

Some objections to an objectivist conception of intrinsic value

Emrys Westacott

In his essay "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," G. E. Moore defines intrinsic value in the following way:

To say a kind of value is 'intrinsic' means merely that the question whether the thing possesses it, and in what degree it possess it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question.^[1]

This is by no means Moore's only attempt to define the concept of intrinsic value, but it seems to have been the definition he was ultimately most satisfied--or least dissatisfied--with.^[2] The term 'intrinsic nature' in the above definition may be understood as referring to a thing's intrinsic or non-relational properties.^[3] From the fact that these properties are non-relational it follows that this conception of intrinsic value is thoroughly objectivist: intrinsic value is conceived by Moore as being a kind of value that something has inhering in it or attached to it *irrespective of whether anyone actually values it*. This is a concept which would seem to provide a suitable ground for Moore's objectivist ethics, and it continues to be upheld and employed by contemporary philosophers such as Chisholm who also wish to defend a strong form of objectivism in ethics.^[4] This objectivist notion of intrinsic value should be clearly distinguished from a quite different concept of intrinsic value, that of non-instrumental value. To say that something has intrinsic value in this latter sense means merely that it is valued by someone for its own sake and not merely as a means to something else.^[5]

I have no objection to using the term 'intrinsic value' in this second sense, as a synonym for non-instrumental value, and with the clear implication that such value requires there to be a valuer. The first, objectivist conception of intrinsic value, however, I regard as deeply problematic. I would not say that the concept as used by Moore and Chisholm is meaningless. Moore's elucidation of the term 'intrinsic value' is comprehensible, and can be recognized as one of the senses carried by the words. I wish to argue, however, first, that we have no criteria for deciding which things are intrinsically valuable (in Moore's sense); and second, that in the absence of such criteria Moore's objectivist notion of intrinsic value has no useful employment in ethics. I propose to begin by considering Moore's well-known criticism of Mill in *Principia Ethica* in order to bring out the nature of the problem, and then to put forward two arguments against Moore's objectivist conception of intrinsic value. Throughout the following discussion I will follow Moore in treating the expressions 'intrinsically valuable' and 'intrinsically good' as being interchangeable. I will also assume, except where I explicitly indicate otherwise, that these terms mean just what Moore takes them to mean--namely, as referring to the value that a thing or state of affairs possesses in virtue of its internal nature, and thus independently of whether anyone actually values it.

Let us first consider Moore's criticism of Mill. In a famous--or perhaps

infamous--passage Mill writes:

The only proof capable of being given that a thing is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it.^[6]

In his critique of Mill, Moore begins by describing this claim, and the general argument of the passage from which it is taken, as a “naive and artless use of the naturalistic fallacy.”^[7] He elaborates on this, describing Mill’s argument as an attempt “to prove that ‘good’ means ‘desired’.”^[8] Drawing out the implications of this interpretation, he insists that Mill “has attempted to establish the identity of the good with the desired”,^[9] and finally identifies the target of his attack as “Mill’s contention that the desired is necessarily good.”^[10]

We can perhaps agree with Moore (and countless critics after him) that Mill’s analogy between visibility and desirability is a poor one: ‘visible’ means ‘capable of being seen,’ whereas ‘desirable’ means something like ‘worthy of desire.’ Nevertheless, it seems perfectly clear that in the passage cited Mill is not trying to prove that what is desired is necessarily good. Rather, he is trying to give an answer to the question: What possible criteria might we use in deciding what things fall under the concept “desirable”? What considerations are relevant when we are trying to decide what is intrinsically valuable? The criterion for deciding which things fall under the concept “visible” is obvious; we apply this concept to whatever we can see. In this case to see something is to prove that it is visible. Now clearly, to desire or to value something does not prove that the thing in question is desirable or intrinsically valuable. And Mill frankly admits the impossibility of proving conclusively that something is desirable in itself, insisting that “questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term.”^[11] Why, then, does he think that what people actually desire is a relevant consideration? His answer, it seems to me, might run as follows.

Either there are criteria for determining which things are intrinsically valuable or there are not. If there are no such criteria, then we have absolutely no way of knowing if anything is intrinsically good or bad, or intrinsically better or worse than anything else. And if this is the case then we must regard any conformity between what is intrinsically valuable and what we actually value for its own sake as a mysterious coincidence, and any assertion of such conformity as a mere act of faith. If, on the other hand, there are criteria for deciding which things are intrinsically valuable, then either people’s actual desires and beliefs about what is valuable are relevant, or they are not. Since it is difficult to see what else could be relevant, we are left with no alternative but to consider what things people actually desire for their own sake (i.e. what things have non-instrumental value).

