

My aim in this lecture is to introduce students to some basic concepts surrounding the nature of valuing. In my experience, debates over environmentalism tend to vacillate between different reasons for valuing nature. Aesthetic, ethical and practical considerations get muddled together. I would like students to be able to identify in any given case why nature is being regarded as valuable. In so doing they should be able to recognize certain philosophical issues surrounding such claims.

1. Instrumental and intrinsic value.

Let's begin with an important distinction:

- To say that person P values X **instrumentally** means that, for P, x has a tendency to bring about something else that P values. In other words x is a "means to an end" for P.
For example, most people value their automobile in this way. An automobile is instrumentally valuable because it can assist you in achieving certain goals.
- To say that person P values x **intrinsically** means that, for P, x is an end in itself.
For example, most people value friendship as an end.

2. Relationships between instrumental and intrinsic value.

It is important to note that these are not dichotomous categories. An object can be both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. For some automobile enthusiasts cars have intrinsic value. These people regard the possession of a nice car as an end in itself. Of course, cars still have instrumental value for these individuals. The same point holds for friendship. You might value a friend for instrumental reasons such as when they lend you money or comfort you during an illness. In these cases your friend is valuable to you partly because they assist you in achieving certain ends.

Some things are valued only for instrumental or intrinsic reasons. For most people cars are only instrumentally valuable. The way to test whether an object is only instrumentally valuable is to ask, "if that object ceased to perform its function, would I still value it?" If the answer is "no" then the object is only instrumentally valuable. Likewise, something is only intrinsically valuable if it provides no assistance in achieving your ends, but you value it anyway. Some friendships are like this.

3. Related philosophical issue: What are the sources of intrinsic value?

Some might find it disturbing to think that there are people who value their automobiles intrinsically. This seems to suggest that an automobile can be regarded on par with friendship. One problem with this suggestion is that it is morally objectionable. Suppose that someone was faced with the choice of saving either their car or a friend from a fire. Anyone who does not know what to do in such cases, we think, has something wrong with them. A first requirement for a theory of value is that it provides some way of explaining why we ought to value certain things.

Another potential problem with the suggestion that automobiles have intrinsic value is that this claim might be psychologically inaccurate. Suppose that Mary is a car enthusiast and she loves her 1967 Ford Mustang. Mary might explain, "Yes I love my Mustang, but I don't hold it on the same level as my friendships!" Here Mary is not necessarily making a moral claim about what one ought to value. She is simply reporting her own psychological states: her Mustang and her friends belong, psychologically, in different categories. A second criterion for theory of value is that it explains how we rank values.

3.1 Value Monism

One way of trying to settle these issues is to ask, what is the ultimate source of intrinsic value? In other words, what is it about an object or person that leads people to value it intrinsically? Some philosophers hold that there is really just one thing that everyone intrinsically values. For lack of a better term, call this position "value monism."

Value monists disagree about what this single intrinsically valuable property is. Some suggest happiness. For these thinkers everything else besides the experience of happiness is merely instrumentally valuable. Others suggest human flourishing (broadly construed as the freedom to select and pursue one's life projects). For now, let's bracket the question of whether one of these is the correct view. Instead, we will consider why value monism is an attractive position to some thinkers.

One advantage of value monism is that it provides a way of settling the two issues mentioned earlier. Recall that it was both morally objectionable and (arguably) psychologically incorrect to say of Mary that she values her Mustang on par with her friendships. Now suppose that you are a value monist. Specifically, you think that the only intrinsically valuable thing is human flourishing. On this view, it is incorrect to say that Mary's Mustang has intrinsic value for Mary. Instead, Mary's Mustang is valuable

to her only insofar as it is conducive to her flourishing. The reason that Mary should save her friend instead of her Mustang (when faced with this choice) is because this action promotes human flourishing to a greater degree.

Accepting value monism sometimes means that you cannot take people at face value. For example Mary might say that she values her mustang “in itself”. She would continue to value the Mustang even if it never leaves the garage. In order to accommodate such claims the value monist must put a particular spin on Mary’s statement. On this view, it might seem to Mary that her mustang is an end in itself. But, on closer reflection, it is argued, we see that the Mustang is really just instrumentally valuable for her. It is because the Mustang contributes to Mary’s flourishing (or happiness) that she values it.

3.2 Value Pluralism.

Imagine another car enthusiast named Barry who loves his 1968 Chevy Camero. When faced with the choice of saving his Camero or a friend from a fire, Barry has to stop and think about it. Here is what he says: “I realize that morally speaking I should save my friend instead. When it comes down to it, that is probably what I would do. But I have to admit that this would be a very difficult decision. I really do love my car!”

A value monist might say of Barry that he ultimately values human flourishing. Where Barry is running into problems, on this view, is in deciding which option (car or friend) brings about the most flourishing. Here again we run into the problem of psychological accuracy. The value monist appears to ascribe to Barry an artificial system of values. Who are we to tell Barry what he really values?

