

Varieties of Good

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Abstract

The argument in this paper is that there is often a confusion between saying of something that it is intrinsically good and saying that it is good as an end-in-itself. It leads to the accusation that if you do not value something as having intrinsic worth, you must be valuing it merely instrumentally, and as having value because it promotes something else that you value. This is a mistake that distorts arguments about value, including moral value. The mistake includes seeming to have to assert that many things have intrinsic value, else they could not be defended as having value as ends-in-themselves, leaving them as valuable only insofar as we can make use of them.

1 Varieties of Good

Let us consider as our example trees. One could pick any number of other things that might by someone be said to have value. The way the matter is sometimes put is that if you do not grant intrinsic worth to trees, then you must be granting them only instrumental value, such as for firewood or furniture manufacture. This is a mistake. Someone who holds the first part of the inference is not committed to holding the second part. Indeed, as will be seen later, it is logically impossible for him to do so if it were applied universally to all objects of value. But before moving onto that, let us see how a confusion gives rise to the idea that the inference follows.

In order to do this, we have to see what we mean by something having *intrinsic value* and something *valued as an end-itself*, and see that they are not the same thing. Thus to assert the latter is not to assert the former, and to deny the former is not to be forced to deny the latter.

The pertinence to this observation has been given new energy by the confusion which gives rise to its being propagated by the Green movement. (Although this is an aside as far as the argument is concerned). It is sometimes said that if one does not value trees - say those in a stricken and much-harvested rainforest - intrinsically, one must be saying that the only value the trees can have must be instrumental.

Even before the Green movement got up a head of steam, however, the same arguments were applied to art. The assertion would be that if art were only valued for its promoting something else - such as an elevated or improved character, or because it galvanises people to political action, or because it produces in us certain emotions - then one must be asserting that its value is only instrumental and not intrinsic. This is said to have the undesirable consequence that it denigrates the true value of art since the artwork might be replaced by something else - perhaps a drug in the case of emotion - that produces the same effect. The worth of the intrinsic aesthetic - or more vaguely, artistic - qualities is said to be lost. But this again is to confuse an art object having intrinsic value with its

having value as an end-in-itself. A denial of the former is not in fact a denial of the latter and thus an assertion of mere instrumental value.

We need now to turn to what is meant by 'intrinsic value' and how this may be contrasted with 'valued as an end-in-itself'. By 'intrinsic value' I would understand something having value 'in itself' regardless of what anyone valued. By 'anyone' here, I do not mean just what humans value - or more broadly, what people value (there may be valuing aliens, and even creatures on our own planet who may be granted the capacity of truly valuing things who may in some extended sense be regarded as 'people') - but rather any creature that is capable of valuing. We have to tread carefully here, but the extremes are clear enough. It is clear that things that are inanimate are not normally regarded as valuing things. Turning to live things, we might wonder whether trees, dogs, and dolphins may be said to value things. Fortunately, nothing hangs upon making a decision about this as far as the argument here is concerned. All that matters is that intrinsic value involves things having value! independently of whatever valuing creatures there are and whatever such creatures value. That there can be intrinsic value in this sense, I will argue briefly later, is in fact doubtful; but in any case it does not follow that things cannot have value as ends-in-themselves perforce they do not have intrinsic value.

Let us suppose that things can only have value in a way dependent upon creatures that are capable of valuing things. This does not, as is sometimes supposed, assert that things may only have value instrumentally, or 'for the sake of something else'. Indeed a little thought shows that this would in any case be impossible. Not *everything* can have value because of something else that we value, as we would then be involved in an infinite regress in which no item in the chain could have value save for the value of the next item in the chain, and then the same for that item and so on, with nothing in the end having any value. For anything to have value - even for those who believe that things have value only because they are valued - far from entailing that things could have only instrumental value, entails that some things at least have value as ends-in-themselves. That is indeed how it is seen to work. It is perfectly possible to say that things have value only because ! they have value for valuing creatures, and also to say that, while such things do not have intrinsic value (however that can be), they have value as ends-in-themselves. Valuing creatures can value things as ends-in-themselves. They need not value things only as means; indeed, universally applied, they cannot, without the result being that nothing has value.

