

SENTIMENTAL VALUE

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I analyse the concept of sentimental value, with a view to identifying its relations with the notions of intrinsic, final, extrinsic and instrumental value. The analysis explores issues arising in the understanding of an object as sentimentally valuable, and reveals a serious tension in the common sense extrinsic conception of sentimental value.

I

Sentimental value is a quality of objects to which one feels emotionally attached. The notion of sentimental value is at the centre of a triangle whose points are defined by emotion, memory and the self. Tracing the lines that connect these points would show how a non-reflective sense of oneself is generated when consciousness encounters objects whose past life give rise to certain emotions in the present. An explanation of this complex phenomenon, however, should wait for an answer to a rather basic conceptual question that forms the focus of this paper: what sort of value sentimental value is.

Sentimental value appears to hold a distinct, if precarious, place in the realm of value properties. I shall offer an analysis of sentimental value that will increase its stability by sharpening its distinctness. The analysis I present is situated in the context of philosophical axiology. I identify the senses in which sentimental value may count as personal; I show that sentimental value falls on neither side of the means–end distinction; and I conclude by exploring an issue that resists a simple response: whether sentimental value could be adequately characterized as ‘final’ or ‘intrinsic’.

Describing the experience of an object as sentimentally valuable is a task that makes significant demands on one’s literary skills. A rather prosaic example, however, may help for the more abstract discussion that is to follow.

Looking at a pebble on my bookshelf, I feel a quiet stir. The pebble was picked up on a winter afternoon, as I was walking on the shore at the once popular resort of Llandudno. I lifted the pebble and gave it to my partner before we returned to the station. Later that evening, she painted the name of the town on the smooth side of the pebble – the one I see in my imagination as I write this text. The pebble will probably rest on my bookshelf for some time to come – longer, in any case, than its usefulness as a reference point for this discussion.

II

The intimate relation between oneself and the objects one experiences as sentimentally valuable may support the view that sentimental value is personal. It can, indeed, be argued that sentimental value is personal because it is not impersonal, since it is part of a phenomenon that involves a point of view of the world, namely, the point of view of the person who is emotionally connected with the bearer of value. This involvement is quite pronounced in the case of sentimental value, since it combines the viewpoint of care or appreciation, which is characteristic of value experience in general, with the perspectival element of emotional experience in particular.¹

Sentimental value is also personal as opposed to universal: that an object has sentimental value for a particular person does not entail that it ought to have sentimental value for anyone else. The universality lacking in sentimental value is thus of a normative character: it is not rationally binding on any other person to find a pebble, for instance, emotionally valuable. However, this is not quite right, for two reasons. First, it is not rationally binding even on me to find a pebble valuable, emotionally or otherwise. Secondly, if an object is indeed emotionally valuable for someone, then it might be possible for anyone to see that the object has sentimental value – for example, you may well understand that a particular object has sentimental value for me.

I suggest that this problem can be disentangled in the following way. An object is sentimentally valuable to an agent for certain reasons, which, by the very fact of being reasons, are in principle intelligible by everyone else, even though they may not be applicable to anyone else. Universality may thus come in through the understanding that something has the relevant quality, but not in the experience of that quality as enjoyed by the agent who sees the object as sentimentally valuable.

¹ Cf. P. Goldie, *The Emotions* (Oxford UP, 2000), ch. 1, esp. pp. 1–2.

Nevertheless I should note an important qualification to the claim that sentimental value is personal: the claim should not make us lose sight of the fact that sentimental value is not predicable of persons. We may value particular people, and we may also experience certain emotions towards them: however, the two do not combine to make those people sentimentally valuable. Even in cases where the locus of emotion and valuation coincide, they do not produce a third state of seeing a person as valuable sentimentally.

It might be objected that in such cases a person is sentimentally valuable because the emotion is the *raison d'être* of the valuation. This objection, though, is seriously misguided. For instance, you may value people for their courage, and also feel awe (or admiration, or fear) in thinking about that aspect of their characters; but to claim that they are sentimentally valuable would be wrong at two levels, conceptually and morally. Conceptually, because the focus of your valuation is people's courage, not your emotions towards them. Indeed, the feelings which the courageous might inspire in you may have nothing to do with the feelings triggered in the presence of sentimentally valuable objects. The difference lies in the fact that sentimental value concerns the relation between past and present moments in the history of oneself, whereas the value you find in, say, someone's courage concerns things that might be unrelated to your actual history, such as bravery in the line of battle, or steadfastness in helping the vulnerable, under highly adverse circumstances.

