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Testing for intrinsic value, for us as we are

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ABSTRACT
Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Brentano, Moore, and Chisholm suggest marks of intrinsic value. Contemporary philosophers such as Christine Korsgaard have insightful discussions of intrinsic value. But how do we verify that some specific thing really is intrinsically valuable? I propose a natural way to test for intrinsic value: first, strip the candidate bare of all considerations of good consequences; and, second, see if what remains is still a good thing. I argue that we, as ordinary human beings, have an astonishingly difficult time completing this test for plausible candidates. More precisely, for us as we are, it seems that the conditions for completing the first step of the test militate against the conditions for completing the second step. I conclude, then, that we have a good reason to think that we cannot verify whether or not particular things are intrinsically good. I explore some implications and I consider a number of important objections.

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Intrinsic value; instrumental value; agency; Aristotle; Kant; Korsgaard

I. Introduction
Locutions such as ‘instrumentally good’ or ‘instrumentally valuable’ are used fairly often and seem to be generally understood. For a thing to have instrumental value is for that thing to have value insofar as it produces some good consequences or helps to bring about some desired outcome. If meditation brings about stress-relief then, we might say, meditation is instrumentally good. If a part-time job helps a person to pay her bills then, she would say, her part-time job is instrumentally valuable. But philosophers have long held a special interest in the notion of intrinsic value or intrinsic goodness. What does it mean to say that a thing is good without regard for any of its good consequences or any desired outcomes it helps to bring about but, rather, just because of the very nature of that thing itself? What does it mean to say that meditation (or a part-time
job) is good or valuable without any consideration for stress-relief (or for paying bills)?

Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Brentano, Moore, and Chisholm suggest different marks of intrinsic goodness, including what is unimprovably good (that is, your life could not get any better once you have something intrinsically good, a mark argued for in Plato (1958) and Aristotle), the most final good (desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, a mark emphasized by Aristotle), the unqualifiedly good (such as Kant’s conception of a good will, the only thing that is good without adding any qualifications), the object of intrinsic love (for Brentano (1969), a thing is intrinsically good just in case that thing is worthy of love and just in case it is correct to love that thing), that which is good solely in virtue of its intrinsic nature (part of Moore’s (1960) account), that which would still be good even if it existed in total isolation from everything else (argued for in several parts of Moore’s Principia Ethica), the intrinsically good as a thing that is necessarily good (Chisholm (1972) argues that intrinsic goodness differs from instrumental goodness insofar as something intrinsically good is good in every possible world in which it exists), and the intrinsically good as that which ought to exist for its own sake (part of Chisholm’s (1968) account).1

For Aristotle, for instance, there must be something that is intrinsically good (and not also instrumentally good). Otherwise, he argues, our desire would be empty and futile:


If, then, [A] there is some end of the things we do, which we desire [or choose] for its own sake (everything else being desired [or chosen] for the sake of this), and if [B] we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for [C] at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that [C] our desire would be empty and futile), clearly [D] this must be the good and the chief good.

There are several different ways of reading this passage.2 But all of those interpretations seem to agree that Aristotle is arguing for the following

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1See Feldman (1998) for a nice analysis of these different marks of intrinsic goodness. Also, about the issue of bearers of intrinsic value: Mooreans say the bearers of intrinsic value are states of affairs such as states of pleasure, whereas Kantians say the bearers are concrete objects such as people. See Bradley (2006) for a nice discussion and analysis of these two camps. I’ll remain neutral about this issue in this paper; it does not matter, for my purposes; my argument remains just as effective (or ineffective) on a Kantian picture as on a Moorean picture of the bearers of value.

2Coren (2018) gives a careful overview of the competing interpretations, as well as a detailed defense of Aristotle’s inference from [C] to [C].
view: there must be something that is desired for its own sake and only for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else. That intrinsically good thing, that final end, must be the highest good – this is in [D]. Aristotle identifies that good as happiness. If [C], if we desired and chose each of our desired and chosen things instrumentally, that is, for the sake of something else, then [C']: there would be no point if any of our desires or choices. That is why [B] is true, for Aristotle: at least some of the things we desire must be desired non-instrumentally.

Taking a cue from Stawson (1962), I think that it is, for us as we are, practically impossible (not to say ‘self-contradictory’ or ‘logically impossible’) to verify that there are intrinsically good things. In this paper I will explain why I think that this view is plausible. First, I describe a natural way of testing for intrinsic goodness (Section 2). Then I try but fail to run the test. I argue that this gives us a good reason to think that we as ordinary human beings cannot determine whether there exist intrinsically good things (Section 3). I consider several important objections to my argument, I clarify what I try to show here and how I’ve tried to show it, and I try to run my test for candidates such as happiness, Kant’s notion of a good will, physical pain, and pleasure (Section 4). Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of some implications, perhaps most notably: for us as we are, instrumental goodness is deeply entangled with intrinsic goodness (Section 5).

II. A test for intrinsic value

Suppose that something is intrinsically good if and only if that thing is good without regard for any of its consequences. This view appears to reflect accounts of intrinsic goodness given by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Brentano, G. E. Moore, and Chisholm. Consider the question of how we might try to figure out whether we view something to be intrinsically good. How might we test for intrinsic goodness? One natural answer, it seems, is to imagine a thing without any of its good (or bad or neutral) consequences. With the thing so imagined, we can consider whether or not it is good. If it is good, it is a plausible candidate for something that is intrinsically good. If not, then not. This strategy is inspired by G. E. Moore’s (1903, 1912, 1960) way of testing for intrinsic goodness, wherein we completely isolate the candidate from everything else, considering a world where (to borrow an example) there exists only pleasure and nothing else. Moore then asks us to consider a comparison between that pleasure-world and another world where there are all other things (beauty, knowledge, and so on) but less pleasure. My strategy is less demanding. I simply ask us
to consider a candidate without any of its good (or bad or neutral) consequences. Situate that thing in our world, the world we ordinary human beings inhabit, in whatever way makes it easiest or at all possible for you to imagine the candidate without its good consequences, without its instrumental goodness. If we leave any good consequences in our considerations then we have not given ourselves a chance at determining whether the thing has intrinsic goodness. We would still be evaluating (at least in part) a thing’s instrumental goodness.

