

# INTRINSIC VALUE AND THE ARGUMENT FROM REGRESS

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**Abstract.** Proponents of the argument from regress maintain that the existence of Instrumental Value is sufficient to establish the existence of Intrinsic Value. It is argued that the chain of instrumentally valuable things has to end somewhere. Namely with intrinsic value. In this paper, I shall argue something a little more modest than this. I do not want to argue that the regress argument proves that there is intrinsic value but rather that it proves that the idea of intrinsic value is a necessary part of our thinking about moral value.

## Introduction

The Argument from Regress is a response to a problem. Namely, where does Instrumental Value get its value? Proponents of the regress argument argue that Instrumental Value gets its value from Intrinsic Value.<sup>1</sup> In her paper „Intrinsic Value: Look-Say Ethics” Tara Smith outlines three common criticisms of the Argument from Regress. Smith, like many others, claims that the Argument from Regress does not establish its conclusion (Smith 1998). The main purpose of this paper is to show that the three arguments outlined by Smith do not do as their advocates would have us believe. I shall start by defining Instrumental Value and go on to outline the Argument from Regress. I shall examine the three criticisms. The first will be shown to misrepresent the Argument from Regress. The second uses an

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Attfield 1983, p. 160. Also see 1981, p. 414.

analogy, which in the absence of further argument cannot be effective. I will accept the premises of the third argument, but dispute the conclusion that it undermines the Argument from Regress to the extent that is claimed.

### I. What is Instrumental Value?

To say that something is valuable instrumentally (I shall take the terms „Instrumental Value” and „means” to convey the same concept) is to say that it is a way of achieving a particular good end. All judgements about means are therefore judgements about causal relations. More specifically they are judgements about which actions will achieve a good end. Past confusion may have arisen because judgements of means involve assessing both whether an action has a particular kind of effect and whether that effect will be good-in-itself. But it must be remembered that the two judgements are different in kind. Moore says that ends and means are quite separate (More 1993, p. 74; also More 1993a). Ends are things which are good-in-themselves. Means are judgements about causal relationships; about which actions produce which results.

Instrumentally valuable things get their value from their ability to perform a particular role, „the Instrumental Value of an item is viewed as a function of how well or poorly it serves as an instrument for the fulfilment of ... goals.” (Bernstein 2001, p. 329). Bernstein argues that money is a good example of something with Instrumental Value as it can be used to buy things such as cars, homes or other things we may want. Instrumentally valuable things derive their value from that which they are instrumental to. A thing’s value as a means depends entirely on its relationships to other things. To illustrate this point I shall sketch two possible worlds where money exists. In possible world A money has Instrumental Value, I can buy whatever I choose with it. However, in possible world B I cannot buy anything. Money is simply a collection of bits of paper and metal. So what explains the fact that money has Instrumental Value in world A and not in world B? The money itself is the same. So the only relevant difference is the relationship in which the money stands to the things that one can or cannot buy with it. In possible world A my sixty pence is considered to be of equal value to a loaf of bread and so I can exchange it for a loaf of bread. In possible world B my sixty pence is not considered to be of the same value as a loaf of bread and thus I cannot buy it.

However, as Bernstein points out, instrumentality is not just a relational concept, it is functional too. Therefore, another aspect of an instrumentally valuable thing is its replacability. Other objects could replace the coins and notes we currently use as money and as such they would have the same value. So instrumentally valuable things can be replaced by anything else and that thing will have the same value so long as it performs the role equally well (Bernstein 2001, p. 330).

So, to recap, something has Instrumental Value if it lends itself efficiently to the achievement of a valuable end. Instrumental value is relational insofar as it depends on the relationship in which it stands to other things and it is functional insofar as it must perform a particular role to be considered valuable.

## II. The Regress Argument

What is a regress? A regress occurs when one asks a question and cannot answer it satisfactorily without repeating the question with which one began. When this happens an indefinite number of times the regress is infinite. Thus, the initial question in any infinite regress remains unanswered.