The last remark points also to what is morally amiss in thinking of, say, a courageous person as sentimentally valuable: if you happen to value people *only on the ground that* the thought of their courage gives you a thrill or triggers some other pleasant emotion, then you are seeing them merely as a means to increasing the range of your emotional palette. I claim, though, that valuing others not for their actions, characters or qualities, but solely as a means of producing feelings in yourself, is a paradigmatic case not of sentimental, but of instrumental value. And, as I shall presently show, these two types of value are importantly different.

III

Sentimental value is not instrumental: it does not serve a purpose, or stand as a means for achieving further ends. More precisely, sentimental value is not instrumental in two senses. First, it does not by itself bestow on the object another type of value: that an object is sentimentally valuable does not in any way render it aesthetically accomplished or morally praiseworthy. Secondly, sentimental value is not necessarily attributed to objects of

instrumental value. Indeed, a common characteristic of things having sentimental value is their disuse. A broken ivory comb, a faded school tie, a collection of scratched vinyl records, are objects that fail to serve their designated purpose. Their sentimental value is connected with the fact that they are artefacts out of circulation.

Nor is sentimental value an end in itself, for it does not constitute a goal at which one can reasonably aim, in contrast with the true, the good and the beautiful. Truth is a goal of any discussion or quest about how things are. Goodness is something which at least most of us pursue: our actions aim at what we think of as good ends, and we look for the best means to those ends, while we hope that our character partakes in a bit of goodness. And however variable people's tastes or aesthetic ideals might be, beauty is a quality we may attend to in creating an artistic object. Sentimental value, on the other hand, is not something that we may try to discover or to achieve either as an end of our activities or as a quality of who we are. The fact that sentimental value falls on neither side of the means–end distinction generates a web of theoretical puzzles which require careful untangling.

IV

Objects that function as a means to achieving a goal are instrumentally valuable. Instrumental value is to be contrasted with intrinsic value. I have claimed that sentimental value is not instrumental. It appears, therefore, that sentimental value is intrinsic.

However, this reasoning is too quick to establish the intrinsicity of sentimental value. After all, what could be the intrinsic worth of objects of sentimental value? There seems to be nothing intrinsically valuable about the pebble on my bookshelf.

I need to clarify the key terms. As I understand it, 'intrinsic' value is a value dependent only on the internal properties of an object and their interrelations. Its opposite is 'extrinsic' value, which is dependent on features that are not internal parts of the object. A rather different distinction is that between the value of objects that are valuable as a means, and the value of objects that are valuable for their own sake. The former is commonly referred to as 'instrumental' and the latter as 'final' value.

'Intrinsicity', in other words, concerns the relation between the value of an object and the rest of its properties, whereas 'finality' concerns its place in an ordered set of values. However, the intensional difference between intrinsic and final value need not imply that they are not extensionally the same. According to the standard analysis of this issue, since an object's

having the internal properties that it has is part of its intrinsic nature, and since its final value is dependent on and only on its having the internal properties that it has, 'all final value is intrinsic value'.²

Given the traditional pedigree of this approach, I shall call it the 'orthodox' view. This view has recently come under attack by philosophers who take a more 'liberal' approach to the relation between intrinsic and final values in claiming that 'There are final values that are not intrinsic'.³

Although I find myself in sympathy with the liberal approach, I believe that both parties in this debate are prone to misrepresenting the nature of sentimental value. I shall state briefly my main worry with a particular version of the liberal analysis, before I develop my objections to the orthodox approach.

Liberals maintain that the final value of certain objects is dependent on features other than their internal properties. Such a feature is thought to be the usefulness of the valued object. As a prominent liberal has put it, we can say of 'mink coats and handsome china and gorgeously enamelled frying pans', that 'they are valued for their own sakes under the condition of their usefulness' (Korsgaard, p. 264). This observation is acute, but can be taken in a way that plays into the hands of an opponent: if those objects are chosen primarily as a means of keeping oneself warm, serving tea or cooking chips, then their value is above all instrumental. At best, this view renders the final value of objects parasitic on their usefulness. It would thus, without any argument, preclude sentimental value from counting as a type of final value: as I have noted already, some emotionally valuable objects, from broken ivory combs to sea pebbles, are things that have ceased to serve, if they ever had, a useful purpose.

V

The orthodox view offers an important argument against the identification of sentimental with final value. The argument is based on the view that intrinsic value is a quality of states of affairs: what is of value, for instance, is

² D. Zimmerman, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 62; cf. F. Brentano, *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong* (1889) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge UP, 1903); W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford UP, 1930); R. Chisholm, *Brentano and Meinong Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982).

