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## TWO APPROACHES TO INTRINSIC VALUE

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In this paper I shall examine some views on intrinsic value as a theoretical concept of ethical theories, and specifically of environmental ethical theories. I shall elaborate a distinction between two ways of understanding intrinsic value – the “definitional” and the “correlational” approaches – and I shall argue that the latter is preferable<sup>1</sup>.

Values are features entities may have or not; and intrinsic value is a value. Intrinsic value is a feature some morally considerable items have. Being morally considerable is then entailed by having intrinsic value. The question is, does the converse also hold? Is there possible to conceive an entity’s lacking intrinsic value, although it has a moral standing? Of course this is not a conceptual problem, and the decision is relative to the ethical theory assumed. P. Taylor, for example, explicitly states that his concept of intrinsic value<sup>2</sup> applies to those beings *x* that, on his view, are morally considerable, but **also** satisfy two additional conditions: they are such that a state *S* of affairs in which their good is realized is better than another similar state of affairs in which it is not realized (or not realized to the same degree), and (a) *S* is realized independently of *x*’s being valued, either intrinsically or instrumentally, by some human valuer; (b) independently of *x*’s being in fact useful in furthering the ends of a conscious being or in furthering the realization of some other being’s good, human or nonhuman, conscious or nonconscious<sup>3</sup>. Then on his theory of environmental ethic the collection of beings which have intrinsic value is included in the collection of those beings which have a good of their own. Now, having a good of its own is the core property advanced by Taylor, and thus on his theory all beings having a good of their own are

<sup>1</sup> This paper elaborates some points following arguments presented in my *The Conceptual / Normative Distinction in Environmental Ethics*, this journal, 1–2/1998.

<sup>2</sup> P. Taylor, in his *Respect for Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986 uses the phrase ‘inherent worth’; but, as customary in discussions of this issue, I shall take it as synonymous of ‘intrinsic value’.

<sup>3</sup> P. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, p. 75.

morally considerable. Consequently, the intrinsically valuable beings are morally considerable. But this argument would support the converse relation only if conditions (a) and (b) made no point. However, I doubt that either P. Taylor or his critics take these conditions as trivially true. So, at least on some environmental ethic theory, intrinsic value is not as large a concept as moral considerability<sup>4</sup>.

We know then that (at least) some morally considerable beings are intrinsically valuable. But some properties are relational, while others are not relational. How is intrinsic value? My answer will be very cautious. First, I shall distinguish two different contexts in which it could be framed. Second, I shall argue that even in the latter, and usually taken into account one, a very unhappy though common confusion conflated the substantive issue of conceiving intrinsic value as a property, with the epistemological issue of its explanatory role in ethical theories.

When I say: this human has intrinsic value, and this dolphin has intrinsic value, and this fir tree has intrinsic value, and this virus has intrinsic value, and this owl species has intrinsic value, etc., the accumulating examples give way to the feeling that my claim consists in (at least) two parts: (i) that plenty of entities have intrinsic value; and (ii) that they have the **same** sort of intrinsic value. Now, (ii) is ambiguous. Having the same property **P** might happen either when **P** applies equally to, e.g., **x** and **y**, or when **P** comes to **x** and to **y** in degrees. The ambiguity concerns the issue whether intrinsic value is held equally by all intrinsically valuable entities. Some authors adopted versions of environmental<sup>5</sup> egalitarianism<sup>6</sup>, others rejected it<sup>7</sup>. The fact I wish to notice is that both parties shared, however, the idea that intrinsic value must somehow be a **relational** property: it is supposed to relate morally considerable entities with an element of a collection of indices<sup>8</sup>. An egalitarian would proceed as

<sup>4</sup> The above argument does not exclude the possibility to establish the converse relation by quite another route. But I do not see how that conclusion would co-habitate with the non-trivial conditions (a) and (b).

<sup>5</sup> Or, to put it in another way: 'ecological' or 'biospherical'.

<sup>6</sup> See Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989; P. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, etc. T. Regan coined a suggestive phrase to express this idea: intrinsic value, he says, is a 'categorical' concept (*The Case for Animal Rights*, p. 240).

