

Worthless Value Makers and the Nature of Instrumental Value

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Abstract

This paper asks whether the necessary means to something valuable must themselves possess value. It focuses on value makers—the factors that explain why things are good or bad—and offers two reasons to doubt that they must be value bearers. The first points to a potential regress problem: if every value must have a value maker and every value maker must be valuable, this leads to an infinite chain that contradicts plausible first-order views. The second reason is less technical and draws on examples where seemingly worthless factors appear to generate value. Finally, the paper considers how traditional understandings of instrumental value are challenged once we deny that value makers must be valuable themselves.

1. Introduction

This paper asks whether something that provides value to an item must itself be valuable. It is easy to think of cases where a given value seems to pass from one thing to another. A dress may be beautiful because of its beautiful pattern; a society may be unjust because of its unjust inequalities; a person may be admirable because of admirable traits (cf. Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen 2015: 34). In many such cases, the same type of value carries over from one item to another, but this need not always happen: Admirable features might not only make someone admirable, but they might also contribute to making them lovable, respectable, and desirable. While examples like these show that items can sometimes gain value from other valuable items, they do not settle the stronger claim we shall consider:

- (1) Necessarily, if a factor f makes an item x valuable for its own sake, then f has value.¹

My focus is on the connection between the final value of items and the normative status of its various explanatory factors. There are two ways to interpret the mechanisms predicted by the claim. On one reading, a factor makes an item valuable for its own sake by transferring part of its own value to it, as in the cases mentioned earlier. In other words, the idea behind this interpretation is that an item cannot have value unless sourced from another, more fundamental value. In another reading, the factors that make items valuable become valuable themselves in virtue of their value-making capabilities. An item cannot have value without bestowing value on more fundamental factors.

There is a substantive argument in support of (1) that builds on the second interpretation and appeals to intuitions about the necessary means of value. The necessary means of value are the factors counterfactually implicated in the presence of value—factors such that, if they had not been present, the value would not have been instantiated. The thought is that such factors must be valuable, not because they confer value but because they receive it. In effect, value reflects onto the items that help explain it, resulting in these items becoming *pro tanto* good for giving rise to goodness or *pro tanto* bad for giving rise to badness. Dancy (2003: 635) seems to make a similar argument in mereological contexts:

[T]o say that a part with no value can contribute value that it has not got commits one to saying, it seems, that though there is no reason to preserve the part as a part, there is a reason to protect the whole, and that reason derives from the presence of the part. Now this does sound incoherent. Surely we do have reason to protect the part here, if it is contributing value. So its presence is of value, it would seem, on pain of breaching the link between values and reasons for attitudes (2003: 630–631).

¹ I wish to leave the modal profile of this claim a bit ambiguous. I believe it is false regardless of whether we interpret it as a claim of logical, nomological, metaphysical, or normative necessity. I should also mention that while I focus on the final value of x , I wish to leave open what kind of value the factor f must have according to (1). The arguments that follow are intended to cast doubt on (1) across several such interpretations. However, I will return to this issue in more detail later, particularly in Section 3, where I address the issue that if f makes x valuable, then f must at the very least have some sort of instrumental or contributory value.

This reasoning also appears compelling when applied to the necessary *causes of value*. If physical health is valuable, and exercising is a necessary causal means to achieving it, then exercising also inherits value. Familiar claims about reasons also support the argument: If we have reason to desire an end, we also have reason to desire its necessary causal means (Kieseewetter & Gertken, 2021). The question is whether the transfer of value to the necessary mereological and causal means of value also occurs to its necessary explanatory means. I will argue that this is not so and that we have good reasons to reject (1).² Furthermore, I will show that doing so teaches us something important about the understanding of *instrumental value*—the kind of value that items have in virtue of facts about their effects.