Returning to trees. We can value trees without the trees having a value instrumentally and we can value them as ends-in-themselves, without supposing that they have intrinsic value. We can just decide, or come to think, that in some situations, trees are the end of the line - we just like to have trees around, regardless of anything else we value. To say that things only have value as a result of the value that we - or more generally, valuing creatures - place on them is not to say, or even risk saying, that they must therefore be valued only instrumentally - it is consistent with this value being that of an end-in-itself.

Part of the problem of seeing this arises from contrasting 'intrinsic value' with 'extrinsic value', and supposing that to value something extrinsically is the value it has only for 'for the sake of something else', that is instrumentally. Valuing something for the sake of something else is indeed to value it instrumentally, but it is not the same as saying that something can have value *only because* of something else and not intrinsically. It is to bundle too much under the concept of extrinsic, and conflate what should be distinguished. The something else here, it is contended, is that there are creatures that value things. But

to repeat, such creatures can value things as ends-in-themselves and not extrinsically in the sense of 'for the sake of something else'. Something can have value *because of* something else, but not *for the sake of something else*, and it be valued as an end-in-itself.¹

We need to clear up another possible confusion here. Saying that trees may be valuable as ends-in-themselves is not to say that they have, let alone have to have, *absolute* value. That is, we do not need to be committed to holding that another value cannot come higher in what we value and trump a lower value. We might perfectly imagine that in order to save the children in the orphanage as the fire rampages through the forest, we need to cut a swathe through the forest. But we can well see that this is consistent with still valuing the trees, even the trees we cut down, as ends-in-themselves. Indeed, we may regret having to cut the trees down, and to a certain extent as the trees served no instrumental purpose we may see how this indicates that we did truly value the trees as ends-in-themselves.

So it is false, as some Greens and some in philosophy of art have asserted, that we have to say that things must have intrinsic value if they are not to have only instrumental value. The value of things may depend on their being valued, but that does not mean that that value cannot be as an end and not as a means.

It may also be argued that the whole idea of things having intrinsic value is in any case doubtful, and is perhaps even absurd. Suppose there were no creatures in the universe capable of valuing things. We do not have to be too exact about what this means for the purposes of the argument. We do not have to get tied up in which creatures are capable of valuing things and why. The first because we know that we value things: they are important to us, we may love them, we may like them just for what they are. The second because we know what it means to say that an entity is incapable of valuing things: rocks cannot value things. Given this, we know what a universe would be like if it had no creatures capable of valuing things: such a universe would have in it only things like rocks, and not things anything like us. Does anything have value in such a universe? I argue that it does not. It no longer makes sense to say that good or bad things can happen in such a universe; rather things just happen or they do not. The resistance to this conclusion stems from a contradiction, that of somehow positing such a universe while also somehow imagining that we are floating around to view it. Both not there and yet there. In such a universe, when the earth is swallowed by the Red Giant that the sun will probably become one day, it makes no sense to say this is a bad or a sad thing if we strictly adhere to there being no-one there to value the event. You have really got to work hard here to think yourself out of the picture; to, in fact, think every valuing creature out of the picture. What you are left with is a load of rock and gas doing what according to the laws of physics they do. Value has disappeared and has no place in the description of what is happening - it would only still do so if there were valuing creatures around.

