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RETHINKING INTRINSIC VALUE

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ABSTRACT. According to the dominant philosophical tradition, intrinsic value must depend solely upon intrinsic properties. By appealing to various examples, however, I argue that we should at least leave open the possibility that in some cases intrinsic value may be based in part on relational properties. Indeed, I argue that we should even be open to the possibility that an object's intrinsic value may sometimes depend (in part) on its instrumental value. If this is right, of course, then the traditional contrast between intrinsic value and instrumental value is mistaken.

KEY WORDS: instrumental value, intrinsic properties, intrinsic value

The phrase "intrinsic value" is something of a philosophical term of art. It is not, I think, an expression in much use in ordinary conversation or writing, not even among the fairly educated. Yet, at the same time, it also seems to me plausible to suggest that when philosophers introduce the term "intrinsic value" they are attempting to provide a label for a concept that does occur in ordinary thought, even if it only occurs implicitly and without a common label.

As an analogy, think of the concept of supervenience. Although one could hardly suggest that the term "supervenience" is anything other than a bit of philosopher's jargon, I think it clear that it is meant to provide a label for a certain kind of dependence relation the basic idea of which is indeed to be found (even if only implicitly) in ordinary thought. That is to say, I think that many people have the *concept* of supervenience, even if they don't have the *term* supervenience – indeed, even if they don't have any term for the concept in question at all. Philosophers provide a label for that dependence relation, and this then allows all of us to theorize explicitly about it.

Similarly, then, it seems to me that our first bit of philosophical jargon, "intrinsic value," is also meant to name a concept that most people do have – the concept of a particular kind of value – even if they don't have this or any other term for the concept in question. Providing the label allows us to theorize explicitly about that type of value.

I say all this not so much to make a fetish out of ordinary beliefs about the concept of intrinsic value, but rather to warn us against the opposite



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danger, that is, that we will make a fetish out of philosophical beliefs about the concept of intrinsic value. In particular, it seems to me that the very label we have provided ourselves – “intrinsic value” – reflects a philosophical theory about the nature of the value in question. And it seems to me that this theory may well be false.

Nonetheless, there is a strong temptation to think that the philosophical theory in question *must* be true. Realizing that the phrase “intrinsic value” is indeed a philosophical term of art, and given that the theory is effectively “built in” to the term itself, there is a strong temptation to think that the theory must be true, by definition. It is this temptation that I am especially keen to resist.

Let me start, then, by distinguishing two concepts, both of which have some claim to being considered concepts of intrinsic value. On the one hand, we have the notion of the value that an object has independently of all other objects – the value that an object has “in itself.” Philosophers sometimes try to get at this kind of value by suggesting that it is the value that an object would have even if it were the only thing existing in the universe. Although this particular suggestion is not without its own difficulties, it points us toward the basic idea that value of this sort must depend solely upon the intrinsic – that is, roughly, nonrelational – properties of the object.¹ After all, if the object’s intrinsic value is had independently of all other objects, that value cannot depend at all upon any of the relational properties of the object; rather, its intrinsic value must depend upon the intrinsic properties of the object alone. It is, of course, a further question whether anything at all does have intrinsic value in this first sense. But such value, if it does exist, depends on an object’s intrinsic properties alone.

This first notion of intrinsic value should be distinguished from a second concept, that of the value that an object has “as an end.” I suppose that the familiar picture at work here goes something like this. Many objects are valued merely as means to other objects – they are valuable solely by virtue of the fact that they will produce (or help produce) those other objects. Those things valued as a means in this way possess “instrumental” value. But what about the objects that the instrumentally valuable objects are means to? In some cases, of course, objects may possess instrumental value by virtue of being means to objects that are themselves of no

¹ The contrast between intrinsic and relational properties is indeed only a rough one, since (as Gary Rosenkrantz pointed out to me) some relational properties are actually intrinsic (for example, certain relations between an object and its parts). For simplicity, however, I’ll continue to refer to “relational properties”; this can be read as shorthand for “*nonintrinsic* relational properties.” Obviously, giving an adequate characterization of the distinction between intrinsic and nonintrinsic properties would be a difficult matter; I won’t attempt that here.

more than instrumental value (as means to still other objects). But eventually – or so the thought goes – we must reach objects that are valuable as “ends” or “for their own sake.” The objects that come at the *end* of these chains – those that are desired (or deserve to be desired) for their own sake – have intrinsic value in the second sense of the term.

I think this familiar picture is itself problematic, for reasons that I will get into later. But its very familiarity should help to fix this second notion of intrinsic value, value as an end.

It is, once again, a further question whether there is anything at all that does have value as an end (although I imagine that very few will deny that there is). But if something does have value as an end, then there is reason to “promote” it, to try to produce the valuable object, or perhaps to preserve and maintain it; we sometimes say that the world is better off “as such” for the existence of the valuable object.²

In laying out these two notions of intrinsic value I have helped myself to various phrases. I’ve spoken of something being valuable “in itself,” or “as an end,” or “for its own sake.” And I’ve spoken of the world being better off “as such.” Let me hasten to admit that none of these phrases wear their meanings on their sleeves, and not everyone will feel altogether comfortable with the uses to which I have put them, aligning them with one or another of our two notions of intrinsic value. The same would no doubt be true for various other phrases that sometimes get used in similar discussions (for example, talk of something being valuable “in and of itself”). I doubt that any of these terms unambiguously pick out a single one of our two concepts, and so my own uses are somewhat stipulative. I can only hope, however, that I have said enough to give a rough feel for the two concepts that I have in mind.