<sup>7</sup> Classical discussions of this thesis are in Goodpaster, 'On being Morally Considerable', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1978, pp. 308–25, and in R. Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 2nd ed, 1991, especially pp. 153–155. A recent attack directed against this thesis is in W. French, 'Against Biospherical Egalitarianism', in *Environmental Ethics*, 17 (1995), pp 39–57.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, their assumption is even stronger: both parties conceive intrinsic value as a **functional** property, in that it attaches to each entity exactly one index.

follows: she would start with a set  $\mathcal{E} = \{1, 0\}$  of two indices, and with a ranking relation  $\leq$  on this set. In the simplest case, the definition of  $\leq$  is:  $1 \leq 1$ ,  $0 \leq 0$ , and  $0 \leq 1$ ;  $0 \leq 1$ , e.g., indicates that the index 1 is a mark of 'more' intrinsic value than the index 0. Then she would say that, as a relation, intrinsic value applies to pairs like  $\langle x, 1 \rangle$  or  $\langle x, 0 \rangle$ , where the first component of the pair is a (morally considerable) being and the second is an index. If intrinsic value applies to  $\langle x, 1 \rangle$ , then say simply that  $x$  has intrinsic value; and if the latter situation obtains, simply say that  $x$  has not intrinsic value. The opponent's strategy is not essentially different; the main difference is that her collection of indices is larger: it would look like:  $\mathcal{E} = \{n_1 \dots n_k\}$ . She would say that a being  $x$  has intrinsic value to degree  $n_i$  just in case the relation of intrinsic value applies to the pair  $\langle x, n_i \rangle$ . The elements of the new collection  $\mathcal{E}$  of indices are also supposed to be ranked by the relation  $\leq$ . The properties of  $\leq$  cannot be settled, of course, in advance; they depend upon the ethical theory adopted. Notice, however, that since values are not thought in general as quantitative concepts, relation  $\leq$  is not likely to be defined as a total ordering or as a metric relation<sup>9</sup>. Intrinsic value proves thus to be a 'hidden' relational property. It is similar, e.g., to having the right to vote. Indeed, the right to vote might be correlated with an equal vote for each person, or with more votes for some persons (or, equivalently, with 'weighted' votes). In the first case, the collection  $\mathcal{E}$  contains two indices, let them be 1 and 0; and that  $x$  has the right to vote means that  $x$  is correlated by the voting property with 1; but, if correlated with 0,  $x$  could not claim to vote. Suppose now that  $\mathcal{E}$  is a larger collection. Then some people might have more votes, or 'weighted' votes (as happens with some of the owners of a company).

Surely, even if intrinsic value were relational in this sense, environmental ethicists would not be much impressed. The reason is that they have in mind another idea of a non-relational property. Rather they think that intrinsic property, if non-relational at all, is thus because it is **not** supposed to relate beings  $x$  with some **concrete** entities like people, animals, plants, species, ecosystems, etc. The cases when a relate is an abstract entity like indices or numbers seem to make no difference. I suspect, however, that in this second context the conflicting views which have been advanced (and fiercely defended or criticized) misrepresented the role of the concept of intrinsic value in environmental ethic theories. Usually, talk of what makes a natural item intrinsically valuable involved three aspects: (1) non-instrumentality; (2) non-externality; (3) independency.

<sup>9</sup> It might be necessary to require that there is an index  $n_{inf}$  such that for each element  $n_i$  of the collection  $\mathcal{E}$  it holds that  $n_{inf} \leq n_i$ . In this case that  $x$  has intrinsic value to degree  $n_{inf}$  amounts to:  $x$  has no intrinsic value.

