

Hurka on the Intrinsic Value of Attitudes

In Virtue, Vice, and Value Thomas Hurka develops an interesting and unusual form of consequentialist theory.¹ One of its distinctive features is the set of claims that it makes about the intrinsic value of certain psychological attitudes. It is not unusual, of course, for consequentialists to hold that some psychological states are intrinsically valuable. Utilitarianism does so, for example. But Hurka claims that a wide variety of attitudes are intrinsically good; and a wide variety of attitudes are intrinsically bad. Furthermore, Hurka develops a sophisticated structure of claims about the value of these attitudes. In the present paper I examine Hurka's views. I develop three arguments for the conclusion that his theory is fundamentally flawed. The arguments suggest that many of the attitudes that Hurka claims are intrinsically good are really only extrinsically good. This may seem to be a deflationary view about the value of these attitudes. But I think that common sense is inclined to agree that, for example, the desire to produce knowledge as an end is extrinsically valuable.

I

The Abstract Argument and Its Flaw

Hurka's claim about the intrinsic value of certain attitudes is part of what he calls a recursive theory of value. I will summarize it for our purposes. The 'base level' of the theory incorporates claims about the most basic states of affairs that have intrinsic value. Hurka believes that pleasure, knowledge and achievement are the states of affairs at the

base level that are intrinsically good; pain, false belief and failure are the states of affairs at the base level that are intrinsically bad. We will not examine these claims. Our interest is in the further claims he makes about the value of psychological attitudes directed at these states of affairs. Described abstractly these claims are as follows: a love of something intrinsically good for itself is intrinsically good; a love of something intrinsically bad for itself is intrinsically bad; a hatred of something intrinsically bad for itself is intrinsically good; and a hatred of something intrinsically good for itself is intrinsically bad. (11-19) These claims pertain to the second level of his theory. They could in fact be employed in a different recursive theory that made different claims about base-level goods. Hurka also makes claims about third- and higher level intrinsic goods. At the third level of the recursive theory we evaluate attitudes towards the second-level attitudes. He claims (roughly), for example, that a love of a love of something intrinsically good is intrinsically good.² In theory the hierarchy of psychological states extends upward, but it is doubtful that human beings have attitudes above the third level. I will generally focus the discussion on the second level of his theory, but our conclusions apply to higher levels.

In claiming that certain attitudes have intrinsic value Hurka can of course grant that they also have extrinsic value. He does not much explore this sort of claim, but it is open to him to make. My interest will be in the claims he makes about intrinsic value, and how he supports them.

It is important to realize the breadth of Hurka's claims about the attitudes that have intrinsic value. The main topic of Hurka's book is morally significant character traits, that is, virtues and vices. He thinks of these as manifesting themselves in various,

presumably stable, psychological attitudes that have the structures described. But he accepts that even passing attitudes that embody them also are intrinsically good or bad. Hence, any episodic desire, for example, whether ‘in character’ or not, having the relevant structure is intrinsically valuable. (cp. 48-49) Hurka considers the value of a number of other psychological states like wishes that are neither desires nor dispositions to act, but that have the relevant structure. He claims that a wish that something intrinsically good happen ‘for its own sake’ has intrinsic value. Virtuous people have such wishes.

Hurka does not give us a general characterization of the relevant attitudes. Consider the general ‘positive’ attitude that is sometimes intrinsically good, and sometimes intrinsically bad. Hurka calls it ‘loving’. Some desires will fall under this rubric, as will other propositional attitudes like wishing and hoping for. But both positive and negative attitudes can be taken toward one proposition. I can want it to be true that Smith is President, or fear that it is true that Smith is President. To explain fully the nature of the attitudes that have intrinsic value we would need to say what all the ‘favoring’ attitudes have in common, and what all the ‘negative’ ones have in common. But let us proceed without this.

We begin by examining Hurka’s basic claims about the second level of his theory in their full abstractness. He says that the central idea in his recursive theory is captured by “a simple idea”, namely, “it is intrinsically good to be oriented positively toward good and negatively toward evil, and intrinsically evil to be oriented negatively toward good and positively toward evil.” (17) Elsewhere he writes that “the core idea” of his theory is that “the value of an attitude...depends on the value of its object.” (24) Finally, he gives

a summary of what his theory says “makes good attitudes good”: “if an attitude is one of loving, it is good because its object is good; if it is one of hating, it is good because its object is evil.” (189) He says these contentions are “immediately persuasive”. (190)