For it does seem to me clear that these are indeed two distinct concepts. And on the face of it there is no reason to assume – at least without further argument – that the two kinds of intrinsic value come to the same thing. That is, it seems to me to be a substantive claim that whatever has value as an end has this value solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties.

Of course, one could accept this substantive claim, and I think that the dominant philosophical tradition here does exactly that. Indeed, as I have already suggested, I think that the dominant philosophical tradition finds expression in the very term that has been introduced to facilitate the discussion – “intrinsic value.”

² There are, of course, still other questions as well. For example, does everyone have reason to promote every object that has value as an end, or is such value, rather, “agent-relative,” so that for any given valuable object only particular individuals have reason to promote it? But I will leave these important questions aside.

More particularly still, what I find plausible is this: the concept of value as an end is one that plays a role – even if unlabeled and often only implicit – in ordinary thought. Seeking to gain the genuine advantages of explicit investigation, philosophers have introduced a label for this notion of value as an end. But accepting the substantive thesis that an object's value as an end depends solely upon its intrinsic properties, they have settled upon the label "intrinsic value" – thus enshrining that thesis into the very vocabulary with which we discuss value.

Now to be honest, I am not a historian, and I don't know whether or not my speculative reconstruction of intellectual history is accurate or not. Indeed, to be utterly honest, I don't even care whether or not my bit of historical story-telling is accurate. What I am keen to argue, however, is that it is indeed a substantive thesis that value as an end depends solely upon intrinsic properties. If we don't see this as the substantive thesis that it is, this is (I suspect) because we use the single, theory-laden label to pick out both concepts. But whatever the cause of our unthinking allegiance to the thesis, we do well to rid ourselves of it. I want to argue that the substantive thesis is false. Or at least (a bit more cautiously) I want to argue that we should not assume the thesis to be true without considerable argument.

That is to say: it seems to me fairly *likely* that value as an end need *not* depend solely upon an object's intrinsic properties. But even if I am wrong about this, I am convinced that the substantive thesis should not be accepted without argument – argument that to date has not been forthcoming.

Since I intend to continue to refer to value as an end as intrinsic value, my own favored way of stating my particular thesis is that intrinsic value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties. To those trained in philosophy, however, this claim can appear incoherent. But of course, I am not claiming that the value of an object which depends solely upon its intrinsic properties need not depend solely upon its intrinsic properties. This is indeed a trivially false suggestion. I am claiming, rather, that value *as an end* need not depend solely upon an object's intrinsic properties. This thesis may be false as well, but at the very least I hope to show that it is not *obviously* false.

If intrinsic value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties then it may also depend at least in part upon relational properties. I'm going to offer several examples to show the reasonableness of allowing for this possibility. My aim, I should note, is not to argue for the plausibility of any given example. (Indeed, I don't myself share the views being discussed in all the examples.) But I hope the reader will agree that each of these

examples presents an intelligible perspective – a position concerning the value of the given object that can be readily understood and is not without its own appeal. Even if we reject these positions after further reflection, we should not be disposed to simply rule them out of court as incoherent. We should leave conceptual space for views of these sorts. But to do this, we have to leave space for the possibility that intrinsic value may depend upon relational properties.

Ultimately, in fact, I want to go even further. It seems to me intelligible to suggest that among the relational properties that are relevant to intrinsic value are the causal properties of an object. And, in particular, it seems to me that among the relevant causal properties might be the very fact that an object has produced (or is a means to) another valuable object. Thus, I want to leave open the possibility that the *intrinsic* value of an object may be based (in part) on its *instrumental* value.

If I am right about this, of course, then the familiar contrast between intrinsic value and instrumental value is mistaken, or at least dangerously misleading.³ But this is a point to which we shall return. First, some examples.

1. Consider, first, a radical subjectivist, who holds that absolutely nothing would have any value as an end, in the absence of some creature who values it. Of course, given that there *are* creatures that value objects as ends, some things do have intrinsic value. That is, the subjectivist does believe that many objects do indeed possess value as an end. Obviously, however, they do not possess that value solely by virtue of their intrinsic properties. For it is not an intrinsic property of an object that it is valued by some creature. It is, rather, a relational property.

Adherents of the dominant philosophical tradition typically say that according to radical subjectivism nothing at all has intrinsic value. Insofar as this merely means that, according to subjectivism, nothing has value solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties, then that may be (virtually) correct.⁴ But it would be dangerously misleading, at the very least, to come away from such a remark thinking that according to subjectivism nothing has value as an end – for this is far from the case. It seems to me preferable to allow for talk of intrinsic value under subjectivism, simply noting

³ Failure to see this point seems to me the most significant error in Christine Korsgaard's otherwise commendable "Two Distinctions in Goodness" [reprinted in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 249–274]. Korsgaard makes many points similar to those I make here.

⁴ Though the case of a creature that values itself may provide an exception to this generalization: isn't it an *intrinsic* property of the creature that it values itself?

that, according to subjectivism, intrinsic value depends upon a relational property.

I might note, if only in passing, that even subjectivists are not altogether free of the temptations inherent in the dominant philosophical tradition (even though they themselves provide an important counterexample to it). For many subjectivists will want to say something like the following: for an object to be valuable as an end, not all forms of being valued are sufficient. In particular, if an object is valued merely as a means to something else, then that object possesses merely instrumental value. In contrast, for an object to be valuable as an end, it must itself be valued “intrinsically.” And typically, I think, this is taken to mean that the object must be valued simply by virtue of what the object is “in itself” – independently of other objects. That is, the only objects with intrinsic value are those objects that are valued simply by virtue of their intrinsic properties.