This is where value pluralism enters the picture. According to this view, people can value all sorts of things as ends in themselves. The reason that Barry finds it difficult to rescue his friend instead of his Camero, on this view, is because he values them both intrinsically. It is precisely because Barry holds the two things on par, the value pluralist claims, that his decision is so difficult.

For now I want to set aside the difficult question of which theory -- value monism or value pluralism -- is the most psychologically accurate description of how and why people value things. Instead, let’s consider how the value pluralist deals with the ethical question of what one ought to value.

Value monists tend to identify intrinsic value with certain kinds of psychological experiences or abilities. Typical examples are human happiness or human flourishing. Some environmentalists see this as a defect in value monism. Where, they ask, does this leave natural objects like boreal forests and arctic tundra? Assume for now that these sorts of entities lack psychological states (some environmentalists argue that even forests can experience pain, but that is another topic). If an object lacks psychological states, does this mean that it is incapable of having intrinsic value? The value monist seems to be stuck with this conclusion. For the value monist most natural objects are only capable of having instrumental value. That is, they are valuable only insofar as they are conducive to human happiness or flourishing. By contrast, a value pluralist has an easier time arguing that all sorts of natural objects have value in themselves regardless of how humans regard them.

4. Subjective and Objective value.

We have identified a potential psychological difference between Mary and Barry in what they value intrinsically. We have also identified an important commonality in what they ought to find intrinsically valuable. Arguably, then, there are two kinds of facts surrounding questions of value. On the one hand are subjective facts about the sorts of things a person holds valuable. On the other hand are objective facts about what a person ought to value.

The words “subjective” and “objective” are among the most confused terms both in common parlance and in philosophy. Sometimes “subjective” is used as a term of derision such as when one says of an attitude or opinion, “that is *merely* subjective.” In other cases “subjective” is used to describe a thesis about how the mind is related to the external world, as in “everything is subjective.” Before we can evaluate such claims it is important to get clear on what they mean. For the sake of argument, I propose the following definitions for “subjective value” and “objective value”.

- Some entity x is **subjectively valuable** to the extent that the value of x co-varies with individual psychological states.
- Some entity x is **objectively valuable** to the extent that the value of x does not co-vary with individual psychological states.

Consider, for example, an automobile. Within this framework an automobile is relatively subjectively valuable because its value co-varies with individual psychological attitudes (compare Mary or Barry to a non-car-enthusiast). The value of human flourishing is by comparison psychologically invariant.

Like the instrumental/intrinsic value distinction, the subjective/objective value distinction is not dichotomous. Rather, subjective and objective value can be regarded as matters of degree. At one end of the continuum are objects whose value is highly subjective while at the other end are objects whose value is relatively objective.

Notice also that these two distinctions are logically independent of one another. The following table illustrates how this is the case.

How is x valuable?

	Subjectively	Objectively
Instrumentally	E.g. Mary's Mustang.	Good health.
Intrinsically	E.g. Barry's Camero.	Happiness.

I am here identifying good health as an instrumental good. I am thus assuming that good health is valuable insofar as it allows people to pursue their ends. Good health is also objectively valuable. It doesn't depend on your individual psychological makeup whether good health will assist you in pursuing your goals.

By the same token happiness is an objective good. The value of happiness is invariant across a wide range of different psychological states. Likewise, happiness is an intrinsic good insofar as it is regarded as an end in itself. People do not pursue happiness because it leads to something else.

4.1 Where do value monism and value pluralism fit into the picture?

Whether you are a value monist or a value pluralist affects the way you place particular objects into these four boxes. For example, we have seen that some value monists regard human flourishing as the only intrinsic good. Here is how they would carve up the territory.

	Subjectively	Objectively
Instrumentally	Mary's Mustang. Barry's Camero	Good health. Happiness Some Nature.
Intrinsically	Human flourishing	Human flourishing

Notice the qualification "some" nature. I make this qualification on the assumption that not all natural objects are conducive to human flourishing. Remote forests that no one ever visits are a potential case in point. However, you might take issue with me here. You might argue that a remote forest can contribute to human flourishing regardless of whether humans visit the place. Imagine a conservationist whose personal goal is to protect pristine forests that remain untouched by humans. For this individual, flourishing involves the knowledge that there are wild places that neither she nor anyone else visits. Notice however that we are now sliding towards the subjective end of the spectrum. This reason that our imagined conservationist instrumentally values nature depends considerably on her individual psychological makeup. To conclude, ask yourself how a value pluralist might describe this situation.

Questions for further reflection:

- According to Aldo Leopold, how do most farmers value nature?
- According to Leopold, how do conservation managers value nature? If there is a difference between farmers and conservationists, explain what it is and why it exists?
- Finally, how does Leopold think that people should value nature?