



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Attfield, Robin, "Postmodernism, Value and Objectivity."  
*Environmental Values* 10, no. 2, (2001): 145-162.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5824>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2001. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

# Postmodernism, Value and Objectivity

ROBIN ATTFIELD

*School of English, Communication and Philosophy  
University of Wales Cardiff  
PO Box 94, Cardiff CF1 3XB, UK*

## ABSTRACT

The first half of this paper replies to three postmodernist challenges to belief in objective intrinsic value. One lies in the claim that the language of objective value presupposes a flawed, dualistic distinction between subjects and objects. The second lies in the claim that there are no objective values which do not arise within and/or depend upon particular cultures or valuational frameworks. The third comprises the suggestion that belief in objective values embodies the representational theory of perception. In the second half, a defence is offered of belief in objective intrinsic value. Objectivists hold that axiological properties supply interpersonal reasons for action for any relevant moral agent. The intrinsically valuable is understood as what there is reason to desire, cherish or foster in virtue of the nature of the state or object concerned. The concept of intrinsic value is shown to be instantiated, and defended against a range of criticisms.

## KEY WORDS

Intrinsic value, extrinsic value, postmodernism, objectivity, subjectivism, dualism, representationalism, axiology

## INTRODUCTION

This essay <sup>1</sup> appeals to the shared presuppositions of groups of human beings, whether gathered or dispersed in space (such as you, the readers of this paper), engaged in reflection, whether on environmental values and their metaphysical status or on any other theme. This is particularly relevant to the first half of the paper, which replies to some postmodernist criticisms of belief in objective intrinsic value, including some presented in recent years as criticisms of Holmes Rolston III by J. Baird Callicott <sup>2</sup> and Bryan G. Norton.<sup>3</sup> (I shall be using

'postmodernist' in what follows to refer to stances, arguments and related critiques of the kinds presented by Callicott and Norton in these essays.) In the second half, these replies are supplemented with an attempt to defend this same belief.

Since Callicott and Norton seem implicitly to assume, like many others, that hardly any forms of dualism are acceptable, let alone any modernist forms,<sup>4</sup> I will say a little in support of some of them. Then I will focus on some of the grounds for scepticism as to objective intrinsic value. Among the assumptions which I shall not seek to defend, but shall just take for granted, is the belief that you, the reader, like your fellow-readers, can and sometimes do reflect on the natural environment, on scientific and normative beliefs about it, and occasionally on second-order, metaphysical beliefs about those beliefs.

My discussion will also serve to examine three postmodernist challenges to belief in objective intrinsic value. One lies in the claim that the distinction between subjects and objects is a Cartesian or Kantian modernist illusion, and that the language of objective value presupposes this flawed and dualistic distinction.<sup>5</sup> The second lies in the claim, by which postmodernism is sometimes defined, that there are no objective values which do not arise within and/or depend upon particular cultures or valuational frameworks. The third consists in the suggestion that belief in objective values is bound up with the representational theory of perception. All three of these challenges to belief in objective intrinsic value have their contemporary champions, as will shortly be seen.

## 1. SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS

Consider the first claim, concerning the distinction between valuing subjects (subjects who reflect on value) and potentially valuable objects (objects of value) being illusory.<sup>6</sup> Since this distinction is between two categories, subjects and objects, it is to that extent dualistic. My first point, however, is that those who reject a dualism of minds and bodies are by no means committed to rejecting this quite different kind of dualism. For even if minds are clusters of properties and/or dispositions of material objects, and thus themselves material, the possibility remains of some material entities having consciousness, intentions and thoughts, and thus comprising subjects, and of these subjects reflecting on the other material objects, or all material objects, or on anything whatever, actual or possible. Thus the wrong-headedness of some forms of dualism would not imply that all dualism is wrong, or that this sort is wrong. Indeed, if this sort of dualism is not a possibility, then you (the reader of this essay) would not be able to scan and survey it or to reflect on its strengths or weaknesses.

My next point is that all readers of this essay (including its author) are committed to accepting this distinction, even if any are consciously inclined to reject it. For none of us can help believing that we, a scattered group of human

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

beings, are reflecting (as we read) on value and objectivity, and on various beliefs (in some cases metaphysical beliefs) about these things. And if we believe this, then whatever we may say about the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics, or the self as a social construct, or the relational theories of perception and of identity, we also recognise and accept the distinction between thinkers and objects of thought. For we presuppose this distinction before we can as much as consider the nature of selves or of objects.

Next, something should be said about quantum physics, and Heisenberg's and Schrödinger's indeterminacy principle. Does quantum physics, the Copenhagen interpretation or the indeterminacy principle imply either the conclusion that observers cannot be distinguished from what they observe, or the counter-part widely-held conclusion that all properties, value included, are observer-dependent? Callicott has argued to this effect,<sup>7</sup> concluding that 'Mass and motion, color and flavor, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, all alike, are equally potentialities which are actualized in relation to us or to similarly constituted organisms'.<sup>8</sup>

