

Good for Us

The Nature of Intrinsic Value

Michael J. Zimmermann

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reviewed by Trevor Curnow

The notion of intrinsic value is often encountered in the context of environmental ethics these days. For example, does the existence of a species, or of a variety of species, have a value independent of any possible usefulness? What is the value of preserving a wilderness if one of the conditions of that preservation is that no one is allowed to visit it? I mention these questions because (curiously, as it seems to me), Zimmermann does not. While he makes it clear (p. vii) that he is concerned with ethical theory rather than its application, one result of neglecting the environmental context is that the development of the theory proceeds without any obvious sense of the challenge the above questions pose.

To turn to what Zimmermann does rather than does not do, he takes up some issues raised by Moore's *Principia Ethica*, a text he regards as unduly neglected by contemporary philosophers. Moore's major work is very much a curate's egg and some of the neglect is thoroughly deserved. On the other hand, the book was perhaps too fashionable for its own good, with the result that its present unfashionableness leads to its being widely ignored. I sympathise with Zimmermann's judgement that the book has its merits and deserves to be treated on them. I am less impressed by the way in which he takes up some of Moore's ideas and runs with them.

The book's argument is, as the author acknowledges, 'long and often tortuous' (p. 242), and I have neither the mind nor the space to engage with all its twists and turns here. The best I can do is to single out some of the important issues that emerge in the early foundational chapters, and suggest why I do not find Zimmermann's handling of them convincing.

In the first place, Zimmermann does not seem to me to give an adequate account of the problematic nature of intrinsic value. He is impatient to solve the problem and consequently reluctant to linger on it. For example, he raises the question (p. 27) of whether 'ethical goodness' might

not be relative, and (in particular) relative to persons. This strikes me as a strong point, and I find his dismissal of it unconvincing. One of the ways of unpacking 'ethical goodness is relative to persons' is 'what is ethically good is good for us', and this points towards an instrumental rather than intrinsic understanding of moral value. What is good for us is valued for our sake rather than its *own*sake. This reflects one of the general problems I have with Zimmermann's approach, which is that he recurrently puts the emphasis on 'valuing' (directly or indirectly) rather than 'having value'. This smuggles in an implicit reference to the valuer, which constantly threatens to undermine the genuinely intrinsic nature of the value concerned.

A second fundamental point on which I would take issue concerns what Zimmermann terms the 'bearers' of intrinsic value. For him these are states of things not things themselves. He gives an example (p. 42) of someone valuing a rare stamp, and suggests that the rarity rather than the stamp is the bearer of value. Leaving aside the problem of what it means for rarity to be a 'state' of something, is it not possible to suggest a middle way whereby the stamp is valued, but *because* of its rarity? Is the *source* of value necessarily the same as the *bearer* of value?

For these reasons and others, I find myself unpersuaded by the book's central argument, although I am conscious of not having done full justice to it. Fortunately, the book has more to offer. Along the way, Zimmermann sheds useful light on various topics. The discussion of requirement and fitness in chapter four, for example, is extremely helpful. There are also welcome references to the thought of figures such as Brentano and Ross who, like Moore, have suffered unreasonable neglect.

In the end, though, these are essentially specialist merits in a book that is already specialist in its scope. Those with a specific interest in the subject with which Zimmermann engages will doubtless find it stimulating reading, but most, I suspect, will not.

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Back to current electronic table of contents