Note that, for the purposes of this paper, I adopt a broad and relatively undemanding notion of a value bearer—any item that can be said to have or possess value. This includes not only concrete objects and actions, but also states of affairs, properties, events, relations, and so on. While these categories may call for more fine-grained treatment, I assume that the arguments presented here generalise across them unless otherwise stated. This inclusive approach also benefits those who find (1) plausible, since a more restrictive view of value bearers risks rendering (1) trivially false. For instance, if value accrues only to one kind of item, like states of affairs, while the role of value maker is played by another, such as properties and relations, then (1) would fail, as the transfer of value from value bearer to value maker would be blocked by categorical mismatch. I will leave these discussions aside in what follows and adopt a kind of pluralism about value-bearers.³

2. Infinite regress and the quest for fundamental values

One way to understand explanation is epistemic in the sense that it involves telling a story about what the world is like or how it works (e.g., Broome 2013: 48). We invoke this sense when we say that science aims to explain how brain processes give rise to conscious experience. However, there is also a worldly notion of explanation, where one thing is said to explain another by being responsible for its existence. We appeal to this notion when we say that conscious experience arises out of processes in the brain. I bring this up to say that the notion of value-making I will appeal to involves something like the

² Korsgaard (1996/1983) seems to assume (1) or something like it in her early work. For a discussion of Korsgaard's changing views on this, see Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000: 39). Lemos (2005: 183) and Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000: 48f) criticise (1) by pointing out that there are no arguments in its favour. My discussion extends beyond theirs by suggesting that there are compelling reasons to reject the principle.

³ For discussions about the nature of value bearers, see, e.g., Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000, 2003) and Zimmerman (2001).

second, worldly sense of explanation. In other words, my question is whether the factors that explain the instantiation of value in a worldly sense must be valuable themselves.⁴

One immediate difficulty is that there is little agreement about the nature of explanation, let alone the more specific case of evaluative explanation. Still, there is one rarely contested principle to which I can anchor my discussion hereafter:

- (2) Necessarily, if an item x has value, then some factor f makes x valuable.

Most philosophers agree that, although we may be unsure what factors explain a given value, there are no cases where value lacks explanation altogether. This assumption is so widely accepted that it is considered part of the common ground in analytic axiology.⁵ To see why, suppose we are walking through a clothing store when we hear a friend say that one dress is more beautiful than another. The dresses appear identical to us, so we ask what makes one preferable to the other. Next, imagine our friend responds that there is no explanation for this—one dress simply happens to be more beautiful. What is strange about this is that it makes value relations seem quite capricious, like butterflies that accidentally land on some items rather than others.⁶ The absurdity of this makes it tempting to assume that (2) is true for the time being, though I shall return to it shortly.

Combining (1) and (2) seems to lead to an infinite regress. This is so regardless of which of the two interpretations of (1) we adopt, provided we

⁴ The worldly explanation is irreflexive, asymmetric, non-monotonic, and appears *hyper-intensional*. For this reason, philosophers may be tempted to regard value-making as a special case of *grounding*. For some early sources from the quickly and ever-expanding literature on this topic, see Correia & Schnieder (2012). I will take no stance here on whether value-making can be understood in terms of metaphysical grounding or some unique sort of normative grounding.

⁵ Cf., Majors who writes that “it is a commonplace to observe that it is a commonplace to observe that the moral supervenes upon the natural”, which he takes to mean, in part, that “the natural fixes the moral” (2009: 29). He mentions many philosophers that understand this relationship in terms of supervenience, among them being Moore (1942: 588), Brink (1989: 160), Smith (1994: 22, 40), Jackson (1998: 118), Shafer-Landau (2003: 77), Dancy (1993: 77; 2004: 87) and others. For some other philosophers who employ the thicker notion of *grounding* to explain the relationship between value and the world, see, e.g., Väyrynen (2013, 2021). One possible exception to the consensus is Gert (2012), who presents a theory that could be interpreted as saying that the evaluative property of being a harm can lack the sort of explanation that we are interested in here.

⁶ I borrow the butterfly analogy from Rønnow-Rasmussen (2006).

assume a unified explanatory relation at each step—one that is irreflexive, asymmetric, and rules out circular or self-grounding chains.⁷

For instance, if items can only have value in virtue of valuable factors and all values must be explained by something, then we have this: Item A has value in virtue of factor f1, which has value in virtue of factor f2, which has value in virtue of factor f3, and so on *ad infinitum*. On the other hand, if facts about factors being value makers can make those factors valuable and all values must be explained by some factor, then the regress becomes a little more subtle: Fact A [f makes x good] makes f good and so Fact A must be good, but then we have Fact B [Fact A makes f good] which makes Fact A good and so fact B must be good, but then we have Fact C [Fact B makes fact A good] and so fact B must be good, and so on *ad infinitum*.