In short, even though subjectivism constitutes a counterexample (if true) to the thesis that all intrinsic value is based solely upon intrinsic properties, many subjectivists nonetheless hold a corresponding thesis – that all intrinsic valuing is based solely upon intrinsic properties. Presumably, however, if we can free ourselves of our unthinking allegiance to the first thesis, we ought to be able to free ourselves of the second thesis as well. We should allow for the possibility that someone might value an object intrinsically – that is, as an end – even though what they value about the object is not simply a matter of its intrinsic properties. It is important to free ourselves of *both* of these theses, and indeed the best evidence that it is intelligible that intrinsic value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties lies in the very fact that many of us do indeed *value* things intrinsically without doing so on the basis of their intrinsic properties alone.

2. Subjectivism, if true, provides a very general objection to the claim that intrinsic value depends solely upon intrinsic properties. If it is correct, then in (virtually) *no* case at all does the intrinsic value of an object depend solely upon its intrinsic properties. But of course one might reject this general claim – holding that in many cases intrinsic value does depend solely upon intrinsic properties – while still thinking that in at least some particular cases relational properties matter as well.

Consider, for example, the importance of uniqueness. Many people, I think, are attracted to a view according to which the intrinsic value of an object depends in part on how rare that object is, or (in the limiting case) on its being completely unique. Obviously enough, however, uniqueness is not a property that an object has independently of whatever else may

exist in the world; it is a relational property, rather than being an intrinsic one. Thus if an object's value as an end can depend upon its uniqueness, intrinsic value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties.

There are, of course, familiar moves that defenders of the dominant philosophical tradition can make at this point. They might suggest, for example, that uniqueness contributes at best to something's instrumental value, perhaps providing a source of pleasure, say, that cannot otherwise be attained. But the fact remains that many of us would not find it plausible to insist that an account along these lines tells the complete story. We might want to insist, for example, that beautiful objects are *intrinsically* valuable – not merely as a means, but as an end. (They are worth having “for their own sake”; the world is the richer “as such” for their existence.) And it might be, as well, that a *unique* work of art is made all the more valuable as an end by virtue of that very fact.

To forestall misunderstanding, let me hasten to point out that an advocate of this view need not think that uniqueness contributes to the intrinsic value of an object *regardless* of the other properties of the object. That is, one need not hold that anything at all becomes intrinsically valuable as it becomes rare or unique. It might be, for example, that only objects that are independently intrinsically valuable are such as to have their value enhanced by uniqueness. But even if so, the fact would remain that for such objects uniqueness would *increase* the object's intrinsic value. Hence intrinsic value would indeed depend (if only in part) on a nonintrinsic property.

Once again, the present point is not so much to evaluate this proposal as to see that it is *sufficiently* intelligible and plausible that we should want to leave room for it in our conceptual framework. But to do so, we must allow for the possibility that intrinsic value can depend on relational properties.

3. Uniqueness, of course, is not a causal property; but it does not seem difficult to think of examples where someone might well want to ascribe intrinsic value on the basis of properties that are causal. Consider an elegantly designed racing car, one capable of driving at extraordinary speeds while still handling with ease. Someone might value the existence of such a car, and indeed value it intrinsically, as an end. Thus, they might think the world is better off (“as such”) for the existence of such a car; they might think they have reason to bring such a car into existence, or to preserve it and care for it.

Now if we ask what it is about the car that makes it valuable in this way, the answer will presumably make reference to its causal properties – let's say, its ability to perform at a particular speed. Thus, the suggestion

being made is that the car is intrinsically valuable by virtue of its relational properties, including its causal properties.

Once again, friends of the dominant philosophical tradition might suggest that the car is simply valuable instrumentally – as a means of going fast, or as a way of winning the race, or simply as a method of reminding ourselves of our engineering prowess.

But we need not find such alternative accounts compelling. The car itself might never have been driven at all, and indeed we might never intend to drive it. What we might find valuable is simply its *ability* to perform at the given speed. We might value its *suitability* for the task of racing. This is, of course, a causal, instrumental property, at least if we construe these notions broadly (that is, after all, my very point), but it seems strained to insist that this causal property could not conceivably be the basis of the car's being valuable as an end. Rather, the most natural way to understand the view being discussed here is as claiming that the car has intrinsic value *by virtue* of its causal properties. And whether or not you are attracted to this view, you may at least find it sufficiently intelligible that you want to leave room for its possibility.

4. Somewhat similar cases involve excellence in various practical arts – for example, fine cooking. No doubt most of us do value the ability to cook a gourmet meal at least in part for merely instrumental reasons. (Presumably, for example, we might value the ability as a means to fine food, and the food as a means to pleasure.) But I think it is not an uncommon view to hold that such abilities are intrinsically valuable as well – that they are valuable as an end, and not merely as a means.

Now it might be suggested, reasonably enough, that insofar as we do value such skills intrinsically, it is by virtue of their being manifestations of excellence; and perhaps – though this might be more of a stretch – it could also be argued that being a manifestation of excellence is itself solely a matter of the intrinsic properties of the ability. But whatever the merits of these claims, it seems to me that something more needs to be said as well, for we do not typically value excellence in any skill whatsoever – however pointless and useless the skill – even if such excellence is difficult to attain. In the case of cooking, for example, it seems to me that an important part of the reason we value the skill lies precisely in the fact that this skill is *useful*.

