



Inherent and Instrumental Values in Ethics

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ABSTRACT: The distinction between inherent and instrumental values in ethics could, in my view, be said to represent a contemporary version of both the eudaimonistic distinction between virtues as instruments and forms of happiness as the goals or ends to be achieved through these instruments, and of the deontological distinction between duties and the *summum bonum* to be, at least ultimately or in an afterlife, achieved through them. The paper identifies and explores what appears to be a threefold relationship between inherent and instrumental values. First, their mutual inseparability is found to be based in the very concept of instrumentality. Second, their parallelism in the relevant respects is seen also to be rooted in their instrumental relation. Third, and very significant, the inherent and instrumental values are discovered to be reversible so that what were inherent values can often become instrumental and vice-versa. Finally, and most importantly, the value and richness of human life is perceived to be nothing else than the function of the richness in values in ethics as well as in other spheres of human life.

I. Introduction

John Dewey holds the value concept as controversial since a survey of the current literature of the subject discloses that views on the subject range from the belief, at one extreme, that so-called 'values' are but emotional epithets or mere ejaculations, to the belief, at the other extreme, that a priori necessary standardized, rational values are the principles upon which art, science, and morals depend for their validity. And between these two conceptions lies a number of intermediate views. (1) One intermediate view says that values in general are things, beliefs, actions, emotions, and attitudes which are found acceptable, desirable, and even praiseworthy to the individual, to society, or to both of them. (2) We find as many different kinds of values as there are different areas of human life-intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, religious, moral, political, economic, etc. The distinction between inherent and instrumental values applies equally to each one of these fields. This chapter, however, will limit itself to the inquiry into the nature and relationship of the inherent and instrumental values in the field of morality with only an occasional excursus into other fields.

To indicate the meaning of these two kinds of values we could begin by saying that the inherent values are, roughly speaking, the desired results achieved through the operation of the instrumental values. Another, and less etymological way of defining inherent values is that they are things, thoughts, emotions, etc. desired for their own sakes whereas the instrumental values are always intended for the sake of inherent values. We could also say that the two kinds of values are related as ends and means to one another, or as primary and

secondary values. Since these definitions are general, they are applicable to all domains of value-including the ethical.

The best way to express the deepest nature of both the inherent and instrumental values would be to define them as essential aspects of one and the same value instead of two kinds of values. Such a close connection between two essential aspects of value would also answer the question concerning the relevance of this inquiry by suggesting that for an adequate understanding of value — any value — serious attention to both of its essential aspects is indispensable. The important practical results of this connection would be the perception that we can affect, increase, or modify, our inherent values only by focusing our efforts on our instrumental values.

Since inherent and instrumental values are by definition causally related, the best way to learn more about their nature would be to inquire into various aspects of that relationship. There are four characteristics of this relationship: the first is that inherent and instrumental values are strictly inseparable. Second, they are parallel as regards their quantity, quality, origin, duration, etc. The third characteristic is that they are capable of inverse relation, that is, inherent values can become instrumental values and vice versa, and that in both directions. The fourth characteristic is the quantity or richness of values are directly proportional to the quality and richness of human life. Each characteristic will be examined.

II. Inseparability of Values

The *summon bonum*, the highest good, of human life is, according to both teleological and deontological theories, happiness, ⁽³⁾ which is invariably regarded as the result or effect of moral or virtuous actions and thus as absolutely or essentially inseparable from them as its causes. This is but another way of saying that happiness is an inherent value, in fact the quintessence of all inherent values, while the moral or virtuous actions, thoughts etc. are the instrumental ones. Since Aristotle defines happiness or eudemonia as "the activity of reason in accordance with virtue in a complete life," ⁽⁴⁾ we are tempted to conclude that happiness is not only distinct but also separate from virtues through which, as through its means, it is attained or produced. This, however, would be an erroneous conclusion since it would degrade happiness to the level of a mere artifact, which remains in existence even when the action producing it has been completed. For Aristotle — and for other eudemonists such as hedonists and utilitarians — happiness is not a product but a process, a mental process, "activity of reason," which lasts only as long as this process or activity lasts. Aristotle cannot mean by happiness, a purely concentrated intellectual effort in working, for instance, on a difficult mathematical, scientific, or philosophic problem, an intellectual effort shorn of emotional undertones. For in that case, he would make happiness, in spite of himself, unavailable to the bulk of humanity since only a minority are ever engaged in intellectual activity, and without the condition of universal availability, happiness, would cease to be the highest good. We will return to this later in this chapter. In the meantime, we must conclude that by happiness Aristotle can mean only a higher or lesser degree of conscious, and perhaps even unconscious, satisfaction or contentment with a particular kind of intellectual activity, and its result. ⁽⁵⁾

