

Beyond Intrinsic Moral Monadic Worth: Towards a Diachronic Relational Approach to Moral Status

The Tradition and Problems of Intrinsic Moral Monadic Worth

“HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED”- Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild*, 189

Ethicists are keen on drawing a distinction between instrumental and intrinsic moral value. Instrumental value, on this view, is transitive, but not symmetrical. An entity, or object, is instrumentally valuable, according to this view, insofar as that entity, or object, is relevant to some entity, or object, which acts a terminus, or end, for practical reasoning. For example, clean drinking water is instrumentally valuable because it is something necessary for the survival of human animals and compliant moral agents should express concern for clean drinking water not because clean drinking water is an end worth promoting or honoring, but because it is needed for human animal survival and the survival of human animals is an end worth promoting or honoring. So, on this view, an entity, or object, is intrinsically morally valuable insofar as it generates *pro tanto* reasons for agential action, or behavior. If any agent has reason not to behave or act on the reasons generated by an intrinsically valuable entity, or object, it is because that agent has countervailing reasons generated by other intrinsically valuable entities, or objects. To ignore a reason generated by an intrinsically morally valuable entity, in the absence of a countervailing reason generated by other intrinsically valuable entities, is therefore, according to this view, to either act irrationally, or to express some form of ethical skepticism or non-compliance.

Call the ethical tradition constituted by these commitments the tradition of intrinsic moral worth (IMW). Oftentimes, this tradition is supplemented by a further, but often unnoticed commitment, to a view one could call intrinsic moral monadic worth (IMMW), or the view that intrinsic moral worth tracks and/or consists of a monadic ontic property an entity, or object, possesses alone, or, as philosophers like to say, *in and of itself*.¹ In symbolic notation, the intrinsic moral monadic worth of an entity can be captured by a one-placed predicate, as in the following statement: $(\exists x) Px$, where P stands for the property which generates *pro tanto* reasons for agents to act or behave in a particular manner. Various accounts of this monadic property can be given. Ratiocentrism, Sentientism, and Humanism, for instance, are all views that attempt to specify what P denotes.²

But IMMW can be questioned. First, there is the problem of overlooking individuals. Proponents of intrinsic moral monadic worth take themselves to be identifying ontic monadic features that purchase any being or entity status in the moral community. This ambition has its advantages and its disadvantages. It has the advantage of universality and ease of applicability. If any entity can purchase status in the moral community in virtue of possessing a monadic property, it's possible to formulate moral status covering laws and assimilate thoughts about moral status into what John Hacker-Wright (2007) calls a “legalistic” conception of practical reasoning (451). On a legalistic conception of moral status, moral considerability is determined by asking whether a being falls under the scope of a status-

¹ I use the phrase “tracks and/or consists of” to accommodate both realist and non-realist views of moral value.

² See Singer (1975) and (1993) for a defense of Sentientism. See Kant (1785) and Frey (1977) for a defense of Ratiocentrism. For a recent defense of Humanism see Chappell (2014).

conferring covering law. If a being, or entity, falls under the scope of that law, that being is morally relevant, and owed moral consideration. If a being, or entity, falls outside of the scope of that law, that being is morally irrelevant. This provides us with a clear standard for determining moral status that we can consult anywhere and everywhere.

The disadvantage of this legalism is that it overlooks the moral importance of individuals. The legalism of IMMW suggests that a moral subject's value is entirely dependent upon general features that subject possesses. These are not characteristics peculiar, or particular, to a subject. For example, sentientism claims that all sentient beings are moral subjects and ratiocentrism claims that all rational beings are moral subjects. But sentience and rationality are not particular features of sentient or rational beings. Sentience and rationality are general features that any sentient or rational being shares with other sentient or rational beings. Thus, the monadic tradition overlooks, and in fact, ignores particularities of individuals. And this is true even for those pluralistic versions of IMMW. For example, a ratiocentric sentientist, who acknowledges the moral relevance of all sentient beings, but attributes moral preeminence to rational beings, still fixes on general features at the expense of particular features.

