

S. A. Davison, *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything*, Continuum, 2012, 160 pages. ISBN: 9781441162823. Hardback/Paperback: £45.00/14.99.

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Davison's book *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything* argues that every existing particular object has some degree of intrinsic value. (Davison also endorses the more ambitious claim that there is some item in every ontological category that has value but the book primarily focuses on concrete particulars.) Chapter 3 contains a helpful discussion of what the bearers of intrinsic value are, where Davison argues that concrete particulars can be such bearers and that it is not only states of affairs or facts that are value-bearers. In chapter 4 Davison puts forward his main argument for his view, which he calls the 'cut-off argument'. Assuming that one excludes the view that nothing has intrinsic value one has two options in that one can either adopt a restricted view that posits a cut-off separating those things that have value from those that lack value or otherwise accept Davison's universalist view that holds that everything has value. Davison claims that one should accept the universalist position since there are difficulties in locating a cut-off. In particular, any cut-off would seem arbitrary given that identifying a particular point and holding that no value is had by things that only differ very slightly would violate the idea that small changes in underlying non-evaluative features should not give rise to such large differences at the evaluative level. According to Davison, the appropriate response to intrinsic value is in the first place not a matter of preserving or creating valuable things but of being for the good symbolically, which involves recognising the goodness of things and expressing it in one's thoughts, actions and utterances. The book concludes by discussing how the advocated view of value fits together with a traditional form of theism.

Whilst the cut-off argument constitutes a genuine challenge that any restricted theory needs to address, it is not clear that it cannot be overcome given that the claim that positing a sharp cut-off would be arbitrary requires that features that are relevant in making something valuable are a matter of degree and can be altered slightly, which ensures that the argument does not apply to binary features, such as being alive or having the capacity to experience pleasure and pain. Davison seems to be aware of this problem and addresses some of these proposed cut-off candidates in chapter 4. In criticising these proposals, as well as on a number of other occasions, Davison relies on what he calls the 'anything better than nothing argument' (pp. 68-75), which is based on the idea that the annihilation of an object is a change to which a fully informed, properly functioning valuer would have to be responsive and that the only way such a valuer could respond to this change would be by regretting the object's annihilation. "It would be a mistake to be completely indifferent to this change, to respond to it in the same way as if

nothing had happened at all; this would indicate a failure to track a change in the world, however slight” (p. 71). The critique of these restricted views that only attribute intrinsic value to some but not all objects is thus not that the proposals as to where the cut-off is to be located are arbitrary but rather that such proposals exclude things that (to Davison) seem to be valuable and the value of which can be established on the basis of the ‘anything better than nothing argument’. In this way, the argument that is doing most of the work in supporting the main conclusion turns out to be a more direct, positive argument, rather than the advertised cut-off argument. The problem for Davison now is that this argument is question-begging since a modification of one’s evaluation is required only if what changes is evaluatively significant. In particular, the problem is that the change is evaluatively significant only if what is being annihilated is of value. That is, a fully informed, properly functioning valuer is responsive to the change from existence to non-existence only if something of value is annihilated. Yet, the object’s being valuable is precisely what needs to be established. Moreover, the argument is not only question-begging but also generates counter-intuitive results since the claim that anything is better than nothing implies that everything has intrinsic value not only in the sense of being either good, neutral or bad, but in the sense of having positive value, which seems rather implausible. (Davison tries to respond to the charge of implausibility, primarily on pp. 87 and 94, but his responses were not particularly transparent to this reviewer and the former response at least seemed to rely on an inadmissible separation of the object of value and the ground of value (a distinction that is recognised and put to good use in chapter 3).)

Relatedly, Davison runs into difficulties when he attempts to establish that it is better for us to exist than to not exist and that we can and should accordingly be grateful for existing. In particular, Davison tries to show that we can be grateful for having been brought into existence by appealing to the idea that if we were to live intermittent lives that would be interrupted by periods of non-existence, then we would be grateful to someone who had neutralised a threat to us not returning to existence (cf. p. 130). Yet, the intermittent existence case has no bearing on the issue of comparability since what is being compared in this case is two different lives, namely one that continues after the period of non-existence in question and one that fails to do so whereas what is compared in the other case is one life with nothingness.

Davison’s claim that every existing particular object has some degree of value is somewhat difficult to evaluate since it is not clear what conception of concrete particulars Davison has in mind (other than that he accepts at least the commitments of some sort of common-sense ontology, cf. p. 20), especially what account of mereology he endorses. The cut-off argument that pushes one towards value universalism (given that one rejects nihilism) has a well-known analogue in the context of the special composition question where the mereological cut-off argument pushes one towards accepting mereological universalism. Yet, all of

Davison's examples are taken from an ordinary common-sense ontology and it is not clear how comfortable he would be in attributing value to various gerrymandered objects. Combining a commitment to unrestricted composition with Davison's value universalist view would seem to be especially problematic for two reasons. First, the explanation that Davison offers of how the degree of intrinsic value of an object is determined would make many of these strange objects highly valuable. "X is more intrinsically valuable than Y because X's intrinsic structure includes all of the same types of intrinsic properties that are parts of Y's intrinsic structures, plus other, more interesting ones" (p. 84). This suggests that for any object X, any fusion Y of X together with some other object Z would be at least as valuable as X, no matter how gerrymandered Y would be. Second, if there should be infinitely many objects (which would follow from the density of space-time together with plausible mereological harmony principles), then universal composition would ensure that any change involving a concrete particular would lead to a change of an infinite number of objects that have that particular as a part and each of which would be valuable, thereby threatening to undermine the possibility of adequately evaluating the aggregate effect of the change. (On p. 106 Davison discusses a related objection but his response to that particular problem does not generalise to cases involving infinite value vectors.)

Further problems arise when it comes to explaining what degree of value is had by different objects. In trying to account for comparative judgements regarding degrees of intrinsic value, Davison appeals to the different dispositions that objects have (cf. p. 83). Any such explanation of degrees of intrinsic value is problematic since dispositions are (at best) only nomologically intrinsic and as such cannot ground intrinsic value which is taken to be metaphysically intrinsic. Put differently, in order for value to be intrinsic the property of being valuable needs to be shared by all duplicates, however, only all nomological duplicates share the same dispositions, making it the case that intrinsic value cannot be explained in terms of dispositions.

Overall, this is a nicely written book that contains some interesting ideas and suggestions. However, the positive proposal faces numerous difficulties and needs to be worked out and developed more fully.