Those who employ the Regress Argument are trying to answer the question, where does Instrumental Value get its value? Some philosophers may want to answer that it is perfectly possible for things with Instrumental Value to get their value from other instrumentally valuable things (Kagan 1998, p. 278). But according to the regress argument this is not a satisfactory answer. Say, for instance, that there is an instrumentally valuable thing, W, which is instrumentally valuable for X, which has Instrumental Value for another thing, Y, and so on infinitely. Some philosophers would argue that it is sufficient to say that W gets its value from X, X from Y and so on. Thus each instrumentally valuable thing gets its value from another instrumentally valuable thing. But proponents of the regress argument, myself included, do not find this explanation satisfactory. Namely, because it is no explanation at all, it simply moves the question without answering it.

The only way to stop this regress is to say that Instrumental Value gets its value from something that is not instrumentally valuable. Relational and replaceable things are not sufficient to explain the value of something that is instrumentally valuable. So it would seem that the only other alternative is something that is non-relational and irreplaceable, in other words some-

thing that is intrinsically valuable. On this conception Intrinsic Value derived from a thing's intrinsic properties. This is known as the good-in-itself conception of Intrinsic Value.<sup>2</sup>

The reason why only Intrinsic Value will stop the regress is that when you ask where it gets its value the answer is always from itself. If it is not necessary to refer to another object to explain value than the regress has been stopped.

I do not want to claim that the Argument from Regress conclusively establishes that there is such a thing as Intrinsic Value. Rather I will argue that Intrinsic Value is the best possible way to explain Instrumental Value.

### **Criticisms of the Regress Argument**

It is often argued that the Regress Argument is unsatisfactory. This is because the knowledge of Intrinsic Value that it claims to give us is „not based on an accumulation of positive evidence... [but rather] we know of Intrinsic Value only by default” (Smith 1998, p. 546). Smith contends that the logic used by the Argument from Regress is flawed, and has three main problems (Smith 1998, p. 539).<sup>3</sup>

### **The circularity argument**

First, I shall examine the objection that the reasoning used by advocates of the Regress Argument is circular. Smith contends that the Regress Argument plays upon an ambiguity in the notion of Instrumental Value (Smith 1998, p. 549). She maintains there are two ways in which Instrumental Value can be understood. First, it could be simply a thing's practical effective-

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<sup>2</sup> Smith distinguishes between two conceptions of Intrinsic Value: the Good-in-itself conception and the Sought-for-its-own-sake conception. On the good-in-itself model Intrinsic Value is „packed within the allegedly valuable thing, independent of and thus unaffected by the existence or condition of all other things, persons and interests” (Smith 1998, p. 540). The sought-for-its-own-sake version of Intrinsic Value „consists of the fact that a thing is sought not as a means to or constituent of any other end” (Smith 1998, p. 540). Smith argues that in order for the Regress Argument to establish its conclusion it must employ the Good-in-itself version of Intrinsic Value.

<sup>3</sup> Smith argues that many philosophers who embrace the idea of Intrinsic Value do so to oppose subjectivism. Such philosophers think that only if value is independent of our preferences can our moral conclusions have firm grounds. Smith says she shares the goal of opposing subjectivism, but she thinks that Intrinsic Value is an „ill-conceived antidote” (Smith 1998, p. 539). Her objective is to show that claims about Intrinsic Value are ultimately subjective.

ness as a means. The second notion is that the ends served by the instrumentally valuable things „are themselves worthwhile” (Smith 1998, p. 549). This broader conception, she contends, requires that the objective have value in order for Instrumental Value to be ascribed.

She investigates which definition the Regress Argument employs. The first narrow sense, she asserts, does not tell us anything about the value of the target thus it cannot be used to establish the existence of Intrinsic Value. Therefore, she believes, advocates of the Regress Argument are committed to understanding Instrumental Value in the second sense, which „does imply value in the target but only by assuming that value from the outset” (Smith 1998, p. 549). Therefore, the Regress Argument offers no proof for Intrinsic Value because that value is presupposed by the definition of Instrumental Value given from the start.

It seems clear that Smith is correct that proponents of the Regress Argument should not be satisfied with the first, narrow, sense of Instrumental Value. And the Regress Argument does indeed employ Smith’s second, broad, sense. But, this does not yield the conclusion that Smith indicates. The only way that she can establish her conclusion is by stating that it is the existence of Intrinsic Value that shows there is Instrumental Value. For example she says: „Some things must have Intrinsic Value in order for anything else to have [instrumental] value” (Smith 1998, p. 546).

And also: „[T]he Regress Argument posits that something must have Intrinsic Value... in order for any Instrumental Value to get off the ground” (Smith 1998, p. 547).