This raises the second problem with the IMMW tradition: the problem of overlooking the moral importance of relationships. If IMMW is true and it acknowledges only general status-conferring characteristics, it is impossible to make sense of various forms of partial love. But a parent does not love a child because the child possesses general features, but because the child possesses particular features, because that is her child, not just any child. It makes no sense to say that a parent should care for a child because the child is sentient or because the child is a rational being. A parent should care for a child because that's her child, because she's made various promises and commitments to that child. And a loving spouse does not love her partner because the partner has a psychological profile, but because that partner has particular quirks, particular peccadillos, a particular aura, and the like. People don't fall in love with each other because they have met another sentient or rational being. People fall in love with each other because there is something special about that person to them.

The third, and final, problem with IMMW also overlaps with the second. This is what I call the problem of overlooking actual sources of moral motivation and value. If IMMW is right, an entity, or object, possesses intrinsic moral value even if no agent or other subjects stand in any relationship to that entity at all. This too seems like a distortion of moral engagement. Careful attention to actual moral engagement suggests that the deepest forms of worthwhile existence consist in the integrity of an entity and the togetherness an entity experiences with other beings. IMMW does not seem to have the resources to recognize this. IMMW takes moral value to solely consist in the possession of a monadic ontic property of a being or entity. But partnerships, marriages, friendships, and the like are not properties any one entity or being can possess. These are relations that particular individuals enter into with other individuals, not ontic properties that any entity possesses in and of itself. So IMMW seems incapable of recognizing the crucial value of relationships. And this is the case with respect to both relationships with others and one's relationship with oneself. Integrity, understood as consistency in one's values and/or commitment to a vision, consists in a relation one has to oneself over time.³ We could, of course, think of an individual in process terms, and then take integrity to be a monadic ontic

³ This is not the only way to understand integrity. Williams takes integrity to more specifically involve the value of autonomous agency. See Smart & Williams (1973) and Chappell (2007).

property that process either possesses or does not. And this is, to be sure, possible to do. But then our stipulation will be doing the normative work that integrity should be doing. So, although IMMW doesn't overlook integrity as much as it overlooks the importance of individuality, it will still fail to capture what is particularly important about integrity, namely, the relations it draws attention to that hold over time between a person and herself. In this way, IMMW distorts the moral value of integrity.

Towards a Diachronic Relational Approach to Moral Status

The problems of IMMW suggest the possibility of a diachronic relational approach (DRA) to moral status. On a DRA to moral status, an entity, or object, is morally valuable insofar as it stands in relationship with another entity, or object, or itself and that relationship can be sustained between moments or across time. A DRA to moral status is obviously going to involve two major features: a time index and a relation index. Start with the relation index. There are many different forms of relations an individual can stand in with respect to others. First, an individual can stand in a self-referential relationship. This is any relation in which the relata are identical. On a DRA, various forms of self-obligation are grounded in, or responsive to, the value of these kinds of relations. Second, an individual can obviously stand in a relation with other individuals. These are intimate relations. This is any relation in which both relata are particular individuals. On a DRA, various forms of other-obligation are grounded in, or responsive to, the value of these kinds of relations (but self-referential relations are also intimate relations). Third, an individual can obviously stand in a relation with a group of individuals. These are public relations. This is any relation in which one relata is a particular individual and the other relata is a group of persons. On a DRA, various forms of social obligation are grounded in, or responsive to, the value of these kinds of relations. Fourth, an individual can obviously stand in a relation with a tool. These are resource relations. This is any relation in which one relata is an individual and the other relata is a tool, or function. For example, the relationship between a human and a hammer is a resource relation because it involves a relationship between an individual, a human, and a hammer, a tool. Resource relations are relations that cannot be particularized. That is, resource relations are relations where neither relata needs to be a particular individual. For example, a hammer lies in a resource relation with a human because any human could use any hammer.

Now, consider the time index. For any kind of relation, there are several possible time signatures. First, a relation can extend farther and farther into the past. These are relations with historical signatures. Most relations have historical signatures. Various kinds of relations are further distinguished in virtue of the character of their historical signature. For example, intimate relations are divided into filial relations, friendships, marriages, partnerships, and so on. Public relations can also have historical signatures. For example, public relations are divided into communal relations, citizenship relations, and various forms of social relations, such as gender relations, race relations, and class relations. Second, a relation can persist from the past to and through the present. These are relations with continuous signatures. Most relations with historical relations also have continuous signatures. For example, friendships, marriages, and partnerships are relations with historical and continuous signatures. They are relations that formed in the past and generate various reasons for behaving in certain ways in the present, namely, ways that express regard or concern for the ongoing relations formed in the past. Third, a relation could be formed in the future. These are relations with potential signatures. These are relations that generate various reasons for planning to create various forms of value.