At first glance, the regress may seem to undermine the explanations of any value in the sequence. The worry is that if the explanatory chain has no endpoint, none of its values is ever truly explained. However, this is too quick: The value of the first item in the chain is explained by the second, the second by the third, and so on. To deny this is to conflate local questions—about what explains the value of a particular item in the sequence—with the global question of why such a sequence exists in the first place. Bliss stresses this point in a broader discussion about metaphysical explanation:

All the regress can tell us is how each member has the property under consideration, namely, in dependence upon something else. The appearance of an infinite regress should not lead us to conclude that nothing within the regress has the property under consideration—nor has its possession of that property unexplained—but rather that not everything about the possession of the property that needs to be explained has been (2013: 408).

The infinite regress does not undermine the explanation of value unless the explanation is meant to be about the evaluative domain as a whole (cf. Bliss

⁷ In effect, I assume that the kind of explanation involved at each step of the regress is of the same type. As noted in footnote 4, it is meant to be irreflexive, asymmetric, non-monotonic, and plausibly hyperintensional. For these reasons, value-making appears to function as a special case of the grounding relation. However, I should acknowledge the possibility that the regress might be rendered less vicious by adopting a more nuanced picture—one that distinguishes different kinds of explanatory relations at different steps in the chain. I am unsure how such a story would go and must leave its development to my critics. Finally, I will reconsider the suggestion in section 3 that the regress might also be avoided by interpreting it in circular terms. I will be making the point that much of first-order theorising involves the identification of *fundamental values*. It is this project that the regress threatens, and that threat will remain even if we accept circularity.

2013: 408; Priest 2014: 186–187). This is important because the explanatory claims at stake in (1) and (2) do not have global characters. The idea that every value-making factor must be valuable is naturally read as a claim about local explanation. By contrast, the global claim that the entire evaluative domain must have an explanation (and that the factors that explain it must be valuable) is less convincing. While it seems necessarily true that each value must be instantiated in virtue of something, it is not clear that the domain of value must have an explanation.⁸

The worry is that combining (1) and (2) yields an untidy picture of the evaluative domain incompatible with plausible first-order theories. Such theories proceed by identifying fundamental values that are meant to be of explanatory significance in ethics. Hedonism is a good example. It posits that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and pain the only intrinsic bad (Moore 2019). Proponents of the view allow that things other than pleasure and pain are valuable, but only insofar as they promote these experiences. In other words, hedonism has pleasure and pain as the foundation of everything else within the evaluative domain, meaning that their values do not depend on anything else being good or bad.

While there are legitimate criticisms of hedonism and its relatives, it would be surprising if it failed because there could not be any foundation within the evaluative domain—no anchors for all other values to latch onto. It seems quite intuitive to suggest that pleasure and pain are at the very least among the items valuable for their own sakes and that this is due to their intrinsic subjective characters, i.e., *what it is like* to experience pleasure and pain, respectively (cf. Nagel 1989: 156–162). The suggestion that the evaluative buck stops here—or somewhere else—is, on balance, far more intuitively plausible than the idea that the values of pleasure and pain depend on or yield an infinite chain of values.

I should reiterate that the infinite regress would pose a problem for *any* first-order theory positing a rock bottom within the evaluative domain. This includes most such theories, since, as noted above, they are often defined by what they take to have fundamental value. Hedonism holds that value bottoms out in pleasure and pain; other views might locate it in, for instance, the will to

⁸ *Subjectivism and Divine Command Theory* could perhaps be understood as attempts to provide this kind of global story by appealing to facts about desires, attitudes, and preferences of people or God. The question of whether a global story of this sort is needed or if value can be left partly unexplained from a global perspective is left aside here. However, I suspect that there are plausible varieties of objectivism that deny the need. While each value has a full explanation in the local sense that was just alluded to, the evaluative sequence as such may be explanatorily primitive. For more on the sort of subjectivism to which I have just alluded, see, e.g., Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000: 36–40).

act from empathy. No such first-order theory can succeed if the regress cannot be halted. The absence of a rock bottom would also entail that if there were one good thing, there must be infinitely many good things. A world containing only seven goods, say, would not just be unlikely—it would be impossible.⁹

For these reasons, a view of the evaluative domain that blocks the regress and allows for fundamental value has clear advantages, all other things being equal. To avoid the infinite regress and preserve a more streamlined picture of the evaluative domain, we must reject either (1) or (2). One obvious response is that (2) is too strong and should be replaced with a more modest principle:

(2*) Necessarily, if an item x has *non-fundamental* value, then some factor f makes x valuable.