These conclusions about the observer-dependence of all properties including value are rejected by John O'Neill, a philosopher of science who contributed one of the essays about intrinsic value in *The Monist* of 1992. O'Neill points out that the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics is only one interpretation among many,<sup>9</sup> a claim borne out by the physicist Peter Hodgson,<sup>10</sup> who adds that many physicists reject it. O'Neill also points out that in any case the Copenhagen interpretation need not imply the conclusions just mentioned. For Niels Bohr can be construed as taking an instrumentalist interpretation of quantum theory, with no ontological commitments at all;<sup>11</sup> and he certainly need not be construed as maintaining that all properties of electrons are observer-dependent, or that no electron would have either position or velocity if there were no observers. (O'Neill adds that 'the Copenhagen interpretation is conceptually conservative, and denies the possibility that we could replace the concepts of classical physics by any others'.<sup>12</sup>)

While there would almost certainly be no finite observers if there were no objects, there is no need to hold that the identity of particular observers is constituted by their relation to the particular objects of their reflections. Indeed the very claim that this might be the case itself presupposes that the observers already exist so as to be able to have some relation to these objects, as is conveyed by the phrase 'their relation'. In fact, subjects such as ourselves turn out to be capable of undergoing radical changes of scene, and of the objects of our reflection, without forfeiting identity. Nor did Heisenberg's or Schrödinger's identity depend on their reflection on any particular electron or group of electrons; nor did Bohr's identity depend on his reflections on Heisenberg and Schrödinger; nor do ours depend on our reflections on Bohr, or on anyone in particular at all.

As for the conclusion that properties are observer-dependent, few would maintain that every one of their own actual and possible properties are observer-dependent. Besides, it is not as if statements about the middle-sized objects of our acquaintance and their properties could be translated without remainder into statements about electrons, even if it were clear that statements about the properties of electrons were all observer-dependent themselves. Indeed we can accept that observation generates changes to the world, without needing to adopt at the same time a Fritjof Capra-like relational metaphysic.<sup>13</sup>

Quantum physics, after all, is designed to explain, or deepen our understanding of, the nature of the objects of observation which human subjects observe and study. It would be paradoxical if its investigations mandated the conclusion that the distinction between subjects and objects which gave rise to its own introduction was misguided in the first place. Fortunately there is no need to hold that it does so.

But unless there is some other ground for denying the distinction between subjects and objects, no reasons seem to remain against accepting this supposedly modernist distinction between subjects and objects, or against objects having objective, i.e. interpersonally discoverable, properties. Hence the objection that objective intrinsic value would be one of these properties cannot be held to count against belief in it. Indeed, Descartes and Kant may each have been confused or wrong on some epistemological and/or metaphysical matters, but they will not have been wrong in the matter of the possibility of the existence of subjects, and in the corresponding possibility of the existence of objects with objective properties. Nor were their ancient and medieval predecessors who recognised this distinction mistaken; for there is actually nothing distinctively modernist about it.

## 2. RELATIVE FRAMEWORKS

But there is another postmodernist doctrine which would also involve rejection of belief in objective intrinsic value, the claim that there are no objective values which do not arise within and/or depend upon particular cultures or valuational frameworks.<sup>14</sup> Adherents of this doctrine can, it would seem, accept the distinction just discussed between subjects and objects. Indeed those who require of a culture or of a valuational framework that one or more subjects participate or have participated in it are probably committed to that very pre-postmodern distinction. But this just serves to underline the distinctness of the current doctrine, and also the heterogeneity of postmodernism.

My claim, however, is that this doctrine is in tension with our reflective beliefs about value. In biographical terms, no doubt, values are learned within particular cultures and/or frameworks, and to this extent the doctrine is trivially true. But when it is interpreted in such a way as to imply the denial of inter-

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

cultural, universal values, it is neither true nor trivial. But first, to give this discussion a more substantive turn, let us consider the value of tolerance, a trait widely recognised as a value, if not as an unqualified one, for this turns out to produce a further problem for the postmodernist doctrine.

Now postmodernists of this variety might well claim to give differential support to tolerance through remarking how the rival position of ethical absolutism can lead to intolerance, and relatedly through claiming credit for rejecting all such absolutist claims. Yet once confronted with an intolerant culture or valuational framework, no basis for rational persuasion in the cause of tolerance remains open to them. For the adherents of the intolerant culture can stress that on the postmodernist showing there are no intercultural standards, and thus no bases for appeal beyond the culture in question; and the postmodernist adherent of tolerance has to agree, whether or not it is assumed or claimed that all ethical usage can be construed in relativist (or, in Harman's terms, 'quasi-absolutist') terms.<sup>15</sup> However, if this is assumed or claimed, then the relativist has to acknowledge, implausibly, that there is not even the possibility of an appeal beyond the culture in question.<sup>16</sup>

The only alternative for the relativist seems to be to claim that there is a valuational framework shared by all cultures, one, maybe, which respects human or natural rights, and which requires tolerance with few if any qualifications. But such a framework is just what the postmodernist claim was devised to deny. For if there is such an overriding universal or cosmopolitan ethic, then no distinctive objection remains, from postmodernism thus interpreted, to belief in intercultural, objective intrinsic value. Further, while the re-emergence of an intolerant absolutism is a perennial possibility, there are all kinds of candidate intercultural values (rights among them) which would militate against intercultural values being intolerant in content, or being held in an intolerant manner.