I hope I am not being misunderstood. I am not making the unremarkable observation that the ability to prepare gourmet food is instrumentally valuable by virtue of its being useful. Rather, I am suggesting that if we do value this ability *intrinsically*, part of the reason that we do so lies in

the fact that this ability is useful. That is to say, it is the usefulness – the instrumental value – of culinary skill that provides part of the basis of the intrinsic value of that skill. Were culinary expertise to somehow lose its instrumental value (if we no longer needed food, and if it no longer gave us pleasure), it would lose at least some (and perhaps all) of its *intrinsic* value as well. Indeed, it might be suggested that something very much like this has gone on for other practical skills, where technology has robbed a skill of its instrumental value, and thereby reduced or eliminated its intrinsic value as well.

As before, the question is not whether on reflection you will accept this view (though I think that, suitably refined,⁵ it may have much to commend it), but only whether a view like this seems sufficiently intelligible that we should try to leave conceptual space for it. For if we are to do this, we will have to allow for the possibility that intrinsic value can depend, in part, on instrumental value.

5. Although the last two examples suggest that intrinsic value may depend, at least in part, on instrumental value, it should be noted that they are only cases in which instrumental *capacities* are relevant to intrinsic value. It is because of what the race car *can* do that it has intrinsic value, whether or not it ever is used. Similarly, perhaps, it is because of what culinary skill *can* do that it is intrinsically valuable. (Even if the gourmet food produced is never consumed, one might still think the skill itself is intrinsically valuable.)

So let's consider one more example, one where the actual causal history of the object is taken to be relevant to its intrinsic value. Consider the pen used by Abraham Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves. Clearly, this pen had considerable instrumental value – it was the actual means by which a great deal of intrinsic good was brought into the world. But it seems to me that we might want to say something more than this. It seems to me that we might want to suggest that this pen has *intrinsic* value – that the continued existence of this pen has value as an end. Of course, the pen's defining instrumental moment is now long since over. But by virtue of that history, we might say, it now possesses intrinsic value: it is something we could reasonably value for its own sake. The world is the richer for the existence of the pen; its destruction would diminish the value of the world as such.

⁵ To mention just one aspect in need of further specification, a view like this will presumably have to appeal to some notion of a minimal relevant level of usefulness. After all, even “useless” skills have *some* instrumental value.

As usual, no doubt, one can point to continuing instrumental value in the pen: perhaps, for example, its display in a museum edifies us, reminding us of the value of human freedom. But to insist that such ongoing instrumental value is the sole source of whatever value the pen now has seems to me to be an overly narrow view. At the very least, I think I understand someone who suggests that the pen *itself* has intrinsic value – that it is valuable as an end.

Of course, if it does possess intrinsic value, this is by virtue of the fact that this very pen played a historically important causal role. It is not the mere *capacity* to have played this role that singles out the pen as having intrinsic value: any of a large number of other pens near Lincoln could have done just as well. It is, rather, the fact that this particular pen actually played the particular causal role that it did. That is, in this case, at least, intrinsic value seems to depend not upon mere instrumental capacity, but rather upon actual instrumental history.

Note, further, that it seems plausible to suggest that if this pen does indeed have any intrinsic value, most or all of it is due to this instrumental role. Stripped of its instrumental history, the pen probably has no intrinsic value at all. Thus, in this case, it might be suggested, the intrinsic value of an object depends *completely* upon its instrumental value.⁶

Let's pause for a moment and think about the implications of what I have just said. It is, of course, a familiar point that a single object might be both instrumentally valuable *and* intrinsically valuable. But I am arguing for something considerably stronger: I am arguing that something may have intrinsic value – in part, or even in whole – because of its instrumental value. For such objects, then, when we specify the properties by virtue of which the object possesses intrinsic value, we will need to list the instrumental properties as well.

This last point, I think, is likely to encounter particular resistance. Even some of those sympathetic to my suggestion that intrinsic value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties may hesitate before allowing for this possibility. The objection seems obvious: insofar as X is instrumentally valuable, it is only valuable because it is a means to something *else*, Y. To say that it is instrumentally valuable is just to say that it is valuable (in that regard) merely as a means to something else. So it cannot, by virtue of

⁶ That is, but for its instrumental value, the pen would have no intrinsic value at all. Note, however, that to say this is not to claim that the pen's being instrumentally valuable is the *only* feature relevant to its having intrinsic value. One could still insist, plausibly, that other properties help ground the pen's intrinsic value as well. Thus, instrumental value may here be *necessary* for intrinsic value, without being sufficient.

that very fact, be *intrinsically* valuable; it cannot thereby be worth having for its *own* sake.

But it seems to me that this objection simply begs the question. To see this, let's start with a simple point. It is, of course, true that to point out that something is instrumentally valuable is indeed to say something important about *why* it is valuable (namely, that it stands in a certain causal relation to something else of value). But obviously enough, we don't want to hold that if we explain the basis of something's value, it can't possibly be *intrinsic* value that we are explaining. That is, we don't want to insist that intrinsic value is inexplicable. On the contrary, typically at least, we can explain something having intrinsic value by noting the various properties that provide the basis of its intrinsic value. Accordingly, if there really is an objection to the suggestion that in some cases instrumental value may be the basis of intrinsic value, this cannot be on the general ground that intrinsic value has no basis (and so, *a fortiori*, the basis cannot be something's instrumental value). Rather, the objection will have to be to the *particular* basis offered. That is, the objection must be that *instrumental* value can never be the basis of intrinsic value.