If an item has fundamental value, there need not be a factor that makes it good or bad. This also looks problematic when combined with (1) and considered from the point of view of the kinds of first-order theories mentioned earlier. For instance, if there is no explanation for why pleasure is good for its own sake, the truth of hedonism starts to seem like a strange coincidence. The fundamental value attributed to pleasure would not be sufficiently grounded in the features of the experience itself, making it seem as though that value could just as easily have been tied to something else, like the heat of a fresh sunburn or the sensation of drowsiness. Value is not so capricious.

A possible rejoinder is that if an item has fundamental value, it does so in all possible worlds where it exists, but this does not quite answer the capriciousness worry. The temptation to think that even fundamental value must be explained by something becomes *stronger* once we see that certain items have that value in all possible worlds. In other words, if some items are rigidly valuable, it becomes even more natural to suppose their fundamental value derives from their intrinsic features. And when we talk of some values as being brute and unexplainable, what we are judging to be brute is rather the fact *that* the essential natures of their bearers explain these values. So, the capriciousness worry arises not because the fundamental value of items can vary across different possible worlds, but because those values seem to have surprisingly little to do with the properties of their bearers.¹⁰

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

¹⁰ Cf., also with Timmons (2012: 4), who claims in his introduction to moral theory that aside from practical aims, such theories also try to fulfil the theoretical aim of giving a picture of the factors in virtue of which moral facts and properties occur in the first place. He suggests that if a first-order theory fails to provide such a picture, then this counts against the theory.

One might also attempt to resist the regress argument by suggesting that evaluative explanation is not linear but circular—that value might circulate among a closed set of items without bottoming out in any one of them. But even if such circularity softens the appearance of regress, it does not remove the deeper difficulty to which I have just been alluding. Circular chains of value explanation are no better suited than infinite ones to support the idea of fundamental value. They offer no terminus—no explanatory ground that could play the foundational role required by most first-order ethical theories. Theories like hedonism or virtue ethics do not merely describe patterns of value; they aim to identify what lies at the root of it. If value arises from a loop, then there is no base. So, while circularity may prevent a regress from being technically vicious, it leaves untouched the structural problem at the heart of (1): it blocks the very kind of explanation that first-order theorising requires.¹¹

Return to the hedonism example. If this view is true, then this is because there is something about pleasure that makes it good for its own sake, just as there is something about the experience of pain that makes it bad for its own sake. Sunburns and drowsiness lack the value of pleasure and pain not by accident, but because they differ from those experiences. There is *something it is like* to be in a state of pleasure or pain, and these subjective qualities give rise to fundamental values.¹²

3. Normative Transmission and Worthless Value Makers

We saw that some factors make items valuable by bestowing their own value on them, meaning that the value of those items is derivative (Korsgaard 1998: 63f). A factor cannot confer value it does not already possess, so value makers of this kind must be value bearers (cf. Dancy 2003: 635). I also mentioned that not all value-making involves this type of relationship. Not all the factors that explain a property must already have that property: Factors that explain consciousness do not have to be conscious, just like factors that explain colour need not have colour, and so on.¹³ The regress problem occurs for both

¹¹ I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

¹² Note that this does not mean that the correct explanation of value must be a good explanation in the epistemic sense, meaning that it is satisfyingly illuminating. For instance, if my remarks above are on the right lines, then the explanation for why pleasure is good for its own sake may just boil down to *the intrinsic nature of pleasure*. Similarly, the explanation for why the will to act in accordance with duty is good for its own sake may just boil down to *the intrinsic nature of the good will*. As true as these explanations are, they may not leave us with the sense that things have been settled and that we understand the nature of value better. Finding the correct worldly explanation for value is difficult enough. To demand that the correct explanation also be the most satisfying one is to demand too much.

¹³ Lemos' and Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen's rejection of (1) is also partly based on this kind of analogy. For sources, see footnote 1.

interpretations of the mechanisms underlying (1), but there are additional problems with the latter.