It may be objected that the notion of things having only dependent value, necessarily, and in contrast to intrinsic value, makes the value ascribed instrumental - for it might look as though the value of things only exists to serve what the valuers value. But this objection would only make sense if there were some meaningful notion of intrinsic value to contrast with value being placed on it by some valuers or other. When examined closely, it is now obscure what 'intrinsic value' can mean. As soon as we talk about something having value

¹Zimmerman [2]

we start to talk about things outside of it, and so in this sense all value is dependent on external relations. That does not in any pernicious sense mean that the value is merely instrumental. Without this kind of story we would be stuck with the mystifying assertion that an object *just is* valuable, and that is that. This leaves one unable to answer how or why it is valuable. This story is ably filled in, and can only be filled in, ! if we refer to valuers, for then the thing has value in respect of what the valuers value. We can then go on to specify what that is. We may want to expand this is by talking of mental attitudes towards certain objects as well as behaviour and dispositions to behave with respect to the object.

Similarly, it might be said that I have given no clear idea of what valuing something as an end-in-itself means, as opposed to valuing it instrumentally. It may be argued that the kind of situation envisaged, whereby something is valued because of what valuers value, must be suppose that the thing valued is valued instrumentally, not as an end-in-itself. So if someone values something because of the way it looks, or because of the effect it has on him, it may be said that the thing in question has value instrumentally because it serves those purposes. But this objection runs the risk of shooting itself in the foot by trivialising the notion of instrumental value to the point where it is meaningless. Suppose I value trees not because of the effect they have on me, but just because I like to know they are there and trees are nice things. If *that's* valuing something instrumentally, then we would be liable to say that everything is therefore valued instrumentally. But then without a contrast with valuing something as an end-in-itself, the notion of valuing something instrumentally becomes meaningless, as would therefore the statement containing that phrase asserting that in the end everything is valued instrumentally when we refer to value in terms of what valuers value.

Suppose I have a rock picked up off a beach in my fireplace, and I say that it is something I value. If I am asked why I value it, I might reply that I think it is beautiful, looks marvellous in the fireplace, and it brings back happy memories of where I found it. I might also show behaviour that indicates that I would be upset or annoyed if it were lost or removed. This does not make the valuation instrumental - it's as non-instrumental as one can get - the rock serves no purpose in anything but a trivial sense of being something that is there that I value. But what account could be given of its value otherwise? I defy anyone to give one that does not surreptitiously refer to what people (valuers) value. This might be the rock's mere existence - odd and unsatisfying though such a reply might be - but even that would refer to something that someone values. It is hard to see what it would mean to say that the rock had value just anyway regardless of what anyone valued.

Another objection might be that the view of value being dependent on valuers, in particular what human persons value, is unacceptably anthropocentric. But the reverse is the case. It is idea the that trees, and other entities in the universe, would have the value they appear to have to us even if we were not around to value them - that is anthropocentric. It is an attitude of hubristic hegemony to suppose that the value trees and other (planets, stars) things appear to us to have would remain even if we were not around, and further not to notice the dependence of the value on us and what we value. That is truly anthropocentric. Not only might there be other creatures who value things differently, it is quite possible to think that the things that we value have no value at all once we and all such creatures are gone. To be anthropocentric is to deny that what one would have then

would be a universe void of value.²

It might be thought that there is an example of something that has intrinsic value, and that is ourselves. But this overlooks the fact that the reason we have value, and may do so apparently independently of valuers, is because we value ourselves, and may do so as an end-in-itself. What we have is not a case of something that is independent of all valuers, but something that may be independent of all other valuers apart from ourselves. So, we are not a case of something that has intrinsic value. Things have value just so long as there is one valuer left in the universe.

In conclusion, therefore, things can have value as ends-in-themselves, not merely instrumental value, without having intrinsic value; and indeed no thing can, as is usually argued, have intrinsic value at all. The former argument stands or falls regardless of whether the latter one does.

²Something akin to the bleak but brave vision of Bertrand Russell in 'A Free Man's Worship' [1] p. 47.

References

- [1] Russell, B. (1959) 'A Free Man's Worship', in *Mysticism and Logic*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- [2] Zimmerman, M. (2010) 'Intrinsic Value vs. Extrinsic Value', in E. Zalta (Ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>]