Another reason for questioning the latest postmodernist doctrine is that it makes sense to question the rightness, or the aptness, or the value of the deliverances of any culture and of any valuational framework. But if the doctrine were true, then this questioning would amount to asking whether these deliverances complied with or corresponded to the values of one or another culture or valuational framework, whether the same one or a different one. Most people would agree, though, that this is not what such questions or questionings amount to; for we are not asking whether the values of one culture or framework comply with those of one or another such culture or framework, but whether they are good or right. So the doctrine is not true.

This argument is clearly a resuscitation of G.E. Moore's 'Open Question' argument, and cannot be regarded as conclusive.<sup>17</sup> For this argument assumes (rather than shows) that no definition of rightness is to be found, and thus begs the question. It claims as a premise that it is always an open question whether the judgments in question are good or right, but this cannot be safely assumed. Thus a successful analysis of concepts like rightness has not been shown to be

impossible. The issue that now arises is whether a reply of this kind can be mounted to the Moorean argument presented above.

But such a reply can only help the postmodernist if rightness or whatever other value-concept is in question can be plausibly defined in a postmodernist manner, i.e. in a culture-relative or framework-relative way. For only if such a definition succeeds can the postmodernist *both* block the suggestion that it is an open question whether given judgments about goodness or rightness from within a culture really are good or right, *and* continue to uphold the postmodernist doctrine. As it happens, a culture-relative definition of rightness has recently been offered by David Wong,<sup>18</sup> of which an ampler discussion than is here possible would be in place.<sup>19</sup> Suffice it here to say that any culture-relative definition of rightness suffers from the problem of making the same action both right on the strength of the norms of one culture, and wrong on the strength of the norms of another; and Wong is not immune from this problem. The only way for cultural relativists to avoid this problem is to maintain that the norms of all cultures coincide; but this is just what the postmodernist is seeking to deny.

However, Robert Elliot has produced a framework-relative account of valuation which, through defining value in a manner indexed to particular valuers, avoids generating such contradictory judgments.<sup>20</sup> For if judgments of value are all relative to diverse valuational frameworks in the first place, then apparently conflicting judgments are really compatible expressions of judgment from within different frameworks with different criteria of valuation. Further, questions about whether given judgments are really right turn out themselves, given this position, to be asked relative to some valuational framework, and thus to be compatible with the postmodernist doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

But this more sophisticated position apparently conflicts with the phenomenology of our responses to seemingly conflicting values; for I would claim that when confronted with conflicting judgments of value we would usually maintain that there really is a disagreement.<sup>22</sup> If I am right, this would count against a theory which relativises disagreement away (except when both judgments are grounded in one and the same valuational framework). Since in any case the argument from tolerance presents an independent problem for the postmodernist doctrine, no more needs to be said here about this defence of that doctrine. My conclusion is that this postmodernist doctrine is no more formidable an obstacle to belief in objective intrinsic value than the one considered previously.

### 3. INTRINSIC VALUE AND THE REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY OF PERCEPTION

A third postmodernist claim held to count against belief in objective intrinsic value consists in the importance of rejecting the representational theory of perception. Belief in such value is held by Bryan Norton to be bound up (at least

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

in the work of Holmes Rolston) with the belief that humans stand in a picturing relation to nature, and such representationalism Norton understandably rejects, as 'Descartes' most pervasive, important and devastating legacy as the father of modern philosophy'. And Rolston, claims Norton, 'restricts possible solutions' to solving 'the epistemological problem of providing warrant for environmental values' 'to those that can be formulated within a representational theory of perception'.<sup>23</sup>

Now the representational theory of perception is usually taken to be the theory that observers are aware not of things but of ideas of things; and this doctrine, found differently in Descartes and Locke, seems to introduce an unnecessary intermediary level (that of ideas) to accounts of perception. In this form, then, the theory should probably be rejected, and this is what Norton does. But John Searle, for example, is among many contemporary philosophers who also reject this theory,<sup>24</sup> and if Searle's position had to be classified, the appropriate term would surely be 'modernist' rather than 'postmodernist'. In this same form, then, there is surely no reason why the believer in objective intrinsic value should adhere to a theory which is also rejected by many *non*-postmodernist philosophers; and it is not at all clear that Rolston in particular is an adherent of this theory.

While I would agree with Norton that Rolston's phrase 'we do stand in some picturing relation to nature' is unfortunate, a different understanding of Rolston's point seems to be in place. What I think he had in mind is that human language and beliefs should reflect or correspond to the facts of the world out there, and this he chose to call 'picturing'. But as long as 'picturing' was not intended literally, this claim need not imply a belief about some isomorphism, or parallelism of structure, between thought or language on the one hand, and reality on the other. What Rolston requires, and certainly what in my view he should require, is rather that thought and language be *true* of reality, a stance that may not be postmodernist, but does not remotely involve representationalism.