There are, in fact, two meanings that the word ‘object’ has here. One way of understanding what Hurka finds persuasive is the following. We first find ‘base level’ goods like knowledge and pleasure. These goods, or instances of them, can be the objects of certain favoring attitudes. For example, suppose S is pleased that she knows about the theory of evolution. Here ‘pleased’ is a ‘factive’ attitude that implies that S has the relevant knowledge. But there is another way to interpret what the ‘object’ of an attitude is: it is defined by the agent’s beliefs. This sort of ‘object’ may not exist, or even be capable of existing. The object of S’s desire can be finding the Fountain of Youth. With this meaning in mind Hurka speaks of the “intentional and therefore internal relation” that an attitude has toward its ‘object’. (32) It is important to realize that it is this meaning that Hurka has in mind in the second level of his theory. He makes this clear when he says that a false belief about an object’s existence does not by itself affect the value of a favoring attitude towards it. If a scientist like Aristotle desires knowledge as an end, the fact that his methods of investigation will only yield erroneous conclusions does not detract from the intrinsic value of his desire. (34; Cp.178; 183)

Hurka’s basic argument thus actually involves an equivocation. It admittedly has some force when it utilizes the first, or factive, understanding of ‘object’. If we have picked out an existing piece of knowledge it is plausible to say that a love of it is valuable, at least in some way. If S is pleased that she knows the theory of evolution her attitude is in a clear sense a response to an existing intrinsic good. Similarly, if we

assume that a desire will lead to the production of some knowledge then a desire for it as an end is valuable, in some way. (I will say more about this shortly.) But his conclusion about the value of attitudes employs the intentional meaning of ‘object’. Sometimes what an agent believes is intrinsically valuable really is so. But sometimes it is not.³ In the latter case it is not clear why having a favorable attitude towards this sort of ‘object’ is intrinsically valuable. Suppose that S is pleased that she ‘knows’ astrology for its own sake. (She is not pleased with this knowledge because of what it can do for her.) Hurka writes, “The value of an attitude...depends on the value of its object.” If we take ‘object’ in the factive sense, this statement actually seems to argue against saying that S’s attitude in this case has intrinsic value, rather than in favor. Astrology is not knowledge, so S does not have an attitude that responds to something having intrinsic value. In the assertions constituting the second level of his theory Hurka takes ‘object’ to have the ‘intentional’ meaning. But the base level of his theory does not assert that all of the objects that agents believe are intrinsically valuable really are intrinsically valuable.

Another way to put the problem is this. If S knows about the world, knows what has intrinsic value, and has the appropriate attitudes to them, then these attitudes might well be thought to inherit the intrinsic value of their (factive) objects. But if S’s attitudes are based on false beliefs it is not obvious that they have intrinsic value, even if they reflect her convictions about what has intrinsic value. By utilizing the intentional meaning of ‘object’ with regard to second level attitudes Hurka loses the ability to claim that they have intrinsic value simply in virtue of being ‘about’ the states of affairs at the first level that have intrinsic value.

Now, Hurka can support his views about the intrinsic value of some psychological attitudes in some other way. He can appeal, for example, to ‘reflective equilibrium’. But I do not think he is correct in saying that there is an “immediately persuasive” argument from the intrinsic value of base level goods to the intrinsic value of all of the attitudes that he claims have it.

II

The Priority of Producing Good.

If there is no straightforward argument for the claim that a large class of psychological attitudes has intrinsic value we can ask whether there are any reasons to claim that many of them, anyway, have extrinsic value. I want to approach this question by continuing to look at the whole range of attitudes that Hurka is interested in. This will allow us to consider some of the interesting remarks he makes about a number of specific attitudes. The critical issue in considering these attitudes is not whether they can be valuable: obviously they can be. The issue is the kind of value they have: is it intrinsic or extrinsic?⁴ To answer this question we need to examine the basis of the value judgments that Hurka makes. Many of these judgments actually turn out to be most plausibly construed as involving extrinsic value.

Let us grant Hurka that there are certain ‘base level’ values. We do not even need to decide what they are, so long as we understand them to be ‘agent-neutral’. That is, certain objects, properties or states of affairs are characterized as intrinsically good, whatever their relation is to a given agent. So, if knowledge is intrinsically good then

anyone's knowledge is intrinsically good. And if some kinds of knowledge are better than others, then anyone's having that kind of knowledge is better.

I will now mention six points that Hurka makes. They represent some of the remarkable elaborations of the recursive theory of value that he develops in his book. Some of these points can be seen as qualifications to the agent neutrality of the base level goods.