³ W. Rabinowicz and T. Ronnow-Rasmussen, 'A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and For Its Own Sake', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100 (1999), pp. 33–52, at p. 34; cf. C. Korsgaard, 'Two Distinctions in Goodness', *Philosophical Review*, 92 (1983), pp. 169–95; S. Kagan, 'Rethinking Intrinsic Value', *Journal of Ethics*, 2 (1998), pp. 277–97. The labels 'orthodox' and 'liberal' are to be understood throughout in the senses stipulated here.

not 'this vase' or 'beauty', but 'that this vase is beautiful'; what is valuable is not 'a person' or 'happiness', but, e.g., 'that Mary is happy'. According to this approach, things that have intrinsic value are not individual entities or their properties, but (actual) states of affairs.⁴

On the basis of this claim the orthodox argue as follows: all intrinsic value is a quality of states of affairs; all final value is intrinsic value; therefore all final value is a quality of states of affairs.⁵ No object can be valuable either intrinsically or for its own sake. Hence sentimentally valuable objects can have neither intrinsic nor final value.

I find this line of reasoning highly problematic. First, the claim that the bearer of intrinsic value is necessarily a state of affairs seems to contravene another view upheld by the same tradition, i.e., that value is the fitting object of a positive emotion, such as love, liking or admiration.⁶ In my view, such emotions are primarily directed towards individual entities. We love particular beings, rather than states in which they occur, as we may admire a painting, love a neighbour, or like someone's cat, but not necessarily the events in which they partake. If value is to be analysed in terms of emotions that can be directed towards individual entities, and not (only) towards states of affairs, then, contrary to the major premise of the orthodox argument, intrinsic value may be predicable of objects.

Secondly, and most importantly, the appeal to the notion of a 'state of affairs' provides no non-question-begging way to exclude sentimental value from the domains of final and intrinsic value. In the case of an object like my familiar pebble, some of its properties, like being picked up by a particular person, at a particular place, decorating a particular shelf, etc., are of course extrinsic to the object itself. The orthodox view states that if the object is valuable in virtue of its extrinsic properties, then it is not valuable for its own sake. However, this statement is based on the claim that final value is identical with intrinsic value, which is precisely the claim which has been put in question, and which the orthodox thesis needs to prove rather than assume. In the absence of proof, we have no reason to conclude that sentimental value is not final because it is extrinsic.

There is, to be sure, a state of affairs that involved the pebble being picked up by me, during my visit to Wales, etc. Although the property of being picked up at that moment is extrinsic to the object, it is intrinsic to the

⁴ Arguments in support of this claim have been supplied by G. Harman, 'Toward a Theory of Intrinsic Value', *Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1967), pp. 792–804; Chisholm, *Brentano and Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge UP, 1986); see N. Lemos, *Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge UP, 1994), ch. 2, for a defence. My criticism focuses on Zimmerman's elaborate version of the orthodox view.

⁵ Zimmerman, ch. 3, esp. pp. 39–45.

⁶ See J.N. Findlay, *Meinong's Theory of Objects and Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); Lemos, ch. 1; and Zimmerman, esp. ch. 3.

state of affairs under consideration: it is a constitutive feature of the state of affairs *this pebble's being picked up by me*, etc., that I picked up this pebble, etc. Given that the sentimental value realized in a state of affairs that involves the particular pebble is dependent on properties that are intrinsic to that state, it is itself an intrinsic value of that state of affairs. Hence if we follow the orthodox advice and switch our analysis from objects to states of affairs, sentimental value comes out intrinsic.

VI

If we are to draw any moral from the previous discussion, it should be one of caution about the application of some standard terms in understanding the particular case of sentimentally valuable objects. I have claimed that sentimental value is at once extrinsic (if we focus on objects as bearers of value) and intrinsic (if we zoom out to cover the states of those objects); that it is neither instrumental (since it is not a means to an end), nor an end in itself (as it is not a goal or product of our actions).

A concluding remark is due on whether sentimental value is 'final'. A sentimentally valuable object is valuable not for the sake of something else, but for its own sake. The 'for its own sake' idiom is usually rendered in a single word as 'final'; but this rendering can be misleading. Sentimental value does not signify the *final* point of any activity, nor can it lay a claim to be among the *ultimate* constituents of human well-being. Sentimental value, however, is self-contained, in the sense that it involves no reference to future events or projects realizable beyond the sphere defined by agents and the objects that they experience as emotionally significant. I propose that the notion appropriate to express this aspect of sentimentally valuable objects should be 'complete value'.⁷

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