But this is not what the Argument from Regress asserts. It is certainly true that for something to have Instrumental Value it has to be instrumentally valuable for something. That is what Instrumental Value is. But no part of the definition assumes that the thing that Instrumental Value is valuable for is Intrinsic Value. What I am arguing is that there is a problem. Namely, where does Instrumental Value get its value. It cannot be from other instrumentally valuable things because if it is explained in this manner there is an infinite regress. So it is necessary to posit Intrinsic Value.

Smith’s argument that the only way that the Regress Argument can establish its conclusion is by assuming it from the outset (i.e. that it is circular) misrepresents the Regress Argument. So the Regress Argument is not circular, or at least not in the manner Smith claims. If it is circular at all it is only circular in the way that most philosophical arguments are. Namely, it elucidates the assumptions that are in some ways implicit in what is being explained.

### III. Comparison with the First Cause Argument

Smith says that it is illuminating to compare the Regress Argument to the First Cause Argument for the existence of God. The First Cause Argument, she claims, does not answer the question about existence but merely shifts it. One is left with the question why did creation start with God. In parity, she argues that once the question where does Instrumental Value get its value has been answered, it is reasonable to ask where does Intrinsic Value get its value.

This is an argument from analogy, not a logical flaw as Smith claimed. And like all arguments from analogy it relies not only on the two things under comparison being sufficiently similar, but also on those one is trying to convince finding the analogy equally striking in the relevant way. For an argument from analogy to do the work that Smith wants, it would have to be obvious that the argument that she is comparing it with also shifts the question. But many people find the First Cause Argument persuasive. Indeed the First Cause argument is traditionally thought to be one of the strongest for the existence of God. For those who find the First Cause Argument convincing the analogy acts in favour of, rather than against the Regress Argument.

Unless Smith can conclusively prove that the First Cause argument does shift the question this criticism of the Regress Argument is a non-starter.

### IV. Other ways of understanding Instrumental Value

The strongest and most important objection to the Regress Argument is that there are other ways of making sense of Instrumental Value aside from Intrinsic Value. And Smith argues that advocates of the Regress Argument do not even examine these: she says, „[a]n argument by default, purporting to offer the only possible explanation of some otherwise inexplicable phenomenon, must truly exhaust all alternatives” (Smith 1998, p. 548). She argues that there are other sorts of value, which could be used to make sense of Instrumental Value. There is more to the value spectrum than instrumental and Intrinsic Value.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Weston 1992, pp. 236-249.

Smith maintains that even if it is allowed that the regress of values must stop somewhere this observation does not suffice to say where. She argues „instrumental value is perfectly intelligible independently of intrinsic value” (Smith 1998, p. 548). The Regress Argument has not exhausted all available options in attempting to explain Instrumental Value.

She claims „[v]alue admits of more species than the traditional picture suggests” (Smith 1998, p. 548). The word species is important here because she is claiming that there are significant differences in the types of value that there are. She continues:

„Instrumental” and „relational” are different concepts; „instrumental” [only] designates one type of relationship... The point is, that a thing’s value is non-instrumental does not entail that its value is non-relational. Since „intrinsic” means non-relational, non-instrumental status does not entail intrinsic status. Consequently a thing may be valuable in a way that is neither instrumental nor intrinsic (Smith 1998, p. 548).

In short, she claims that the Argument from Regress does not exhaust all of the possibilities when it posits Intrinsic Value as the only way of stopping the regress. There is another possibility, namely non-instrumental relational value. The argument can be broken down into the following steps:

- 1) Instrumental Value is relational value.
- 2) It does not follow from this that relational value is Instrumental Value.
- 3) The fact that value is non-instrumental does not entail that it is non-relational. In other words relational value can be non-instrumental.
- 4) Intrinsic Value is by definition non-relational value.
- 5) Therefore: that value is non-instrumental does not entail it is intrinsic. Thus there can be relational value that is neither instrumental nor intrinsic.