Now granted his explicit adherence to a 'relational theory of perception', Norton would probably reject what I take to be Rolston's correspondence theory of truth, for he seems to reject belief both in objects situated out there and in properties situated out there for propositions to be true of. But this rejection is in no way implicit in (let alone equivalent to) rejecting 'the representational theory of perception, which is Descartes' most pervasive, important and devastating legacy as the father of modern philosophy'.<sup>25</sup> For the rejection of this Cartesian theory is compatible with metaphysical realism and with a correspondence theory of truth. Language could be true and could correspond to the facts without picturing or representing them. If, however, belief in the possibility of correspondence with the facts is also regarded as representational, or if 'representationalism' is a term covering all non-relational theories of value, then the project of talking the rest of us out of all this is going to be immensely harder than that of persuading us to jettison Descartes' representational views on perception, the



task undertaken by Norton. Short of being presented with some new arguments, correspondence theorists can afford to remain unaffected by the arguments against Cartesian representationalism (sound as they are), and the same conclusion applies to objectivists about value.<sup>26</sup>

This is not the place to discuss further Norton's call for relational theories of perception, as opposed to the topic of relational theories of value. However, before I return to relational theories of value, I will turn to the issue of whether true beliefs are possible about objective value in particular, and attempt to dispel some of the meta-ethical worries which predispose some axiologists to hold that value-talk ascribes not objective properties but relations with subjects or observers.

#### 4. THE NATURE OF INTRINSIC VALUE

Here an analysis of intrinsic value may help. By 'value' I do not mean some nonnatural property, but rather what there is reason to desire, foster or cherish. Intrinsic value contrasts with extrinsic value (that is, with what there is reason to desire, cherish or foster for reasons beyond the nature of its bearer), and contrasts thus with derivative kinds of value. Kinds of derivative value include instrumental value (which explains itself), contributive value (present, for example, when your understanding contributes to the value of our friendship), and inherent value (exemplified, for example, when a scene or picture facilitates valuable experiences of appreciation by making them possible). By contrast, intrinsic value derives from nothing but the nature of the state or object which bears it, and the intrinsically valuable is thus what there is reason to desire, cherish or foster in virtue of the nature of the state or object concerned, in contrast with ulterior reasons.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly intrinsic value admits of degrees, for there can be more or stronger reason, and thus degrees of reason, to desire, cherish or foster something.<sup>28</sup>

This account already diverges from a nonnaturalist account. For one thing, according to nonnaturalists, fundamental nonnatural properties such as 'good' and 'valuable' are unamenable to being analysed, whereas I am suggesting that 'valuable' can be analysed, and also how this is to be done. There again, nonnaturalism makes the relation between the natures of valuable entities and the reasons for desiring or cherishing them mysterious and synthetic, not conceptual and analytic (as I am suggesting). Thus I have no need to make the discerning of these relations depend on acts of synthetic intuition, operating without grounds, as nonnaturalism does.<sup>29</sup>

Others sometimes use 'intrinsic value' to mean the property of actually being valued either as a goal or for itself.<sup>30</sup> However, as pragmatists point out, in real life such values and goals often merge into ulterior goals or ends, or generate such ends. Since this is so, the criticisms on the part of writers such as John Dewey

of the distinction between intrinsic value (in this sense) and instrumental value (in the corresponding sense of the property of actually being valued instrumentally) are understandable.<sup>31</sup> But these criticisms have no bite on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value in the senses which I am using. For while the distinction between valuing nonderivatively and valuing derivatively is a psychological one, and is readily crossed, the distinction between being derivatively and nonderivatively valuable is quite different. No doubt some actual processes will actually be valuable both intrinsically (and thus non-derivatively) and instrumentally (and thus derivatively), such as, perhaps, the process of being educated, for plausibly there is reason to desire this both for itself and for its outcomes, such as employability. But the possibility of the two sorts of value being present together does not weaken the distinction between them. (As will already be apparent, I am not suggesting that value which is not instrumental is always intrinsic, as if there were no other kinds of non-intrinsic, or extrinsic, value,<sup>32</sup> such as inherent value and contributive value – as introduced above.)

Incidentally, the property a thing has when it is valued for itself or as an end, what Eugene Hargrove has called ‘weak anthropocentric intrinsic value’,<sup>33</sup> may or may not indicate the presence of value in my sense, depending on whether there are nonderivative reasons to desire, foster or cherish the thing in question. This seems to make it an open question, though one usually answerable in a positive direction, whether such things are intrinsically valuable (in my sense). For the same reasons it is an open question whether value as thus defined is or is not associated with reasons for action, or thus carries normative implications. When there are such reasons, as there usually will be, such value will be suited to practical reasoning because of the reasons; but where such reasons are absent, it would not seem suited to the purposes of guiding practical reasoning at all.

The objection may here be raised that the objectivist concept of intrinsic value may not encapsulate the values of environmentalists, either because it has a different application, or perhaps even because it has no application at all. But the issue of whether the notion of intrinsic value has application and thus of whether there is anything of intrinsic value should not, in my view, be settled by whether this concept is needed to articulate the values of environmentalists, let alone by whether it best articulates them. By the same token, nor should the issue of whether an objectivist understanding of talk of intrinsic value is in place be made to hang on this criterion. For, while I believe that such talk can be employed to articulate some of the values of environmentalism, and that talk of inherent value and other kinds of extrinsic value<sup>34</sup> can articulate other such values, like the value of natural beauty, it should not be assumed in advance that the values of environmentalism are sound ones or defensible ones, or (come to that) even coherent. Sooner than align these issues with environmental campaigning, we should approach them rather by reflection on axiological and ethical discourse in general.

