

Kant's Ethics and Kantian Ethics

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Lecture 8. Reprise: Objective and Unconditioned Value

1. Introduction: objective and intrinsic value

A claim to *objectivity* about value is sometimes cast as a claim about the value something has *in itself*, independent of its relations to other things. This thought about independence or separateness is also expressed in the idea of *intrinsic* value, so that it can be tempting to align a commitment to objectivity in ethics with a commitment to intrinsic value. G.E. Moore: “from the proposition that a particular kind of value is ‘intrinsic’ it does follow that it must be ‘objective’”. No. (1) because the extrinsically valuable can be objectively valuable (as Moore allowed); (2), because the intrinsically valuable can be merely subjectively valuable (as Moore denied). The story of Maria Herbert helps us see why this matters.

2. Two distinctions in goodness (reminder).

There are . . . two distinctions in goodness. One is the distinction between things valued for their sakes and things valued for the sake of something else—between ends and means, or final and instrumental goods. The other is the distinction between things which have their value in themselves and things which derive their value from some other source: intrinsically good things versus extrinsically good things. Intrinsic and instrumental good should not be treated as correlatives, because they belong to two different distinctions. (Korsgaard, ‘Two Distinctions in Goodness’, p. 250)

(1) Ways things have value:

intrinsic value = value thing has in itself (unconditioned) extrinsic value = value thing has from other source (conditioned)

(2) Ways we value things:

as an end = for the thing's own sake

as an instrument = for the sake of something else, i.e. as a means

Two distinctions amended

(1*) Ways things have value:

intrinsic value = value thing has in itself (unconditioned)

extrinsic value = value thing has from another source (conditioned)

instrumental value = value thing has from its effects

(2*) Ways we value things:

as an end = for the thing's own sake

extrinsically = for the sake of something else instrumentally = for the sake of its effects.

3. *Unconditioned Value: the Good Will, Humanity, Happiness*

The intrinsic value of the good will, as creator of ends; the extrinsic value of happiness, as an end: the good will shines ‘like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself’; it ‘need not on this account be the sole and complete good, but it must be the highest good and the condition of all the rest, even of all our demands for happiness’ (*G* 396). We value happiness as an end. Accompanied by good will, it has extrinsic value (is a conditioned good), because of its relation to the good will: for example, (i) it aids motivation; or (ii) it is deserved; or (iii) it is chosen as an end.

Metaethical conclusion: happiness may be merely *extrinsically* valuable, yet *objectively* valuable, e.g. on (i), (ii), and, according to Korsgaard (iii). She says happiness has extrinsic value conferred upon it by a good will valuing it as an end; persons have intrinsic value because they value things as ends, conferring (extrinsic) value on them. The regress argument:

If we regard our actions as rational, we must regard our ends as good; if so, we accord to ourselves a power of conferring goodness on the objects of our choice, and we must accord the same power—and so the same intrinsic worth—to others. (‘Two Distinctions’, p. 262)

4. *Objectivity*

The Euthyphro test. Something is loved by the gods because it has value; or it has value because it is loved by the gods. Variant predicates: ‘is chosen by a rational will’; ‘interests us’. Direction of fit: rational choice may fit value; or value may fit rational choice. (Illocutions of valuing may be verdictive or exercitive.) Korsgaard’s Kant is really a *subjectivist*, because he gives the wrong answer to the Euthyphro question.

(i) My valuing of my ends confers value on them (extrinsic value, on happiness). Consider Maria Herbert, depressed, valuing nothing: and if she doesn’t value happiness, it has no value.

(ii) My power of conferring that value is the source of my intrinsic value—as if Euthyphro’s gods were to congratulate themselves, ‘we are good because our loving makes things good’. Source of goodness need not be good (cf. war and poetry, manure and roses). *If Maria loses her power of conferring value, she loses her value.*

(iii) My valuing of myself confers value on myself. ‘I have come to think of the value we place even on ourselves as also conferred... [T]here is a continuity between the value of humanity and the value of other things: they are all the result of our own acts of conferring value.’ (‘Motivation, Metaphysics’, 63)’ Korsgaard assigns these merely conditioned value. Note that this would be so even if the condition were (as it isn’t) necessarily met. Recall Maria: if Maria fails to value herself, she has no value.

Meta-ethical conclusion. Contrary to Moore, something can be *intrinsically* valuable yet merely *subjectively* valuable. (Compare issues in metaphysics of intrinsic properties.)

Conclusion about Kant. The good will is not merely intrinsically good, but objectively, unconditionally (and perhaps essentially) good. Kant's own response to the Euthyphro question seems different to Korsgaard's.

'Whilst it is true that the moral laws are commands, and whilst they may be commandments of the divine will, they do not originate in the commandment. God has commanded this or that because it is a moral law, and because his will coincides with the moral law. . . .No-one, not even God, can be the author of the laws of morality, since they have no origin in will, but instead a practical necessity. [God is] the lawgiver, though not the author of the laws. In the same way, God is in no sense the author of the fact that the triangle has three angles.' (*Lectures on Ethics* 40, 51–2)

'The law is not valid for us because it interests us . . . ; the law interests us because it is valid for us.' (*G* 461)

'Rational beings. . . are called persons because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves—that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means.' (*G* 428)

Rae Langton, 'Objective and Unconditioned Value', *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007), 157-185.