

## What is Instrumental Value?

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In her pioneering article “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” Korsgaard distinguishes between four different types of value:

*Final Value:* An object  $x$  is finally valuable if and only if it is valuable as an end.

*Instrumental Value:* An object  $x$  is instrumentally valuable if and only if it is valuable as a means.

*Intrinsic Value:* An object  $x$  is intrinsically valuable if and only if it is valuable in a way that supervenes only on the intrinsic properties of  $x$ .

*Extrinsic Value:* An object  $x$  is extrinsically valuable if and only if it is valuable in a way that supervenes—at least to some extent—on the extrinsic properties of  $x$ .

With these categories in mind, it is the nature of *final* value that has received the most philosophical attention. And why shouldn't it? After all, of all the various *types* of value, final value is the sort that really *counts*. Morality, for instance, will require agents to—at least occasionally—promote final value. What is good for a person is that which is *finally* valuable for them. One important concern for those interested in final value is the relationship between final value and intrinsic value. Some claim that final value is value that supervenes on the intrinsic properties of a given object (and hence hold that “final value” and “intrinsic value” are identical concepts). This is the position of Moore, Michael Zimmerman, Ben Bradley, and others (call this the “Moorean” view).<sup>1</sup> Others believe that something can be valuable as

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Ben Bradley, “Is Intrinsic Value Conditional?” in *Philosophical Studies* 120 (2002); Michael Zimmerman, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value* (Lanham, MD: Row-

an end not simply on the basis of its intrinsic properties, but also on the basis of some relational or extrinsic properties, and hence that final value is—or can be—a form of extrinsic value. This view is held by, e.g., Korsgaard, Kagan, and Hurka (call this the “non-Moorean” view).<sup>2</sup>

One important thing to note is that final value, whatever theory one accepts, is properly contrasted with *instrumental* value. But its status as final value’s natural contrast has not yielded any additional attention. Instrumental value is often characterized in vague terms, without any clear analysis of when, or why, a particular object, state, or event is instrumentally valuable. In this paper, I seek to offer one account of the nature of instrumental value, for two reasons. First, previous accounts—even those who have sought precision—go wrong in properly identifying the nature of instrumental value. Second, because instrumental value is final value’s natural contrast class, the account of instrumental value I offer in this paper is important for our understanding of final value. If my account of instrumental value is correct, we can no longer identify instrumental value with extrinsic value—that is, value that supervenes at least in part on extrinsic properties. Instrumental value occasionally—though not always—supervenes wholly on intrinsic properties of objects, states, or events. It further follows that the Moorean view is false: the identification of final value with intrinsic value fails to adequately distinguish between final value and instrumental value.

### 1. *Instrumental Value: First Steps*

In defining the idea of instrumental value, Christine Korsgaard writes the following: “Objects, activities, or whatever, have an instrumental value if they are valued for the sake of something else—tools, money, and chores would be standard examples. . . The natural contrast to a thing that is valued instrumentally or as a means is a thing that is valued for its own sake or as an end.”<sup>3</sup> There is clearly something right in Korsgaard’s idea. If an object has instrumental value, this does not imply that the object has value for its own sake. Of course, objects can be both instrumentally valuable and finally valuable, in which case an object might both be instrumentally

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man and Littlefield, 2005). Some identify “intrinsic value” with “final value” even though they dispute that final value supervenes on intrinsic properties. See Shelly Kagan, “Rethinking Intrinsic Value” in *The Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998).

<sup>2</sup>See Christine Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Kagan, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup>Korsgaard, 250.

valuable and valuable for its own sake or as an end. Nevertheless, the mere fact that something is instrumentally valuable does not by itself imply that the object is valuable for its own sake. Rather, its value has to do with its being a *means*.

But Korsgaard's account—sketchy though it is—has two major defects. First, something can possess instrumental valuable without being valued as such. Instrumental value, in other words, cannot be defined in terms of that which we value. For instance, I might not value my cell-phone for the sake of anything at all. In fact, I might fail to value it. Furthermore, it might be that *no one* values this particular phone; perhaps no one beyond me has ever stopped to consider it. But it still possesses instrumental value, insofar as I might use, or have used, it to call the police, or order pizza, or ask my beloved out to dinner, all of which contribute to finally valuable states, such as pleasure. (I will assume for the purposes of this paper that pleasure is a paradigmatically finally valuable state, though nothing important turns on this assumption.)

