Intrinsic value and intrinsic properties

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1 Introduction

It's now commonplace — since Korsgaard (1996) — in ethical theory to distinguish between two distinctions: on the one hand, the distinction between value an object has in virtue of its intrinsic properties vs. the value it has in virtue of all its properties, intrinsic or extrinsic; and on the other hand, the distinction between the value has an object as an end, vs. the value it has as a means to something else. I'll call the former distinction the distinction between intrinsic and nonintrinsic value; the latter is between value as-an-end and instrumental value.

I don't want to get into the arguments that this distinction among distinctions is needed, or that it has been neglected in traditional treatments of "intrinsic value". I'm going to take all that for granted. Suffice it to say that there is such a distinction, that objects can sometimes be instrumentally intrinsically valuable, and sometimes be finally extrinsically valuable (I will give some examples in a moment); and let it be taken that people sometimes use "intrinsically valuable" when they clearly mean "valuable as-an-end", and use that misleading phrase to conflate the two.

The question I am interested in is downstream of all this. It is: once we have distinguished intrinsic value from value as-an-end, is there any point in carrying on talking about intrinsic value? Does the concept of intrinsic value, as distinct from value as-an-end, have any interesting role to play in ethical theory?

Shelly Kagan, for one, answers these questions in the negative:

> [T]he 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 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? ... I find myself inclined to reject this friendly suggestion.... I am inclined to be skeptical of the claim that intrinsic value — understood as the value that an object has solely by virtue of its intrinsic properties — does pick out a kind of value worthy of study. Why should we think that it does? (Kagan 1998, p. 290)

Kagan's actual argument for his skepticism, which appears in his paper immediately below the passage quoted is not, I think, very good.[1] But he hardly needs an argument — it is enough to throw out the challenge: Why should ethicists be interested in value due to intrinsic properties? Why is it more interesting, significant, or theoretically important than value due to extrinsic properties? This question does not have an obvious answer, and Kagan is surely right to ask it.

I think that Kagan's question can be answered. Intrinsic value — understood as the value that an object has by virtue of its intrinsic properties — should be of importance to ethicists.

2   Defining "intrinsically valuable"

To show why this is, I first need to make the definition of intrinsic value, in its post-Korsgaard sense, more precise. The idea is that something is intrinsically valuable iff it is valuable in virtue of some intrinsic property it has. That is, x is intrinsically valuable iff there's some property F, such that x is F, F is intrinsic, and x is valuable in virtue of having F. This last, "in virtue of", clause is difficult to understand. I think that it could be paraphrased by saying, again, that x is F, and also saying that the presence of F-ness makes for value; that it is good that there be things which are F.

That is:

> x is intrinsically valuable iff there is a property F such that:
>
> a) x is F,
> b) it is good that there be things which are F, and
> c) F is intrinsic.

This can be made clearer with an example. Suppose I have a piece of chocolate, and I name it "Choco". There is a property, *being made of chocolate*, such that Choco has this property; it is an intrinsic property; and it is good that there be things made of chocolate. So Choco is intrinsically valuable. This may sound outrageous, but that is only because it is too easy to hear "intrinsically valuable" as "valuable as an end in itself". Of course chocolate is only good because it is a means to pleasure (or something like that) so Choco is only instrumentally intrinsically valuable. It would be outrageous to suppose that Choco is valuable as an end, but that is not the claim here.

When we say that something is valuable, but not necessarily intrinsically so, I take it that we mean that that thing has some property, not necessarily an intrinsic one, in virtue of which it's valuable. That is:

> x is valuable (intrinsically or extrinsically) iff there is a property F such that:
>
> a) x is F, and

b) it is good that there be things which are *F*.

Henceforth, when I say that something is valuable, without explicitly saying that it is intrinsically valuable, I mean that that thing is valuable in this sense. Obviously, the senses of "is valuable" and "is intrinsically valuable" that I am defining here cannot be anything like "is valuable all things considered". Having just one good-making property isn't sufficient for that. It's intended to be something more like "is valuable *pro tanto*" or "is valuable in some respect".

There is another use of "... is intrinsically valuable" and "... is valuable" that one sees in the literature and that cannot be analysed in the ways given above. This is where a property or kind of thing is said to be valuable or intrinsically valuable. For example: "*Being in a state of pleasure* is intrinsically valuable", "Chocolate is intrinsically valuable". It just doesn't make sense to read these as "... is valuable in virtue of its intrinsic properties" — for who knows what the intrinsic properties of abstract objects such as properties and kinds are?

I read "*F* is valuable" (where *F* is a kind or property) as "it is good that there be things which are *F*"; and I read "*F* is intrinsically valuable" as "*F* is intrinsic and valuable" — that is, "*F* is intrinsic and it is good that there be things which are *F*".