Since we called happiness an inherent value and the activity resulting in happiness, an instrumental value, we can see why they are inseparable. Returning to the requirement that happiness be available to all humans, it is plausible to conclude that Aristotle distinguishes three major forms of happiness — one for each part making up the human nature: rational, sensitive, and vegetative. In this way, happiness would indeed be accessible to all humans, though its forms or levels would be different. Even at the lowest, biological level, any one engaged in the activities of eating, drinking, etc. with moderation could be correctly said to be enjoying happiness in so far as they are deriving the sense of satisfaction, fulfillment,

and enhancement of their health. By the same token, the next level of life, the social and emotional, would add another, a higher, dimension to happiness in most individuals, to be capped by the intellectual level but only in a few fortunate people. All these considerations show that, as noted before, happiness is not a product but a process, or more exactly, a chain of complex processes as well as memories or echoes of them, and that the inherent values are inseparable from instrumental ones.

The same results concerning the inseparability of inherent and instrumental values could be shown, space permitting, if we based our analysis of them on the hedonist, utilitarian, or any other teleological model of ethical theory instead of the Aristotelian. The same would have to be said about the deontological models. For even Kant, for instance, conceives perfect happiness as inseparable from morality, from "infinite" moral "progress," no matter what he says — or how inconsistently — about this worldly happiness in relation to morality. (6)

Inseparability between inherent and instrumental values holds in all domains of value. In aesthetics, for instance, while inherent values are aesthetic experience, enjoyment, and appreciation of various kinds, the instrumental ones are the activities and processes that bring about that experience. The same must be said about the two kinds or aspects of value in the spheres of religion, economics, politics, science, and the rest.

III. Parallelism of Values

The parallelism of inherent and instrumental values is a direct logical consequence of their inseparability. Since these values are but two different aspects of one and the same thing rather than two different kinds, their specific traits must be strictly parallel. Bentham's seven criteria for measurement of pleasure and consequently of moral goodness (intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity or remoteness, fecundity, purity, and extent) will provide us with a valuable scheme for our analysis of the parallelism of major traits of inherent and instrumental values. (7)

To return to the sphere of ethics, we see at once how and why the degree of intensity or the length of duration of inherent moral values such as love, joy courage, temperance, or pursuit of truth or knowledge must correspond to the degree and length of activities which generate and sustain them in existence and which are correctly called instrumental values. To deny such a correspondence would be to deny the causal relationship between them and implied in their names. In other words, the degree of intensity of instrumental values necessarily determines the degree of intensity of inherent values, but it is the intensity of instrumental value that is determined by the moral agent's efforts. One practical consequence from this fact is that inherent values such as love, joy, etc., desirable as they are, are not attainable in any degree by mere wish or ineffectual desire but only through serious and systematic efforts.

The degrees of fecundity and purity of inherent values such as love, joy, etc. are, in a like manner, ultimately functions of the moral agents' efforts. The same cannot be said concerning the criteria of 1) certainty, 2) propinquity, and 3) extent in so far as their respective degrees seem to be determined by the circumstances often beyond the control of the best-intentioned agent. But even here the degrees of these three criteria in case of the inherent values correspond exactly to, and are determined by, the degrees of the instrumental ones. This parallelism between degrees of inherent and instrumental values is rejected in deontological ethics. The essential causal connection between morality and happiness, typical of the teleological ethics, is replaced by an accidental one, dependent on fortunate circumstances, such as health or wealth or, in the other-worldly existence, on the good graces of a benevolent Deity conceived as a moral postulate. From being a natural end and aim of every human action, according to eudemonists, happiness is here degraded

to the level of accidental occurrence or of external award. But even so, Kant, for one, is forced to recognize the parallelism between happiness and morality, the inherent and the instrumental value, by postulating happiness as the award to be proportional to the agent's morality, even though the instrumental relation, as noted above, has been set aside. (8)

What has been said about the parallelism based on the causal relation between inherent and instrumental values in the sphere of ethics applies to other domains of value. In religion, art, science, for instance, the degrees of enjoyment or satisfaction of inherent values closely reflect the degrees of appropriate involvement necessary for the attainment of them. Religious blessings have been alleged to have a supernatural source. Although this is debatable, it can always be adequately explained in terms of natural exertions of the religious individuals. Their sometimes puzzling characteristics lose their mystery when more relevant data are obtained about the individual involved. All mystery is apt to disappear from the supernatural phenomena when one studies the lives of the great mystics of history and discovers the not so mysterious cross of often brutal, if not outright cruel, ascetical practices on which they were systematically crucifying themselves in the name of saintliness. If the inherent values achieved by great artists, scientists, and mathematicians are at first out of proportion with their efforts, their instrumental values, this is so only because we may overlook the fact of their superior genetic traits by means of which they seem to accomplish great things with ease.