There are two main steps, then, in my test for intrinsic goodness: first, strip the candidate bare of all considerations of good consequences; and, second, see if what remains is still a good thing. If we can perform both the first step and the second, and if it turns out that we are not left with any goodness in the thing, then we can conclude that either the thing is not intrinsically good or some other test must be run. If we can perform both the first step and the second, and if it turns out that we are left with some goodness in the thing, then we can conclude that the thing has some intrinsic goodness. If we cannot perform the first step, or if we cannot perform the second step, then we must conclude that either we cannot determine whether that thing is intrinsically good or else we must run some other test. As I’ll argue in the next section, it seems to me that the conditions for performing the first step of this natural test militate against the conditions for performing the second step, at least for us as we are. Maybe we can complete the first step, but then we are left with nothing coherently evaluable for an ordinary person. And if we leave some stuff to coherently evaluate in the second step, then we have not really completed the first step of the test. Since these difficulties seem to apply (as I’ll discuss in Sections 3 and 4) to all sorts of reasonable candidates for intrinsic goodness, I’ll argue that we cannot yet determine whether there are intrinsically good things. Of course, I say, ‘we cannot yet determine’ rather than ‘we cannot determine’ because it is logically possible that there is some other means of testing for intrinsic goodness other than this test. But it seems to me that this test is a natural way of trying to determine whether a thing has intrinsic value.

III. Running the test

I enjoy going for a reasonably long and brisk walk each day. I walk for the sake of keeping my weight under control, for the sake of stress-relief, for the sake of clearing my head, and for the sake of reflecting on ideas and experiences. Now, my test requires that I imagine walking without
any of the good consequences (instrumental value) of walking. I must imagine walking without keeping my weight under control, stress-relief, and so on. Once I have removed all of these considerations, what am I left with? As far as I can tell, I am left with an experience that is no longer coherently evaluable for me. It is no longer walking as I understand walking. This is not to say that walking, stripped of all such considerations, is no longer attractive to me. My claim is quite different: I do not know what it means to go for a long and brisk walk without any possibility for improving my physical health, maintaining my mental and psychological well being, relieving stress, and other good consequences I associate with long and brisk walks. As far as I can tell, the activity and experience of a long and brisk walk stripped bare of all and any possibilities for associated good consequences is more like the experience of an automaton with some rudimentary form of artificial intelligence. At the very least, it is not an experience I, as an ordinary human being, can imagine, much less evaluate.

I think that I would have the same disappointing results after stripping bare things such as eating a delicious and fairly healthy meal, taking a hot shower, meditating, joking with my partner, and other such things. I do not understand how I can evaluate the goodness or value of joking with my partner once that activity has been stripped bare of considerations such as the benefits for my relationship with my partner, the pleasure I get and my partner seems to get from laughing, and stress-relief. To be sure, there is an important sense in which the maintenance of my relationship with my partner is distinct from my joking with my partner. But there also seems to be an important sense in which maintaining my relationship with my partner is deeply entangled with joking with my partner as I understand, desire, choose, enjoy, and more generally experience joking with my partner. We can, of course, logically and metaphysically separate my joking with my partner from the resulting improvement or maintenance of my relationship with my partner. But with respect to this step in my test for intrinsic goodness, what is at issue is not (as far as I can tell) the logical or metaphysical status of these things but, rather, my subjective, personal, ordinary human perspective on the status of these things. I do not see how I can get beyond the latter, and yet it seems that I am asked to do so in this test for intrinsic goodness. I accept that a species (or perhaps even a human being) with a psychology and/or phenomenology quite unlike my own might be able to imagine walking or joking stripped bare of all such considerations. But I just do not see how I can disentangle these activities from all such considerations – some of those
considerations, certainly, but not all of them. It seems that I must conclude, then, that I cannot run this test for intrinsic goodness. More specifically, if I can remove all considerations related to the good consequences (the instrumental, non-intrinsic goodness) of the candidate, then I am not left with something I can coherently evaluate. It seems, then, that the conditions for performing the first step of this natural test militate against the conditions for performing the second step.

IV. Objections, replies, and clarification

Objection 1: I haven’t run the right candidates through my test. Consider Kant’s suggestion: a good will. Or consider Aristotle’s suggestion: happiness.

Response to 1: Kant argues that the only thing that is intrinsically good is a good will (Kant 1959, Ak. 1–3). Let’s try a good will as our candidate. First, then, I must remove all considerations relating to the good consequences a good will tends to produce. If I carry a good will with me throughout my day, for example, I tend to treat people with more respect and compassion. I tend to be more patient and kind than I otherwise would be. My test requires that I isolate a good will from considerations of all such things. So, too, I cannot consider the pleasure, strength of character, firmness of resolve, or removal of uncertainty that might well accompany a person’s decision to form a good will toward a person, a group of people, a particular situation, a memory, an expected experience, or even as a general effort throughout a person’s day or week or whatever the period of time might be. Nor can I consider the good consequences resulting from a removal of malevolent (or indifferent) intentions from within a person due to that person’s forming and acting on his/her good will. I must also isolate a good will from its typically beneficial pragmatic consequences of a generalized good will including the possibility of much greater social harmony and trust between groups otherwise at odds with one another, and the increased likelihood of combatting the negative effects of cynicism and hatred. Moving from the general to the particular, it would be natural for me to associate a particular good consequence with a particular instance of good will, such as associating the likelihood of a driver’s not acting on road rage if a driver has good will toward his/her fellow drivers. But I must resist that natural association completely if I am to complete this first step of my test for intrinsic goodness. I must totally isolate the driver’s good will from any possibility of the driver bringing about any good consequences for that driver or for other drivers through the good will. So, too, as natural as it might be to slip in this
consideration, I must totally resist the following: a human being’s forming a good will whether in a particular scenario or in a more general way is a sign of someone who has not given in to the urge to treat other people as human beings typically treat each other (in a self-interested and largely indifferent way, only showing favor to family members, close friends, and people who are in a position of authority over them or those who can help or damage their interests). That is, I must isolate the good will from the other features of a person’s character, personality, and tendencies that seem to accompany particular and general instances of a good will.