In actual fact, Moore himself adopts a procedure which is in principle no different from that by which Mill tries to ‘prove’ the unprovable. Under cover of his isolation test--a thought experiment in which one considers whether or not a thing would be valuable if it existed entirely by itself^[12]--he is evidently looking to what is actually valued (at least by himself) as a guide to what is intrinsically valuable. Now Moore, like Mill, accepts that such a procedure does not constitute a proof. But given his polemic against Mill, this amounts to an admission that the considerations he takes into account in trying to determine what has intrinsic value (namely, what appears intrinsically valuable to him) are not really relevant. It would seem, then, that Mill and Moore end up equally relying on the principle that in trying to decide which things have

intrinsic value all considerations are equally irrelevant, but some are less irrelevant than others.

The problem in both cases, I believe, is the attempt to utilize a purely objectivist notion of intrinsic value. Such a notion may be meaningful in a limited way. But just as a transcendent conception of truth, detached from its natural context of verification, is ultimately vacuous, so a concept of value that is totally unconnected to people's actual desires and valuations must be deemed philosophically untenable. I now propose to put forward two separate arguments to support this point of view.

In "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," Moore says,

if a given thing possessed a certain degree of intrinsic value, anything precisely similar to it would necessarily have possessed that value in exactly the same degree . . . even if it had existed in a Universe in which the causal laws were quite different from what they are in this one.[\[13\]](#)

Elsewhere, he makes it clear that intrinsic value is something which "actions, feelings and states of affairs would or might have possessed, even if human psychology had been quite different from what it is."[\[14\]](#) The view expressed in these passages is endorsed by Chisholm, who holds that "if a state of affairs is intrinsically good then it is intrinsically good in any possible world in which it obtains."[\[15\]](#)

Moore and Chisholm would presumably agree that one such possible world would be a world in which the causal laws, including the causal laws governing or involving human psychology, were very different from those that obtain in this world. Let us imagine, then, a world in which the causal laws, particularly the laws of human psychology, were such that human beings inevitably and invariably regard things which are intrinsically good as intrinsically bad. Whenever a person apprehends something which is intrinsically good, this very apprehension of the property of goodness inhering in the object causes that person to regard the thing in question as intrinsically bad. Given that this is, indeed, a possible world, the question may be asked: What grounds do we have for believing that the actual world is not like this?

One answer that readily occurs is that if the world were like this there would be far more agreement among human beings concerning questions of value than is actually the case. However, this response can be side-stepped. For the sake of the argument we can restrict our attention to those things about which there is widespread agreement: for example, the value of pleasure, happiness, friendship, beauty, and knowledge, and the disvalue in normal circumstances of physical pain, emotional suffering, cruelty, ugliness, and ignorance. Moreover, we can conceive of the present world as more closely resembling the Enlightenment ideal of a world in which there is widespread agreement on fundamental questions of knowledge and valuation.

Having acknowledged the need for qualifications of this sort, however, I would argue that the answer to the question posed is that there are, strictly speaking, no grounds for believing that our world is like the one described above. But since we have no grounds for supposing the actual world *is* like the imagined world, we are perhaps justified in preferring the simpler explanation of why it is that we say certain things are intrinsically good and other things are intrinsically bad--the simpler explanation being that our judgements reflect the values inhering objectively in things or states of affairs.[\[16\]](#)

It may be there are other possible responses to the question posed here that objectivists

like Moore and Chisholm could offer. But I can think of none so obvious as the appeal to simplicity. Let us suppose, anyway, that Moore would defend his position along these lines. Now let us pose this further question: What grounds do we have for supposing that certain things or states of affairs have, inhering in them or attached to them, the property of intrinsic goodness? The answer, it seems to me, is that strictly speaking there are no grounds for supposing this to be the case. Of course, by the same token there are no grounds for supposing that intrinsic goodness does not belong to certain things or states of affairs. But, using the same principle of simplicity as was invoked above, it would seem more reasonable to prefer the simpler account, which in this case is the one offered by the non-objectivist. It is simpler since it does not unnecessarily and arbitrarily posit the existence of “non-natural” properties which are supposed to inhere in things or situations.

The argument may be summarized as follows. An objectivist like Moore must either admit that we have absolutely no reason to suppose that there is any connection between what we think is intrinsically good and what really is intrinsically good, or he must appeal to the principle which holds that, all things being equal, simple explanations are to be preferred. But if he appeals to this principle in this case, he must, for the sake of consistency, allow this principle to decide the question of whether or not it is reasonable to believe that there is such a thing as intrinsic value inhering objectively in things or states of affairs. For in this case, too, there seems to be no other basis for preferring one theory to another. But in this second instance, the verdict would go against the attempt to posit value as a property that certain things have independently of their relation to us.

