Organic Unities

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A day can go better or worse for a person, as can a whole life. One's whole life evidently comprises all of the days of one's life. What is the relation between how well each of a person's days goes and how well her whole life goes? The simplest answer is *summation*: just as a life is nothing more than the days that make it up, the value of a life is nothing more than the sum of the values of those days. But, G. E. Moore (1903: 28) warns in full italics that "*The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts*," thus inaugurating a subject of inquiry mostly missed in the history of ethics before him (*see* MOORE, G. E.; for earlier discussions, see especially the work of Franz Brentano [*see* BRENTANO, FRANZ], as expounded in Chisholm 1986: 69–90).

The existence of organic unities – wholes whose value differs from the sum of the values of their parts – is especially compelling when the value in question is aesthetic. An ugly patch of color added to a painting can enhance its overall beauty. But many moral philosophers are convinced of the possibility of organic unities for the kinds of value that especially interest them (*see* INTRINSIC VALUE; WELL-BEING).

Some claim, for instance, that *trajectory* matters: a life whose days get progressively better is better than a life whose days get progressively worse, even when the sum of the values of the days in each life is the same (cf. Velleman 1991). Others maintain that *variation* matters: a life whose days are suitably different from one another is better than a life all of whose days are spent doing exactly the same thing, even when the number and value of individual days are identical across the two lives (Chisholm 1986: 70–1; Lemos 2010: 40–3). Some critics will resist these examples, pointing out that trajectory and variation tend to be of great *instrumental* value (*see* INSTRUMENTAL VALUE). Lack of variety, for example, causes boredom. Perhaps the hypothesis that upward trajectory and variation are important instrumental goods is enough to explain away the intuitions about these cases (Feldman 2004: 124–41).

Moore's first example of an organic unity is *consciousness of beauty* (1903: 28–9). The mere existence of an unobserved beautiful object is of minor intrinsic value, Moore held, as is the bare state of being conscious. But when we combine these two states to yield *being conscious of the existence of a beautiful thing*, we get a state of great value, a value far exceeding the combined value of the nearly worthless parts. Another interesting example is *punishment* (Moore 1903: 214–6; *see* PUNISHMENT). One reason it can be better to punish an evildoer than to leave him unpunished, according to Moore, is that the evil of his suffering under punishment combines with his past wickedness, another evil, to make a whole that is less bad than the existence of the wickedness without the later suffering. In this way, bringing a bad thing into the world can, paradoxically, make it better. This relates to an important application of the principle of organic unities: the problem of evil (Chisholm 1986: 97–102). If the

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principle of organic unities is true, we can see how the presence of an intrinsically bad thing might be necessary – not merely causally, but metaphysically – for making the world better on the whole than it would have been without it. An all-powerful and benevolent God thus might reasonably prefer the presence of the bad thing.

Another important putative example is that of *malicious pleasure* (Brentano 1969: 90–1; Moore 1903: 209–10). Someone's being pleased is a good thing. Someone's suffering is a bad thing. Combining the two into the state of affairs of someone's being pleased *by* the other's suffering results in a bad thing that seems at least as bad as its bad component (the suffering). The summative approach, however, would seem committed to holding that such a whole is less bad than its bad part – that, when someone is suffering, it makes things better to take pleasure in it.

One way to resist this example is to deny that the pleasurable component of this combined state is itself a good thing, precisely because it is directed at the suffering of another. Kant held the value of happiness to be conditional in this way – that happiness is intrinsically good only when had by a good will (*see* KANT, IMMANUEL). But Moore was committed to the view that the intrinsic value of anything must be determined solely by its intrinsic properties (1922: 260). He thus felt committed to the idea that the pleasurable component of a state of being pleased by another's suffering is itself intrinsically good, since it could be intrinsically the same as a pleasure directed at another's happiness. These commitments likely explain Moore's enthusiasm for the doctrine of organic wholes.

Those who are attracted to the Moorean view about the intrinsicality of intrinsic value, moved by some of the preceding examples, but concerned about preserving the summative view of value, may have another option, however. They can deny that the state of being pleased by another's suffering is a whole with parts that have any intrinsic value. On this view, the simple state of *being pleased* lacks sufficient detail to have any value (Zimmerman 2001: Ch. 5). Only a more complex state of pleasure, such as the state of *being pleased by a given fact* (of which the preceding simpler state is a part), can have value. Just as the duration and intensity of the pleasure in these more complex states will help determine their value, so will the nature of the object of the pleasure. If such a strategy could be made to work for all the preceding cases, or at least the ones that on reflection need accommodating, the attractive simplicity of the summative approach to axiology might be salvageable.

***See also*:** BRENTANO, FRANZ; INTRINSIC VALUE; INSTRUMENTAL VALUE; KANT, IMMANUEL; MOORE, G. E.; PUNISHMENT; WELL-BEING

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