## 5. COULD INTRINSIC VALUE BE UNINSTANTIATED?

Thus the issue of whether anything has intrinsic value is also the issue of whether there are any non-derivative reasons to desire, foster or cherish anything. Might there be nothing of intrinsic value? If this were so, then this concept would clearly be an irrelevance, in virtue of being empty and uninstantiated; and these are among the worries which need to be dispelled. In order to answer this question, I want to adjust an argument produced by Aristotle in a parallel (but different) context, that of the issue of whether there might be nothing which is valued as an end.<sup>35</sup>

Let us imagine, then, that nothing is intrinsically valuable. What, I suggest, follows is that nothing is valuable instrumentally either. For if anything has instrumental value, there must be something else which confers value on it. This further item might, admittedly, also be of instrumental value. But there could not be an infinite series of items of instrumental value with each item dependent for its value on ulterior members of the series. For in that case there would be nothing which gave value to any of the items in the series, and so not a single one of them would be valuable. Thus either something is intrinsically valuable, or nothing is instrumentally valuable. But, while some radical sceptics might be willing to endorse the belief that nothing is instrumentally valuable, in practice everyone who has not abandoned all reflection and all endeavours is committed to (at least) the instrumental value of breathing. Parallel arguments would readily show that either something is intrinsically valuable, or nothing is contributively valuable; and, again, that either something is intrinsically valuable, or nothing is inherently valuable. If so, then either something is intrinsically valuable, or nothing is valuable at all.<sup>36</sup> And this latter belief (that nothing is valuable at all) is even harder to accept than the view that nothing has instrumental value. Imagine trying to justify this belief, if it is true. Any attempt to do anything, I suggest, presupposes that it is false.

The argument from the impossibility of infinite sequences of derivatively valuable entities has been criticised by Monroe Beardsley and by Anthony Weston on the alleged count of sharing the shortcomings of the argument to a First Cause.<sup>37</sup> But whereas an infinite series of causes comprises a genuine possibility, no such possibility arises of an infinite series of extrinsically valuable items, unless something outside the series supplies a reason for their value. In actual fact, an infinite series of causes may itself also be argued to be in need of explanation, Hume and Russell notwithstanding; but that is another issue.

The case of dictionaries might be offered as a possible counter-example to the impossibility of an infinite sequence of extrinsically significant items lacking an ulterior explanation of its or their significance. For dictionaries such as Webster's use a large (though finite) number of words to expound the meanings of other words of the same level and order; and maybe there is nothing but the physical limits of dictionaries to prevent such sets of words being infinite. In any case the

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

words in dictionaries somehow explain each other, without resort to words outside their circle.

Now clearly this would-be counter-example has to concern same-language dictionaries, for French-English dictionaries and other translanguistic works of reference specifically use a different set of words to explain the meanings of the terms which are interpreted. But this point begins to show why dictionaries would not work if they attempted to explain the meanings of unknown terms by other unknown terms, albeit in the same language. They work because their users already understand some of the terms, and they employ the known to explain the unknown. Thus some of the words in the dictionary are effectively on a different level from the rest, the level, that is, of relatively familiar words, and there is no mystery about the meanings of unknown terms being explained by terms such as these. While this is a comprehensible process, it does not make comprehensible any process by which items of derivative value could somehow serve to explain the value of other items of the same level and kind (that is, other items of derivative value), without this derivative value being dependent on nonderivative value.

In actual fact, we often believe that we know what gives their value to such items, and usually find that (at one or two removes) this is something widely recognised to have intrinsic value (such as pleasure or autonomy or well-being). By contrast, where the point of an activity is clearly instrumental itself (e.g. the acquisition of money or power), and no intrinsic good is in the offing, we soon become sceptical about whether the activity has any value (or justification) at all. Thus where the dictionary example is analogous to the issue on hand, as it might seem to be with respect to the analogy between familiar words and familiar values, the analogy if anything supports belief in ulterior sources of value, and not in a circle of items of extrinsic value with miraculous capabilities for mutual justification.

To return to questions of intrinsic value, and to put the significance of the recent argument into a new perspective, a world without intrinsic value would, as Robert Edgar Carter has argued, be an entirely arbitrary world, a world entirely lacking in non-arbitrary reasons for action.<sup>38</sup> Fortunately, as is shown by the argument about intrinsic and extrinsic value just presented, our world is not such. Some theorists, however, might suggest that relativist accounts of value need not make values arbitrary. Whether or not this view should be accepted (on which, see the remarks about relativism and normativity towards the end of this essay), it should here be stressed that Carter's point about arbitrariness (the only context in which arbitrariness is mentioned in his essay) concerns not relativist accounts of value, but what the world would be like if intrinsic value (however construed) were absent from it altogether. His point is difficult to deny.

None of this, of course, settles where intrinsic value is located, or whether it should be given an objectivist, subjectivist or relational construal, though it removes some barriers to the former view. There is no need for present purposes

to linger over the issue of the location of intrinsic value, except to remark that if the growing consensus of ethicists is correct that cruelty and negligence towards nonhuman animals would be wrong even where there is no impact on human beings, and for no reason beyond animal suffering, then it seems to follow that sometimes intrinsic value or (in this case) disvalue is located in states of nonhuman creatures. And on some but not all definitions of 'anthropocentric', this already shows that anthropocentric accounts of the location of intrinsic value and its extension are wrong. My position makes it important that such accounts are at any rate *capable* of being wrong.<sup>39</sup>

## 6. SUBJECTIVISM AND OBJECTIVISM

Subjectivist interpretations of intrinsic value remain possible. But, given the sense of 'intrinsic value' specified above, they are difficult to defend. If 'having value' meant 'being valued', then subjectivism would be irresistible, and 'having intrinsic value' might simply mean 'being valued (by someone or other) as an end or for itself'. But if 'valuable' means 'bearing reasons for being desired, fostered or cherished', it is implausible that 'this is valuable' is equivalent to 'this is valued by X', or 'by Xs' (as subjectivists used to suggest), or even 'within the Y valuational framework'.<sup>40</sup> The valuers concerned might well actually have their reasons, but, given this sense of 'valuable', the mere act of valuing on their part, however reasonable, would be insufficient of itself to make the objects of valuation valuable.

