

Are Intrinsic Values Real?

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What, first of all, is an intrinsic value, and why does it matter so much? In 1998, I had reached the conclusion that a sustainable alternative to environmental catastrophe could only come about when the intrinsic value of the natural world was recognised sufficiently. Now, I have come to doubt the very possibility of intrinsic value and, consequently the possibility of the entire project of sustainability.



Intrinsic values are most easily understood in relation to the alternative of instrumental value and to draw a distinction between the two is both valid and useful. A commonly given exposition holds that a thing is valued instrumentally if it is “good” because it serves a human purpose. For this reason, we can say that instrumental values are anthropocentric. The source of value is a human judgement. At the level of the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds from whom data were gathered for my thesis, a wild animal has value “because you might see one”. It is not hard to see that adult thought processes are fundamentally the same. The Serengeti has value because tourists might visit and spend a lot of money there staying in lodges to view the animals.

Intrinsic value has been proposed as an alternative but what sounded a relatively straightforward proposition I have come to see is fraught with difficulty. In principle, a thing has intrinsic value if it is good in itself and remains good even if it serves no instrumental purpose. Complications arise when we ask (this is the difficult bit) whether it would still be good if no human beings existed to ascribe value to it. This matters enormously to environmental ethicists who have long made such assertions as wild animals having intrinsic value because they are sentient, can reproduce and have the capacity for suffering and flourishing, or more simply the all-embracing claim that “nature itself has rights”. But if there are no environmental ethicists to argue the case, how do these rights come into existence? The difficulties here are such that the very possibility of intrinsic value is now being questioned by some, myself included.

The ecocentric environmentalism of the 1980s and 90s existed in optimistic opposition to the hegemonic forms of environmentalism which were and are demonstrably and unashamedly anthropocentric in origin, and technocentric as a result. I can offer no explanation other than hiding in “the future” for my failure at the time to acknowledge explicitly that intrinsic values were never going to offer an alternative. My work during the 1990s was not concerned with the endless pursuit of an esoteric philosophical position on value. It was concerned with the action that children born in the 1980s and growing up during the 90s might be taking as adults. *Value as a reason for action*. It was, and is, relatively easy to show that instrumental values are quantifiable and can be ranked in order of the probability that action will result. If, as I am now starting to wonder, intrinsic values do not actually exist, they can hardly be reasons for action. Much of their appeal lies in their association with moral purpose which, arguably, is what is both needed and lacking in substantial measure. This creates a new

problem to solve. Let us suppose for now that intrinsic values do exist, can they be quantified and therefore ranked in order of probability of action?

To allow the natural world moral standing places upon moral agents a duty to consider its interests. But how much duty? If there is to be a categorical imperative in the Kantian sense, from where does the rational position derive and what happens when the dilemmas arise that pit one “good” against another within a finite system that has limits? My past struggles with this question took me to the book of Genesis in search of an imperative that was qualitatively unique and would trump all competing values. “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31). Unfortunately, I now understand “good” here to be not a value judgement but an efficiency judgement.¹ Simply put, God was pleased with His creation and thought it good because it worked well. So, that remaining avenue of moral imperative is closed. All that remains is the proposition that if there is to be moral purpose it must somehow be derived in sufficient strength from instrumental value.

Clare Palmer has argued that there is no need to argue for “more contentious, non-anthropocentric ethical views” if anthropocentrism takes “future people, ecosystem services, and other cultural and aesthetic interests seriously enough”.² The weakness here is that we do not know how much is “enough”. There are plenty of people who do take future people and ecosystem services seriously but there are even more who do not. Even amongst those who do, we do not know the strength of intention in relation to other competing priorities, so my question of sufficiency is not answered and we do not have the moral imperative that may be required. Some thinkers have attempted to find ways forwards that at least retain the possibility of intrinsic value by suggesting that there can be such a thing as “anthropocentric intrinsic value”³ which, furthermore, can exist in strong or weak forms.⁴ Another who would retain a place for intrinsic value concedes “gentle anthropocentrism”.⁵

Yet another seeks clarification in three definitions of intrinsic value – value as an end, objective value and moral standing. These are not just different ways of saying the same thing, but three genuinely different concepts.⁶ End value exists if the thing is an end in itself and not just a means to an end, in which case it still has value even if it does not serve the instrumental purpose of promoting value in something else. Objective value exists independently of whether or not the thing is being valued whilst a thing with moral standing requires moral agents to consider its interests. Though entirely logical constructs, it is still difficult to see how any of these could exist without human valuers. If there are no human valuers, who recognises objective value? The universe has functioned efficiently for billions of years without the need for any invention or attribution of value. How can a thing have moral standing if there are no moral agents? None of these alternative concepts solves the problem of quantification or ordering that is demanded by value as a reason for action.