But to assert this, without argument, is simply to beg the question at issue. Obviously, if we could assume, without further ado, that intrinsic value must be based solely upon *intrinsic* properties, then it would indeed follow trivially that instrumental value cannot be the basis of intrinsic value. But of course this is the very assumption I am trying to challenge. And once we have allowed for the possibility that relational properties may be relevant to something's intrinsic value, then I don't see how we can rule out the possibility that instrumental value may be among the relational properties that are relevant. At a minimum, it will take a further argument to rule this possibility out; it won't do to simply deny it without reason.

Of course, none of this should be taken to mean that I am suggesting that *all* cases of instrumental value ground intrinsic value. That would be a further claim, and an extremely bold one; and I see nothing to recommend it. It simply seems to me that in *some* cases instrumental value may ground intrinsic value.

If this is indeed possible, then we will need to distinguish between two types of cases involving instrumental value. In the typical case, presumably, something's instrumental value will not contribute to its intrinsic value at all. If the object in question does happen to have intrinsic value (which it need not), this will not be explained – even in part – in terms of its having the instrumental value that it does. In such cases we can speak of the instrumental value as being “mere” instrumental value. (Though we should note that an object's having mere instrumental value is quite compatible

with its *also* having intrinsic value, on independent grounds. Thus, having “mere” instrumental value should not be confused with *merely* having instrumental value – that is, having instrumental value alone, and no other value, including intrinsic value.)

In other cases, however, an object’s instrumental value will contribute to (and perhaps, in some cases, even be a ground of all of) the object’s intrinsic value. In such cases we can speak of “intrinsically valuable instrumental value.” And we can say that the object is intrinsically valuable (at least in part) *because* of, or *by virtue of*, its instrumental value.⁷

To put the point still another way, when an object has *instrumental* value, it is worth having for the sake of something else. And often that is the end of the matter. But in at least some cases, by virtue of the very fact that the object is (or was, or will be) worth having for the sake of something *else*, it is also worth having for its *own* sake as well.

6. Before moving on to other issues, I want to quickly mention one last example. What is the meaning, or value, of life? A very common answer, I believe, suggests that it lies in helping other people attain meaningful lives themselves. From the standpoint of the dominant philosophical tradition, however, this answer is deeply flawed. First of all, helping others is an instrumental relation, and so can provide at best instrumental value to one’s own life. Furthermore, unless there is something *else* that can provide a life with *intrinsic* value, helping another won’t even provide one’s own life with *instrumental* value. So this common answer cannot be complete. (It won’t solve the second problem to suggest that my helping you has instrumental value by virtue of the instrumental value to be found in the fact that you help someone else. For chains of instrumental value – however long – must end in one or more things with intrinsic value.)

Suppose, however, that helping another is not a case of “mere” instrumental value, but rather a case of intrinsically valuable instrumental value. Then the problem is solved. In helping someone else, my own life has intrinsic value – by virtue of this instrumental fact about me. And my acts of helping another will indeed possess instrumental value, provided that I help someone who helps another (who herself helps another, and so on).

⁷ Let me note, if only in passing, that similar locutions may be necessary for other types of value as well. I take it, for example, though I won’t argue the point here, that symbolic value is not necessarily a form of instrumental value. And typically, no doubt, having symbolic value does not itself ground an object’s having intrinsic value. But it does seem possible to me that for at least some symbols the symbolic value *does* itself provide (at least part of) the basis of the object’s intrinsic value. So we may need to distinguish between “mere” symbolic value, on the one hand, and “intrinsically valuable symbolic value,” on the other.

My acts will possess instrumental value because they help produce lives with intrinsic value – lives that themselves possess intrinsic value by virtue of their instrumental value.⁸

In arguing for the intelligibility of a view of this sort, I do not mean to suggest that one who holds a view like this could not, or should not, admit that there are indeed various other sources of intrinsic value in our lives. I simply want to note that a view of the kind I have just sketched *could* be complete in itself – appearances to the contrary notwithstanding – once the dominant philosophical tradition is rejected.

I have been arguing, by means of a series of examples, for leaving open the possibility of an object's intrinsic value depending upon some of its nonintrinsic properties. As I have already explained, however, it is not my purpose to defend any of the specific views that lie behind the various examples. You may find, in fact, that you don't accept any of them. If so, you certainly won't be convinced that intrinsic value ever actually does turn on nonintrinsic properties. (At least, you won't be convinced on the basis of any of my examples; you might, of course, have your own.) But even if this does describe your situation, I hope that you agree that at least some of the various examples are sufficiently intelligible that we should be willing to leave open the *possibility* that relational properties may play a role in determining intrinsic value – that the possibility should not simply be ruled out of court, without further argument. And if you do agree to this much, then I have accomplished what I set out to do.

There may be some, however, with a certain amount of sympathy to my basic position, who nonetheless take issue with the way in which I choose to express it. They might agree, for example, that an object's value as an end need not depend solely upon its intrinsic properties. But they might insist nonetheless that value as an end should not be *called* "intrinsic value" – that the *term* "intrinsic value" should be reserved for the value that an object has solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties. Thus, I might be correct to distinguish value as an end from intrinsic value, and I might be correct to chastise the dominant philosophical tradition for its assumption that value as an end must depend solely upon intrinsic properties; but I am wrong to report any of this by saying that *intrinsic* value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties.