A being is instrumentally valuable insofar as it is a means to another being. A being has non-instrumental value if it is not a means to some other being's end: it is an end in itself, and it is valuable for its own sake. This characterization of what is to make a being have non-instrumental value does not, of course, guarantee that such beings do exist; it only shows that they might exist. It is the job of ethicists to move from possible to actual assertions of existence. For traditional ethics, humans (and God) arguably had non-instrumental value. Environmental ethicists' aim was to show that elements of some collections of natural beings also have this sort of value. Second, a being has external value insofar as its value depends on its relations with other beings. It has non-external value if its value can be established with reference only to its non-relational properties. Think of a universe in which that only being exists; if it is better than a universe in which even it did not exist, then the being has non-external value. Non-externality means thus that the being's value depends only upon its 'intrinsic', i.e. non-relational properties or nature. Our small isolation test was meant to eliminate possible references to other entities, and hence to eliminate reference to relations holding among these entities and our subject. Third, a being has independent value insofar as it is possessed independently of the fact that it happens to be valued by some valuer(s). Independency is 'objectivity'; and, conversely, non-independence is a mark of subjectivity.

Non-instrumentality, non-externality and independency are clearly related in various ways. Indeed, if something has value because it is a means for some of my ends, then surely its value is not independent. Or, to put it in other terms: if some being has an independent value, then it has it non-instrumentally. But this does not preclude one to coherently hold that something's value is dependent, though non-instrumental<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, it is consistent to hold that something has independent value, but not in virtue of its non-relational properties. As H. Rolston, III forcefully argued, in a holistic web the idea that an individual being's value depends on the individual's non-relational properties is doubtful; systemic value is independent, although not necessarily acquired in isolation<sup>11</sup>. We have thus established that:

(V<sub>1</sub>) Independency entails non-instrumentality.

(V<sub>2</sub>) Independency and externality are consistent.

From (V<sub>1</sub>) and (V<sub>2</sub>) a piece of formal logic allows the derivation of:

(V<sub>3</sub>) Non-instrumentality and externality are consistent.

<sup>10</sup> J. O'Neill, in 'The Varieties of Intrinsic value' in *The Monist*, 1992, pp. 121–123 argues that C. L. Stevenson's emotivist account is an example of such a position.

<sup>11</sup> H. Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1988; *Conserving Natural Value*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.

A tiger, e.g., has non-instrumental value; its value depends then upon what it is in itself, not on the contingent fact that it is a means for some other being. The tiger also has non-external value: *caeteris paribus*, a state of affairs or a universe in which it exists is better than a state of affairs in which it does not exist. But suppose that we move it on the Moon. Would it retain its non-instrumental and non-relational value? H. Rolston, III is unambiguous: non-externality fails, since 'the tiger is what it is where it is, in the jungle'<sup>12</sup>.

Now, some beings have intrinsic value and others lack it. When is such a claim true and when is it false? For many authors, the answer to this question looks trivial. Intrinsic value, they assume, is nothing but one of the three already met properties – non-instrumentality, non-externality, and independency – or a combination thereof. Even worse, as J. O'Neill argues, intrinsic value is ambiguously identified with them. Not surprisingly, some arguments involving intrinsic value are fallacious: they tacitly involve illicit translations among non-instrumentality, non-externality or independency. Consider, e.g., the following argument:

'1. To hold an environmental ethic is to hold that natural objects have intrinsic value.

2. The value objects have in virtue of their relational properties, e.g., their rarity, cannot be intrinsic value.

Hence:

3. The value objects have in virtue of their relational properties has no place in an environmental ethic.'<sup>13</sup>

In the second premiss, the object's external value is considered, while in the first one its non-instrumental one is concerned. The argument is then committed to the fallacy of equivocation. Notice, however, that in fact it is very ambitious. It does not intend to establish a statement about non-instru-

<sup>12</sup> See *Conserving Natural Value*, p. 174. It might be objected that the example does not prove anything, for one of its premisses – that in jungle the tiger had non-external value – is false. The objection is not correct. First, questions of consistency and entailment, involved in theses (V<sub>1</sub>) – (V<sub>3</sub>) are not theory-relative: as I argued in the paper mentioned in note 1, they are disciplinary. Hence, it is possible to take in the premiss the tiger's non-instrumental and non-external value as settled on a certain environmental ethic theory, and argue that they are not necessarily connected, because according to another theory their roles can be distinguished. Second, relational properties taken into account are relative to the context of inquiry. While the tiger was contemplated in jungle, the global structure of its environment was not explicitly considered; it came relevant only when the hypothesis of moving the animal on the Moon was imagined. We can never be sure that all relational or non-relational properties of entities are taken into account. In fact, this is not even compulsory, insofar as any inquiry depends on some theoretical assumptions.