In recent times I have found myself increasingly in agreement with writers of Daniel Coren’s persuasion.⁷ Coren draws on the work of G.E. Moore to propose a test for intrinsic value. First, he suggests, something is intrinsically good if and only if that thing is good without any of its consequences. Then he suggests we imagine the thing with every conceivable good consequence eliminated. Then we must examine the thing that remains and determine whether anything about it is still good. He gives as an example walking. A brisk daily walk has good consequences. It aids fitness and weight control, it relieves stress and creates thinking space, and it induces feelings of pleasure and wellbeing. Strip away all these instrumental goods and what is left? Nothing but the functioning of a non-intelligent robotic machine. Does this have any purpose or value? Cohen believes he is left with an experience that is no longer coherently evaluable. Walking has undoubted instrumental value, but no intrinsic value.

If there is a flaw in this, it requires a human agent to perceive the state of non-evaluability, which is something of a circular argument. Eugene Hargrove's notion of weak anthropocentric value may be juxtaposed against this.⁸ We could say that, for example, sunlight, warmth and reliable rainfall are "good" because they allow plants to thrive, a process that evolved long before humans existed and might yet do elsewhere in another world where human level intelligence never evolves. Plants, by the same logic, are "good" because they allow the herbivores that feed on them to thrive. It is possible to see in this way that value can exist without humans to attribute it or evaluate it, though we remain bound by the fact that to contemplate this still requires human minds.

I have not always thought like this. For a good many years I went off on a tangent, attracted by the possibility that the classical music which I value has, like other forms of "high art", intrinsic value. Many people believe this. After all, the music existed centuries before I was born and it was giving me pleasure as a young boy years before I became capable of analysing it. Notions such as happiness or pleasure have long attracted philosophers seeking an irreducible fundamental "good". Pleasure has a difficult relationship with hedonism so I will leave it for now. More straightforwardly, Yew-Kwang Ng, in a text on happiness entitles a chapter "Happiness as the only intrinsic value".⁹ He argues that whilst institutions and moral principles may be used to promote happiness directly and indirectly, these may come to be mistakenly valued for their own sake. They are thus but instrumental values contingent upon the only intrinsic value, which is happiness.

Whilst acknowledging that the purring of my cat is presumably indicative of a "good" sensation for that animal, I still want to ask how there can be happiness without humans to be happy. We might say the cat is contented but not ascribe to it the human sensation of happy. I have scrutinised many arguments for intrinsic value with interest but to my way of thinking have found none that satisfy the truth criteria I have set. The entire concept of value still requires intelligent minds, be they those of philosophers of whatever hue or economists, however their thoughts may be refined or presented. Instrumental values are all that we have.

Boat of Garten
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¹ Ashley, M. (1998) Value as a Reason for Action in Environmental Education. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Bristol: University of the West of England. Also <https://www.gotquestions.org/God-saw-that-it-was-good.html>

² Palmer, C. (2016) Contested Frameworks in Environmental Ethics. In R.Ricardo (ed) *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World : Values, Philosophy, and Action*. EBSCO Publishing.

³ Frasz, G. (1986) Intrinsic Value in Environmental Ethics. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Georgia, Department of Philosophy Colloquium Series

⁴ Santos, A. (2003) A Pragmatic Theory of Intrinsic Value, *Philosophical Inquiry International Quarterly*, XXV: 1-2.

⁵ Chakraborti, N. (2004) *In Defence of Intrinsic Value of Nature*. Kolkata: New Age.

⁶ Persson, E. (2008) *What is Wrong with Extinction?* University of Lund monograph.

⁷ Coren, D. (2019) Testing for Intrinsic Value, for us as we are, *Inquiry, an Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*. 10.1080/0020174X.2019.1667866

⁸ Hargrove, E. (1992) Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value, *The Monist*, 75(2): 183 – 207.

⁹ Ng, Y-K (2022) *Happiness: concept, measurement and promotion*. Singapore: Springer Nature Link. Pp41 – 57. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4972-8_5