This framework can support the intrinsic-instrumental distinction and avoid the problems of IMMW. To see this, recall that the intrinsic-instrumental distinction is really a distinction between two kinds of reasons: those reasons that terminate justification in practical reasoning and those that do not. For example, if I have reason not to burn down my neighbor's house, it's because doing so negatively affects my neighbor and the fact that some act would harm my neighbor provides me with a decisive reason not to perform that act. In this case, the harm it would cause my neighbor is the final consideration to which I appeal when I ask whether I should light the house aflame. If I ask why I should care about hurting my neighbor I either don't understand the meaning of hurting my neighbor or I am expressing ethical skepticism or non-compliance. Another way of putting the point is to say that the value I should attribute to my neighbor's home is transitive. It is just a place holder for the value of my neighbor living well. My neighbor's well-being is intrinsic because it terminates the practical reasoning that prescribes my not burning down her house. The practical reason I have not to burn down her house is justified by the end realized when I don't, namely, her living well.

This kind of example demonstrates how inessential IMMW is to the idea of intrinsic moral worth. The ends of practical reasoning do not have to be conceived in terms of the monadic features of an entity. These ends can just as easily be construed as relations. That is, I can have reason not to light my neighbor's house on fire because doing so would cause it to burn down and that would hurt my neighbor and because doing so would cause it to burn down and that would damage my relationship with my neighbor. If IMMW can ignore the latter reason, that burning my neighbor's home down would damage my relationship with my neighbor, then a DRA can ignore the former reason, that burning my neighbor's home down would cause her blood pressure and stress levels to rise and thereby inconvenience her mental states by imposing occurrent suffering. And in the end, they will both do the same sort of work: distinguishing between intrinsic and instrumental forms of value. But the DRA has one thought more: it explains instrumental forms of value with reference to resource relations. An entity is instrumentally valuable to some entity because it is a resource to that entity; it can be replaced. Here, the diachronic relational approach is a bit more illuminating than IMMW.

It also avoids the problems of IMMW. First, a DRA avoids the problem of overlooking the moral importance of individuals. IMMW locates the intrinsic value of an entity in one or more of the entity's monadic features, but these are always general features that many other entities share. In this way, IMMW undersells the importance of the individual entities with these features. A DRA recognizes that some relations emerge only when they take one or more particular relata. For example, intimate relations take two or more particular relata. These particular relations cannot be realized by plugging in any particular person. They are entirely compromised if the particular relata they take by definition are traded for some other relata. A parent compromises a loving relationship with a child, if she ignores her child and tends to someone else's. This might sustain or strengthen a neighborly relation with that child, but it compromises the filial relation with her child. Thus, a DRA takes the irreducible importance of individuals to form the bedrock of its approach.

In this way, a DRA avoids the second problem with IMMW: the problem of overlooking the moral importance of relationships. In fact, the DRA I have formulated suggests that an entity has no moral status unless it stands in a relationship with another entity. This might be implausible. We might prefer a version of DRA which recognizes the moral relevance of at least some monadic properties to

the determination of a subject's moral status.⁴ But even this hybrid form of a DRA would take relationships to constitute a great bulk of a subject's moral status in virtue of its invocation of the relation index. And a monological DRA would take relationships to constitute the entirety of an entity's moral status. So, a DRA also takes the irreducible importance of relationships to form the bedrock of its approach as well.

Finally, a DRA avoids the problem of overlooking actual sources of moral motivation and value. Actual moral engagement suggests that the deepest forms of worthwhile existence consist in the integrity of an entity and the togetherness an entity experiences with other beings and that IMMW does not seem to have the resources to recognize this. One reason is that IMMW implies that value is synchronic. On IMMW, an entity has intrinsic moral value at any one point in time so long as it possesses the relevant monadic ontic property. This overlooks the importance of time and growth to moral value. A DRA can recognize this importance in virtue of its time index. The time index of DRA takes the moral status of an entity to be responsive to the time signature of the relation that entity stands in. In this way, a DRA provides the resources necessary for recognizing a diachronic component of moral status. So, a DRA has the resource needed to appreciate the deepest sources of moral motivation and the deepest forms of worthwhile existence: the historical and ongoing relations we have with ourselves and the people we love.

