

FAQ on Intrinsic Values

A Free Ebook

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This FAQ contains many of my arguments, ideas, and beliefs concerning intrinsic value in the form of “questions and answers” and “frequently asked questions.”

1. What does “intrinsic value” mean?

“Intrinsic value” describes value beyond our goals, opinions, preferences, and cultural customs. Instead, something is intrinsically good if it is good just for existing, good in itself, and good for its own sake.

One meaning of “good” is “useful.” Many things are valuable as a means to an end. When we say that food is good, we mean that it's good for keeping us alive. When we say that we should eat food, we mean that we should eat food if we want to stay alive because it is necessary and useful to stay alive.

Another meaning of “good” is “desired.” We say that flowers are good and spinach is bad when we like flowers and dislike spinach.

However, pleasure, happiness, and human life seem to be good. They are things we should desire and we ought to have goals that promote intrinsically good things. All things equal, it's right to save a life and it's wrong to kill a life if human life has value. We also think it's rational to help people attain pleasure and avoid pain because we think pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad. Comedians give us pleasure and being a comedian “makes sense” because the goal is “worthy.” To tell a comedian that attaining pleasure is pointless would seem to be irrational.

On the other hand people who desire to count blades of grass seem like they are irrational because their behavior isn't “worthy.” Even worse is when people desire to hurt others. The goal of hurting others (without due cause) isn't a worthy goal and it doesn't really “make sense.”

2. How does intrinsic value relate to morality?

We should do what we can to promote intrinsic values—make people happy, save lives, help improve people, and so on. We should do what we can to help people avoid

intrinsically bad things, like pain. That is the main idea behind morality. Intrinsic values help us discover what actions are “best” or “preferable” all things considered.

The reason that some actions are right and some are wrong is because of the benefits and harms our actions can produce. We know how horrific it is to torture a child, and that is how we know that torturing children is wrong.

3. How do we know what has intrinsic value?

This is a matter of dispute, but it seems quite possible that we can know intrinsic values through observation in a similar way to how we observe psychological facts. We know what has intrinsic value through experience. We experience that pain is bad and pleasure is good. We know other people have the same kinds of experiences for similar reasons. We know other people's pleasure is good just like our own and their pain is bad just like our own. That is why it makes sense that we care for other people. To not care for other people is irrational because we aren't the center of the universe. Other people also exist and they are just as important as ourselves. To act like one's own pleasure matters, but no one else's pleasure matters is a strange denial of intrinsic value.

If something is intrinsically good, then we should have reason to believe that it's not merely good in some other sense. We shouldn't merely desire it, and it shouldn't merely be useful. Pleasure in particular seems like something we desire precisely because it feels good and it “feeling good” seems like a good reason to think it really is good no matter who experiences it.

I discuss this issue in more detail in “[How to Find the Meaning of Life.](#)” In particular, we can argue that something has intrinsic value using the following criteria:

1. We experience X as good (or bad).
2. We know X is good (or bad) for everyone.
3. X's intrinsic value explains our moral experiences.
4. Our experience of X's value can't be fully accounted for as a “final end,” usefulness, and/or a pre-existing desire.

4. Are intrinsic values compatible with naturalism?

Naturalism is the view that we can know everything (or everything in a specific field of study) through the empirical methods of science (observation) and everything that exists is physical. I will discuss these two positions below.

5. Can we know intrinsic values from observation?

That is a matter of dispute. [Torbjörn Tännsjö](#) thinks so, but [Robert Audi](#) doesn't. We seem to know that our own specific pleasures are intrinsically good from experience alone, but Audi thinks that we can't generalize that "all pleasure has intrinsic value" without an ability to reason about our observations that he thinks is incompatible with empiricism (observation alone). Audi thinks that we can find out that "pleasure is intrinsically good" through "reflection" (or conceptual analysis). We can find out that "pleasure is intrinsically good" is self-evident, but that doesn't mean we couldn't prove that pleasure is intrinsically good through argumentation.

I suspect that Audi might also think that the belief that "all water is H₂O" also requires something more than empiricism. The view that all water is H₂O is often taken by philosophers to be a nonempirical/intuitive "[metaphysical](#)" claim about "all possible worlds," but we can't observe "possible worlds." ([Saul Kripke](#) was one of the first philosophers to make this argument.)

I am currently uncertain whether our justification for *all* of our intrinsic value beliefs reside purely from observation or not. It is possible that it isn't self-evident that "all pleasure is intrinsically good" after all. An empiricist can hypothesize that all pleasure is intrinsically good and that seems like a good hypothesis until it is falsified. If someone has an intrinsically bad pleasure, then we would find out that only some pleasure is intrinsically good.

