose) you attach no value to your doctor’s learning a couple of week’s early whether or not you have *D* (especially since the doctor is not going to tell you how the test

came out). If a payment of a small amount of money were needed in order to complete the test (for the purchase of litmus paper), you would have no interest in paying it.

You care about the outcome of the test only because of the indicative connection between the test and whether you have the disease. You want the test to come out negative, because you want it to be the case that the test comes out negative. You take the test's coming out negative to be a desirable thing, even though you are not going to learn how the test came out (except indirectly if you learn that you have survived for more than two weeks). But you do not take the test's coming out negative to be in any way a valuable thing. Here then is a clear example in which value and desirability diverge.

8.8 Conclusion

In Essay 6, I argue against the standard view that all value is either intrinsic, instrumental, or contributory. There I see a need also for a kind of evidential value. But this is a mistake. I confuse value with desirability. Something can be desirable because of what it indicates without having any value, as is illustrated by the doctor's test just described.

Here is an argument for the standard view. Suppose a state S is of value, where this is neither intrinsic or instrumental value. Then S must be of value in part because of a relation to something else T but not because S tends to produce T . It is hard to see how this could be unless the larger event $S \bullet T$ were of greater value, and indeed of greater intrinsic value, than $S \bullet \sim T$. (To the extent that $S \bullet T$ is merely of greater instrumental value than $S \bullet \sim T$, the value of T in contributing to $S \bullet T$ is itself instrumental and not contributory.)

This argument is not conclusive. If there were such a thing as purely evidential or indicative value, that would provide a way to avoid the conclusion. Let H be that

you are healthy and N be that the test comes out negative. $H \bullet N$ is of no more value than $H \bullet \sim N$, so, N does not have contributory value. If there were pure evidential or indicative value, N would have it, and N would then be a counterexample to the argument. Since there is not pure evidential or indicative value, this N is not a counterexample. But there may yet be some further unknown example.