This is because the reasons in terms of which value has been defined above need to be understood as unrestrictedly interpersonal reasons. While there is no certainty that agents, or even that moral agents, will be motivated by them, necessarily such reasons (simply *as* interpersonal reasons) are among the reasons which moral agents capable of acting on them should consider and by which they should be influenced. But subjectivist theorists of value are unlikely to accommodate this normativity, and sometimes, as in the writings of John Mackie, pride themselves that it is absent from their notion of value.<sup>41</sup> Their problem then is whether the notion of value which they employ can do the work and take the strain of supplying reasons for action. Incidentally, these problems for subjectivism retain their significance however frequently actual judgments are affected by subjective factors. It might be suggested that the subjective character of many judgments makes axiological subjectivism less implausible, and axiological objectivism less plausible. But the verdict that some judgments are subjectively biased presupposes that the possibility exists of judgments being unbiased, and this is precisely what objectivism affirms, and what its denial at least ostensibly undermines.

The claim of objectivism, at least as I understand it, is that axiological properties (such as value and disvalue) supply interpersonal reasons for action

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

for any moral agent to whose actions they apply. If this is what opponents of objectivism object to, they seem to be suggesting that no objective states of affairs could supply such reasons for action; and thus that neither pleasure nor autonomy nor friendship nor suffering could supply such reasons, until and unless someone does or would value them. And this is what I find implausible. If their objection is to nonnatural properties, no more than synthetically related to states such as pleasure and happiness, then I can sympathise with the objection, as these properties would then be too insecurely related to reasons for action. Also the nonnaturalist claim that certain states are necessarily but synthetically good is prone to generate, as David O. Brink has pointed out,<sup>42</sup> the claim that these synthetic truths are self-justifying (for no other form of justification is available). But this is a foundationalist position, with whose rejection I can sympathise; for, if foundationalists purport to recognise self-justifying propositions, I am certainly no foundationalist.

But, as we have seen, objectivists need not be nonnaturalists, and can go along with belief in what Jaegwon Kim<sup>43</sup> has called ‘strong supervenience’, and thus with the belief that what is of intrinsic value is so by virtue of conceptual necessity.

## 7. RELATIONAL ACCOUNTS

However, while objectivism may now seem to supply a plausible construal of intrinsic-value talk, there are several remaining alternatives. Thus some philosophers analyse reasons as desires, and make reasons for action apply only to those capable of being motivated accordingly.<sup>44</sup> The corresponding account of ‘value’ would relativise interpersonal reasons, and thus value, to groups or communities capable of acting on certain motives, thus producing a relational and relativist analysis of value-talk in general. But this account, among other problems, also seems to deprive value-talk of its full normativity. For states of value supply reasons for action to agents in general, and not just to specified individuals or restricted groups. It will not do for relativists to deny that such states can supply reasons to agents in general, maybe on the strength of their relativism; for this is what is ordinarily *meant* by ‘value’ and ‘valuable’, and the onus is on the relativist to show that this ordinary usage is incoherent.

Others define ‘value’ as what certain valuers do value or would value, apparently supplying further relational accounts.<sup>45</sup> But if an account of this general character were to define ‘value’ as ‘what would be valued by valuers whose valuations are shaped by all the relevant reasons for action’, then this definition would be extensionally equivalent to my own, since all the work would now be done not by ‘valuers’ but by ‘reasons for action’.<sup>46</sup> At the level of meta-ethics, this relational account would actually be equivalent to an objectivist account (at least in the sense which I have offered). If, however, such accounts

do not specify that the valuations alluded to in their definitions be shaped by all the relevant reasons for action, then these accounts of 'value' would seem to be defective in this very regard.

Michael Smith's position is slightly different, as he seeks to relativise 'value' to the valuations of rational agents, ones, that is, who care about all the reasons.<sup>47</sup> My view here is that it is not irrational sometimes to fail to care about some of them; for someone too exhausted by weariness or too benumbed by suffering to care might still remain a rational person. However, if Smith may be interpreted as relativising value to agents who care about all the reasons, then his view is effectively an objectivist position too. There seems, in any case, to be a growing consensus that value is to be understood in terms of interpersonal reasons for action. Nor is this position cryptically subjectivist, as some might claim. For it is one thing to refer to interpersonal reasons for action, as the growing consensus does, and quite another to make value a function of valuations or of valuational frameworks, as subjectivists do.

By contrast, most other kinds of relational (and thus anthropogenic) definitions of 'value', by appealing to actual or hypothetical valuations, and not to rational ones, seem, like subjectivist accounts, to be hard put to it to accommodate the normativity of value-language. For these accounts invoke what would actually be valued, and what would actually be valued is unlikely to be wholly and invariably equivalent to what there is reason to value. Thus, like subjectivist construals of value, relational accounts are less plausible than objectivist accounts such as the one defended here.

