

Intrinsic value: a reply to Justus *et al.*

Mark Sagoff

Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA

In a recent Forum article in *TREE*, Justus and co-authors distinguish intrinsic from instrumental value in terms of its relation to human beings [1]. They define ‘intrinsic value’ to mean ‘a value independent of humans’ or that ‘is valuer independent and thus independent of stakeholder valuation.’ In contrast, instrumental value derives ‘from valuers such as humans.’ According to this definition, ‘instrumental value is simply value that depends on valuers.’

Justus and colleagues argue that if intrinsic value has no basis in what stakeholders consider important, it follows that ‘intrinsic value cannot have a role in conservation decision making’ [1]. A view popular in the 1970s ascribed rights to natural objects and in that way divorced intrinsic value from human valuation [2]. As a legal theory the idea that natural objects have intrinsic value in the sense of ‘standing’ or ‘rights’ independent of human valuers went nowhere – as Justus *et al.* correctly conclude it must.

While their logic is impeccable, Justus *et al.* fail to show that conservationists generally believe that intrinsic value is ‘valuer independent.’ On the contrary, conservationists argue that people may value natural objects because of their inherent qualities rather than because of any benefit those objects offer them. In other words, conservationists distinguish (1) those attributes of nature we value as objects of our love, reverence, appreciation and respect from (2) those attributes of nature we value for the contribution they make to our wellbeing. Conservationists criticize the assumption associated with economics that human welfare, utility or benefit is the only thing that has value ‘in itself’ and that the value of any other good must be measured instrumentally as a means to produce it. Thus Holmes Rolston has argued that natural beauty has ‘an intrinsic objective value, valued by me but for what it is in itself’ [4]. Justus *et al.* do not cite to or quote from a conservationist so confused as to think that intrinsic value is ‘valuer independent.’

Justus *et al.* mistakenly believe that aesthetic value is instrumental. They state, ‘Art is instrumentally, not intrinsically, valuable because [of] .. the responses it produces in humans (e.g. pleasure)’ [1]. Pornography then

might be the most valuable form of art because it produces the most pleasure. Evolution has prepared the pleasure centers for procreation not poetry. We use the faculty of pleasure to perceive in art properties that possess intrinsic value including expressive and symbolic significance. Value lies in the intrinsic properties of art – its meaning, complexity and unity-in-variety – and not in the pleasure or other emotional faculties by means of which we experience and appreciate those properties.

Justus *et al.* consider important ‘what stakeholders prefer, and how strongly’ [1]. This view threatens conservation because the intensity of preference, typically measured by willingness to pay (WTP), usually tilts in favor of economic development.

Conservationists emphasize the importance of the reasons for a preference rather than the WTP to satisfy it. This is because conservationists believe that on reflection and in view of the security and decency of our souls some reasons are more persuasive than others. To secure an ecological heritage is a better reason for acting than to maximize a consumer porridge.

Callicott has written, ‘A big part of the *normative* work of contemporary environmental ethics is to give our fellow valuers reasons to value nature intrinsically’ [11]. Reasons to value nature intrinsically derive from religious, cultural and moral traditions as well as from aesthetic perceptions basic to our identity as human beings. None of these reasons presuppose, as Justus *et al.* claim, an odd sort of non-valuer valuation.

References

- 1 Justus, J. *et al.* (2009) Buying into conservation: intrinsic versus instrumental value. *Trends Ecol. Evol.* 24, 187–191
- 2 Stone, C.D. (1974) *Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*, Wm. Kaufmann Inc. Publisher
- 4 Rolston, H., III (1986) *Philosophy Gone Wild: Essays in Environmental Ethics*, Prometheus Books
- 11 Callicott, J.B. (1985) Intrinsic value, quantum theory, and environmental ethics. *Environ. Ethics* 7, 275–285

0169-5347/\$ – see front matter © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.tree.2009.07.005 Available online 18 September 2009

Corresponding author: Sagoff, M. (msagoff@umd.edu).