After removing all such considerations, what am I left with? After I have performed the first step of my test and completely stripped bare my notion of a good will, what is there for me to assess and evaluate in the second step of my test? Perhaps there are some who would say that they are confident that they have something left to coherently evaluate, and perhaps they would say that there is (or is not) goodness remaining in what is evaluated. But after I really have stripped my notion of a good will from all possibilities for positive consequences, associations, and instrumental goodness of absolutely all kinds, I no longer understand what is left to evaluate. If I turn to something concrete and tangible such as a particular person with a good will, I soon realize that I am associating the good will with that particular good (or bad) person, with that particular person’s tendencies, character, inclinations, and, more generally, the contexts in which I take that person to be capable of forming and showing a good will. As such, I realize that I am certainly not evaluating a good will in itself. I find it impossible to totally isolate the good will I feel toward my struggling younger sister from the interests and suffering of my younger sister, for example, and the possibility of my decreasing her suffering or helping to improve her interests. More precisely, my suspicion is that all of the intuitive pull behind the claim ‘a good will is intrinsically good’ as well as the more basic claim ‘we can consider a good will on its own, in itself, without any considerations for any possibilities for instrumental goodness of any kind’ is done by (a) our smuggling into the thing we are evaluating the goodness drawn from the instrumental goodness of general and particular instances of good will and (b) the notion of ‘good’ already in place in ‘good will’. So, if I can perform the first step of my test for the notion of a good will, then I do not see how I can perform the second step. And if I cannot run my test then I must conclude that either I cannot determine whether a good will is an intrinsically good thing or else we must find some other means of testing for intrinsically good things.
What about happiness? We’ve seen that Aristotle identifies happiness as the highest good and, in particular, that which is chosen and desired only for its own sake (not for the sake of anything else) (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 1094a18–22, I.7). That is, happiness is the only thing that we do not choose or desire instrumentally (even in part). It is the only good thing that is good entirely in its own right and for its own sake. Is it possible to run my test for happiness? I must separate the bare notion of happiness from possibilities for positive consequences such as becoming a more effective and successful employee (since it seems reasonable to assume that a happy person will be more productive and effective in the workplace), becoming a more caring partner (on the assumption that being happy will make me a more caring partner), and other such instrumental considerations.

It seems that some important aspects of this process will turn on what is meant by happiness, and, in particular, what counts as something other than happiness. Must I strip away considerations relating to the removal of the possibility of feeling pain and all of the associations and consequences related to what I understand as the physical and mental forms of pain? It is far from settled what Aristotle takes to constitute happiness, let alone whether or not Aristotle’s account is correct in whole or in part. Early on in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells us that happiness consists in performing our human characteristic function with excellence, that is, using reason (and especially practical reason) to identify the mean between excess and deficiency so as to aim at that mean (the mean relative to us, not relative to the object itself) in a complete life (*NE* I.7). But near the end of the *NE*, after spending a great deal of time focusing on virtue rather than contemplation, Aristotle curiously concludes that the best life for a human being consists in the contemplative life with the basic needs provided (*NE* X.7–8). Must we settle these ambiguities by stipulating that happiness is whatever collection of states of affairs a person takes to be constitutive of a life that is good in itself and desired just for its own sake, where that collection might be radically different (such as happiness consisting in continuous, peaceful contemplation) for one person compared with another person (such as happiness consisting in an active and highly successful career in politics)? Well, suppose we take Aristotle’s initial account of the highest good, that which is good for its own sake: that intrinsically good thing is desired just for its own sake. I might say that I desire my sister’s happiness in something like that sense. Does that mean that my sister’s happiness is part of my bare notion of happiness? It’s not clear this is so. After all, I desire my
sister to be happy not just for the sake of her happiness but also for the sake of my mother’s happiness. Why do I desire my mother’s happiness? I think that I desire my mother to be happy both for its (her) own sake and for the sake of my own happiness: I couldn’t have peace of mind unless I took my mother to be happy. But, coming back to an issue raised above, I desire to be happy in part because of the good I can do for others as a happy colleague, a happy partner, a happy parent, and so on. We seem to have arrived at something like a dilemma: either there is nothing left in my notion of happiness once it has been entirely isolated from all instrumental goodness and stripped of all possibilities for good consequences, or else my apparently bare notion of happiness somehow includes all positive consequences of being happy. In both the former and the latter, it seems, I do not have a genuinely bare notion of happiness. Either I have nothing at all (or, at least, a thing I cannot coherently imagine or evaluate) and so a fortiori I do not have a bare notion of happiness to evaluate for goodness in the second step of my test, or else I do not have a genuinely bare notion of happiness (that is, my notion of happiness is inextricably bound up with instrumental goodness of one kind or another).

Objection 2: I haven’t tried all feasible tests for intrinsic goodness, so I am not licensed to conclude that there is not any such thing as intrinsic goodness.

Response to 2: I am not arguing that there is not any such thing as intrinsic goodness. Nor am I arguing that there do not exist any things that are intrinsically good. Rather, I am arguing that a natural test for whether a thing is intrinsically good is, for us as we are, difficult if not impossible to run for reasonable candidates. So, we have a good reason to think that we cannot determine whether there are things that are intrinsically good. This conclusion is compatible with the claim that there exist psychologically or phenomenologically different species capable of successfully running candidates through this test. My conclusion is also compatible with the claim that there exist other tests that ordinary human beings can run in order to determine whether there are intrinsically good things.

Objection 3: In part because I am glossing over Christine Korsgaard’s important distinction between intrinsic value and final value, my discussion is misleading and I still haven’t considered the right sorts of candidates. Korsgaard (1983) argues that intrinsic value ought to be contrasted with extrinsic value rather than instrumental value. She suggests that we see intrinsic value as non-relational value. Non-relational value is the value something has in virtue of its intrinsic properties.
Extrinsic value, then, is relational value, and can be neatly contrasted with intrinsic value. Final value, for Korsgaard, is the value something has as an end or a purpose. So, something might have intrinsic final value in virtue of its consequences. Korsgaard argues that gorgeously enameled frying pans are good for their own sakes. Similarly, Beardsley (1965) suggests that rare stamps might be good for their own sakes. Kagan (1998) claims that the pen Abraham Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation might well be good for its own sake. There are other similar examples and suggestions in Rabinowicz and Ronnow-Rasmussen (2000, 2003). Intrinsic value isn’t as morally significant as final value. Perhaps philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant are better understood as endorsing final value than intrinsic value.

