

Intrinsic Value

Many people claim that nature has intrinsic value. Sometimes called inherent value or worth, intrinsic value falls within the philosophical domain of metaethics—the meaning and status of moral language. While there can be confusion about what the term ‘intrinsic value’ means, working through this confusion is central to projects in environmental ethics to address environmental problems.

Many people claim that values are wishy-washy, subjectively messy, and best left out of serious scientific and policy discussions about environmental issues. Values cannot be objectively measured and quantified, and value preferences seem to be no different than preferences for different flavors of ice cream. But to claim that discussions about values are not valuable is itself a value claim. In a factual sense, science can only describe and explain what the environmental issues are and predict what might happen if such and such happens first. Science cannot tell us what we should or should not do. We must make ethical judgments that stem from our stated values, enter into dialogue with each other, and arrive at some form of intersubjective agreement about what to do about environmental problems. Values thus play a central role in the resolution of all environmental problems.

No one denies that nature has instrumental value for people. Nature consists of natural resources that can be consumed or utilized. Does nature also have intrinsic value? To address this question, philosopher Richard Routley devised a thought experiment that became known as the “last man argument.” In this thought experiment, Routley asks us to imagine an Earth where everyone has died except for one man. Before this man dies, he goes about eliminating animals (painlessly) and plants—every living thing he can. Has this last man done anything morally objectionable? If you answer no, then you supposedly subscribe to an anthropocentric (human centered) environmental ethic in which the only kinds of things that have intrinsic, non-instrumental value are humans. If you answer yes, then you supposedly subscribe to a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic in which nonhuman nature (or parts of nonhuman nature) has intrinsic, non-instrumental value.

Beyond anthropocentrism, where one locates intrinsic value determines the kind of environmental ethic to which one subscribes. If nonhuman animals have intrinsic value, this is what environmental philosophers call a zoocentric (zoology centered) environmental ethic; this is sometimes called sentientism (focused on the capacity to experience pain and/or pleasure) or psychocentrism (centered on having a psychological makeup). If nonhuman animals and plants have intrinsic value, this is a biocentric (life-centered) environmental ethic. If holistic biological and ecological entities such as species and ecosystems have intrinsic value, this is an ecocentric (ecology-centered) environmental ethic.

Philosopher Dale Jamieson calls intrinsic value the “gold standard” of morality because what has intrinsic value has ultimate moral value. But what precisely is intrinsic value? It is commonly used in at least four different senses. First, intrinsic value can simply mean non-instrumental value. Something has instrumental value if it can be used for something else. That something else has intrinsic value. Thus, money has instrumental value for people who have intrinsic value.

Second, intrinsic value can be a criterion for moral standing. In order for something to count morally or be what philosophers call morally considerable, it must have intrinsic value. Intrinsic value in this case is the ticket that gets something admitted into the moral community. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) claims that human beings have intrinsic value and thus are ends-in-themselves.

Third, something that has intrinsic value can be understood to have inherent value because its value depends entirely on what inheres in the thing itself. The British philosopher G.E. Moore (1873-1958) defines intrinsic value in this sense, claiming that it is a non-relational property—i.e., its value depends on the existence of nothing else. In this sense, something that has intrinsic value stands in contrast to what has extrinsic value, understanding extrinsic value to be externally dependent on something else.

Fourth, something that has intrinsic value can have what philosophers call objective value in the sense that its value is independent of the valuations of valuers. This is sometimes called mind-independent value because the value really exists in the object independent of whether humans perceive it or not. To put a twist on an old question, does a tree in a forest that has never been perceived by people have intrinsic value? If you answer yes, this tree has objective intrinsic value.

The first and second senses of intrinsic value seem to encapsulate a similar idea that something that has intrinsic value is an end-in-itself because it has its own moral standing (second sense) and because it is where instrumental value terminates (first sense). The third and fourth senses seem to encapsulate another similar idea that something that has intrinsic value is self-sufficient because its value does not depend on anything else (third sense) and because its value does not depend upon human valuers (fourth sense).

The fourth sense of intrinsic value is an instance of what philosophers call a realist account because the value really exists, in this case independent of valuers. The idea that there are values independent of valuers strikes some people as an odd idea. Perhaps there still is intrinsic value, but its existence depends on the existence of valuers. This is what is known as a subjectivist account in that the value is projected as an attitude from a human subject; in this case something can be valued intrinsically. Environmental philosophers question whether a realist account of intrinsic value or a subjectivist account of intrinsically valuing is more satisfactory and makes for a better metaethical grounding of an environmental ethic.

Some environmental pragmatists claim that we should give up on the notion of intrinsic value altogether because it is too theoretically problematic and not pragmatically useful for developing an environmental ethic. They suggest that all value is extrinsic—dependent on something else—and all we have are interrelated webs of value. Non-pragmatists worry that if everything only has this kind of value, then it seems that everything—including people—only has value for the sake of something else; it is not clear what this something else is.

This entire discussion of intrinsic value might seem to be theoretically nebulous and less helpful when thinking about the environment and environmental problems. All discussions about what we should do in response to environmental problems, however, involve value judgments. Getting clear about what the values are remains an important step toward solving the problems.

See Also: Deep Ecology; Ecocentrism; Green Discourse; Pragmatism

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