1. The value of an attitude depends in part on its object's relation to actuality. (118f; 125; 168-9) This means, for example, that the compassion directed at an imaginary character like King Lear is less valuable than that directed at a real human being.⁵ Attitudes directed at remote possibilities have less value or badness than when those same attitudes are directed at real possibilities.

2. The attitudes themselves have different values, even when their objects have the same proximity to the actual world. Desires to realize goods have more value than mere wishes to bring those same goods into existence; desires to bring about bad states of affairs are worse than mere wishes for them to happen. (123)

3. Pain that an agent feels at harm she herself has caused is better than pain that she feels for a harm of the same magnitude caused by someone else. Similarly, it is worse to enjoy a fantasy of torturing someone than it is to enjoy to the same degree a fantasy of witnessing someone else torture a person. (204-5) This is one of the modifications that Hurka makes to the agent neutrality of his theory. Others include the following.

4. Desiring a certain amount of my own pleasure as an end just as much as I desire the same amount of others' pleasure as an end, and desiring that amount of pleasure for others more than I desire that amount of my own, are equally valuable, under

certain conditions. That is to say, under these conditions an agent's having an altruistic bias towards the pleasure of others is just as valuable as her desiring her own pleasure equally with others'. (208-212)

5. Being pained by one's own vice—a third-order attitude—is more valuable than being pained by someone else's vice of the same magnitude. (206)

6. In contrast, being pleased by one's own virtue is not more valuable than being pleased by someone else's virtue of the same magnitude. Hurka plausibly describes a disproportionate pleasure in one's own virtue to be “an objectionable form of moral pride”. (206)

I consider these claims to be morally sensitive, and largely in line with the evaluations of the relevant attitudes that are made by reflective people. But we need to understand their basis. Consider Hurka's second point about the value of wishes as opposed to desires. To wish for a certain good is to have a favoring attitude towards it, but so is a desire to produce it. Why, then, is a desire to produce it more valuable? Hurka's approach suggests that reflection on the relationship between a wish for a good and that good, as compared to a desire for it and that good enables us to answer this question. I think, though, that the only plausible answer is that these judgments reflect a focus on producing good results. A desire to produce a certain good is more likely to produce that good than a wish for it is. If this is the explanation for our thinking, then the evaluations that we are making concern the extrinsic value of these two attitudes, not their intrinsic value.

A similar idea underlies Hurka's first point. Our normative thought does not deny that wishes and hopes, as well as attitudes directed at fictional beings, have value. And

we are indeed inclined to agree that, say, compassion directed at a remotely possible being is less valuable than compassion directed at an actual being. The issue is why we think this. And, again, the obvious explanation is that we think that compassion directed at actual beings, or at beings whose misfortunes are likely to occur, will tend to lead agents toward the real amelioration of their suffering, or some other being's suffering. To conceive of the evaluations in this way is again to see our thinking as involving judgments of extrinsic value.

Now consider Hurka's fifth and six points. These concern certain attitudes towards one's own virtue and vice, as compared to attitudes towards the virtues and vices of others. If we were looking at these evaluations abstractly it seems that we would say that a pleasure in my own middling honesty is just as valuable as the same amount of my pleasure in your middling honesty. Similarly, we would say that being somewhat pained by my own moderate callousness is just as valuable as my being somewhat pained by your moderate callousness. Hurka correctly says that we do not tend to equate the value of the relevant attitudes. The most plausible explanation of these judgments, I think, appeals to certain deep-seated, but well-known, propensities of human nature. We generally are rather too impressed with our own virtue, and therefore insufficiently motivated to improve ourselves. So our judgment about the value of an agent's pleasure in her own virtue is somewhat discounted. We likewise think that humans tend to ignore their own vices as compared to the vices of others. Furthermore, an agent's pain at her own vice is more directly tied to reforming action than is her pain at another person's vice, since that second pain may not even be known by the other agent. If these thoughts

are underlying our evaluations we are again making judgments about the likely effects of the relevant attitudes, given human nature.

I submit that in fact all six of the modifications that Hurka makes to his recursive theory of value can plausibly be seen as reflecting a concern with producing good results. The departures from strict agent-neutrality, for instance, seem to respond to the influence of background beliefs about human nature and its propensities. They make morally enlightened corrections for the prevailing motivational winds, as it were.⁶ We thus can see why certain attitudes are more or less valuable than we would have supposed if we considered them merely as abstract propositional structures.

I do not assert that no higher order psychological attitudes are intrinsically valuable. It is possible, for example, that a factive pleasure in knowledge that one actually possesses is intrinsically valuable. We do not need to resolve this question. It is sufficient for our purposes if we can see that many of the attitudes that Hurka regards as intrinsically valuable are more plausibly regarded as only extrinsically valuable.