Response to 3: While I appreciate the fact that Korsgaard and others have helped to stimulate a good deal of insightful discussion about value, I maintain that the idea that something is good if and only if that thing is good without regard for any of that thing’s consequences (the account in use in this paper) still seems to capture the way the notion of intrinsic value is used. Both in the ordinary language sense and in the sense used in most of the history of philosophy, it seems to me that by ‘intrinsic value’ people mean the value that is free of all instrumental or consequential value. For example, one of Aristotle’s favorite ways of picking out the causality or value (or anything else) that something else has intrinsically, namely, καθ’ αὐτό (‘intrinsically’ but also sometimes translated ‘essentially’), is used often – there are many examples in his Physics, Metaphysics, ethical and political works, and so on – to contrast with the value or causality that something has in relation to its being instrumental for other things or achieving other things. Moreover, I confess that I am not at all persuaded by the examples mentioned in the objection. Korsgaard argues that gorgeously enameled frying pans are good for their own sakes because of the role they play in our lives. A role played in our lives, such as impressing our friends when they come over for dinner, is an instrumental or consequential concern. Therefore the value something has because of a role it plays in our lives counts as instrumental value rather than intrinsic value. Rare stamps and Lincoln’s pen also seem clearly not the sorts from things from which I can strip away all instrumental and consequential considerations and still be left with something good. Lincoln’s pen used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation is good because it was used to help end slavery in the States. If the pen had been used to prolong slavery, the pen would be bad. Its goodness comes from its instrumentality, as far as I can tell.
Objection 4: There are still other more plausible candidates for intrinsic value. Kant’s good will and Aristotle’s notion of happiness are notoriously tricky examples. Considering an experience of intense physical pain independently of its possible consequences, and evaluating it as intrinsically bad, is as easy to do as almost anything in ethics. So pain is a great candidate for something that has intrinsic disvalue. So, too, pleasure is a good candidate for something that has intrinsic value. Even happiness in a completely ordinary sense, separated from any special sense in which Aristotle uses εὐδαιμονία (traditionally translated ‘happiness’ but it’s unclear that’s a good translation), might well be a better candidate than those I’ve considered so far in this paper.

Response to 4: Intense physical pain certainly sounds bad. Pleasure certainly sounds good. Of course, that doesn’t entail that pleasure is intrinsically good. Nor does it entail that pain is intrinsically bad. Usain Bolt endured intense physical pain while training to win his Olympic gold medals. But since the pain was endured for an important and achievable goal understood to Bolt, I very much doubt that Bolt would say that his pain was bad. Athletes often welcome a certain level and kind of pain during workouts. As a different kind of case, consider that most parents do not want their children to experience pain, but the parents also expect that if a child experiences pain after touching something they aren’t supposed to touch then the child will understand not to touch that thing again. Adults, too, often learn from mistakes producing physical pain. Anxiety can produce physical pain as well as psychological pain, and it is by experiencing that pain that an adult might understand that he needs to change his lifestyle. Childbirth is often excruciatingly painful for the mother. Yet mothers usually say that the pain was worthwhile. If childbirth could always be free of pain then that would definitely be nice. But the fact that childbirth often involves a great deal of physical pain for the mother does not make childbirth bad.

Obviously this is not to argue that physical pain is more often good than bad. It is, of course, reasonable to say that pain is generally not something any of us want to experience. My point, rather, is that when it comes to specific, real cases rather than abstract generalizations, whether pain has value or disvalue seems to depend on the (expected) consequences of the pain. But those are instrumental considerations. If, then, I really do try to strip away all instrumental considerations that I normally associate with an experience of physical pain, I cannot say that I am left with something that is bad. In order to say that with any confidence what I am left with is something bad (or, for that matter, good or neutral), I need to
know more about the context of the pain. Physical pain does not, then, seem to be a good candidate for a thing that can pass my test for intrinsic goodness. Note that instrumental aspects of the painful experience’s context can also make the painful experience worse, in many ordinary cases. For example, you might feel pain at seeing a friend succeed, leading you to realize your jealousy and perhaps to question your friendship. Or, the painful experience of breaking your leg might lead to being unable to exercise properly.

Structurally similar analyses will, in my view, suffice for pleasure. Of course, it sounds plausible to say that pleasure is, in general, good. But if I understand that I am experiencing pleasure for doing something I shouldn’t have done, then the pleasure no longer has value or goodness for me. Those sorts of instrumental considerations inform my judgment that the pleasure has value as opposed to disvalue. Nozick’s (1974) experience machine famously asks us to imagine a machine that can give us whatever pleasurable experiences we desire. But I don’t think that we need to turn to such extraordinary cases. Ordinary cases work. I get considerable physical pleasure from eating a lot of chocolate. But that physical pleasure is, for me, associated with my worry that I am doing damage to my health. In contrast, the physical pleasure I get from eating fresh fruit is associated with my thought that I am improving my health. Note that, as with pain, a pleasurable experience can often become better through instrumental features of its context, such as feeling pleasure in a friend’s success and then realizing that your friendship seems to be strong. In order to say that I am left with is something good, I need to know more about the context of the pleasure. I do not know whether I am left with something that is good, once I strip away all of the instrumental considerations possibly associated with a specific, real (not abstract or general) experience of pleasure. Physical pleasure does not, then, seem to be a good candidate for a thing that can pass my test for intrinsic goodness.

But suppose the objector persists as follows. It is natural to say that (1) the pain involved in childbirth is part of a complex state of affairs, namely, the experience of childbirth, and (2) the pain itself is intrinsically bad, but (3) the complex state of affairs, the experience of childbirth, is intrinsically good. The pain itself has intrinsic disvalue. But the pain is part of the experience of childbirth, and that complex state of affairs has intrinsic value. Moore argues, ‘the value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the value of its parts’ (1903, 28). Lemos notes: ‘Moore held, for example, that a part which is, in itself, intrinsically bad can greatly enhance the intrinsic value of some wholes to which it
belongs’ (2015, 125). This principle (’the principle of organic unities’) has received support from Chisholm (1968) and Lemos (1994, 2015), among others, though, for instance, Zimmerman (2001) argues that this principle is false.³ Moore also endorses the thesis that ‘the part of a valuable whole retains exactly the same value when it is, as when it is not, a part of that whole’ (1903, 30). This claim is sometimes called ‘invariantism’ or ‘the thesis of universality’.⁴ Returning to the childbirth example: if Moore is right then it seems that the pain involved in childbirth retains exactly the same disvalue, that is, the pain itself is intrinsically bad to precisely the same degree, as when that pain is not part of the experience of childbirth. (And, if Moore is right, then the intrinsic value of the experience of childbirth as a whole is not necessarily equal to the sum of the intrinsic value of all of the pains and pleasures involved in that experience.)