Indeed, the previous section hinted at plausible counterexamples: If we judge that pleasure is good for its own sake because of its intrinsic subjective character, we are not rationally committed to judging those subjective qualities good. Further cases emerge when we step outside classical theories, such as hedonism, and consider other areas of value. For instance, a piece of wilderness can perhaps be valuable for its own sake in virtue of its extrinsic property of being untouched by humans.¹⁴ Its untouched status may also make it rare, and rarity can often function as an enhancer of value. However, when we judge something good because it is rare, we are not rationally committed to thinking that rarity itself is good or that being untouched by humans is intrinsically valuable.¹⁵

Consider the case of a memorial plaque that holds value for a person because it was created by a loved one. The plaque's value might be explained by its relation to the person who crafted it, but that does not imply that the relation of having been made by a loved one is something to be cherished or pursued. Indeed, we rarely treat such relations as valuable in the abstract. The relation explains the value, but it is not the bearer of it. This asymmetry appears to be common in emotional and personal life.

It is also helpful to approach the issue through the lens of reasons for responses, since value is often thought to be connected to such reasons. At a minimum, if an item is good in virtue of some factor, then there are usually reasons to favour or promote the item—reasons that depend on the presence of that factor. The question is whether those reasons transfer back to the factor itself. In many cases, they do not. If an item is good because it is rare, we may have reason to favour or promote it, but not to favour or promote rarity. Likewise, certain items may be good for us because they once belonged to someone we care about. There may be reasons to value or preserve those items, but it does not follow that we have reasons to preserve the relation of belonging to someone we care about. More generally, we can judge the items as good

¹⁴ The example comes from O'Neill (1992). For a discussion, see, e.g., Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000).

¹⁵ The wilderness example and the rarity example are both adapted from O'Neill (1992: 124–125), who used them to show that items can be good for their own sakes in virtue of their extrinsic features. I am here suggesting that these examples also show that there is no rational commitment such that we have to assign value to rarity or the state of being untouched by human hands if we judge that certain items have value in virtue of these factors. Put differently, we would not be irrational to judge that some items are valuable in virtue of being rare or untouched by human hands while also judging that neither of those factors have value themselves.

without being rationally committed to there being reasons to favour the explanatory grounds of their goodness.

Finally, consider the general claim that certain items have value for me simply because I care deeply about them. It is plausible that there are reasons to protect or preserve such items for my sake. But it seems too far to conclude that the relation of being cared about by me must be valuable. My capacity to care and the fact that I care about independently valuable things may well be valuable in themselves, but the relation itself—that I happen to care about something—appears neither good nor bad but neutral. If there are reasons to protect or promote the relation, these reasons do not stem from the value of the relation as such, but rather from something about the item that merits positive attention.

As noted in the introduction, intuitions supporting (1) likely rest on intuitions about the necessary means of value—factors that are counterfactually implicated in the instantiation of value. The idea is that if something is a necessary means to value, then the item's value is reflected onto the means, making them *pro tanto* good for giving rise to goodness or bad for giving rise to badness. However, the examples I have just discussed suggest that this reflection does not hold in general—not in cases where the relevant factors are necessary means in the sense of being part of the explanation of value. These observations seem to invite a broader challenge for philosophers, which is to clarify the various ways in which something might count as a necessary means to value, and to determine which, if any, conform to the kind of principle expressed by (1). Given what has been said so far, we may conclude that the relation of value making is not among them.

This also means that while there may be a connection between the value of ends and the value of their causal means, we need to be careful about how we establish the connection. The most effective way to defend causal transmission principles is to demonstrate that their application to everyday examples yields the correct results. If I have reasons to visit my father, and taking a plane is the only causal means of doing so, then it follows that I have reasons to take the plane. It is hard to see how there could be reasons to pursue an end without any reasons to pursue the means necessary for reaching it.¹⁶ However, there is also a temptation to defend such principles by appealing to the same general intuition that was just brought into question, which is that *anything* counterfactually implicated by the presence of value must be valuable. Given

¹⁶ For criticisms of some standard forms of instrumental transmission involving either oughts or reasons, see, e.g., White (2017) and Kolodny (2018), respectively. For an influential defense of the principle as applied to oughts, see, e.g., Kiesewetter (2015).

the counterexamples discussed here, we cannot rely on this intuition uncritically.

