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BROWN AND MOORE'S VALUE INVARIABILISM *VS* DANCY'S VARIABILISM

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Campbell Brown has recently argued that G.E. Moore's intrinsic value holism is superior to Jonathan Dancy's. I show that the advantage which Brown claims for Moore's view over Dancy's is illusory, and that Dancy's view may be superior.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent paper in this journal, Campbell Brown has argued that one type of intrinsic value holism (hereafter simply 'value holism'), that held by G.E. Moore, is superior to another, that held by Jonathan Dancy.[1] I shall show that the advantage which Brown claims for Moore's value holism over Dancy's, that it avoids redundant extra evaluations, is illusory, and that Dancy's view may be superior.

II. MOORE'S AND DANCY'S VERSIONS OF VALUE HOLISM

Value holism denies at least one of two claims which jointly comprise *value atomism*. These two claims are the following:

Invariabilism. For any *x*, the intrinsic value of *x* is the same in any context in which it appears

Additivism. The intrinsic value of a whole comprised of *x* and *y* (where *x* and *y* do not overlap) equals the sum of the intrinsic value of *x* and the intrinsic value of *y*.

My first task is to outline Moore's and Dancy's forms of value holism. I begin with Moore. Moore held the following theses about intrinsic value:

(a) *x*'s intrinsic value depends solely upon its intrinsic properties
(b) *x* must also possess intrinsic value (and to the same degree) at any other time or place at which it exists

[1] C. Brown, 'Two Kinds of Holism about Values', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 57 (2007), pp. 456–63.

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(c) Anything with the same intrinsic properties as *x* must possess intrinsic value (and to the same degree) as *x*.[2]

This is invariabilism. Moore combined invariabilism with a denial of additivism. He makes clear his denial of additivism:

> The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts (*Principia Ethica*, p. 79).

For Moore, even though intrinsic value is invariant (so that everything which bears it does so to exactly the same degree in all circumstances in which it is present), the intrinsic value of wholes formed by the combination of their parts can be greater than, or less than, or equal to, the intrinsic value the constituent parts have therein. That is to say, something can bring more intrinsic value to a whole than it has itself.

Moore rejected additivism and embraced value holism precisely in order to be able to handle cases which look like variations in intrinsic value. A simple example is the following. Suppose *A* takes pleasure in the belief that *B* is full of admiration for him. The *prima facie* problem for Moore is that it seems that the intrinsic value of this pleasure can be affected by something external to it, namely, whether *B* does in fact admire *A*. That is to say, most people are inclined to ascribe at least somewhat more intrinsic value to the pleasure that *A* experiences when *B* does in fact admire *A* than when *B* loathes him or is merely indifferent to him.

Because Moore is committed to invariabilism, he cannot allow that pleasures which have the same intrinsic nature could have their intrinsic value affected by something external to them, namely, whether *B* actually admires *A*. His strategy for dealing with these kinds of cases is to deny additivism. He does this by holding the intrinsic value of the pleasure constant but allowing that when we combine the pleasures with admiration, indifference or loathing, we form new wholes, and the intrinsic values of these wholes are not necessarily the sum of the intrinsic values of their parts. So we start with the invariant intrinsic values that the various parts have:

A's taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires him = +5
B's admiring *A* = +5
B's being indifferent to *A* = 0
B's loathing *A* = –5

We then form Moorean organic unities from these parts thus:

A's taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* & *B*'s admiring *A* (intrinsic value = +20)
A's taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* & *B*'s being indifferent to *A* (intrinsic value = +3)
A's taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* & *B*'s loathing *A* (intrinsic value = –10).

[2] G.E. Moore, 'The Conception of Intrinsic Value', repr. in his *Principia Ethica*, ed. T. Baldwin (Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 280–8. For discussion of Moore, see Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford UP, 2004), p. 168.

So the intrinsic value of *A*'s taking pleasure in the belief that *B* admires him along with *B*'s loathing *A* might be much lower than the individual (and invariant) intrinsic values of the pleasure and the loathing respectively. This brings out why Moore's position is a kind of value holism, for though it retains invariabilism, it denies additivism.

Dancy's value holism is more complicated than Moore's. One difference between them is that Dancy rejects invariabilism, since he allows the intrinsic value of a thing to vary between contexts. This suffices to make him a value holist; but he also rejects additivism. On Dancy's view, there is a distinction between the intrinsic value which a part of a whole *has* and the intrinsic value which the part *contributes to* the whole. It can be the case that a part of a whole contributes less intrinsic value to the whole than it has itself there. So on Dancy's account, there are two ways in which intrinsic value can be holistic. The first is that the intrinsic value which constituent parts have within a whole can vary, as compared with their intrinsic value elsewhere. The second is that a part may contribute less than its full intrinsic value to a whole of which it is a part.