This objection does not require the acceptance of the principle of organic unities and invariantism. Rather, the objection says that my earlier appeals to the evaluation-determining relevance of instrumental aspects of the context of the specific pain or pleasure overlook an intuitive and traditional reply: what I am calling ‘context’ is plausibly just a complex state of affairs whose value or disvalue is importantly distinct from the (sum of) the value or disvalue of its proper parts. For example, each of the following might well be true: first, the pleasure of eating a lot of chocolate has significant intrinsic value; second, eating a lot of chocolate damages my health, and worsened health has significant intrinsic disvalue; third, the intrinsic value of the pleasure of eating a lot of chocolate is the same whether or not it is a part of the complex state of affairs of my consuming a lot of chocolate thus damaging my health; and, fourth, the intrinsic disvalue of my health being damaged might not be the sum of the states of affairs constituting its proper parts (one such state of affairs: the intrinsically valuable state of affairs where I get pleasure from eating a lot of chocolate). Four analogous claims might all be true for a case such as the experience of painful childbirth.⁵

In response, I’ll first clarify the relation between (a) the distinctions described in the objection and (b) the distinctions I’ve used in my test

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⁴Zimmerman (1999) notes that the principle of universality is ‘to be contrasted with the principle of conditionality, which may be put as follows: the intrinsic value of a part of an intrinsically valuable whole does depend on the other parts of the whole’.

⁵I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for Inquiry for prompting me to address this important continuation of Objection 4.
and its application. Neither my test nor the way I propose to apply it requires the rejection of the principle of organic unities or invariantism. My view is not that there are no intrinsically good or valuable states of affairs. For all that I’ve argued here, it might still be the case that there are plenty of intrinsically good states of affairs that are themselves proper parts of intrinsically bad, complex states of affairs. My interest, rather, is in running a natural, two-step test for any candidate for an intrinsically valuable (simple or complex) state of affairs. Indeed, my test can wholeheartedly endorse those distinctions between the question of whether a particular state of affairs has value or disvalue and the question of whether a complex state of affairs, of which the first state of affairs is a proper part, has value or disvalue.

Next, my response looks more closely at what is involved in applying my test to an instance of pain or pleasure stripped of all (possibly instrumental) connections to the value or disvalue of its parts and to the relevant whole. It seems exceedingly difficult to remove all possibly instrumental aspects of the context of an instance of pain. For instance, it seems extremely difficult to separate the pain involved in childbirth from that woman’s purpose for enduring the pain involved in childbirth, namely, having a child and no longer being pregnant. After all, we are not talking about pain in general. We are talking specifically about the pain involved in childbirth. I have never endured pain without any instrumental contextual factors (whether good consequences or bad or some mixture).

The objector might say that childbirth is an easy case because it is a case where some pain is endured for the sake of something obviously good and desirable. Take, then, a less memorable context for pain, such as the pain I endure while stubbing my toe. That’s bad not just because of the pain in my toe but also because it put me in a worse mood for the next few minutes, made me lose my train of thought, perhaps it gave me a headache, and so on. That is, it’s bad also because of its consequences. I have a hard time imagining what it’s like to endure even stubbing-my-toe pain without any instrumental aspects of context. In an important sense, this isn’t at all surprising. In medical science today, pain is still a notoriously difficult thing to measure in anything like an objective way, due in large part to how person-specific and context-dependent pain seems to be. And even without consulting any scientific literature, most of us are aware nowadays that pain in a particular part of the body

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6 Echoing the long-standing frustrations of doctors and many other members of the professional medical community, Timothy Mead, MD, writes, ‘You can’t measure pain’ (2011). Some creative methods of pain measurement have been tried in recent years, with some success (see, for instance, Lee et al. (2018)), but
usually helps us realize that something is amiss in that area, and/or that we need rest, and/or that we need treatment, and so on. With emotional pain, it’s commonly held that, in many cases, encountering painful emotional experiences aids processes such as learning, forming confidence for future challenges, and acquiring what we take to be positive character traits such as courage and resilience. This is not to suggest that all instances of pain have some instrumental goodness. Many instances are instrumentally bad or neutral. But we seem to normally evaluate pain (at least partially) instrumentally.

The final part of my response is as follows. Either I cognitively remove all possibly instrumental aspects of the context of the pain, so that I imagine something like ‘bare pain’, or I do not. If I do not do so, then what I evaluate in the second step of my test as bad is not the pain alone but, rather, (at least in part) instrumental aspects of the context of the pain. But if that is so, then I have not shown that pain is intrinsically bad. Instead, it seems that all I have shown is that pain is instrumentally bad. (Pain might be intrinsically bad, but I have not shown this.) If, instead, I do cognitively remove all possibly instrumental aspects of the context of the pain, then I am not sure what, exactly, is left to evaluate. Nor am I sure how to evaluate what is left. Of course, pain in general is reasonably taken to be something more or less everyone would rather avoid, all else equal. That’s something we say about pain in general. But my evaluation is supposed to be based on my judgment about what is left once I’ve stripped away all (instrumental) aspects of the context of the specific pain, leaving me with something like bare pain, as opposed to just reporting common sense about the nature of pain in general. I can accept the metaphysical claim that the intrinsic value or disvalue of a specific instance of pain is an importantly different matter from the intrinsic value or disvalue of a complex state of affairs of which that pain is a proper part, while nonetheless rejecting the epistemic claim that I am left with something I can reasonably evaluate once I’ve stripped pain of all possibly instrumental aspects of context. Similarly, I can accept the metaphysical claim that the value or disvalue of an experience of pain is the same whether or not that experience of pain is part of a valuable complex state of affairs, while rejecting the epistemic claim that I can verify or evaluate (much less precisely quantify) the value or disvalue of an experience of pain stripped of all instrumental relations between that pain and the complex state of affairs of which that pain is a part.