This objection can certainly be offered in a friendly spirit. The objector might go on to offer some alternative favored term for value as an end,

⁸ There is no threat of infinite regress here. If you and I help each other, for example, then each of our lives has intrinsic value, and each of our lives has instrumental value – and each life has its intrinsic value by virtue of its having instrumental value.

be it “final” value,⁹ or “end” value, or “basic” value, or what have you. The thought is simply this: the term “intrinsic value” does seem to wear its meaning on its sleeve – at least to the philosophically trained – and the meaning it seems to wear is not that of value as an end, but rather the value that an object has solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties. So why don’t we agree to reserve the term for that kind of value? Any other use is potentially misleading; and in any event, intrinsic value – understood as the value that an object has by virtue of its intrinsic properties alone – is certainly a *kind* of value worth studying, isn’t it?

I find myself inclined to reject this friendly suggestion. I certainly agree that if we do continue to use the term “intrinsic value” for value as an end, then we leave ourselves open to natural misunderstandings – in particular we leave ourselves open to the common philosophical assumption that intrinsic value must depend solely upon intrinsic properties, the very assumption I have been challenging. Nonetheless, it seems to me that other possible names (at least, those I can think of) are themselves unsatisfactory and potentially misleading in their own ways, and so this weakens at least some of the reason we might have for abandoning the tradition of referring to value as an end as “intrinsic value.”

Furthermore, I am inclined to be skeptical of the claim that intrinsic value – understood as the value that an object has simply by virtue of its intrinsic properties – does pick out a particular kind of value worthy of study. Why should we think that it does?

Remember, first of all, that to pick out the value that an object has by virtue of its intrinsic properties alone is to identify a type of value on the basis of a certain type of metaphysical fact, namely, that the relevant properties are all “one-place” properties. But why should we think that this picks out a kind of value of particular interest from the perspective of *value* theory? Why should this type of value be of any more interest to us as value theorists than it would be to pick out the value that an object has on the basis of its relational properties alone? Or the value that an object has on the basis of its 17-place properties alone?

Some, I suppose, might be tempted by the claim that value based on intrinsic properties alone is a kind of value that an object has necessarily. And necessary value would, I grant, be an interesting type of value to study. (Of course, even if this were so, we would have no reason to assume that value based on intrinsic properties would be the *only* kind of necessary value.) But in any event, the tempting thought is mistaken: since intrinsic properties need not be had necessarily, value based on intrinsic properties alone need not be possessed necessarily. So what, then, *is* especially inter-

⁹ This is Korsgaard’s proposal, in “Two Distinctions in Goodness.”

esting about value based on intrinsic properties alone? Is there anything at all that makes it especially worthy of study?

Note, second, that without further argument we cannot even assume that all instances of value based on intrinsic properties alone will be instances of value as an end. (That is, to put it in my preferred terminology, we cannot assume that value based on intrinsic properties alone is always a kind of intrinsic value.) Admittedly, intrinsic properties alone can never ground instrumental value, but for all that, in any given case the value that is grounded in intrinsic properties alone might be a relatively unimportant or “lesser” value. Thus, we cannot assume – in the absence of an argument – that value grounded in intrinsic properties alone is always value as an end.¹⁰

I have, of course, already argued for the possibility that value as an end need not be based on intrinsic properties alone. But now I am drawing our attention to a further point: in the absence of further argument, we cannot even assume that value based on intrinsic properties alone will be an *instance* of intrinsic value. So again, we must ask, what if anything makes it especially worthy of study?

Suppose we stipulate that when we talk about the value that an object has solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties, we are restricting our attention to value as an end. That is, even if some of the intrinsic properties ground some *other* kind of value, a value that is not the basis of, or a kind of, value as an end, we are simply going to disregard that aspect of the value. So now (thanks to the stipulation) we can assume that *if* there is any value based on intrinsic properties alone, this will be a kind of value as an end.

But recall that we are now leaving open the possibility that nonintrinsic properties may be relevant to value as an end as well. (After all, we are exploring what was meant to be a friendly suggestion – open to the possibility that I have been championing.) Now take an object that has value as an end. Presumably, it will have value as an end by virtue of some subset of its properties. And for all we know, the relevant subset will include both intrinsic and nonintrinsic properties. Suppose so: then we can say that the relevant properties jointly determine the object’s value as an end. So far, so good.

¹⁰ Consider, for example, logical goodness (the goodness that an argument has when it is a logically good – i.e., valid – argument). This is presumably a kind of value that depends solely upon the intrinsic properties of the objects that have it (that is, arguments); yet few would take it to be an instance of value as an *end*. (I owe this example to Fred Feldman, “Hyperventilating about Intrinsic Goodness,” in this issue of *The Journal of Ethics*.)

But does it make any sense to talk of the value that the object has *solely* by virtue of its intrinsic properties? Can the value that the object has as an end be *divided* in this way – into a part due solely to intrinsic properties, and into a different part (based perhaps solely upon relational properties, or perhaps on both intrinsic and relational properties)? I don't see any good reason to assume that this must be so.

It might be, of course, that something like this *is* so – if the overall value of the object as an end is the *sum* of more particular values as an end, based on specific subsets of properties, and if there is some guarantee that intrinsic properties make an independent contribution to this sum. But what reason do we have to think that anything like this is correct?