III

The Desire to Produce New Knowledge as an End.

Finally, I want to consider the value of one type of desire. Desires have an especially close connection to action, though of course they are not always acted on. I think there is therefore something odd in general in saying that desires are intrinsically good, given the fact that one of their main functions, we might say, is to bring about changes in the world. (Admittedly, some desires seek to preserve the world as it is. But

such desires operate when an agent believes that failing to act will, or might, lead to a change in the world.) The desire I want to consider is the desire to produce new knowledge as an end. This is a desire that we hold in high regard, and believe to be quite valuable—in a way that we must now clarify. Hurka claims that this desire is intrinsically valuable. He seems to think that his view is the only one that can explain why, for example, we value the efforts of a scientist who seeks to produce new knowledge as an end, but fails to do so. (34; 183)

The Internal Perspective on the Desire. Hurka must be thinking of this evaluation as undertaken by one person who is considering the desire of another person to produce new knowledge as an end. Curiously enough, his conclusion gets no support from what we might call the internal perspective of the person who has this desire.

In order to grasp this problem let us think more closely about desiring to bring something about as an end. In an important article Christine Korsgaard distinguishes between valuing something as an end and believing that it has intrinsic value.⁷ She contends that to say something is intrinsically valuable “is to say that it has its goodness in itself. It refers, one might say, to the location or source of the goodness...”⁸ To value something as an end is, she says, to value it for its own sake. But an agent may value something as an end that receives its value, as it were, from something external to it.⁹ The sort of cases where this distinction is helpful, she says, are “mixed values”, which include “luxurious instruments”. A mink coat has instrumental value, but the people who want one do not want it simply in order to keep warm. So the best way to characterize how people value them is this: “they are valued for their own sakes under the condition of their usefulness.”¹⁰

Korsgaard's point about this distinction is helpful. And in fact we can bring out the difference between the two concepts more sharply by considering the desire for money. Most people desire money only because of its extrinsic value. We can still distinguish two different ways in which a desire for money guides their practical reasoning. Sometimes they will seek to acquire money with some definite use of it in mind. At other times they will seek to acquire money with no such use in mind. In the latter cases they are treating money as a provisional (or, we might say, 'practical') end. An agent in the latter case will regard her action as successful if she comes to possess the money. S can believe that money is only extrinsically good, but still desire it as an end.

With this distinction in mind let us return to the desire to produce new knowledge as an end. We now see that if S desires to produce new knowledge as an end she need not believe that this knowledge is intrinsically good. Instead, she may believe it is an all-purpose means like money, and have no particular use for it in mind for now. But it also possible that S desires to produce this new knowledge as an end because she believes it is intrinsically good. That is, in this case S believes the base-level claim in Hurka's theory that knowledge is intrinsically good, or at least she believes part of it. (She may not believe that all knowledge is intrinsically good, for example.) This is the case we are interested in. Let us ask what state of affairs S desires to bring about as an end when she believes that knowledge is intrinsically good. There are various possible answers. S may want to know some specific fact or theory. Or she may want someone else to know a specific fact or theory. Or, again, she may want to know some indefinitely specified thing. Etc. The crucial point is that she will not desire her own desire as an end; she will desire to bring about knowledge as an end. So if S accepts Hurka's base-level claim about

the intrinsic value of knowledge she will not desire her own desire as an end. She will desire knowledge as an end.

The Spectator's Evaluation of the Desire. Hurka thus must be thinking that his claim about the intrinsic value of S's desire to produce new knowledge as an end is plausible from the standpoint of another person who considers this desire. Hurka conceives of what he is evaluating as a desire and its intentional object as such. If we focus our minds on them properly, he contends, we will affirm that the desire to produce new knowledge as an end has intrinsic value, even if an agent who acts on it does not succeed in producing new knowledge.

However, we can conduct another sort of spectator's evaluation of the desire. When we focus our minds on a second question we can see that the desire to produce new knowledge as an end is indeed valuable, but only extrinsically valuable. In other words, we can affirm the following statement: in general, the desire to produce new knowledge as an end is extrinsically good; that is, good only because of its likely effects.