So far, I have spoken of the value that, according to (1), must accrue to value makers in fairly broad and uncommitted terms. It is time to be clearer. The claim that value makers must be value bearers can be interpreted in several ways. It might assert that value makers must have final value—that is, be valuable for their own sake. Alternatively, it might hold that they must have instrumental value, in virtue of their effects, or some weaker contributory value, by playing a positive role within a valuable whole. These distinctions matter. Final value need not align with intrinsic properties, nor does instrumental value require extrinsic ones. Contributory value, by contrast, may attach to elements that would not be valuable in isolation, yet still enhance something more complex. That said, I do not think it ultimately matters from the point of view of (1). Or rather, I think potential defenders of (1) owe a more detailed account of *why* it matters, given the kinds of arguments and examples presented so far. My aim has not been to target a single conception of value, but to show that (1) is problematic across several plausible interpretations. The examples discussed above are meant to challenge the assumption that value must always transmit—whether as final, instrumental, or contributory—from the item whose value is being explained to the factor that helps explain it.

Here is what a critic might say in response. They might insist on the triviality of the claim that if a factor helps explain the presence of a non-instrumental value, then that factor has instrumental value. However, my examples are meant to challenge this assumption as well. They show that it is not always the case that we have reason to favour the factors that explain why we have reason to favour something else.¹⁷ This holds even if we interpret those reasons instrumentally—as reasons to value something for the sake of its effects. For instance, even if rarity contributes to an item's non-instrumental value, that does not mean we have reason to pursue or promote rarity *as a means*. Similarly, if I accept that my desire for an object helps make it valuable for me, this does not rationally commit me to valuing my desire for an object for its effects. Of course, if the critic simply means that value makers are instrumentally valuable in the sense that they contribute to something else that is non-instrumentally valuable, then that claim is unobjectionable. But we must

¹⁷ I wish to make clear that my discussion does not presuppose a reasons-based account of instrumental value. As noted below, one might use the term “instrumental value” in a deflationary (or even purely descriptive sense)—e.g., to mean that a factor merely features in the explanation of something else’s value, or that it has some human use. But such readings are too weak to support the intuition behind (1), and far too broad to sustain any normatively significant claim about value transmission. If (1) relies on such a diluted conception of instrumental value, then it is, I think, an uninteresting view.

be careful. This looser way of speaking does not imply that it would be fitting to treat such factors as valuable, or that we have reason to respond to them as if they were. In effect, to say that a property has instrumental or contributory value is nothing more than to say that it plays a role in the explanation of another value.

4. Implications

The view that value makers need not be value bearers has broader implications for how we think about ethical questions. Before concluding, I want to mention two examples, the first of which concerns the general phenomenon of improvement.

Human beings are morally obligated to improve themselves and make the world a better place. While there is disagreement about how such progress is best achieved, it is natural to think that we improve ourselves by acquiring more good qualities, and we improve the world by adding more good things to it. If I become a better person, assuming all else is equal, the world becomes better simply by including me. However, recognising that value makers need not be value bearers broadens how we might understand moral progress. It may well be that a person becomes better by acquiring more good traits, or the world improves by containing more intrinsically valuable things. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility that someone might improve through qualities that are not good in themselves, or that the world might be made better by including things that lack value altogether.¹⁸ I am not sure what such qualities or items would be, but I wish to caution against the risk that our attachment to principles like (1) blinds us to less obvious paths toward self-improvement and the betterment of the world.

To make the previous point more vivid, let me turn to a familiar concern within virtue ethics. This tradition holds that understanding morality begins with identifying and accounting for the admirable character traits that exist (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). On many versions of the view, the moral status of an action depends on how a maximally virtuous person would act. An action is morally obligatory in a given situation if and only if—and because—it is the kind of action that such a person would always perform in that situation. Of course, there is disagreement about which traits count as admirable in the first place.¹⁹ However, it is commonly held that a maximally virtuous agent would possess qualities such as truthfulness, generosity, empathy, civility, wisdom, and courage.

¹⁸ Cf., my general argument that value relations need not be explained by the values of their *relata* (García 2023) and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2023).

¹⁹ For more on this sort of account, see Timmons (2012: 280).