6. Are intrinsic values physical?

Asking if intrinsic values are physical is a lot like asking if our minds are physical. Our minds seem to depend on the existence of our bodies (and brains) and it seems reasonable enough to think they are physical—but certainly not physical in the sense of being nothing but atoms.

Intrinsic value seems to depend on the existence of minds, so it seems reasonable to think that intrinsic value, minds, and atoms all exist as physical elements of reality.

Of course, intrinsic values are properties, so they aren't solid objects. To say that intrinsic value is physical is like saying solidity is physical. These things don't exist as solid objects themselves because they are properties of objects. I don't believe in an eternal realm that has objects like "intrinsic goodness" or "solidity."

7. Why don't intrinsic values require God?

It is possible that everything actually requires God because the universe itself might require God to exist, but our real interest is whether or not an atheistic physical universe is enough for intrinsic values to exist. If there is no God and atheism is true, then would we still have reason to believe in intrinsic value? I think so. We know intrinsic values

through experience. Our minds and our experiences would be the same given an atheistic universe. We would still know that pain is good and pleasure is bad.

Moreover, I find it implausible to think that God must directly intervene in our world to make morality possible. The fact that *my pain is bad* doesn't need God's approval. God doesn't have to dislike my pain to make it bad. If God dislikes my pain, then hopefully it's because my pain is really bad in the physical world I exist in.

8. Aren't intrinsic values mysterious, just like God?

We experience intrinsic value, but some people think they experience God. There is something mysterious going on here, right? I think not. It is true that we can be deceived by our experiences, but I see no reason to think I can be deceived by my experience of pain. What would it mean to be deceived into thinking I am feeling pain? I certainly couldn't have a "hallucination of pain" because *a hallucination of pain is pain*. A hallucination is a deceptive experience, but we are doing nothing but describing our experience itself when we experience pain.

When I see a cow in the distance and believe that there's a cow in the distance, I might be deceived. There might just be a cardboard cutout of a cow. I would then attribute meaning to my experience that misrepresents reality. However, it is much more difficult (or impossible) to be deceived by our experiences that don't refer to anything or purport to represent reality. Pain does not purport to represent reality.

Experiences of God are much more like experiences of a cow than intrinsic value because it purports to refer to something in the world—and such an experience can be deceptive. In fact, we have a good reason to trust our experiences of cows insofar as other people can confirm or disconfirm our experience, but our experience of God can not be confirmed or disconfirmed so easily (if at all).

9. Isn't our knowledge of intrinsic values mysterious?

Wouldn't we need some mysterious form of intuition, self-evidence, or "moral sense" to know about intrinsic value? First, I don't think anything mysterious is required. I think even Audi would agree that we can experience that actual instances of our pain is intrinsically bad without appealing to intuition or self-evidence. Second, there is something mysterious going on all the time. Every argument and belief requires assumptions and not all of our assumptions have ever been proven. All of our beliefs are mysterious insofar as they are uncertain, but that doesn't mean that something supernatural or offensively ambitious is required by intrinsic values.

For more information about the assumptions and mystery involved with our knowledge (and scientific knowledge in particular), you can see my essay, "[Common Sense Assumptions vs. Self-Evidence.](#)"

The fact that ignorance and assumptions plague our knowledge of the world and ourselves doesn't mean that we should give up. We have made a great deal of [progress in philosophy](#) and science, and the alternative can lead to [dogmatism and fanaticism](#).

10. Aren't intrinsic values subjective?

David Hume thought that our pleasures and preferences were nonfactual, and there is still a strong bias against the “subjective.” The word “subjective” has two common meanings in philosophy: (1) Something exists in the mind and (2) there is no reliable method to attain knowledge about something.

First, it might be true that pleasure exists in the mind, so the “intrinsically good” property of pleasure is found in the mind as well. However, I think what exists in the mind can be factual. The assumption that what exists in the mind is “nonfactual” seems like an unjustified false assumption. If what exists in the mind isn't factual, then it would never be true that you experience pain or have thoughts. But we know people have pain, thoughts, and so on.

Additionally, it's possible that we experience that human beings have intrinsic value. Human beings don't exist in the mind, but I do agree that human beings can't exist without having minds.

Second, I think it is false that there is no reliable way to know intrinsic values. I think we can experience that we have thoughts and that our experience of our thoughts is a reliable way to know about our thoughts. I see no reason to think it couldn't also be a reliable way to know about intrinsic values.