Of the various objections that might be raised against this argument, I will here consider just one. Clearly, an objectivist might dispute the assumption that Moore’s account of intrinsic value, and of the status of our judgements which employ this notion, is less simple than a non-objectivist account. I shall therefore try to make this assumption plausible with the help of an analogy.

Consider the statement: The giraffe has a long neck so it can reach leaves that are high up on the tree. We have here the implicit application of the concept of natural purpose. I would suggest there is an analogy between the employment of this concept and the employment of the concept of intrinsic value. The concept of natural purpose is frequently used by both scientists and non-scientists alike. There is no need to object to this usage, so long as it is understood that when we use the concept we do not mean to assert that nature really does operate purposively, or that the things to which we apply the concept really do provide evidence of a purposive intelligence which designed them. Like objectivism in ethics, the theory that there really is purpose in nature was generally accepted until relatively recent times. Now, however, the concept of natural purpose is no longer considered intellectually reputable. The main reason for this is that while it might seem on the surface to offer a simpler and neater explanation of many phenomena, it in fact carries with it many unwanted, unnecessary and problematic metaphysical trappings which most scientists and philosophers prefer to do without. Since everything in nature may be capable of being explained in non-purposive terms, the retention of the concept of natural purpose would thus complicate rather than simplify our explanations. The case of the concept of intrinsic value is similar. While the objectivist account may appear, at first glance, to be neater or simpler, it actually involves the unnecessary and unjustified positing of qualities and characteristics which are said, but not proved, to inhere in or be attached to certain objects or states of affairs. For this reason a non-objectivist account, which restricts the notion of intrinsic

value to non-instrumental value, is to be preferred.

Let us now consider a second argument in support of the claim that since we have no criteria for deciding which things have intrinsic value, the concept has no legitimate or useful employment in philosophy. I believe a legitimate analogy can be drawn between the concept of intrinsic value as used by Moore and the notion of intrinsic economic or monetary worth. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this latter notion as that of 'intrinsic price.' An objectivist account of this concept might run as follows. Everything has an intrinsic price. The intrinsic price of many things is actually zero (which is analogous to describing a thing as intrinsically neutral or indifferent). If a thing, purely in virtue of its intrinsic nature, is worth more than zero, then it has a positive intrinsic price (which is analogous to saying it is intrinsically good). If, purely because of its own nature it is worth less than zero, then it has a negative intrinsic price (which is analogous to saying it is intrinsically bad). An example of something having a negative intrinsic price would be a car that one must either tax or pay to have towed away, and which one cannot sell. We could, if we wish, develop a 'logic' of intrinsic monetary worth which would lay out, in general terms, the conditions under which one thing would be intrinsically dearer or cheaper than another. For instance, we might go about defining intrinsic price by saying that a thing has a positive intrinsic price if, for any x, x would be better off if they possessed that thing than if they did not. And we could say, further, that of two things, A and B, A is intrinsically dearer than B if, for any x, the possession by x of just A would make x better off than would the possession by x of just B. The details of such a logic could, of course, be developed as far as one pleased. [\[17\]](#)

The analogy, I think, is a reasonable one. The question it raises is this: Why, according to an objectivist like Moore, are we justified in saying things have an intrinsic value, but not justified in saying that they have an intrinsic price? (I assume that Moore would agree that nothing in fact has an intrinsic price.) I would urge that there is no such justification; that is to say, there is no consideration which leads us to believe that the application of the concept of intrinsic value is any more reasonable or legitimate than the application of the concept of intrinsic price. And if it is accepted that there is no justification for presuming that things have an intrinsic price, and if the analogy drawn is sound, then we should conclude that the concept of intrinsic value is similarly devoid of legitimate employment.

Let us consider some possible objections to this argument. One objection might be that we do not in fact have a concept of intrinsic price, whereas we do already possess the concept of intrinsic value. It is therefore more plausible to suppose that the latter really does have some legitimate use. This objection seems to be weak on several counts.

i) People do in fact appear to have a concept of intrinsic price. This notion is in evidence, for instance, when someone says they only managed to get \$80,000 for their house even though it was "worth a lot more."

ii) Whether we have the concept or not, we can readily form it by abstraction, in just the same way that, according to Moore, we are able to form the concept of intrinsic goodness.

iii) The fact that we already have a concept of intrinsic value does not, of course, prove that anything falls under it, any more than our having the concept of God proves that God exists.

iv) The fact that we possess the concept of intrinsic value and apply it to certain things does not constitute grounds for supposing that these things really are intrinsically valuable. As Moore says in his critique of Mill, the fact that something is desired is not a reason for believing

that it is objectively desirable; similarly, the fact that something is thought valuable is not a reason for thinking that it is intrinsically valuable in an objective sense.