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At this point, a worry arises that the explanatory framework of virtue ethics may face a dilemma that emerges when we ask what makes the traits mentioned admirable virtues and what enables them to determine the deontic status of actions. In his introduction to moral theory, Mark Timmons writes:

Traits that confer rightness do so in virtue of their being good. Now, either the goodness of such traits is an unexplained brute fact or it isn't. On the one hand, to claim that it is an unexplained brute fact seems implausible in light of the fact that we can offer explanations of the goodness of such traits. On the other hand, the sorts of explanations we are inclined to offer allow us to explain the rightness of an action without appealing to character traits themselves. (2012: 296)

Timmons proposes that their intrinsic nature best explains the value of virtues—that they are admirable in virtue of what they are. He favours this view over an extrinsic account because the latter risks undermining the spirit of virtue ethics. For instance, he briefly considers the possibility that the value of benevolence is related to certain “attitudes and motives directed toward the well-being of others—others who have dignity and worth” (ibid.: 295). He argues that this kind of extrinsic explanation threatens to bypass the role of virtue altogether since it would allow us to explain why an act is morally obligatory “directly in terms of how such an act affects creatures having dignity and worth” (ibid). Timmons does not explicitly mention the possibility of an extrinsic explanation stated entirely in descriptive terms—one that does not begin by appealing to the dignity or worth of individuals.

My point is that given the arguments developed above, we cannot rule out the possibility that virtues like benevolence are made admirable by their effects on the descriptive conditions of people's lives. These conditions may well overlap with those associated with well-being or what individuals are owed in light of their dignity and worth. However, this does not mean that such normative notions must feature in the explanation of why virtues are admirable. Even if we explain the deontic status of actions by appealing to how benevolence shapes the conditions of people's lives, this poses no real threat to virtue ethics, so long as the theory continues to assign fundamental value to the admirable character traits themselves. What makes virtue ethics distinctive is not the kind of explanation it gives for the admirability of virtues but the evaluative priority it assigns to them.

A more abstract point is that my discussion broadens our understanding of what it means for something to have instrumental value. It is often assumed that if an object is valuable in virtue of facts about its effects, it must be because

the effects themselves are valuable. Perhaps this assumption is correct, but it cannot be defended by appealing to the general belief that all value makers are value bearers, since that appears mistaken. This observation invites us to reconsider familiar views in normative theory, including hedonism. Traditionally, this theory holds that pleasure is the only thing good for its own sake and that other things derive their value from their tendency or capacity to promote it. However, if I am correct, there is also space for unorthodox forms of hedonism that claim facts about pleasure can confer value on other things, even if pleasure itself lacks value. Pleasure could function as a value maker—it is what renders other things good—without possessing value. Whether such a theory is defensible is an open question, but its very possibility illustrates how much is at stake in assuming, without argument, that all value makers must be valuable.

This reconsideration of instrumental value opens the possibility of understanding its nature in a new light. When we say that an item possesses instrumental value, we might mean that it brings about other good things—it serves as an instrument of goodness. But we might also mean that the item is good in virtue of facts about its effects, irrespective of the value of those effects. The standard assumption that an item can only derive value from such facts if the effects are valuable remains largely assumed and unexamined. As we have seen, it cannot be justified by the claim that value makers must always be value bearers, nor can it be defended by suggesting that the relevant facts gain value simply by making other things valuable. More compelling arguments for this assumption are needed.

5. Concluding Remarks

I began by outlining a few relatively uncontroversial claims about evaluative explanation, such as (2). From there, I developed two arguments: The first showed that combining (1) and (2) leads to an infinite regress that conflicts with the project to identify plausible first-order theories about what has value and why. The second is an argument from example, presenting cases in which apparently worthless factors give rise to value. I have argued that we should reject (1), but even if that argument failed—if (1) and (2) can somehow be reconciled—then we should at least treat (1) as a substantive thesis, not as a conceptual truth to be taken for granted. We must be cautious not to treat any factor counterfactually implicated by value as itself valuable. Such generalisations may sometimes hold, such as with necessary causes or parts. Still, they do not apply across the board, particularly not to the worldly explanations associated with value makers. I concluded by exploring the implications of these arguments for discussions of evaluative transmission.

More specifically, I argued that the falsity of (1) has overlooked consequences for discussions about how we understand the nature of evaluative improvement and what it could mean for an item to have instrumental value. In so doing, I have also supported the controversial view that an item can be instrumentally good in virtue of worthless effects.

Interest statement

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