## CONCLUSION

While I am aware that more could be said than has here been said about some of the ramifications, I have attempted to shed some light on the debate between defenders of belief in objective intrinsic value, and their postmodernist and other critics. I have presented an analysis of value in terms of reasons for action, and have argued that such an analysis distinctly favours an objectivist construal of value over the alternatives. Although I have not definitively excluded all other analyses, I have argued that they are all problematic for ordinary uses of 'value' and 'valuable'.<sup>48</sup> Earlier I examined three postmodernist objections to belief in objective intrinsic value, namely: the rejection of the subject/object distinction; the charge that there are no objective values not relative to particular cultures or valuational frameworks; and the implications of rejecting the representational theory of perception. None of the objections, I have argued, stand up to scrutiny, or give grounds to withdraw or modify belief in intrinsic value, or in an objectivist understanding of this belief.

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented to a Seminar at Florida Atlantic University concerned with the metaphysics of environmental ethics and of claims about the value of nature in 1995. I am grateful to Don E. Marietta Jr. and to Lester Embree for their hospitality, and for their help, and that of other members of the Florida seminar, of my colleague Alex Miller, and of three reviewers for *Environmental Values*, in the preparation of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Callicott 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Norton 1992.

<sup>4</sup> This position seems to be suggested in Callicott 1986 and in Callicott 1992 at p. 137; see also Norton 1992.

<sup>5</sup> For a distinctive defence of Rolston against this charge, see Preston 1998. While the current paper was composed before Preston's paper came to my notice, there is considerable common ground between our two papers.

<sup>6</sup> This criticism may be found in Callicott 1992, p. 140, and in Norton 1992, pp. 215–218.

<sup>7</sup> See Callicott 1985, p. 271; Callicott 1992, p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Callicott 1985, p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> O'Neill 1992, at pp. 126f and 135f; also O'Neill 1991, chapter 6, and O'Neill 1993, pp. 16f., 150 and 184, n. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Hodgson, 1984; also Hodgson 1998.

<sup>11</sup> O'Neill 1993, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184, n. 21. While Henry J. Folse, Jr. adopts a different account of Bohr, he rejects subjectivist interpretations, in favour of an objectivist and interactionist reading. See Folse 1993; also Folse 1985.

<sup>13</sup> See Capra 1975; also Callicott 1985.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Elliot 1992.

<sup>15</sup> See Harman 1996, pp. 33–37.

<sup>16</sup> See further Attfield 1995, pp. 220–229. An argument along similar lines can be found in Williams 1972, at pp. 34–39.

<sup>17</sup> I have criticised G.E. Moore's 'Open Question' argument in Attfield 1987, chapter 10. This chapter has been revised and updated in Attfield 1995, chapter 12.

<sup>18</sup> Wong 1984, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Wong's position, see Attfield 1995, chapter 13.

<sup>20</sup> A sophisticated version of this position is found in Elliot 1992, at pp. 140–141.

<sup>21</sup> Elliot 1992; see also Elliot 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Elliot's framework-relative position is discussed in Attfield 1995, chapter 3.

<sup>23</sup> Norton 1992, pp. 216–218; the passages quoted are from p. 216.

<sup>24</sup> Searle 1983, chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> Norton 1992, p. 216.

<sup>26</sup> For another defence of Rolston against the charge of representationalism, see Preston 1998, pp. 427f.

<sup>27</sup> Michael J. Zimmerman's recent defence of the concept of intrinsic value (Zimmermann 1999) deals well with arguments such as those of Peter Geach that there is no such quality as intrinsic goodness, but his suggestion, for which he does not argue, that being intrinsically good involves a particular (morality-related) way of being good, is less



convincing. (Intrinsic goods are as often and as understandably sought on a prudential basis as on a moral basis.)

<sup>28</sup> A similar point has been made by James P. Sterba about his concept of 'recipient-centered intrinsic value' (Sterba 1998, p. 146). Sterba's concept, however, is applicable only to entities which have a good (as his definition makes clear), unlike the more traditional concept explicated here, which is applicable, unlike Sterba's concept, to states such as pleasure and happiness and to processes such as the development of a creature's essential capacities.

<sup>29</sup> A more detailed critique of nonnaturalism is presented in Attfield 1995, at pp. 198–200, 208f., and 231–236.

<sup>30</sup> This could well be what Sterba has in mind when he speaks of 'agent-centered intrinsic value', contrasted with 'recipient-centered intrinsic value' (Sterba 1998, p. 146).

<sup>31</sup> Dewey 1939.

<sup>32</sup> This possible source of confusion is well exposed in Korsgaard 1983, at pp. 169f.

<sup>33</sup> Hargrove 1992; see also Hargrove 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Thus Karen Green, a defender of objective intrinsic value, has cogently argued that many of the values of environmentalists are nonetheless extrinsic; see Green 1996.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a18–22. My argument is also indebted to Routley and Routley 1980.

<sup>36</sup> See also Attfield 1995, chapter 3.

<sup>37</sup> Beardsley 1965; Weston 1985.

<sup>38</sup> Carter 1967.