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It remains true today that, in most medical contexts, no one except the patient can clarify whether the patient is in pain and how much he or she is in.
Objection 5: My whole argument revolves around an empirical claim, namely, ordinary people don’t seem capable of imagining a thing without any of its consequences and then considering whether what remains is still good. I claim that this is a psychological impossibility for us as we are, as ordinary human beings. But all I’ve given in support of that claim is my own report that I am unable to do this. What about all of the great minds of the past and the present who often talk about intrinsic value? Are they all deeply deluded? And don’t their discussions count as overwhelming empirical evidence that my claim is false? This objection says that I need to explain why all of these discussions of intrinsic value are confused. And given that the basic move is a psychological claim, it would be nice to see it backed by a reference to established empirical research in psychology and cognitive science.

Response to 5: First of all, my thesis does not entail that any of the great minds of the past were deluded about intrinsic value. Perhaps it is useful for us to think of certain things such as a good will or pleasure as having some totally non-instrumental value, even if we have not yet figured out a way (compatible with human psychology) to verify that something such as a good will or pleasure really is intrinsically good. The idea is natural enough: we want to insulate a thing’s value from context-sensitive considerations, so that its value is special and independent. Also, there might well be tests that I just haven’t considered here. Perhaps there are, after all, intrinsically good things, but human psychology makes it difficult if not impossible to verify that a thing is intrinsically good. Finally, even if all other tests for intrinsic value are exhausted, and even if it is somehow eventually decided that there are no intrinsically good things, none of this even hints at the suggestion that the great minds of the past were deluded about anything including intrinsic value. Making progress in science is not normally taken to be a suggestion that the great scientists of the past were deluded. If Aristotle was wrong about gravity and Newton was roughly right about gravity, we can still wholeheartedly endorse the claim that Aristotle made important contributions to scientific progress (and that Aristotle had logical and empirical support for his false claims).

Second, regarding the empirical plausibility of my claim that ordinary human psychology seems to make it awfully difficult to run my test, it is true that I, and others I consulted, might be anomalous in relevant respects. Perhaps others do not have this difficulty. I cannot offer empirical proof that my psychology is identical in all relevant respects to the psychology of other human beings. But researchers psychology and cognitive
science have long thought it plausible that human beings’ thoughts and actions are affected in non-trivial ways by thoughts and feelings of which they might be largely unaware. That is, memories not accessible to our awareness (ask a person why she associates X with Y and she cannot tell you) have non-trivial effects on what we think and what we do. Thus a person might be convinced that she has stripped away all instrumental and consequential considerations when in fact she has not done so.

**Objection 6**: I’ve argued that I cannot coherently imagine and evaluate a certain experience without any possibly instrumental aspects of the context of that experience. But it seems that I’ve conflated two importantly different ways of characterizing the object of evaluation: on what we’ll call ‘the rich conception’, we evaluate ‘S’s phenomenological experience of A-ing’. On what we’ll call ‘the bare conception’, we evaluate ‘S A-ing’. For example, I love going for long walks. As a result, I associate various experiences of pleasure with my idea of a long walk. But my brother detests long walks. So, he probably associates various experiences of boredom with his idea of a long walk. Now, if what I’ve argued is correct, then it seems that I cannot coherently imagine or evaluate my brother’s experience. For I’ve argued that once the experience of going for a long walk, as I perceive and understand it, is stripped of all considerations I associate with it, I am left with an experience I do not know how to evaluate. But that’s false. I can imagine the bare event ‘S going for a long walk’. I can imagine S having a different phenomenology to mine. I understand boredom in general. I can imagine what it would be like for someone to experience what I experience watching baseball while going for a long walk instead. I can certainly evaluate that as bad. Therefore, removing my phenomenology from a certain event doesn’t seem to make it unimaginable. Nor does it seem to make it impossible to evaluate.

**Response to 6**: Objection 6 gives a kind of third-personal argument for the claim that we can coherently imagine and evaluate a bare event, thus completing both steps of my test (and conclude ‘that’s bad’ or ‘that’s good’ or whatever the evaluation is). That is, rather than move from a rich conception to a bare conception of an experience by stripping away all potentially instrumental aspects of the context of a painful or

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7 See, for instance, Greenwald and Banaji (1995). Also, see Coren (forthcoming) for a structurally similar argument regarding the evaluation of epistemic conservatism (the principle that says that a belief gets some prima facie justification simply in virtue of the fact that one holds it).

8 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for Inquiry for raising this objection.
pleasurable experience of my own (a first-personal strategy), I can instead consider the bare event of someone else’s experience and then evaluate that as good or bad, applying a rich conception of an experience of mine that matches the pain or pleasure that the other person seems to experience. This is an interesting challenge to my account.

But I think that the objection does not give us a successful way to coherently imagine and evaluate a bare experience or event. First, I have a more tenuous grip on another person’s painful experiences such as painfully boring experiences than I do on my own painful experiences. I can imagine that someone else might have a different phenomenology. It does not follow that I can imagine what it is like to have that different phenomenology. Perhaps the objector might say that all I need is some reasonably convincing evidence (such as a speech act such as ‘This walk is unendurably boring, please let’s head back now’) that shows that the person (my brother, for instance) is experiencing painful levels of boredom. But it seems to me that I need to know a good deal more than the mere fact that my brother is enduring a painful experience. It seems that I need to know about the possibly instrumental aspects of the context of my brother’s ostensibly painful experience. Am I in fact evaluating the event ‘my brother endures the painful boredom of going for a long walk because an insurance company insists that he takes one million steps in the next year and also for the sake of his health’ while believing that I am evaluating the event ‘my brother endures the painful boredom of going for a long walk’?