Let us assume that the research of scientist S fails to produce any new knowledge, and that her research was guided by the belief that knowledge is intrinsically good. Is it still possible to say that her desire to produce this knowledge as an end was extrinsically valuable? To speak of the value of this desire 'in general' is to adopt a long-term social perspective.¹¹ This is the perspective we took up in thinking about the claims in Section II. Different relative evaluations of a desire D1 from this perspective will seek to bring about different degrees of prevalence of D1 in a group of people, different degrees of strength for D1 on average, and so on. Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that these desires will often provide imperfect human agents with normative premises for their

practical reasoning. In the case of the desire to produce new knowledge as an end these agents will not know before they engage in research whether they will succeed in producing new knowledge. That is, they will have different research strategies, some well chosen, some not. Given this crucial fact, when we engage in thinking from the long-term social perspective we, like Hurka, will have to focus our evaluation on ‘the desire to produce new knowledge as an end’ in the intentional sense. We evaluate a desire that will move people to do things that they believe will produce new knowledge. Let us suppose that it is clear from this social perspective that many people who act on this desire will fail to produce new knowledge. (This is probably too pessimistic an assumption, but weakening it does not affect the point I am making.) It may still be true that the net result of the efforts of all these researchers is that much new knowledge is produced. This establishes that the desire is indeed extrinsically valuable, in spite of the low success rate of researchers. Hurka’s error in thinking about the value of this desire stems from his focusing too narrowly on the results of a failed researcher’s efforts.

In sum, we all grant that this desire is good. Hurka claims that he has the best explanation of why it is good. His explanation does not work at all in the case of a person who has the desire. And an alternative explanation works well in the case of an important sort of spectator’s judgment. All this does not prove that the desire is not intrinsically good. But, on balance, it makes the claim doubtful.

IV

Conclusion

Let us review the conclusions that we have reached.

1. Hurka does not have a convincing abstract argument to show that a wide range of second-order psychological attitudes are intrinsically good.
2. A number of the claims that he makes about the value of specific second-order attitudes are best explained by the assumption that they are extrinsically, not intrinsically, good.
3. In particular, his claim that the desire to produce new knowledge as an end is intrinsically good is not convincing.

These conclusions tend to support a further and broader claim. Most, if not all, of the second-order psychological attitudes that Hurka thinks are both intrinsically and extrinsically good are, in fact, only extrinsically good.

¹ Thomas Hurka, Virtue, Vice and Value (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). References to pages of this work will be included in the body of this paper. References in the notes will abbreviate the title as 'VVV'.

² More precisely: a love for itself of a love of something intrinsically good for itself is intrinsically good.

³ The structures here are similar to the practical syllogism, and there are problems that arise from false minor premises.

⁴ There is some debate about exactly which features of an object count as determining its intrinsic value. Hurka argues for relaxing Moore's strictness about this. VVV 6-7.

Hurka's view "allows a state's intrinsic goodness to be affected by its relational properties." VVV 6. I have no quarrel with speaking of the value of an attitude and its intentional object as 'intrinsic'. Hurka clearly thinks that if the causal properties of an attitude are the only basis of its value then this is not intrinsic value. This is the question that I am addressing in the text. For more on the concept of intrinsic value see Shelly

Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value," The Journal of Ethics 2 (1998), pp. 277-97; Ben Bradley, "Is Intrinsic Value Conditional?" Philosophical Studies 107 (2002), pp. 23-44.

⁵ Hurka draws on G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 219-21.

⁶ This is perhaps least clear with regard to the fourth point Hurka makes. I see him as here trying to reconcile the agent-neutrality at the base level of his theory with the obvious fact that we tend to regard altruistic desires as better than self-interested ones. Sidgwick noted that the value of self-interested desires has been a controversial question historically, but even consequentialists who recognize the good results that self-interested desires often produce have tended to say that these desires are only of neutral value. Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981), p. 366. Cp. Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Methuen, 1970), p.115. There is a strain of thought stretching back to Butler that attempts to resolve this paradox. See Joseph Butler, Dissertation of the Nature of Virtue, paragraph 9; Sidgwick, Methods, op. cit., p. 428; Moore, Principia, op. cit., p. 172; John Rawls, A Study in the Grounds of Ethical Knowledge: Considered with Reference to Judgments on the Moral Worth of Character, Ph.D. Dissertation Princeton, 1950, pp. 207-10. These authors are insisting that human beings commonly act from self-interested desires, so that the amount of good they produce establishes a sort of baseline for our evaluation of other motives. The motives we regard as good are the ones that produce more good than that, 'in general'. (I will say more about this important concept shortly.) This point is fully consistent with an approach to the value of attitudes that regards them as generally only of extrinsic value.

⁷ Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," Creating the Kingdom of Ends (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 9. (Hereafter, CKE.)

⁸ CKE 250.

⁹ CKE 250.

¹⁰ CKE 263-4, at 264.

¹¹ This is the perspective on motives that Bentham adopts in An Introduction, op. cit., ch. 10.