Obviously, if intrinsic properties were the only properties that could be relevant to an object's value as an end, then the difficulty would be resolved: it would indeed make sense to talk of the value (as an end) that an object has solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties – for this would simply be its value as an end. But once we allow for the possibility that nonintrinsic properties can be relevant as well, there is no reason to assume – in the absence of further argument – that the contributions to value as an end made by the various relevant properties can be segregated in this way. And in particular, there is no reason to assume that it even makes sense to talk of “the” value contributed by the intrinsic properties. Rather, it may only make sense to talk about the various ways in which the intrinsic properties contribute – together with the relevant relational properties – to the object's value as end.¹¹

It may be helpful to bear in mind that few contemporary philosophers, if any, would assume that each relevant intrinsic property makes its own independent contribution to an object's overall value as an end. Instead, most (or all) would allow for “interaction effects” between the relevant intrinsic properties. But once we allow for the possibility that nonintrinsic properties may be relevant to value as an end as well, there is no reason to assume (without further argument) that the intrinsic properties nonetheless together make an independent contribution to that value – independent, that is, of the relevant *nonintrinsic* properties. For all we know, we should expect interaction effects here as well. Indeed, it might be that every contribution to value as an end made by the relevant intrinsic properties depends upon the object's nonintrinsic properties as well. Talk of the value contributed by intrinsic properties *alone* appears to rest upon the undefended assumption that such systemic interaction effects won't arise.

¹¹ See Shelly Kagan, “The Additive Fallacy” [*Ethics* 99 (1988), pp. 5–31], for a related discussion of a similar point from another part of ethics.

There are, then, several reasons to be skeptical of the thought that the notion of the value that an object has based solely upon its intrinsic properties is one that is worthy of study from the perspective of value theory. Indeed, the very thought that it makes *sense* to talk about the value that an object has in this way may rest on a mistake.

And this explains my uncharitable hesitation to accept the suggestion that we reserve the term “intrinsic value” for the value an object has solely based on its intrinsic properties, and find some other term for the value something has as an end. I am not at all sure there is anything of interest that we would be saving the label for. Meanwhile, a perfectly important category – value as an end – would go lacking a familiar and evocative label.

So I am inclined to reject the friendly suggestion, and I propose instead that we reverse the proposal. I suggest that we reserve the term “intrinsic value” for value as an end, and leave it to others to come up with a short label for the value that an object has simply by virtue of its intrinsic properties – once they convince us that there is indeed some value in finding a label for this other category!

Finally, let me mention one other proposal that might be offered in a tolerably friendly spirit. I have, of course, been talking as though various kinds of *objects* are the possessors of intrinsic value. And although I have been prepared to use the idea of an object rather broadly, to include, for example, acts and lives and skills, many of my examples have been ordinary material objects – people, and cars, and pens.

It might be suggested, however, that although it is a common enough practice to view objects as the bearers of intrinsic value, it is nonetheless preferable to hold that facts (or, perhaps, states of affairs) are the only genuine bearers of intrinsic value. If a view like this is correct, there will of course be fairly easy translation from the common, informal object-based idiom to the strictly correct fact-based idiom. Instead of saying that Lincoln’s *pen* has intrinsic value, for example, by virtue of its having been used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, we will say that what has value is the *fact* that there exists a pen which was used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. More generally, wherever we might say that object O has intrinsic value, by virtue of having properties P, Q, and R, we will say that what has intrinsic value is the fact that there is an O that has P, Q, and R.

I won’t here enter into the various arguments that might be used to support (or attack) the claim that facts are the only bearers of intrinsic value. Note the following, however: it is not implausible to suggest that it is an intrinsic property of a given fact that it concerns the specific objects

and properties that it does. That is, it would not be implausible to claim that it is an intrinsic property of the *fact* that there exists a pen which was used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation – that it is about a pen, that it is about a pen having been used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, that it is about that pen existing, and so forth. (In contrast, it is not an intrinsic property of that fact that I am now writing about it.)

If we accept this claim about the intrinsic properties of facts (and for the sake of argument, I simply propose to grant it), and we then combine it with the earlier claim that strictly speaking only facts are the bearers of intrinsic value, then the following result emerges: one can accept the thrust of all of my examples, while still accepting the dominant philosophical tradition that intrinsic value turns solely upon intrinsic properties.¹²

Consider Lincoln's pen, once again. I claimed that we should leave open the possibility that it has intrinsic value, given the particular causal role it played. Thus, it seemed, we had to leave open the possibility that nonintrinsic properties (and, in particular, instrumental properties) were relevant to intrinsic value. But if we claim, instead, that strictly speaking the only bearers of intrinsic value are facts, we will say that what has value is (let's say) the fact that there exists a pen that was used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. We can recognize that this fact has intrinsic value by virtue of its being about a pen being used in a particular way – but since we are assuming that this is an intrinsic property of the fact in question, it will still be true that only intrinsic properties of the fact are relevant to its intrinsic value.

To state the point generally, let's introduce some jargon. When it is a fact that O has properties P, Q and R, let's call O the *object* of the fact, and let's call P, Q, and R the properties *ascribed* by the fact. Note that typically the properties ascribed by a fact are not themselves properties *of* the fact: we are not saying that the *fact* that O has P *itself* has P.

What my various examples have in common, then, is this: I have tried to point to cases where there is some object, O, which might be thought to have intrinsic value by virtue of having various relational properties P, Q, and R. I took this to show the appropriateness of leaving open the possibility that intrinsic value might depend on relational properties. But if the only bearers of intrinsic value are facts, then it is irrelevant to note that P, Q, and R are themselves relational properties, for these are only properties ascribed *by* the fact, and not (in the examples I've given) properties *of* the fact. Admittedly – if my examples are to be believed – then the *fact* that

¹² This point is made with regard to the particular case of pleasure in Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures" [*Ethics* 107 (1997), pp. 448–466]. I presume that he also sees that the move can be generalized, although he doesn't say so explicitly there.