<sup>13</sup> J. O'Neill, 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value' p. 124. O'Neill attributes this argument to A. Gunn, 'Why Should We Care about Rare Species?', in *Environmental Ethics*, 2 (1980), pp. 17–37, especially pp. 29–34.

mentality, non-externality or independency; its target is **intrinsic value**. In the first premiss, intrinsic value is correlated with the non-instrumental value; in the second one, with non-external value. Up to this moment, I deliberately did not talk about it in a very rigorous way. But now it is necessary to enlighten some assumptions about intrinsic value. Obviously, it must somehow be related with the non-instrumental, non-external and independent values. But **how?** A first attempt: is this: intrinsic value is just one of these values, or possibly a combination thereof. Let us return to P. Taylor's characterization of intrinsic value<sup>14</sup>. It explicitly involves all of three sorts of values: in its (b) part non-external value is involved; in the (a) part, non-instrumental and the independent values are intertangled. (Surely, if  $(V_1)$  holds, this is not very unhappy.) In the initial stages of the debate on intrinsic value, many authors restricted their account to non-instrumentality; in more recent ones, independency was obsessively discussed.

The literature on the issue whether intrinsic value is independent value and, if yes, what sort of independent value it is, grew enormously. But usually talk of independent value was intermingled with talk of non-externality. The idea was that in questions of externality we should distinguish between: (i) the objects' value that does not depend upon their relations with any other object; and (ii) the objects' value that does depend upon their relations with human valuers. The (ii) interpretation is narrow: if an object has non-external value under (i), then it also has non-external value under (ii). Therefore, when the (i) interpretation of non-externality is taken into account, we easily get a new principle:

(V<sub>4</sub>) Non-externality entails independency  
and hence, by (V<sub>1</sub>), we get.

(V<sub>5</sub>) Non-externality entails non-instrumentality.

In this way, the three properties are linearly ordered, with non-externality in the main role. However, on the (ii) interpretation, nothing precludes taking non-externality as a relational property. The only constraint is to avoid relating the subject beings with human valuers.

It is worth noting that with (ii) non-externality is defined by essentially using the notion of independency. Now the views on independency affects the views on what makes a being having non-external value.

Unfortunately, the notion of an object's value (non) **depending** on its relations with other objects lacks clarity. There are two senses in which we can say that the value of an object is not dependent upon other objects. Thus, on interpretation (ii), they are:

(n-Dep<sub>1</sub>) The non-external value of objects is a property that exists in the absence of evaluating agents. (Weak view)

<sup>14</sup> *Respect for Nature*, p. 75.



(n-Dep<sub>2</sub>) The non-external value of objects is a property that can be characterized without reference to evaluating agents<sup>15</sup>. (Strong view)

The next popular move is to wonder about the merits of the strong and the weak views, and various brands of ‘anthropocentrists’ and ‘non-anthropocentrists’ dispute the battle field<sup>16</sup>. I think, however, that the tentative distinction between the strong and the weak views is not successful. But to see why, examination of another attempt to relate intrinsic value with non-instrumental, non-external and independent values is necessary. On O’Neill’s account, in many situations ‘intrinsic value’ is interchangeably used to mean any of these three values; the lack of required distinctions among different senses of the term, he correctly argues, seldom leads to fallacious arguments.

I have two objections against O’Neill’s suggestion. First, the different ‘senses’ of ‘intrinsic value’ are mutually connected (*via* principles (V<sub>1</sub>) – (V<sub>3</sub>), or even (V<sub>4</sub>) and (V<sub>5</sub>)). A better position would be to say that they are not different senses, but different **aspects** of what makes a being have intrinsic value. Surely, they should not be conflated. But it does not follow that we have different concepts of intrinsic value. Second, and more importantly, O’Neill conflates in his account:

(a) an object’s having a property **definable** with respect to the members of a collection **C** of properties; and

(b) an object’s having a property **in virtue of** falling under (some) members of a collection **C** of properties, or under a combination thereof.