DRA in Jane Addams' Social Democratic Virtue Ethics

If the preceding is correct, a DRA can support an instrumental-intrinsic distinction and avoid the problems of IMMW. One view I believe DRA is clearly compatible with is a view I have increasingly grown fond of: the social democratic virtue ethics of Jane Addams. In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams (1905) begins with the idea that "'Ethics' is but another name for righteousness" and that "certain forms of personal righteousness have become to the majority of the community almost automatic" (1). For most people, Addams says, a sense of "family obligation," and of the "rules of conduct...established in regard to our self-development...and limited circle of friends" has been carefully internalized (2). But Addams contends, "each generation has its own test" and it "may not legitimately use a previous and less vigorous test" (2). Instead, every generation must appeal to a test of conduct that includes "that which has already been attained" and then some (2). For Addams, this more is represented by a move from a test of mere "individual morality" to a test that includes this and "social morality" (2-3). Addams thinks "the most authoritative and dramatic portrayal of the...social test" is offered in "the Day of Judgment" (3). Here, Addams says, the "stern questions are not in regard to personal and family relations, but did ye visit the poor, the criminal, the sick, and did ye feed the hungry?" (3).

According to Addams, a social morality requires "a conception of Democracy...as that which affords a rule of living as well as a test of faith" (6). This requires the inculcation of "a democratic spirit" which involves a thirst for "diversified human experience and resultant sympathy" (7). This thirst is satiated by "contact with social experience" which corrects "opinions concerning the social order" and illuminates the "dynamic value...of wider and more thorough human experience" (7). This kind of experience is provided in "newspapers" and literature, which also portrays "all kinds of life" (8). The

⁴ See Swanton (2003), Delon (2014), Delon (2015) for examples of this kind of view. See also Diamond (1995) and Hursthouse (1999).

mark of this democratic spirit is “a new affinity for all men” and an “imagination” capable of contemplating “the experiences of other people” (9). Thus, in the democratic spirit “identification with the common lot...becomes the source and expression of social ethics” (11).

Here, Addams is articulating a form of virtue ethics insofar as her primary ethical concern is the evaluation of states of agents. For Addams, ethics is primarily about good character and agency and good agency is agency with a democratic mindset and democratic motivations. Thus, I describe Addams' view as a form of social democratic virtue ethics. This view is compatible with a DRA because Addams identifies good agency as agency that relates well to others in a plurality of ways. For Addams, we not only have obligations to our family, but to our friends, and to groups of people, especially the disadvantaged, in addition to the obligations we have to ourselves. And the DRA I articulated recognizes something like this plurality of relations in its relation index where the DRA I articulated recognizes self-referential relations, intimate relations, and public relations. And Addams' view has a time component as well. For Addams every agent is implicated in the task of making moral progress. A DRA to moral status recognizes something like this in its notion of time signatures. For example, the DRA I have articulated recognizes the historical signatures of relations as well those relations which can be continued and/or forged in the future.

There is also some evidence that Addams thinks of the moral status of individuals in relational diachronic terms as well. In her 1915 essay, “What War is Destroying,” Addams argues that war “overthrows...the work of the mother, the nurse, and the teacher,” and that it dashes caregiver's hopes that “a little child” might “become a great and heroic man” (65). According to Addams, war also undermines “the sentiment...that every scrap of human life is...valuable” and “the hope that the next generation shall advance beyond” the present, or the “hope for the ascent of life,” which “is at the basis of social progress” (65). Here, Addams, to be sure, claims that all human life is valuable, but this value is buoyed by the developmental ties all humans have to caregivers and to the place all human life takes in the great procession of history. In this way, Addams is appealing not to monadic properties when identifying the intrinsic value of human beings, but to the relationships and historical location of those beings. These are the primary resources of a DRA to moral status.

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