O has P, Q, and R has intrinsic value, and presumably it only has intrinsic value because (let's say) it concerns the particular object that it does, and ascribes to that object the particular properties that it does. Thus, what is relevant to the intrinsic value of a given fact is the property of concerning the particular object that it does, as well as the property of ascribing to that object the particular properties that it does. But these properties are themselves intrinsic properties of the fact (or so we are assuming). So the intrinsic value of the fact turns solely upon its intrinsic properties, and the dominant philosophical tradition remains correct when it insists that intrinsic value is based on intrinsic properties alone.

I am inclined to respond to this proposal by suggesting that it preserves the letter, but not the spirit, of the dominant philosophical tradition. Admittedly, if facts are the only bearers of intrinsic value, and if it is an intrinsic property of a given fact that it concerns the particular object that it does, and that it ascribes the particular properties that it does, then it seems likely that something's intrinsic value is determined solely by its intrinsic properties. Thus is the letter of the tradition preserved.

But note that this approach places no restrictions whatsoever on what the relevant ascribed properties are like. That is, when a given fact has intrinsic value it will have that value by virtue of ascribing various specific properties to the object – and nothing at all guarantees that the ascribed properties will themselves be intrinsic properties. Thus, the fact that O has P may have intrinsic value, but only by virtue of its ascribing P to O; and P itself may well be a nonintrinsic property. And if the examples I have given are accepted, then this is exactly what we will sometimes find: the *ascribed* properties relevant to intrinsic value will not themselves always be intrinsic properties.

This, it seems to me, still represents an important departure from the dominant philosophical tradition about intrinsic value. At a minimum, I think it represents a failure to capture some of the spirit of that tradition. I suspect that most (though, no doubt, not all) friends of that tradition would want to say something like the following: if facts are indeed the only bearers of intrinsic value, then we must also place a restriction on what sorts of *ascribed* properties are relevant to intrinsic value. Only intrinsic ascribed properties can be relevant. That is, if a fact has intrinsic value, it can only be by virtue of ascribing intrinsic properties to its object.

I take it, after all, that most friends of the tradition would insist that uniqueness cannot be relevant to intrinsic value (that the fact that something is unique cannot be intrinsically valuable). They would insist, similarly, that usefulness cannot be relevant to intrinsic value (that the fact that something is useful cannot be intrinsically valuable). And they

would insist as well that instrumental value cannot be relevant to intrinsic value (that the fact that something has played a particular instrumental role cannot be intrinsically valuable). But to insist upon these things – within the framework in which only facts have intrinsic value – they must insist that the ascribed properties relevant to a fact’s intrinsic value must themselves be intrinsic properties.

But it is precisely this suggestion, I think, that we should now resist. Even if we agree that only facts are bearers of intrinsic value, we should insist that there is no good reason to assume (in the absence of further argument) that the only ascribed properties relevant to intrinsic value are themselves intrinsic properties. And this, I believe, still flies in the face of the dominant philosophical tradition.

The point perhaps can be put this way: certain “base level” properties – properties that can be had by ordinary objects, among other things – are relevant to intrinsic value. If *objects* are the bearers of intrinsic value (as I have assumed for most of this paper) then these properties are “directly” relevant to intrinsic value: objects will have intrinsic value by virtue of having these properties. If, on the other hand, only *facts* are bearers of intrinsic value, then these base level properties are only “indirectly” relevant to intrinsic value, but they are, nonetheless, still relevant: a fact will have intrinsic value by virtue of ascribing these properties to its object.

The dominant philosophical tradition (or so it seems to me)¹³ takes a stand concerning these base level properties, whether they are viewed as directly relevant (if we take an object-based approach) or indirectly relevant (if we take a fact-based approach): it holds that the base level properties relevant to intrinsic value must themselves be intrinsic properties. But if the examples I have discussed are to be believed – or even if we merely find some of them sufficiently intelligible that we want to leave conceptual room for cases like them – then the dominant philosophical tradition must still be rejected. The move to a fact-based approach cannot – all by itself – eliminate our need to challenge the tradition.

¹³ But perhaps I misunderstand the dominant philosophical tradition on this matter. After all, some philosophers firmly within that tradition do note the relevance to intrinsic value of such apparently nonintrinsic properties as *knowing*, as opposed to merely believing. (I owe this objection to Ben Bradley.) Note, however, that precisely in such cases friends of the tradition typically feel the need to start talking about the intrinsic value of (facts about) complex *wholes* (consisting of, for example, the knower and the object known). This allows them to insist that what is actually relevant to intrinsic value is simply an intrinsic property of the *whole* (roughly, that one part, the knower, stands in the right relation to another part, the object known). Yet it is often difficult to see what motivates the turn to wholes in this way, except the very belief that the *only* base level properties that are relevant to intrinsic value are *intrinsic* properties.

To be sure, freeing ourselves of the grip of what I have been calling the “dominant philosophical tradition” concerning intrinsic value will not be easy. For as I have readily conceded, that tradition is reflected in the very terminology that we use to name and discuss the kind of value with which I have been concerned – *intrinsic value*. But it is time to challenge our unthinking acceptance of that tradition. It is time, I say, to rethink intrinsic value.

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