Moore's and Dancy's forms of value holism can be represented thus:

Moorean value holism	
Invariabilism.	A feature or part has a fixed intrinsic value, which it has in every context in which it is instantiated
Moore's inadditivism.	The intrinsic value of a complex or whole is *greater than, less than or equal to* the sum of the intrinsic values of its elements or parts.
Dancyan value holism	
Variabilism.	A feature or part may have one intrinsic value in one context and a different (even opposite) intrinsic value in another context in which it is instantiated
Dancy's inadditivism.	The intrinsic value of a complex or whole is *less than or equal to* the sum of the intrinsic values of its elements or parts.

Although Dancy rejects additivism as well as invariabilism, Brown's argument for adopting Moore's value holism rather than Dancy's focuses on the debate between invariabilism and variabilism.[3] This being so, the relevant choice here is between Moore's invariabilism coupled with the denial of additivism, as opposed to Dancy's variabilism (irrespective of whether this is coupled with additivism). I shall therefore leave aside the issue of additivism, and follow Brown in concentrating on the question whether invariabilism is preferable to variabilism.

III. BROWN'S ARGUMENT FOR INVARIABILISM

Brown (p. 457) aims to show that 'Moore's proposal ... provides a more attractive escape-route from the absurdities of atomism'. He claims (p. 459) that the trouble with variable evaluations (i.e., variabilism) is that

[3] For Dancy's denial of additivism, see 'The Particularist's Progress', in B. Hooker and M. Little (eds), *Moral Particularism* (Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 131–56, at p. 139.

> they supply more values than we can use. A variable evaluation assigns multiple values to a single object: it assigns one value to the object considered as a whole, but a different value to the object considered as a part of something else. However, the former value, value as a whole, is all we need: the latter, value as a part, is entirely redundant.... The virtue of invariabilism, in my view, is that it eliminates these redundant values.

Brown's main contentions are that

1. Variabilism assigns more evaluations than we can use (value as a whole, value as a part)
2. Invariabilism assigns only one valuation to an object (value as a whole)
3. The extra valuation supplied by variabilism (value as a part) is redundant.[4]

To understand Brown's objection we need to know what he means by 'value as a part' and 'value as a whole'. He represents value as a part by '$V_y(x)$', where this denotes the value of x considered as a part of y (p. 457). He then defines value as a whole in terms of value as a part, by saying that the value as a whole of x is the value of x considered as a part of itself (more specifically, 'value as improper part', p. 459). This is represented thus: $V(x) = V_x(x)$. When Brown accuses the variabilist of supplying two evaluations – value as a whole and value as a part – this should be understood as the claim that the variabilist supplies an evaluation of a thing in the context in which it is alone (as in Moore's isolation test), and also other (varying) evaluations of the thing when it is in other contexts.

Brown's 'value as a whole' fits very easily with Moore's value holism. For something's value as a whole is simply its (invariant) intrinsic value, and is also the same as its intrinsic value as a part in every context (because its intrinsic value does not change). Thus Brown is right to contend that invariabilism produces only one evaluation. But he is mistaken in claiming that it is an advantage of invariabilism that it supplies only one valuation. It is in fact a disadvantage, as I shall now show.

IV. WHEN SINGLE EVALUATIONS LOOK IMPLAUSIBLE

Brown advances the simplicity of having only one evaluation as a major advantage of invariabilism over variabilism. However, this simplicity will be advantageous only if (i) the theory gets the correct evaluations, and (ii) it does so without engendering similar complexity elsewhere. Unfortunately, either

(a) Invariabilism gives the wrong evaluations

or

(b) In order to avoid (a), invariabilism must commit itself to the same level of complexity as was deemed unattractive in variabilism.

[4] Brown has a second, subsidiary, argument against Dancy's view, which I leave aside here. See 'Two Kinds of Holism about Values', pp. 461–3.

I can show that this is so by returning to the example of *A*'s pleasure and comparing how invariabilism matches our judgement that *A*'s pleasure in the belief that *B* admires him is better when *B* does admire *A* than it is when *B* loathes *A*. If it is agreed that our evaluations should give this result, the relevant question is how the two theories deliver it.

The variabilist can hold that what happens is that *A*'s pleasure has differing degrees of intrinsic value in the two contexts. So when it is the case that *A*'s pleasure is part of a wider context in which *B* admires *A*, the pleasure has one intrinsic value (+5, say), and when it is part of a wider context in which *B* loathes *A*, this context means that the pleasure has a different intrinsic value (–5, say). The variabilist can thus easily match our judgement about the respective cases.

Of course, if we adopt variabilism, then we need to make *multiple* evaluations, because it is not true that once we have decided the intrinsic value of *A*'s pleasure in one context (in which *B* admires *A*) then we know its intrinsic value in all other contexts (including when *B* loathes *A*). I take it that Brown is likely to argue that invariabilism has an advantage here, because, like variabilism, it can match our judgements, but it can do so without requiring multiple evaluations.

This claim, however, would be misleading. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that invariabilists dig their heels in and claim that the intrinsic value of *A*'s pleasure is either +5 in both cases, or –5 in both cases. The problem with this is that the judgement we started with – that in one case the pleasure is more valuable than in the other – is not adhered to. Either we are wrong to think that it is intrinsically good in the first case (where *B* admires *A*) or we are wrong to think that it is intrinsically bad in the second case (where *B* loathes *A*). This is an unattractive feature of invariabilism, that understood in this way it gives us the wrong answers in these kinds of cases. That being so, if invariabilists take this route, then invariabilism has the disadvantage that it gets the wrong answers to the cases we started off with. So even if variabilism needs more complexity to get the right answers, the fact that it can reach them is a significant point in its favour.