Of course, I must admit that we could be wrong about our own thoughts and experiences. Some people don't think they experience intrinsic values at all. I think they are misinterpreting their own experiences.

11. Aren't intrinsic values really just our preferences?

No. If there are any intrinsic values, then (by definition) they aren't just our preferences. We can prefer or desire something precisely because we find out it's good. Some people don't desire pleasure of certain kinds and we might not want to experience pleasure every second of our lives. Consider how people tend not to desire the pleasure of doing philosophy. I think they fail to realize the importance of philosophical pleasure and they are “missing out” on something intrinsically good.

How do I know that intrinsic values aren't merely our preferences? The same way that I know what has intrinsic value in the first place. See “3. How do we know what has intrinsic value?” above. I experience that some things are good and some are bad. It only

only the fact that pleasure feels good and pain feels bad that makes me prefer or desire pleasure in the first place (for both myself and others). See “3. How do we know what has intrinsic value?” above.

The question is—Are things good because we like them, or do we like things because they are good? This question is commonly attributed to the Socratic dialogue, [Euthyphro](#).

12. Aren't some pleasures bad?

Some people argue the following:

1. Some pleasures, such as those attained by sadists while harming others, are bad.
2. If some pleasures are bad, then they aren't intrinsically good.
3. Therefore, pleasure isn't intrinsically good.

First, the argument equivocates “is a result of morally justified behavior” with “intrinsically good.” Pleasure can motivate immoral behavior, and pleasure can be caused by immoral behavior. The “intrinsic goodness” found in pleasure is in the positive element we experience in it. That positive element can be experienced even when pleasure is a result of immoral behavior.

Pleasure is only one element that we take into consideration when we make moral decisions. It is not the only element. I can't decide to steal money from others to buy myself a car because their suffering will also have to be taken into consideration. There are pros and cons to our actions that we take into consideration when making decisions

Second, even if some pleasure wasn't intrinsically good, that wouldn't prove that no pleasure is intrinsically good. It would still be reasonable to admit that most pleasure we experience is intrinsically good.

For more information about how intrinsic value figures into our moral reasoning, you might want to read my review of Robert Audi's [The Good in the Right](#).

13. Isn't some pain good?

Some people argue the following:

1. We need to experience pain to learn.
2. If we need to experience pain to learn, then pain isn't intrinsically bad.
3. Therefore, pain isn't intrinsically bad.

This argument fails for the same reasons as the argument above. First, the fact that we need to experience pain to learn merely means that pain can be useful. It doesn't prove pain isn't intrinsically bad. How people experience pain still counts for something in our

moral decisions. Second, even if some people wasn't intrinsically bad, that doesn't mean no pain is intrinsically bad. It seems reasonable to think that a lot of pain we experience is intrinsically bad.

14. What about masochists? They desire pain, don't they?

Imagine that someone argues the following:

1. Masochists desire pain.
2. If masochists desire pain, then pain isn't intrinsically bad.
3. Therefore, pain isn't intrinsically bad.

First, we can desire what is intrinsically bad. What is intrinsically good isn't necessarily what we desire—just like many people don't desire to experience philosophical pleasures.

Second, masochists attain pleasure and pain from certain experiences. That's much like how many people enjoy horror movies. It is important to feel negative emotions (fear) for the horror movie to be maximally enjoyable. We are all masochists to various degrees. The the reason that masochists desire pain isn't to have pain without any reward. It is to attain pleasure from an experience that has some involvement of pain. Again, both pain and pleasure count for something when we make decisions.

Third, even if masochistic pain isn't intrinsically bad, that doesn't mean non-masochistic pain isn't intrinsically bad either.

15. Isn't intrinsic value an offensively ambitious claim about reality?

J. L. Mackie offered the argument from queerness that could be used to argue against intrinsic value:

1. Intrinsic values requires substantial claims about reality.
2. Substantial claims about reality should be rejected unless they are appropriately justified.
3. Intrinsic value beliefs are not appropriately justified.
4. Therefore, we should reject intrinsic values.

My answer is simply that I do think our intrinsic value beliefs are at least occasionally sufficiently justified. Mackie thinks that our intrinsic value beliefs are too mysterious and require an offensively ambitious form of intuition and/or an offensively nonphysical kind of reality. I have already responded to this claim above in “Are intrinsic values physical?” and “Isn't our knowledge of intrinsic values mysterious?”