IV. Reversibility of Values

Reversibility of values in the sense that inherent values can become instrumental values and vice versa and that the so-called lower values can become higher values and vice versa is a further characteristic. To take some examples once more from the sphere of ethics, knowledge, courage, love, joy, or temperance in eating, drinking, and sex are commonly viewed as inherent values, as desirable and valuable in themselves. They automatically become instrumental values if we choose to regard them as so many means for the attainment of some higher goal such as happiness. These can become instrumental values if we prefer to treat them as a means for the attainment of more limited goods, (inherent values) such as wealth, health, or fame, which in turn can be treated as instrumental values.

In the sphere of religion, religious beliefs (stories, dogmas, etc.), emotions, and actions are commonly viewed as valuable in themselves, as inherent values. But perhaps just as often they are also viewed as the means for the attainment of higher goals of life such as this-worldly happiness or as the necessary conditions of eternal bliss. Alternatively, they may be used as a means for more limited purposes, that is, as instrumental values, for therapeutic treatment of various mental disorders, which are conceived as inherent values. Other spheres of value such as science, politics, economics, and social relations, when analyzed, reveal the same relationship of reversibility, between the inherent and instrumental values.

The reversibility of values in the sense that higher values can become lower values and vice versa presupposes the philosophical conception of a hierarchical structure of human nature so that the values that correspond to "higher" parts or aspects of that nature are viewed as "higher" and those that pertain to the "lower" elements are viewed as "lower." If we take a non-hierarchical view of human nature, then this distinction becomes meaningless as far as we are concerned, although not as far as those concerned who accept a hierarchical structure. Without such a structure, ethical ideals, religious beliefs, aesthetic enjoyments, scientific or philosophical theories become just so many self-expressions of human nature on a par with the sensuous ones. In some hierarchical conceptions, the sensuous self-expressions or values may be regarded as even "higher" than the ethical ideals, as "inherent" values as they become "instrumental."

One important conclusion follows from these considerations, namely, that the relativity of values is grounded in their reversibility. In the domain of ethics, some philosophers attempt to refute the relativist argument that the varieties of ethical standards world-wide prove the non-existence of absolute and universally valid moral standards by arguing that these varieties of standards can be explained just as well through people's ignorance of the right standards as through their non-existence. (9)

This attempt fails for two reasons: 1) This attempt erroneously assumes that there can be knowledge — or, in this case, ignorance — of things that either do not exist or are even logically impossible, or both 2) because the relativist thesis based on a large mass of relevant data derived from anthropology, sociology, history, and psychology is more plausible than its denial which is in effect based on the supposition of possibility of the absolute standard and not on the proof of this possibility. No more successful is the attempt by the same philosophers to refute another relativist argument which asserts that the foundation or arguments in support of the absolute ethical standard is unknown by claiming that, though such a foundation is presently unknown, it is always possible that it could be discovered or devised in the future. Unfortunately, the claim of abstract possibility is not the same as a positive proof of it. And even if such a proof were available, the argument would remain less plausible than the relativist thesis.

It may be worth observing at this point that not only ethical values or standards are relative because they are grounded in value reversibility All domains of value are relative because the values making them up are all rooted in reversibility, which is another word for a variety of viewpoints on anything regarded as value. In the domain of religion, for example, any belief or any emotion, if taken seriously, is a value to one believer, while being no-value or even a dis-value to another. The same can be said about aesthetic, scientific, philosophical and all other values.

V. Values and Human Life

All of the above considerations suggest that it is values that constitute the essence of human life and determine its quality and that the disintegration of values is literally disintegration of life itself or death. Many thinkers express the same idea, though they may be using a different terminology. For Spinoza, for instance, it is desire which holds the central position among emotions and of which individual emotions are but so many different instantiations. This conception is fully in agreement with our definition of values as things, thoughts, etc. that are desired or desirable to the individual or to the social group. The same idea is also expressed by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and countless others when they assign central position in life to the will or to the will to power. Freud demonstrates it when he reduces all instinctual drives, emotions, and passions to libido or views them as mere instantiations of the libido. The same case could probably be made for most, if not all, rationalists (as opposed to voluntarists). Does not Leibnitz hold that the life of a monad is essentially made up of "perceptions" and "appetitions?" (10) Take away appetitions, desires or values, and you have destroyed life. And does not Kant teach that morality and happiness, both of which are supreme instantiations of will and desire, constitute the quintessence of any rational being? Remove the will to morality and you have removed the human life itself.