A second objection to the argument might be that we do have criteria for applying the concept of intrinsic value, whereas we do not have such criteria for the correct employment of the notion of intrinsic price. Chisholm, for instance, might say that we may apply the concept of intrinsic goodness to anything whose existence is better than its non-existence. What, we might ask, are the criteria for applying the concept of “better than”? Chisholm’s answer, roughly, is that we may apply this concept when we are “required” to prefer one thing to another.^[18] But we then have to ask: What are the criteria for correctly applying the concept of “being required”? Are we required to prefer A to B when we *feel* required or obliged to do so? Or when some authority (Moore or Chisholm, for instance) informs us that we are required to prefer A to B? At some point these objectivist concepts of intrinsic value, superiority, and obligation need to be converted into a currency we can actually use. As it stands, therefore, the sort of analysis offered by Chisholm does not seem to provide us with a criterion for deciding which things are intrinsically good. I do not mean to imply here that Chisholm’s analysis is actually intended to serve this purpose; rather, I wish to draw attention to the fact that no reasonable criterion for deciding which things are intrinsically good seems to be available.

A third objection to the analogy might be that the concept of price only has meaning in an economic context. The price of a thing is something that is dependent upon and determined by factors such as market forces and government policies. It is therefore nonsense to conceive of something having an intrinsic price independently of these things. However the idea of a thing or a state of affairs having intrinsic value independently of any relation between it and something other than it does make sense.

I would agree that the concept of price, or monetary worth, can only be legitimately applied to things within an economic context. To employ it outside this context, as one does when one says that a thing has an intrinsic price, constitutes an illegitimate extension of the way the concept should be used. But exactly the same can be said about the concept of intrinsic value. In its legitimate use, within the context of human desires and valuations, it is unobjectionable. Restricted in this way we may legitimately say that something--happiness, for instance--has intrinsic value for someone, and mean nothing more than that this person desires or values that thing for its own sake. But outside this context, when it purports to refer to value which somehow inheres in or attaches to things or states of affairs, the concept of intrinsic value has no legitimate employment. In the absence of criteria for deciding which things fall under it, the concept itself is empty, and its application is blind.

[1] G. E. Moore, ‘The Conception of Intrinsic Value’ in *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 260.

[2] For some of Moore’s alternative definitions of intrinsic value see *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. viii, p. 21, p. 187, and p. 223. In ‘Is Goodness a Quality?’ he expresses dissatisfaction with the definition given in ‘The Conception of Intrinsic Value,’ and proposes to define the concept as meaning ‘worth having for its own sake.’ (G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 94.) Later, however he rejected this definition on the grounds that it is too restrictive, applying only to experiences and not to states of affairs; see ‘A Reply to my Critics,’ in *The Philosophy of G. E.*

Moore ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (New York: Tudor Press, 1952), p. 555.

[3] See John O'Neill, 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value,' *The Monist*, Vol. 75:2 (1992), p. 119-137. In this very useful essay, O'Neill goes on to distinguish two sense in which a property can be called non-relational: i) where its belonging to a thing is not affected by whether or not anything else exists; ii) where it can be characterized without reference to any object other than the one to which it belongs. This distinction is not relevant to my concern here since the arguments I level against Moore's conception of intrinsic value apply equally to either of these non-relational interpretations of the concept.

[4] See Roderick Chisholm, *Brentano and The concept of Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[5] See O'Neill, pp. 119-120.

[6] J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), p. 34.

[7] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 66

[8] op. cit.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 67

[10] op. cit.

[11] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 34.

[12] See Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 187.

[13] Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," *Philosophical Studies*, p. 268.

[14] G. E. Moore, "The Nature of Moral Philosophy," *Philosophical Studies*, p. 330.

[15] Roderick M. Chisholm, "Defining Intrinsic Value," *Analysis* 41, 1981, pp. 99-100.

[16] The principle of simplicity invoked here is similar to that which Russell discusses in Chapter Three of *The Problems of Philosophy*.

[17] To a large extent this is what a philosopher like Chisholm appears to be doing with respect to the notion of intrinsic value. An entire system of concepts is defined, all in relation to one another. But while the system may be internally coherent, the question of how its fundamental normative terms are to be applied and legitimized is never satisfactorily dealt with. See Roderick Chisholm, *Brentano and The concept of Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[18] See Chisholm, 'Defining Intrinsic Value,' p. 99.