Here’s a second reason I don’t find Objection 6 persuasive. So as to coherently evaluate a bare event or experience, I can use my understanding of ‘boredom in general’ (as the objection puts it) and/or I can use my understanding of my own specific experiences that I recall as boring. The former does not seem particularly helpful for a coherent evaluation. For I think I've only ever experienced specific instances of boredom (normally evaluated contextually), though of course I do not deny that boredom is generally thought to be something unpleasant (like disgust in general, or disappointment in general). The latter option, my understanding of a specific experience that I recall as boring, does not seem to give me a bare experience or event to evaluate. For I seem to be using my own rich conception of an experience. But, if that is so, then I seem to encounter the familiar difficulties involved in moving from a rich conception to a bare conception of an experience and then trying to evaluate whatever remains. I do not see how the third-personal distinction is helpful here. It isn’t clear why it is easier to try to (a) remove all of the possibly
instrumental aspects of the context of my experience of watching the New York Yankees and then try to evaluate my brother’s bare experience (or the bare event) of his taking a long walk than it is to try to (b) remove all of the possibly instrumental aspects of the context of my experience of watching the Yankees and then try to evaluate whatever remains of my experience of watching the Yankees.\(^9\)(2) does not follow from (1). In this paper I’ve focused on giving evidence for (1). I do not require that (2) follows from (1). If Objection 6 is arguing that (1) is false because (2) is false (and because this paper requires that (2) follows from (1)) then the objection seems to be fallacious. Independently, though, (2) seems plausible.

**Objection 7:** There are at least two ways to strip a candidate bare of all considerations of good consequences: I can imagine the candidate without the good consequences that it in fact has (the only option I’ve discussed so far), or I can imagine that the consequences of the candidate are not good. Consider, for example, a long walk with good consequences such as helping to control one’s weight and helping to relieve stress. So far, I’ve only discussed the possibility of completing the first step of my test through the following method: imagine a long walk without the instrumental consideration of controlling one’s weight, without the purpose of relieving stress, and so on. But we might also try to imagine the removal of the goodness of controlling one’s weight, the goodness of relieving stress, and so on. It might well be easier to imagine the removal of the goodness of those consequences than it is to imagine the removal of those consequences altogether. So, perhaps my test can be run in a way I haven’t yet considered.\(^10\)

**Response to 7:** I’ll begin with some clarification. First, Objection 7’s alternative strategy applies not just to candidates for intrinsic value but also to candidates for intrinsic disvalue. For a candidate for intrinsic disvalue, such as watching something (such as a long baseball game) that I find painfully boring, I could try imagining the removal of the goodness of the consequences of that event (such as spending time with some of my

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\(^9\) I should also note: even if human beings have an awfully difficult time, and are perhaps psychologically incapable of, coherently evaluating an experience as good or bad (or neutral) without any possibly instrumental aspects of the context of that experience, it does not follow that we cannot (quite coherently) imagine a human being’s evaluating an experience in precisely that way. Consider the differences between (1) and (2) below:

1. Creatures like us cannot coherently evaluate bare experiences as good or bad.
2. We cannot coherently imagine creatures like us coherently evaluating bare experiences as good or bad.

\(^10\) I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Inquiry* for raising this concern.
family members) rather than the removal of all consequences. Second, Objection 7’s strategy seems to require that I imagine the removal of not just the goodness of a candidate’s consequences but also the badness of its consequences. For if I do not imagine the removal of the badness of some consequences, such as the badness of not spending extra time working (for a candidate for intrinsic value such as taking a long walk), then I might well end up evaluating instrumental badness rather than intrinsic goodness. In effect, I must imagine that all consequences are somehow neutral, without goodness and also without badness.

I foresee some difficulties with Objection 7’s strategy. The first difficulty is this. Focusing exclusively on imagining the removal of the goodness (or badness) of consequences, rather than consequences themselves, might well be more complicated than simply trying to imagine the removal of consequences. Here’s an example of those complexities. Often we say that we do one thing for the sake of another thing. We do X for the sake of Y. In fact, it seems tough to find cases where we do something for no (extrinsic) purpose at all. But we do not always say, or perhaps even think, that we do X for the sake of Y because Y is good or because Y has any goodness. For instance, job applicants in some fields sometimes say, understandably, that they do not enjoy completing dozens of job applications that all receive rejections a few months later. They do not say that they complete those applications because the consequence, namely, getting dozens of job rejections rather than getting no rejections, has goodness. Rather, they do the applications because of the badness they take to be present in the consequence of the alternative. That is, if they didn’t do any job applications then they would feel even worse about themselves. I don’t think this situation is unusual in the relevant respects, where S does X for the sake of Y, not because S takes Y to be good but because the alternative to Y, namely, Z, is taken to have considerable badness. Non-ideal lives, which are the lives lived by most ordinary people, seem to feature many instances of this pattern. So, there seem to be many cases where removing the goodness of consequences does not remove instrumental factors in the context of the candidate for intrinsic value or disvalue.

Even if we were to set aside all such complexities and ambiguities, I think that this task (imagining the removal of all of the goodness of a thing’s consequences) is just as difficult as the task of imagining the removal of consequences. Consider stress relief as a consequence of a long walk. I must consider stress relief without any of its goodness. But I
must also not imagine that it has any badness (for then, in the second step my test, I might well be evaluating instrumental badness, since on Objection 7’s strategy, I do not remove the candidate’s consequences). I must imagine it free of any goodness or badness at all. That is, I must imagine that stress relief is, in relevant respects, like the fact that 17 is a prime number. I’m not sure that this is practically possible for me, as an ordinary person with ordinary capacities. Stress relief seems to be something with a great deal of instrumental goodness. For example, when I’ve relieved my stress levels, I am able to think much more clearly when faced with problems. I am also able to enjoy my life on the rare occasion that I am not faced with pressing problems. Cognitively separating a consequence from all goodness (and badness) appears to be more challenging than Objection 7 assumes.

V. Implications and concluding remarks

I’ve argued that we have a good reason to think that we as ordinary human beings cannot yet determine whether there are intrinsically good things. I proposed what seems to me a natural way to test for intrinsic goodness: first, strip the candidate bare of all considerations of good consequences; and, second, see if what remains is still a good thing. It seems to me that the conditions for performing the first step militate against the conditions for performing the second step, at least from the psychological and phenomenological perspective of an ordinary human being.

