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Short title: Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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Zimmerman, Michael. *The Nature of Intrinsic Value*.

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. Pp. 279. \$81.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper).

I. Style

[[q1]]Some philosophy reads like a ballet: you are witness to beauty and elegance while the author conceals the effort behind it all. Other philosophy reads like a war, where you are witness to every battle, every skirmish, every setback, and every step toward (what the author takes to be) victory. Zimmerman’s book falls into this latter category. He takes us through an inquiry into the nature of intrinsic value, offering us on many occasions a proposal, a critique of that proposal, a new proposal, a critique of that proposal, another new proposal, and so on until he finds a formulation satisfactory. This is not meant as criticism—I find war narratives fascinating and ballets a drag. Readers will be exhilarated or exhausted, enthralled or bored, depending on their particular temperaments. Both sorts of readers will have to admire Zimmerman’s close attention to detail, exemplary intellectual honesty, modesty, and expertise.

II. Synopsis

That the notion of intrinsic value is of paramount importance in ethics, and that this claim needs to be defended, is where Zimmerman begins: “There are many varieties of goodness and badness. At their core lie intrinsic goodness and badness. It is in virtue of intrinsic goodness and badness that other types of goodness and badness may be understood, and hence that we can begin to come to terms with questions of virtue and vice, right and wrong, and so on” (4). After introducing the book, Zimmerman

devotes the second chapter to defending the concept of intrinsic value. Chapter 3 focuses on what sorts of entities—states of affairs, individual objects, states of individual objects, and so on—can have intrinsic value. In some ways this is odd, as it is not until chapter 4 that Zimmerman offers a conception of intrinsic value. But what is arguably most interesting about chapter 4 is that there are proposals at all, for Moore famously claimed that ‘intrinsic value’ is unanalyzable. Zimmerman takes Moore head on, forcefully arguing that there is no good reason to think we cannot analyze the concept, and he proceeds to do just that. Up until this chapter, it seems, Zimmerman expects the reader to have a basic understanding of the idea from Moore or perhaps from the contemporary literature largely spawned by Christine Korsgaard’s “Two Distinctions in Goodness” (*Philosophical Review*, 92 [1983]: 169–95).

Chapter 5 consists of proposals of how intrinsic value ought to be computed; Zimmerman is especially keen on showing the falsity of Moore’s famous principle of organic unities. In the final chapter, Zimmerman questions what particular objects have intrinsic value. This chapter reminds the reader of Moore’s excellent chapter “The Ideal” in *Principia Ethica*. Finally, there is a brief appendix on extrinsic value, the upshot of which is the claim that all extrinsic value is “derivative from” or “reflective” or “revelatory” of intrinsic value (251).

There are far too many arguments and proposals in this rich book to list, let alone discuss, in a book review. I will offer some further details and critiques on two main themes: (1) the importance of the concept of intrinsic value and (2) Zimmerman’s conception of intrinsic value.

III. Is ‘Intrinsic Value’ Important?

More than a handful of philosophers have thought otherwise. Peter Geach and Judith Thomson are two such philosophers, both of whom Zimmerman has squarely in his crosshairs. I think Zimmerman is largely successful in fending off their attacks, but he prematurely claims that “there is no denying the fundamental ethical significance of the concept of intrinsic value” (243). Allow me to explain.

Korsgaard drew our attention to two distinctions, those between extrinsic and intrinsic value and instrumental and final value. The former concerns [\[\[q2\]\]](#) the way in which an object has its value, namely, by virtue of its extrinsic or intrinsic properties. ‘Final value’ is equivalent to ‘noninstrumental[\[\[q3\]\]](#) value’, which is most readily (if a bit crudely) understood as the value something has as an end as opposed to a mean or as something that is valuable “for its own sake” (25). With these distinctions in hand, Korsgaard argued that ‘final value’ is the concept of ethical interest, not extrinsic or intrinsic value. Moral obligation, virtue and vice, and so on depend on final value, and

it does not matter whether that value arises from a set of extrinsic or intrinsic properties or both.

Korsgaard's position thus poses a challenge to Zimmerman.

Zimmerman agrees with Korsgaard to some extent: "I am happy to concede that my primary concern in this book is to give an account of the nature of *final ethical* value" (25). But if he is concerned with final value, what is all this about intrinsic value? Zimmerman's answer: everything that has final value has it by virtue of its intrinsic properties. This is what he attempts to show in chapter 3.

But even if Zimmerman succeeds in chapter 3, the question remains whether the concept of intrinsic value is of "fundamental ethical significance." To maintain that claim, and to rebut Korsgaard's challenge, Zimmerman would have to defend the following propositions: (i) that having final value entails having intrinsic value and (ii) that having intrinsic value entails having final value. But I think both of these propositions are subject to doubt.

As for i, many philosophers deny that final value entails intrinsic value. An object, they argue, can have final value by virtue of (a set of) its extrinsic properties. Examples include the pen Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation (Shelly Kagan), a beautifully enameled frying pan (Korsgaard), and a wedding ring (Rae Langton). Whether there are any objects with extrinsic final value is a controversial and, moreover, substantive issue, which cannot be settled by stipulation on the meaning of 'intrinsic value' or 'final value'. Indeed, that is why Zimmerman has to write chapter 3. Thus, i is undermined.

As for ii, it seems conceivable for an object to have intrinsic value without having final value, that is, the sort of value that an object has as an end. Consider, for example, objects that cannot be ends of ours at all: unknowable mathematical truths (e.g., Goldbach's Conjecture, if it is true), natural instantiations of the golden ratio (e.g., in waves, seashells, and rams' horns), or God's will. If we can conceive of these as having such value—if it is not contrary to the concept 'intrinsically valuable'—then we can conceive of objects with intrinsic value but no final value. Thus, ii is potentially undermined.

IV. Zimmerman's Conception

Zimmerman proposes the following conception of intrinsic value: "S is such that the contemplation of it requires that one favor it," where "favoring" consists in a (set of) "positive attitude[s]" or emotions, which he thinks—to the consternation of many philosophers of emotion—neither cognitive nor conative but "affective" (84). But why does Zimmerman employ the notion of requirement? Another plausible option is that intrinsically valuable objects offer (noninstrumental) reasons. This is attractive because, if one cannot favor some intrinsically valuable object (because one's finite emotive capacities

are already fully engaged with other intrinsically valuable objects, say), one is not in breach of a requirement one could not have met.

Zimmerman is aware of this. It is just that he thinks we can be required to have an attitude without being obligated to have it. This is because “the ‘ought’ of obligation implies ‘can,’ whereas the ideal ‘ought’ [the “ought” of “requirement”] does not” (93). This, however, is an odd move. Zimmerman claims that the concept with which he is concerned is the one that lies “at the core” [\[\[q4\]\]](#) of all other types of goodness and is the one with which we can begin to understand moral obligation. But since he includes a notion of requirement in his concept of intrinsic value, and understands that notion of requirement to contain an ‘ought’ distinct from the ‘ought’ of moral obligation, Zimmerman leaves the reader wondering what he thinks intrinsic value has to do with moral obligation.

One final question: why does Zimmerman think objects with intrinsic value require an attitude from their contemplator? We could, for example, be orientated toward the intrinsically valuable as acting beings, as opposed to as emotional ones. On this account, intrinsically valuable objects require us (at least sometimes) to bring them about or promote their existence regardless of how we feel about them.

V. Concluding Remark

Zimmerman has produced an incisive and illuminating book, but he must overcome several significant obstacles in order to convince us that the nature of intrinsic value is fundamental to ethical inquiry.