Smith gives several examples of the different sorts of value she has in mind:

[B]eing a component of a multi-faceted good, ... something that intensifies a person’s enjoyment of a good, or a token of cherished associations such as an object of sentimental value... [A] thing may be valuable in a way that is neither instrumental nor intrinsic. Job security may not be a direct cause of a person’s overall happiness, but it may be a necessary condition. Similarly, close friends or a fulfilling romantic relationship might be neither a means to happiness nor a prerequisite for happiness, but... elements that enhance it... [I]t is possible that nothing is valuable to a person unless it contributes to her most fundamental objectives. But if this is so, then it is not Intrinsic Value that is the wellspring

of instrumental or other types of value. It is a person's embrace of certain overarching objectives (Smith 1998, p. 548).

The examples that she gives of non-instrumental relational value are not very clear. A better example, I think, is that of rarity. To say that something is rare is obviously to attribute to it a relational property. Imagine that I give money to a charity that saves rare species like the Siberian tiger. If asked why I gave the money to that charity I would say that it was a means to an end, the end being saving the tigers, which I hold to be valuable as an end because of their rarity. So, Smith would argue that the instrumentally valuable thing (giving money to the charity) has been explained in terms of something which is neither instrumentally nor intrinsically valuable. She would say that the existence of another type of value that can explain where Instrumental Value gets its value, seriously undermines the claims made by advocates of the Regress Argument. This is because they claim that positing Intrinsic Value is the best available explanation of Instrumental Value. But if other equally plausible types of value can do the job just as well, then Intrinsic Value can no longer plausibly be pointed to as the best possible explanation.

But the advocate of the Regress Argument is not yet defeated. There are two lines of argument that could be pursued. The first option is to deny that there is non-Instrumental Value that is relational. The second is to deny that non-instrumental relational value stops the regress effectively.

The only way to conclusively establish the first option is to show that relational value is necessarily instrumental. This is not a promising avenue because it is not clear how this could plausibly be maintained, in the face of so many instances of non-instrumental relational value.

This leaves option two, which is to deny that relational value explains Instrumental Value satisfactorily. It seems reasonable to ask where the relationally valuable thing gets its value. Once this has been asked it is possible for the advocate of the Regress Argument to object that there is a problem in understanding relational value without further reference to Intrinsic Value. To make this point clearer I shall return to the example of the rare tiger. Most people find the claim that a rare tiger is valuable an intuitively plausible one. If asked why the tiger is valuable the answer seems to be that it is rare. But if this claim is examined more closely it becomes apparent that rarity alone is not enough to explain its value. If other examples of rare objects are considered this will become evident. Take, for instance, the world's last milk carton, or bin bag. These things are not only rare they are unique. But it would be odd to claim that they have value in virtue of this



fact (at the very least one would certainly have to give a very elaborate and convincing story to show that they do). This is because it is not plausible to claim that a milk carton or a bin bag have any Intrinsic Value. The fact that it is rare does not miraculously endow a thing with value where previously it had none. Similarly it is plausible to argue that we already think that the tiger is intrinsically valuable, otherwise why would its rarity matter? So, as Smith argued, Instrumental Value has been explained by non-instrumental, non-intrinsic relational value. But I have contended that, in turn, making sense of such value still seems to require positing Intrinsic Value, although it might be agreed that the relationship between Intrinsic Value, and non-instrumental relational value is problematic and in need of clarification.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that Intrinsic Value is the best way to explain the value of Instrumental value. I have examined three criticisms of the Argument from Regress. It was demonstrated that the criticisms of the Regress Argument do not undermine it to the extent claimed. One of the criticisms does not work because it relies on a misunderstanding of the argument. The argument from analogy does not strike us as powerfully as it needs to if it is to be convincing. Thirdly, the existence of non-instrumental relational value does not clearly demonstrate that Intrinsic Value is not required to explain Instrumental Value. Thus, non-instrumental relational value does not undermine the Regress Argument. However, there is a problem regarding how this relational value relates to Intrinsic Value, insofar as the rarity of a tiger, for example, seems to give it additional value. Yet, it can only have this additional value because it is already intrinsically valuable. This relationship is problematic for Intrinsic Value, which tries to explain moral value purely in terms of non-relational properties. But even keeping this in mind, Intrinsic Value seems to have some role in explaining Instrumental Value. Although, Intrinsic Value does not provide an unproblematic explanation. The three arguments serve to highlight the difficulties that the advocate of Intrinsic Value needs to deal with. They do not, however, succeed in showing that the explanatory role of Intrinsic Value is redundant.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I wish to thank G. K. Harrison, C. S. Reader, D. Cooper and the reviewers and editors of this journal for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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