I’ll discuss two interesting implications of my argument. First, it seems that, for us as we are, intrinsic goodness (or badness) and instrumental goodness (or badness) are more deeply entangled than we might assume. It is possible, of course, to logically or metaphysically separate the intrinsic goodness of a thing from the instrumental goodness of a thing. For W. D. Ross, the intrinsically good is ‘that which is good apart from any of the results it produces’ (1988, 68). For L. W. Sumner, intrinsic goodness is something ‘worth having or pursuing for its own sake, not merely by virtue of some further good with which it is somehow connected’ (1996, 3). For Elizabeth Anderson, X is intrinsically good for S if and only if it makes sense for S to immediately care about X, independent of its making sense for S to care about anything other than X (1993, 19). For Ronald Dworkin, a thing is intrinsically valuable ‘if its value is independent of what people happen to enjoy or want or need or what is good for them’ (1993, 71). And so on: as summarized at the start of this paper and
discussed later on, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Brentano, Moore, Chisholm, and Korsgaard have insightful discussions of intrinsic value. But I suggest that by pausing to reflect on how difficult it is for an ordinary human being to verify that a particular candidate for intrinsic goodness really is intrinsically good, we can get clearer on the depth of the entanglement between intrinsic goodness and instrumental goodness.

One might worry that I have not shown anything about the entanglement of instrumental goodness and intrinsic goodness. Haven’t I merely been discussing our epistemic access (or lack thereof) to intrinsic value, rather than the metaphysical fact that something has (or does not have) intrinsic value? My answer is: yes. I have shown something interesting about how, for us as we are, intrinsic value seems to be remarkably difficult to disentangle from instrumental value. This is an importantly separate matter from the metaphysical entanglement (or metaphysical disentanglement) of intrinsic value and instrumental value. As much as one might be drawn by what Jody Azzouni (1997, 472) calls ‘the desire to enshrine observation as criterial of ontology’, if I’ve shown that observations of intrinsic value (or disvalue) are hard to come by for ordinary human beings then it does not follow that intrinsic value has no place among our ontological commitments.

But then why does this human perspective-focused entanglement matter? One reason I’ll focus on here is deeply connected with two insightful points from Tara Smith, the first a descriptive observation and the second a normative evaluation of discussions of intrinsic value. I’ll begin with the relevant descriptive observation. Smith observes that ‘the concept of intrinsic value exerts considerable influence in contemporary discussions of many issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, and the environment. Many philosophers who embrace the notion do so in order to oppose subjectivism’ (1998, 539). She observes that these philosophers seem to worry that ‘unless value is anchored in such a preference-independent way … we have no firm grounds for condemning the most heinous atrocities’ (ibid). Without intrinsic value, then, many philosophers seem concerned that we would not have a sturdy foundation for important moral conclusions. In discussions of euthanasia, Velleman (1999), for example, takes a Kantian line: it is precisely and only because a human being is of intrinsic value that her well-being matters. Velleman argues that the source of a human being’s intrinsic value is her rational nature. He infers that it is not permissible to violate a human being’s rational nature. Along the way, Velleman argues that since a patient’s pain relief is good because it is good for the patient, it follows that the patient’s
pain relief must only be instrumentally good. Klampfer (2001, 26) argues that Velleman overlooks the possibility that pain relief may also be intrinsically good. In discussions of environmental ethics, the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value is taken to be of central importance. If an animal, plant or body of water has intrinsic value then it is commonly assumed that we have a prima facie moral duty to protect that thing.\footnote{See, for example, Passmore ([1974] 1980), Bookchin (1980), Norton et al. (1995), Katz (1997), Rolston (1989), and McShane (2014).} The point is that many philosophers see ascriptions of intrinsic value as essential for correctly understanding problems that clearly concern our (ordinary human) perspective on aspects of the actual world, such as euthanasia and the human right to life, as well as how we ought to treat our natural environments. It seems, then, that even if I’ve shown something interesting about entanglement from an ordinary human perspective rather than entanglement in the person-independent, metaphysical sense, my conclusion seems distinctly relevant to the practical, people-centered ways in which many philosophers put intrinsic value to work.

I turn now to Tara Smith’s normative evaluation of discussions of intrinsic value. Smith supports the anti-subjectivism aim of those who deploy intrinsic value, but argues that intrinsic value is an ‘ill-conceived antidote’ for subjectivism about important moral conclusions (1998, 539, see also Smith (2008)). She argues that the identification of intrinsic value is done in an ad hoc way, without objective criteria, ‘uninformed by the broader patterns or principles that obtain across all instances of intrinsic value’ (1998, 545). Smith discusses examples such as Thomas Nagel’s claim that ‘sensory experiences which we strongly like or dislike simply in themselves have agent-neutral value because of those desires’ (Nagel 1986, 167). Those who deploy the concept of intrinsic value insist that they can spot intrinsic value but, according to Smith, provide ‘no satisfactory account of how, and thus no means of verifying his claims’ (ibid.) Of course, I do not presuppose that she’s right. But my discussion clarifies why there does not seem to be any satisfactory account of how intrinsic value can be spotted. My answer is: for us as we are (as ordinary human beings), it is exceedingly difficult to give a satisfactory account of how to spot intrinsic value that does not appear to rule out apparently plausible candidates for bearers of intrinsic value. If there is any plausibility to the claim that intrinsic values are united only by the fact that they elicit similar responses in people, then my discussion helps to explain why this is so.
Another implication: if we want to verify that there are any intrinsically good things, then we must find some other means of testing for such things. Perhaps the preceding antecedent deserves scrutiny, though. Aristotle argues, as we saw, that there must be something that is only intrinsically good (not instrumentally good, even in part) in order for any of our desires to have meaning (NE I.2 1094a18–22). He rejects the possibility of an infinite series of desired ends, with every end or good desired for the sake of a further end or good. Aristotle is also very clear on the claim that human happiness is that highest good, that end which is good solely in itself and not because of anything else. So, Aristotle seems to be crystal clear on why there must be at least one intrinsically good thing, and what that intrinsically good thing is. But he is unclear on what it means for happiness to be intrinsically valuable for an ordinary person. Perhaps we should consider more seriously the possibility of preserving the metaphysical claim that there exist (and must exist) intrinsically good things while rejecting the claim that we ought to be able to determine whether or not particular things are intrinsically good. If this option seems attractive, then I take my discussion to have helped to show why it should be selected. Still, this would be a strange position to take. One alternative is to concede that there are no intrinsically good things.

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12 True, Aristotle has a famous account in his Metaphysics Λ which describes God as the being who is desired just for its own sake, for the sake of which we do everything we do, and which causes all motion and change in the universe. God seems to be Aristotle’s ultimate source of intrinsic goodness and value. But, again, Aristotle does not dig into the details of what it means for a human being to desire, value, or even imagine a good thing in total isolation from all instrumental goodness and value that could be associated with that thing.

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