When one defines a property **P** with respect to members of **C**, the use of the term ‘**P**’ is in fact dispensable. To say that *x* has **P** is just short for a more complex assertion about *x* in which the term ‘**P**’ does not occur (its occurrences are systematically replaced by expressions involving only the terms for members of **C**). I suspect that as a rule environmental ethicists are committed to this definitional view on intrinsic value. As P. Taylor’s definition of intrinsic value shows, the usual manoeuvre is this: take a collection **C** of properties; then determine their mutual connections, their roles and their applications in the preferred theory; and finally define intrinsic value with respect to the members of **C**. I tried above to argue that usually **C** is taken to consist in at least the properties of non-instrumentality, non-externality and

<sup>15</sup> See an analogous distinction in J. O’Neill, ‘The Varieties of Intrinsic Value’ p. 126. The general case, when any other objects might substitute evaluating agents is difficult to make sense of. But, more importantly, the weak and strong views, as defined above, are more relevant in environmental ethics debates, and this is the reason why I shall discuss them.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Anthropocentrism’ and ‘non-Anthropocentrism’ are views concerning independency. But they become relevant to non-externality once it is supposed, under the (ii) interpretation, to involve independency.

independency. When, in a certain theory **T** of environmental ethic, intrinsic value is defined with respect to (some of) these properties, their relational or, respectively, their non-relational character automatically extends over intrinsic value. If, e.g. we allow interpretation (ii) of non-externality, or if we accept the existence of 'systemic value', then one of the defining properties of intrinsic value are relational, and consequently intrinsic value is itself relational. On the definitional approach, intrinsic value is a relational or a non-relational property of objects depending on the theory adopted. It is theory-laden; it makes no sense to say in a trans-theoretically manner that intrinsic value is relational or that it is not relational<sup>17</sup>.

The other approach is **correlational**. According to it, that **x** has intrinsic value is the moral correlate of the fact that **x** falls under (some of) the properties in **C**. When I say that **x** has intrinsic value **in virtue of** the fact that **x** falls under (some) members of **C** or under a combination thereof, I am not bound to conclude that intrinsic value is dispensable. But the correlation between intrinsic value and the properties in **C** is intensional. Hence, intrinsic value has its own, irreducible role in ethical theory.

On the correlational approach, the nature of the properties in **C** requires, e.g., that intrinsic value applies to some beings and not to others, that it is categorical or not, etc. The range of applicability of the members of **C** help delineate the range of applicability of intrinsic value. But the correlation needs not be symmetrical. Therefore, we might hold, e.g., that **x** has intrinsic value in virtue of the fact that in conditions  $C_1, \dots, C_k$  it has independent value. However, it is possible that the converse make no sense: to argue that the value of **x** is independent of any human valuers in virtue of the fact that it has intrinsic value seems odd. The reason is that, intuitively, when we say that **x** has intrinsic value in virtue of (some) members of **C**, we assume that the nature of those properties can be determined previously to any inquiry about intrinsic value. Hence, we seem to assume intuitively that the characteristics of intrinsic value do not in any way constrain the characteristics of the members of **C**. Further, the correlation does not preclude an independent role of intrinsic value in ethical theories.

One cannot infer, then, that once some properties in **C** are relational, intrinsic value should also be relational. The implication is just that an object has intrinsic value in virtue of some relational properties. And we can consistently hold that intrinsic value is a non-relational property, while the properties in virtue of which a being has intrinsic value are relational.