It is quite obvious at this point that by claiming that values constitute the essence of human life we mean that without values human, and, in a sense, all animal life is an impossibility. But we have also claimed above that it is values that determine the quality of life as well. It is intuitively plausible that the larger the number of values by which an individual or a group lives the richer and more worth living their lives are. By contrast, the smaller the number of values by which they live the poorer their lives are apt to be. The number must not be taken here too literally since we intuitively feel that even a small number of values regarded by the individual or a group as "higher" values may make their lives as rich, if not

richer, as a large number of values of lower quality, that is, of lesser intensity, shorter duration, lesser fecundity, etc, or of "lower" kind.

Now the quality of life is not determined by quantity or number of values alone. It is also determined by the greater or lesser diversity of these values. The life of a hermit or a recluse is deprived of the wealth of the social dimension enjoyed by a socially more versatile individual just as the life of a seriously ill individual, lacks activity a normal and healthy person enjoys . It follows that the individual who, either by design or out of necessity, excludes from his life all domains of value except the purely biological ceases to be a human being except in minimal or biological sense.

Let us suppose now that even the biological values collapse. The result is going to be death in the literal sense. This is not to say that every form of death is synonymous with disintegration of values since death can be caused by many other factors both external and internal to a human being. What we mean is that some deaths are either caused or are synonymous with the collapse of all, even purely biological values. Let us briefly look into three paradigmatic cases of death as collapse of values: 1) the suicide, 2) the martyr or hero, and 3) the terminally ill person. The suicide throws away his/her life because he/she truly or erroneously thinks that , for reasons beyond their control, they cannot obtain their supreme, though perhaps purely imaginary, value or values, whatever they might be. They have effectively telescoped all their values whatever into one single real or imaginary value or a cluster of them and have judged that one value to be unattainable. This value has been judged as good as non-existent. Thus the suicide's life has been totally voided of any emotional "strings" that had kept him/her attached to life. So the suicides draw the logical conclusion that life is no longer worth living. Former values that have kept him/her attached to life have been deprived of any emotional content and have become empty memories. This psychological value collapse notoriously need not be irreversible since at least some of the dead values can be revived.

The case of a martyr or heroine resembles that of the suicide in that this person also telescoped values as emotional attachments, under a supreme attachment that is valued or a cluster of values that effectively voided his/her life of all other emotional meaning. The difference between the martyr and an ordinary suicide is that the martyr thinks that through death he/she attains supreme value permanently, while the suicide victim cannot make the same claim. If the martyr's cause and its worthiness is objectively only imaginary, then there may be no difference between his/her death and that of a suicide except that of societal approval in case of a martyr. Heroine could also represent the lesson of life — its worth being determined by one final value.

The case of the terminally ill person is different in the sense that he/she is apt to undergo a physical collapse of even minimal or biological values: no more desire to eat, to drink, or even to breathe, while the suicide and probably hero have undergone a psychological value collapse. For a terminally ill person, all realms of value have become blurred, empty memories or chaotic nightmares which he/she is trying to keep away, along with pains and sufferings. Perhaps by drug overdosing the person falls into unconsciousness hoping that the latest dose will be the final one. Breathing may continue for a while without his/her desiring to breathe, being the last illusion of a value. The ultimate disintegration of values or desires is thus but another word for death.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the preceding considerations tend to suggest that inherent and instrumental values are inseparably connected, that they are strictly parallel as regards their quantity, quality and other characteristics, that they are reversible, and that their richness determines the richness of human life. For example, happiness, knowledge, love, or aesthetic

experience as inherent values are inseparable from actions or attitudes conducive to these values, and the greater or lesser degrees of happiness, love etc. are correlated with the qualities of actions and attitudes generating them. Though happiness, knowledge, love, etc. are inherent values, they become instrumental values whenever they are pursued as the means for the attainment of some reputedly higher values such as when knowledge is pursued for the sake of happiness, or happiness for the sake of eternal bliss. Since values constitute the existential content of human life, we may correctly infer that, in general, the more values we possess and the higher their qualities and degrees, the richer and happier our lives are to be.

Notes

- (1) Dewey, John *Theory of Valuation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p.1.
- (2) Perry, Ralph Barton, *Realms of Value*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968, pp.441-40.
- (3) Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. & tr. Lewis White Beck, 3rd., New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993 p.136
- (4) McKeon, Richard (ed), *The Basic Works of Aristotle, Ethics Nicomachean Ethics*, chap. 1, 1098a, p. 943.
- (5) McKeon , p. 1107, 1178b
- (6) Kant, *ibid.*, p 128.
- (7) Bentham, Jeremy, *Theory of Legislation*, translated from the French of E.Dumont by C.M. Atkinson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914, vol I pp. 1-5 and 42-43.
- (8) Kant, *ibid.*, p 128.
- (9) Stace, Walter T., *The Concept of Morals*, New York: Macmillan Co., 1965, p. 125.
- (10) Leibniz, G.W.F., *The Monology*, #17 *The Rationalists*, Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1960, p. 457.