Invariabilists might protest that this is unfair. They may claim that it is unfair because they do not suggest assigning a degree of intrinsic value to *one and the same thing*, and thus making a choice between our judgement being wrong in the first case and being wrong in the second case. They might argue that instead of assigning a degree of intrinsic value to *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires him which is constant between the two cases, and then claiming that we are wrong about whether its intrinsic value changes, we should hold that we have two *distinct* objects of evaluation. These two different objects of evaluation are

1. *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* and *B*'s admiring *A*
2. *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* and *B*'s loathing *A*.

Invariabilists can then claim that like variabilists, they have reached the correct answers in the two cases but that they have done so without using multiple evaluations. If this is so, then their theory is preferable on grounds of simplicity.

Something that should be obvious by now is that invariabilists (on pain of getting the wrong answers) have to be at least somewhat revisionary about the objects of

evaluation. That is to say, we start off with what looks like one and the same thing holding different amounts of intrinsic value in different contexts, and the invariabilist converts this into a difference in the *objects of evaluation*. Invariabilists will probably claim that this revisionism is not problematic. They might argue that even if it is the case that people *talk as if* the value of one and the same thing has different value in different contexts, this is only because in such contexts we are speaking loosely. Because this is so, we should not be wedded to a strict and literal interpretation of these claims, and a little revisionism is tolerable.

If invariabilists take this route, then we should demand more by way of argument before we are convinced of its innocence. For a large part of what provides support for value holism are the cases in which intrinsic value *appears* to be context-sensitive. For example, we find that our evaluation of a punishment changes in a case where the person that is punished is later discovered to have been innocent. In this kind of case, it looks as if we make differing judgements of the intrinsic value of *one and the same thing* (the infliction of a pain, or whatever), depending upon the wider context in which it appears. It does not seem that there is a change in the *object* of evaluation. So if the invariabilist suggests that we should reconfigure this as a difference in the objects of evaluation, it is legitimate to ask whether the invariabilist is in fact not explaining but instead distorting our understanding of what it is that we are evaluating in these cases.

I have not claimed that these considerations provide a decisive reason to reject invariabilism. However, it does show that there is more work for invariabilists to do if they are to convince us that they really are explaining what is going on in the kinds of cases that support value holism, as opposed to changing the cases to fit their theory.[5]

What is more significant as an objection to the supposed advantage of invariabilism over variabilism is that it looks as if invariabilism countenances a level of complexity similar to that which was claimed to be a problematic feature of variabilism. Brown's argument for invariabilism was based on its supplying only one evaluation. As I have shown, invariabilists apparently have to differentiate many different objects of evaluation in order for their fixed intrinsic values to match our judgements about cases. If it is an unpalatable feature of variabilism that it allows *x* to have different intrinsic values in different cases, then it is an equally unpalatable feature of invariabilism that it postulates an equivalent increase in the objects of evaluation. This is because for anything that on the variabilist account affects the intrinsic value of *A*'s pleasure in a context, the invariabilist needs to postulate a new, and unique, object of evaluation. So instead of having one object of evaluation

O. *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A*

and multiple evaluations of this object depending on *B*'s actual attitude to *A*, we shall have multiple objects of evaluation

[5] For interesting discussion of and objections to this kind of manœuvre in other areas of philosophy, see K. DeRose, 'Contextualism: an Explanation and Defense', in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 187–205, at p. 198; J. Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 13–15.

O_1. *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* & *B*'s admiring *A*
O_2. *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* & *B*'s being indifferent to *A*
O_3. *A*'s taking pleasure from the belief that *B* admires *A* & *B*'s loathing *A*

and so on. In the light of this, it seems likely that there is no simplicity argument which uniquely favours the invariabilist position here. If it counts against a theory that it permits *x* to have varying degrees of intrinsic value, one for every context in which its intrinsic value differs, then it also counts against a theory that it postulates just as many distinct objects of invariant value. In that case, Brown's simplicity argument for invariabilism fails.

V. CONCLUSION

As things stand, it seems that invariabilism and variabilism fare equally well (or badly) on the issue of complexity, so there is a stand-off here. However, if the claim suggested above – that invariabilism can only avoid getting the wrong answers by changing the apparent objects of evaluation – is correct, then the variabilist seems to be in a better position. This is because the variabilist retains the objects of evaluation and explains the judgements made in particular cases, something which the invariabilist seemed unable to achieve. My conclusion, then, is that the worst-case scenario for variabilism is that it fares no worse than invariabilism. The alternative is that because it does not change the objects of evaluation, it is in fact superior to invariabilism in being able to get the right answers in particular cases without needing to distort the judgements being made. The case for Moore's value holism over Dancy's thus remains (at least) unproven.[6]

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