For completeness, I will also say a little about how to define "is valuable as-an-end" in this framework. I have nothing at all substantive to say about this; I am going to leave the idea of final value intuitive. To do this, I am going to suppose that we can make sense of the idea of it being not just good that there are *F*s, but good as-an-end that there are *F*s. So:

x is valuable as-an-end iff there is a property *F* such that:

a) *x* is *F*, and

b) it is good as-an-end that there be things which are *F*.

Similarly for a definition of instrumental value:

x is valuable as a means to Φ iff there is a property *F* such that:

a) *x* is *F*, and

b) it is good as a means to Φ that there be things which are *F*.

Thus if we say that Choco is valuable as a means to pleasure, we mean that there is a property — *being made of chocolate*, as it might be — such that Choco has this property; and such that it is good as a means to pleasure that there be things which are made of chocolate. I take it that "it is good as a means to Φ that Ψ" entails "it is good that Ψ". So "Choco is valuable as a means to pleasure" entails "Choco is valuable".

3   The possessor-independence argument

I am now in a position to answer Kagan's challenge; to say what we want intrinsic value for; to say, that is, why ethicists should care whether objects are valuable in virtue of their intrinsic properties or their extrinsic ones. They should care, I think, for much the same reason that philosophers in other areas care about the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. That reason is that the distinction is needed to ensure that certain predicates of philosophical importance are possessor-dependent.

A possessor-independent predicate is one such that if anything falls under it, then everything does; and a possessor-dependent predicate, of course, is one that is not possessor-independent. Let me give an example. An object changes iff there's some property that it has at one time, and lacks at another time. Consider the property of *being such that there is a sandcastle on the English coast*. Right now, there is such a sandcastle, suppose; so the Great Pyramid has this property. Later on, when the last English sandcastle is washed away, the Great Pyramid will lack this property. Given the definition of change with which I started, the Great Pyramid will change at this time. Similar arguments can be used to show that if anything changes at some time, then the Great Pyramid changes at that time. "Changes", it seems, is possessor-independent. If one thing changes, everything does.

This is a bizarre-sounding conclusion. Surely it's possible for one object to change without that change affecting all other objects! The standard line in contemporary philosophy of time is to distinguish between the sense of change defined above, sometimes called "Cambridge change" and intrinsic change. An object changes intrinsically iff there's some intrinsic property that it has at one time, and lacks at another. Intrinsic change is possessor-dependent. It is what we mean by "change" in most ordinary usage.

It seems to me that something analogous happens in the case of "is valuable". To show that, I am going to exhibit an argument that "is valuable" is possessor-independent — that if anything is valuable, everything is. This argument is, I think, sound. Its conclusion sounds absurd because what we often mean by "is valuable" is "is intrinsically valuable", and it would be absurd to suppose that "is intrinsically valuable" is possessor-independent.

I'll continue with the example of the piece of chocolate named Choco. Suppose that Choco is made of chocolate, that it is good that there is chocolate, and that Choco is valuable. I will show that if this is the case, then everything is valuable. Here is the argument:

1. Choco is valuable (intrinsically or extrinsically).

2. There is some property — *being made of chocolate*, say — such that Choco is made of chocolate, and it is good that there be things which are made of chocolate. (from 1, by definition of "is valuable")

3. For any properties *F* and *G*, if

    (a) it is good that there be things which are *F*, and if

(b) there are things which are *F* iff there are things which are *G*,

then it is good that there be things which are *G*.

4. There are things which are made of chocolate iff there are things which are such that something is made of chocolate.

5. It is good that there be things which are such that something is made of chocolate. (from 3, 4)

6. Everything is such that something is made of chocolate. (from 2)

7. Therefore, everything is valuable (intrinsically or extrinsically). (from 5, 6, by definition of "is valuable")

Of course the object Choco, and the property *being made of chocolate* were arbitrarily chosen, and could be replaced with variables at no cost to the validity of the argument. So the argument shows, if it is sound, that if anything at all is valuable, everything is.

3.1 The soundness of the argument

You might have trouble parsing premise (4), and the intermediate conclusions (5) and (6). What is this talk of "things which are such that something is made of..."? The idea behind this is that we are working with an *abundant* conception of properties. There is a property for any way things might be, however gerrymandered or gruesome. The property named by "being such that *p*", where *p* marks a place filled by a sentence, is the property that everything has iff that sentence is true. This is, to be sure, a crazily extrinsic kind of property. But my whole point is that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties needs to be attended to here. To make this point, I must start with a notion of property that includes crazily extrinsic properties.