I also replied to Mackie's concerns in my essays, "[Intuition is Unreliable](#)" and "[The Argument from Queerness](#)."

16. How can you get what "ought to be the case" from "what is the case?"

It is often argued that you can't get what "ought to be the case" from "what is the case." However, there is little more to this argument than an assertion. Someone doesn't know how it can be done and declares that it is impossible. I disagree. Intrinsic values tell us what ought to be the case because it's better for something with intrinsic value to exist than not exist, and we have the power to promote intrinsic values by creating and protecting things with intrinsic value.

For a more detailed discussion, see my essays, "[What are Moral Facts?](#)," "[The Is/Ought Gap](#)," and my review of Paul Bloomfield's [Moral Reality](#) (and the section on "What linguistic rules determine moral language?" in particular).

17. Why do people disagree about intrinsic values?

Some people argue that amount and prevalence of moral disagreement prove that morality is nothing more than cultural customs or a matter of personal preference and such an argument could be used to try to disprove the existence of intrinsic values:

1. Most of people's moral disagreements can't be resolved.
2. If most of our moral disagreements can't be resolved, then intrinsic values don't exist.
3. Therefore, intrinsic values don't exist.

It is hard to know why anyone would be persuaded by this argument. It's not clear that either of the premises are true or even plausible. Are our moral disagreements irresolvable? It might seem so because philosophers haven't answered all our moral questions yet, but perhaps philosophers have at least answered some (e.g. slavery is wrong) and will someday answer the rest.

If moral disagreements are irresolvable, does that mean that intrinsic values don't exist? I think not. If we can prove that a single intrinsic value exists, then that is enough to disprove the argument. I think it is very plausible that at least one intrinsic value does exist.

It is true that intrinsic values alone aren't always sufficient to determine right from wrong. It seems obvious that giving a stranger with a headache an aspirin is the right thing to do, but it might not be obvious whether or not abortion should be legal. It's not easy for us to know how to best promote intrinsic values because they tend to be immeasurable and

possibly even incommensurable. Even if we can harm one person to save several lives, we can't say for certain that the one person harmed is “worth less” than the lives we saved.

For more discussion on moral disagreement, you might want to read my essay, “[The Persistence of Moral Disagreement](#).”

18. How do intrinsic values motivate us?

Some people have argued that intrinsic values are offensively ambitious claims about reality because they are supposed to motivate us; or that intrinsic values don't exist because they can't motivate us; or that intrinsic values probably don't exist because the fact they motivate us implies that they are actually our preferences. Intrinsic values can't motivate us just from existing, but people tend to want to do what they believe is truly important, worthwhile, and intrinsically good. How exactly people get motivated to be good is up for debate. It's possible that we are naturally born to care for others. People who believe in intrinsic values have a good reason to continue to care for others and learn how to strengthen their interest in helping others. People who don't believe in intrinsic values might choose to weaken their interest in helping others by alienating themselves from society, dehumanizing strangers, learning to stop thinking about the suffering of strangers, and so on. Prejudice has been a powerful force in alienating us from those who are considered to be “inferiors” or “inhuman.”

For more information, you might want to take a look at my essays, “[How to Become Moral](#)” and “[Moral Beliefs Can't Motivate](#).”

19. Does moral realism require intrinsic value?

I think moral realism requires intrinsic value. Intrinsic value tells us why we should do something, and why it really matters that we do it. Without intrinsic value, all our actions are fruitless. None of our goals are “worthy” and what we choose to do is arbitrary. That's not to say that moral realism is required to be a good person. Anti-realists are often interested in being good people for one reason or another. However, without intrinsic values it's not clear why it's so important to be a good person, help others, or refuse to hurt others. There are evil CEO's, mafia men, and assassins who might harm others to benefit themselves. Such people might learn to weaken their sense of empathy for strangers while still enjoying a rich family life.

More Information

I have already discussed intrinsic value in detail in the past. In particular, I have already talked about the following:

1. The meaning of “intrinsic value” in “[What does 'meaning of life' mean?](#)”
2. Common misinformed beliefs and objections to intrinsic values in “[Mischaracterizations of 'intrinsic value.'](#)”
3. I argued that intrinsic value exists in “[An argument for moral realism.](#)”
4. I have a free ebook that discusses my understanding of intrinsic value in more detail, [Is There a Meaning of Life?](#)

I have organized many of my essays relevant to this topic in a free ebook, [Is There A Meaning of Life?](#)

You might also want to take a look at the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on intrinsic value.](#)