<sup>39</sup> Readers interested in my account of intersubjective methods for locating moral standing and intrinsic value are referred to places where I have discussed these questions more fully. See Attfield 1995, chapters 2 and 3; also Attfield 1983 (reprinted in Attfield 1994, pp. 91–105).

<sup>40</sup> This is the view of Elliot; see note 14 above.

<sup>41</sup> Mackie 1977, chapter 1.

<sup>42</sup> Brink 1989, pp. 107–122.

<sup>43</sup> Kim 1984, at pp. 157–163.

<sup>44</sup> Thus Harman 1975.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis 1989.

<sup>46</sup> The theory of Mark Johnston (1989), is close to this position, but remains relational at core.

<sup>47</sup> Smith 1989.

<sup>48</sup> It has been suggested that my conclusions could be better supported by appeal to the Weak Anthropic Principle, and what might be considered its implication that the actual universe has objective intrinsic value. But such an appeal would presuppose that a successful defence of objective intrinsic value, such as I have been attempting to offer, is already available.

## POSTMODERNISM, VALUE AND OBJECTIVITY

## REFERENCES

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thompson as *The Ethics of Aristotle*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953
- Attfield, Robin 1983. 'Methods of Ecological Ethics', *Metaphilosophy*, **14**: 195–208
- Attfield, Robin 1987. *A Theory of Value and Obligation*. London, New York and Sydney: Croom Helm
- Attfield, Robin 1994. *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects*. Aldershot: Avebury, and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.
- Attfield, Robin 1995. *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics*. Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Éditions Rodopi.
- Attfield, Robin and Andrew Belsey (eds) 1994. *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Beardsley, Monroe C. 1965. 'Intrinsic Value', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **26**: 1–17.
- Brink, David O. 1989. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Callicott, J. Baird 1985. 'Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory and Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics*, **7**: 257–275.
- Callicott, J. Baird 1986. 'The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology', *Environmental Ethics*, **8**: 301–16.
- Callicott, J Baird 1992. 'Rolston on Intrinsic Value: A Deconstruction', *Environmental Ethics*, **14**: 129–143.
- Capra, Fritjof 1975. *The Tao of Physics*. London: Wildwood House.
- Carter, Robert Edgar 1967. 'The Importance of Intrinsic Value', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **28**: 567–577.
- Dewey, John 1939. *Theory of Valuation*. Chicago: International Encyclopedia of United Science.
- Elliot, Robert 1992. 'Intrinsic Value, Environmental Obligation and Naturalness', *The Monist*, **75**: 138–160.
- Elliot, Robert 1994. 'Ecology and the Ethics of Environmental Restoration', in Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (eds), *Philosophy and the Natural Environment* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 31–43
- Folse, Henry J., Jr., 1985. *The Philosophy of Niels Bohr*. Amsterdam: North Holland Physics Publishing.
- Folse, Henry J., Jr., 1993. 'The Environment and the Lesson of Epistemological Complementarity', *Environmental Ethics*, **15**: 345–353.
- Green, Karen 1996. 'Two Distinctions in Environmental Goodness', *Environmental Values*, **5**: 31–46.
- Hargrove, Eugene C. 1988. *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988.
- Hargrove, Eugene C. 1992. 'Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value', *The Monist*, **75**: 183–207.
- Harman, Gilbert 1975. 'Moral Relativism Defended', *Philosophical Review*, **84**: 3–22.
- Harman, Gilbert 1996. 'Moral Relativism', in Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell).

- Hodgson, P.E. 1984. 'Philosophical Implications of Quantum Physics', *Proceedings of the Eighth International Wittgenstein Symposium (1983)*. Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky.
- Hodgson, Peter 1998. Review of D. Bohm and B.J. Hiley, *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory*, *Zygon*, **33**: 485–7.
- Johnston, Mark 1989. 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Supp. Vol. LXIII: 139–174.
- Kim, Jaegwon 1984. 'Concepts of Supervenience', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **45**: 153–176.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 1983. 'Two Distinctions in Goodness', *The Philosophical Review*, **XCII**: 169–195.
- Lewis, David 1989. 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Supp. Vol. LXIII: 113–137.
- Mackie, John 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1992. 'Epistemology and Environmental Values', *The Monist*, **75**: 208–226.
- O'Neill, John 1991. *Worlds Without Content*. London: Routledge.
- O'Neill, John 1992. 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value', *The Monist*, **75**: 119–137.
- O'Neill, John 1993. *Ecology, Policy and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Preston, Christopher 1998. 'Epistemology and Intrinsic Values', *Environmental Ethics*, **20**: 409–428.
- Routley, Richard and Val Routley 1980. 'Human Chauvinism and Environmental Ethics', in Don Mannison, Michael McRobbie and Richard Routley (eds), *Environmental Philosophy*, pp. 96–189. Canberra: Department of Philosophy, Research School of the Social Sciences, Australian National University.
- Searle, John 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Michael 1989. 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Supp. Vol. LXIII: 89–111.
- Sterba, James P. 1998. *Justice for Here and Now*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weston, Antony 1985. 'Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics*, **7**: 321–339.
- Williams, Bernard 1972. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, David 1984. *Moral Relativity*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Zimmerman, Michael J. 1999. 'In Defense of the Concept of Intrinsic Value', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **29**: 389–410.