Aside from its extrinsicality, there is nothing remarkable about this property. Some people think that properties are functions from possible worlds to extensions — to the set of things which have the property in the world in question. On that view, *being such that something is made of chocolate* is a perfectly respectable property. It is the function that maps worlds containing chocolate to those worlds' respective domains, and maps all other worlds to the empty set.

You might doubt premise (3). For it to be attractive, the biconditional represented in it by "iff" has to be quite strong. It couldn't be a material biconditional, for the material biconditional "There is pleasure iff there is pain" is true, since both pleasure and pain exist, but, I take it, it is good that there be pleasure, and not good that there be pain. I read it as a strict biconditional. If you go in for that kind of thing, you might like to read it as an even stronger biconditional — a relevant biconditional, say. Once the biconditional is strong enough, I think, premise (3) will be true. The same type of biconditional has to figure in premise (4), on pain of equivocation. Fortunately, the truth of (4) is compatible with a very strong reading of the biconditional.

3.2 Why intrinsic value is interesting

Since the possessor-independence argument is sound, "is valuable" (as defined in section 2) is possessor-independent. This is much at odds with ordinary usage. A chocolate lover might say that Choco, the piece of chocolate, is valuable, but Caro, the piece of carob, is not. But we've just seen an argument that shows that, if "is valuable", in this context means what I say it means, then Caro is just as valuable as Choco. There is no premise in this argument that is incompatible with the love of chocolate. The chocolate lover, therefore, means something different by "is valuable". I suggest that they mean "is intrinsically valuable".

In general, when we say that some particular thing "is valuable", while another is not, we typically mean "is intrinsically valuable". This blocks the possessor-independence argument, for if we substitute "is valuable" with "is intrinsically valuable" throughout it, the final step that leads to the conclusion becomes invalid.

It might be thought that we don't need the notion of intrinsic value to block the possessor-independence argument. Just as the argument doesn't show that intrinsic value is possessor-independent, it doesn't show that value-as-an-end is possessor-independent. Perhaps when the chocolate lover says that Choco is valuable while Caro is not, she means that Choco is valuable-as-an-end, while Caro is not. But that would make it impossible to hold that Choco is only instrumentally valuable (as a means to gustatory pleasure, say) while Caro is not even instrumentally valuable. Surely, this is possible, and is, indeed, what our chocolate lover thinks — one who holds that chocolate is valuable as an end is does not a chocolate lover but a chocolate fetishist.

4   Conclusion

Intrinsic value — understood as value an object has in virtue of having an intrinsic property — is a moral category that can earn its keep. As well as extrinsic properties that are instrumentally valuable have instantiated (e.g. *being a dollar note*) and intrinsic properties that are valuable as ends (*being in a state of pleasure*, perhaps) there are intrinsic properties that are instrumentally valuable (*being made of chocolate*) and maybe extrinsic properties that are valuable as ends (examples of this are harder to come by, but properties relevant to biodiversity or to the status of great artworks might count). And there may well be, therefore, objects which instantiate any of these properties, and which thereby count as non-intrinsically instrumentally valuable, intrinsically valuable as-an-end, intrinsically instrumentally valuable, or non-intrinsically valuable as-an-end respectively.

The distinction between intrinsic and non-intrinsic value is useful because the category of instrumental value (intrinsic or extrinsic) is ill-behaved in a certain way. If anything is instrumentally valuable (intrinsically or extrinsically), everything is; and this is contrary to the way we would like to think about instrumental value. The solution is to distinguish between those things that are instrumentally intrinsically valuable, and those that are merely instrumentally valuable

(intrinsically or extrinsically). It is the latter category that is ill-behaved, and the former that we mostly mean when we talk about instrumental value. If we are to carry on thinking about the distinction between instrumental value and value as-an-end, we need to also think about intrinsicality.

Notes

[1]This is Kagan's argument that intrinsic value (in my sense, not his) is uninteresting:

> [T]o 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? (Kagan 1998, p. 290)

The general challenge in this paragraph — just why is intrinsic value of any ethical interest — is, I think, an excellent and insightful point. But the specific argument, that it is of no more interest than the (obviously uninteresting) value that an object has on the basis of its 17-place properties, confuses intrinsicality with monadicity. The extrinsic property of *being famous* is just as one-place as the intrinsic one of *being cubical*. Elsewhere in his paper, Kagan is careful with these distinctions (see his footnote 1, page 278). In this passage, he seems to have let his rhetoric get the better of him.

References

Kagan, S. (1998). Rethinking intrinsic value. *Journal of Ethics 2*, 277–297.

Korsgaard, C. (1996). Two distinctions in goodness. In *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, pp. 249–274. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.