

Scott A. Davison

On the Intrinsic Value of Everything.

New York: Continuum 2012.

vii +150 pages

\$24.95 (paper ISBN 978-1-4411-6282-3)

The first five chapters of this book aim to defend its ‘Main Conclusion,’ which is that ‘every concrete particular thing that exists is intrinsically valuable to some degree’ (10 and, more warily, to promote its ‘Ambitious Speculative Conclusion,’ which states that ‘some bearer of intrinsic value can be found in every ontological category that is exemplified’ (45). These ontological categories include, besides concrete particulars, “concrete states of particular objects,” “abstract states of affairs,” and “abstract objects such as numbers, sets, properties, and propositions” (89) among others too numerous for Davison to mention. The concluding two chapters attempt to demonstrate the ethical significance of the thesis of universal intrinsic value and its compatibility with the theistic worldview.

Davison’s mode of argumentation is cautious, clear, and epistemologically modest. He makes no claim to possessing a knock-down drag-out argument for his thesis; instead, Davison explicitly adopts Gary Gutting’s method of ‘persuasive elaboration,’ which is based on the assumption that ‘the more thoroughly and extensively a claim is developed without encountering problems, the more likely it is to be correct’ (quote from Gutting, 2). Appropriately, much of the book is devoted to meeting possible challenges to its conclusions. Davison’s efforts at fending off possible attacks on his position also offer a helpful entrée into the literature on intrinsic value.

Two main intuitions are foundational for Davison’s case. First of all, he feels it safe to assume that *some* concrete particulars (e.g., his own children) are intrinsically valuable and that, if so, such valuation should be extended to other relevantly similar concrete particulars. This allows him to set up a kind of non-paradoxical sorites argument. All the world’s particulars can be ordered in a continuous scale of decreasing similarity to the particulars whose intrinsic value is intuitively obvious. Presumably, there is no reason to deny *some* degree of intrinsic value to items which are very similar to those possessing agreed-upon intrinsic value, since the former share (to some degree) the features which lend intrinsic value to the latter. Repetition of this argument can take us all the way down the great chain of being past animals and vegetables and into the realm of lifeless matter; there is no valid cut-off point at which intrinsic value might be said to disappear. Davison explicitly argues against several popular candidates for such a cut-off point. Immanuel Kant famously argued that thanks to their cognitive capacities, only human beings possess inherent dignity. (Davison is careful to mention that Kant is not exactly speaking to the issue of ‘intrinsic value’). However, as Davison points out, today we know that some non-human animals enjoy these human cognitive capacities, if only to a lesser degree. Similarly, he discounts the possession of sentience or life as necessary conditions for intrinsic value. Davison is also quick to point out that his sorites structure is not paradoxical, since such paradoxes depend on the presumption that their extreme conclusions cannot be true. The unfortunate thought-experimental subject whose scalp has been denuded one hair at a time is unquestionably bald; whether or not the subatomic particle occupying the lowest rung in the ontological hierarchy possesses intrinsic value is the very question under discussion.

Davison's second foundational intuition involves a thought-experimental test for intrinsic value (the "Annihilation Test") that uses an imaginary machine (something like a diabolical microwave oven) capable of annihilating completely and without remainder any concrete particular placed inside it. Davison proposes that we can rely on the judgment of a "fully informed, properly functioning valuer" (35) who, witnessing the machine's complete annihilation of some concrete particular, concludes that something of intrinsic value has been lost. Now imagine the valuer witnessing two events, one in which the machine is switched on with nothing inside it and the other in which some seemingly inconsequential item such as a bit of stone is annihilated by the machine. Davison is sure that the competent valuer will remain indifferent regarding the first event and "not completely indifferent" (74) regarding the second. After external factors such as utility are discounted, our fully informed, properly functioning valuer will always feel some slight twinge of grief upon witnessing the annihilation of any existent. Ergo, all concrete particulars possess some (if in many cases miniscule) degree of intrinsic value.

Suppose we accept the book's main conclusion and agree that every concrete particular bears some (perhaps vanishingly small) degree of intrinsic value. What practical difference could this possibly make for our lives? Davison is painfully aware of this question and devotes much of chapter seven to confronting its various corollaries, especially the two which might be formulated as, 'What good is it knowing that everything is intrinsically valuable unless we have a way to compare the intrinsic values of different particulars?' and 'Can it be plausible to require people to respect the intrinsic value of every speck of matter in the universe?'

Davison's response to these complaints is humble and honest while also verging on the mystical. We might expect people to demonstrate their appreciation of a concrete particular's intrinsic value by acting to promote its existence; Davison realizes that often this is infeasible or downright impossible. In such cases, we can only 'be for the good symbolically' (109) in a manner reminiscent of our thoughts and gestures of concern for the wellbeing of suffering people who are beyond our help. It can, of course, be exceptionally difficult to maintain an authentic respect for the intrinsic value of all that exists, especially if one belongs to an instrumentalist culture. Strikingly, Davison maintains that such people are better off at least talking the talk of a universal valuer even if they find it impossible to integrate that mindset into their personal psychology.

The book's concluding chapter considers how the doctrine of universal intrinsic value jibes with theistic religious belief. First, citing Boethius as well as contemporary philosophers, Davison sets up a kind of Euthyphro problem concerning intrinsic value: are concrete particulars intrinsically valuable because God judges them as such ('Divine Subjectivism about Intrinsic Value,' or DSIV), or did God choose to create those concrete particulars because he knew they would bear intrinsic value? Davison approvingly cites Leibniz's two arguments against DSIV: 1) that given DSIV, praise for God's act of creation would become empty, since God could proclaim anything intrinsically valuable, regardless of its nature, and 2) that DSIV makes God's decision to value certain things completely arbitrary. Later sections of the chapter propose an extended hierarchy of intrinsically valuable particulars, starting with barely existent matter and working up to the supremely valuable God. Davison also suggests that his scheme offers an

answer to Nicholas Everitt's complaint that if there is a God, it was incredibly inefficient of him to create an entire universe billions of years ago all for the sake of a very recently developed race of intelligent beings living in a tiny corner of the cosmos. The proposal that all facets of creation, and not just its human component, are intrinsically valuable goes some way towards removing the sting of Everitt's critique of theism. Furthermore, the doctrine of universal intrinsic value helps clarify the logic of human gratitude towards God and makes sense of human prayer. Even if prayer 'makes no measurable difference in terms of producing good consequences' (132), worship may be viewed as a way of being 'symbolically for the good' by expressing 'recognition of God's supreme intrinsic value' (132).

Davison is certainly to be credited for his clarity of exposition and moral seriousness. One can only hope that this short book will inspire more thoroughgoing explorations of the ethical consequences of his doctrine.

Berel Dov Lerner

Western Galilee College, Israel