Two consequences of the correlational approach are worth mentioning. They concern the connections between intrinsic value, and non-externality and

<sup>17</sup> Note that on this approach the theoretical status of the members of **C** is **not** yet settled.

independency, respectively. First – *pace* H. Rolston, III – even if, e.g., in a holistic web it is problematic that an individual being's value is to be determined with respect to its non-relational properties (i.e. with respect to the community it belongs to), logically nothing follows about the non-relational character of intrinsic value. Surely, we can insist that a being *x* has intrinsic value in virtue of the fact that it is included in a web of relations peculiar to the community it belongs to. And yet *x* either has intrinsic value, or it has not absolutely, without reference to anything else. '[T]here are no intrinsic values without contributory instrumentality, beneath, above, behind, and before.'<sup>18</sup> On the definitional approach, this suffices to settle the relational character of intrinsic value; but, on the correlational one, it is still possible to regard it as non-relational. It is a property certain beings have or not in virtue of what is going on in the application of the theory we took into account. Indeed, in the case a theory *T* (of environmental ethic) does not question non-external value, there is no problem to regard the intrinsic value beings have as non-relational. Turn to a case in which this assumption fails. Would it be necessary to conclude that *now*, in this case, intrinsic value changed to a relational property? Or to conclude that it was relational in the former case too, but this feature of it was deeply hidden? (**How** was it then relational?) The correlational approach meets no trouble here: according to it, intrinsic value is in fact non-relational, although a being might have it in virtue of relational properties.

*Mutatis mutandis*, similar arguments apply to independency. Suppose, for example, that (n-Dep<sub>2</sub>) is false. Then the value objects have cannot be characterized without reference to evaluating agents. Although it might be the case that other beings than humans have value (because, if (n-Dep<sub>1</sub>) is true, then their required properties we are concerned with continue to exist in the absence of human valuers), they are not valuable in themselves, i.e. 'completely independently of any consciousness, since no value can in principle [...] be altogether independent of a valuing consciousness [...] Value is, as it were, projected onto natural objects or events by the subjective feelings of observers.'<sup>19</sup>

On the definitional approach, the argument is correct: if intrinsic value cannot be characterized without reference to consciousness, then of course it is not a non-relational property, and specifically one of its relates is human consciousness. A being can have value, but its source is human consciousness; intrinsic value is not anthropocentric, but it is anthropogenic. The correlational approach, however, does not support Callicott's conclusion. For even if no being has intrinsic value unless some valuers value it, we are not yet entitled

<sup>18</sup> H. Rolston, III, *Conserving Natural Values*, pp. 174–175.

<sup>19</sup> J. B. Callicott, 'On the Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Species', in B. G. Norton (ed.), *The Preservation of Species*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986, pp. 142–143.

to infer that intrinsic value is anthropogenic. We can validly deduce only that a being has intrinsic value in virtue of a certain fact; its value is correlated with the fact that some consciousness values it in a certain way. But that being's having intrinsic value is not just short for its being valued by some consciousness; nothing prevents it from having other grounds. Callicott claims that, '[i]f all consciousness were annihilated at a stroke, there would be no good and evil, no beauty and ugliness, no right and wrong; only impassive phenomena would remain.' Whether intrinsic value is **defined** as involving a conscious valuing, no being could have it in the absence, of such a consciousness. However, if intrinsic value is thought to be a property of a being **x in virtue of** the fact that some consciousness is at work, and if it happens that the consciousness disappears<sup>20</sup>, we can not infer that the existence of the consciousness is a necessary condition of **x's** having intrinsic value. (Note that the definitional approach excluded this possibility.)

<sup>20</sup> Consider the following reasoning: no human consciousness is present; then the value, if any, of a being **x** cannot be characterized with reference to human valuers. Since they are absent, how would it be possible that a natural being have any independent value? This reasoning looks valid. But in fact it is fallacious. The reason is that it rests on an ambiguity in principles (n-Dep<sub>1</sub>) and (n-Dep<sub>2</sub>). The notions of **presence** (implicit in (n-Dep<sub>2</sub>)) and **absence** (explicitly referred to in (n-Dep<sub>1</sub>)) of evaluating agents are not clear. Callicott sees no problem with them, and he takes them to concern the **joint** existence of valuers and of valued beings; when they do not exist together, value judgements are vacuous.