The second problem is that Korsgaard's account of instrumental value displays an internal tension. To be valuable for the sake of something else does not entail that this object is valuable as a means to something else. For instance, something can possess *signatory* value: value as a *sign* of intrinsically good things.<sup>4</sup> Though this thing may be valuable for the sake of other things, this does not, however, mean that it is valued *as a means* to some other thing. But even if we identify instrumental value with the value an object possesses, independently of being valued as such, *as a means*, the account fails without further specification. After all, for something to be valuable as a means, it cannot simply be a means to any old thing. A particular missile key might be a means to global thermonuclear war. But it does not possess instrumental *value*.

The last point illustrates the distinction marked by C. I. Lewis between something's being instrumentally *valuable*, and something's being merely *instrumental* or *useful*.<sup>5</sup> A missile key is instrumental or useful for the production of global thermonuclear war. But it is not instrumentally valuable. Though instrumental value clearly has something to do with a particular object's *effects* or potential effects, and as such clearly has something to do with that object's being instrumental or useful *for something*, instrumental value is possessed not in virtue of any old effect of the object, but

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Ben Bradley, "Extrinsic Value" in *Philosophical Studies* 91 (1998), 118-120.

<sup>5</sup>C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (Indianapolis, IN: Open Court, 1946), 384-5.

with the effects of that object that are finally valuable, or valuable as an end. But the precise relationship between the instrumentally valuable object or state and the finally valuable state it is or may be a means to is not precisely understood. Moore, for instance, writes this about instrumental value: “Whenever we judge that a thing is ‘good as a means,’ we are making a judgment with regard to its causal relations: we judge *both* that it will have a particular kind of effect, *and* that that effect will be good in itself.<sup>6</sup> Along the same lines, C. I. Lewis writes: “A thing *A* will never be said to have extrinsic value or instrumental value, unless it is meant to imply that there is some other thing, *B*, to which it is or may be instrumental, which has intrinsic value.”<sup>7</sup>

The problem here is that the consequences or causal effects of a given object or event might be of mixed value. For instance, if I decide tonight to have a second glass of wine, that glass of wine is instrumentally valuable in the production of pleasure. However, the glass of wine is also instrumental to my oversleeping my alarm, missing my lecture, and feeling pain as a result.<sup>8</sup> If the pain I experience in the morning outweighs the pleasure I feel at night, it seems quite plausible to say that the glass of wine is not instrumentally valuable, even though it was instrumental to something itself of intrinsic value, namely, my pleasure at drinking the wine.

The sensible solution here is to suggest that the instrumental value of a given object or event is determined by the value of its *total* consequences, including what it causes, and what it prevents from occurring. In other words, the instrumental value of an object or state of affairs clearly involves a comparison between the value of what actually happened, and the value of what would have happened, had the purportedly instrumentally valuable object or event not occurred or existed. There is, however, one catch, as Ben Bradley notes:

[A] grenade falls in the middle of a group of people. Person *x* heroically jumps on it, sacrificing himself to save the group. There’s a clear sense in which his jumping on it was an extrinsically good thing because the suffering it prevented—even if the saved lives end up having no intrinsic value from then on. But maybe there was another person in the group—call her *y*—who was willing to jump on the grenade, but waited to see if *x* would do

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<sup>6</sup>G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 22.

<sup>7</sup>C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (Indianapolis, IN: Open Court, 1946), 385.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Bradley, “Extrinsic Value”, 111-112.

it first. If  $x$  hadn't jumped on the grenade,  $y$  would have. The intrinsic value of the world had  $y$  jumped on the grenade would have been the same as if  $x$  had jumped on it. Then  $x$ 's jumping on the grenade fails to move the world up on the overall value scale.<sup>9</sup>

With this example, Bradley accurately notes that in order to adequately understand the instrumental value of an object or event, one needs to specify the proper worlds with which to contrast the actual world. In judging the instrumental value of  $x$ 's jumping, you do not contrast the actual world with the world in which someone else jumps on a grenade. You contrast the actual world with worlds in which *no one* jumps on the grenade. According to Bradley, the proper contrast worlds are set contextually.<sup>10</sup> Given the context, it is clear that the relevant contrast world is not the world in which  $y$  jumps on the grenade, but rather the world in which the grenade explodes as normal.

In capturing this feature of instrumental value, Bradley offers the following account of extrinsic value more generally:

Suppose  $s$  is a state of affairs that occurs at world  $w$ . Let  $W$  be a function that determines what world would have obtained, given a context  $c$ , had  $s$  not occurred—i.e., the closest world to  $w$ , given  $c$ , where  $s$  doesn't occur; we can represent this as  $W \langle \neg s, w, c \rangle$ . To determine the extrinsic value of  $s$  at  $w$  given  $c$ , or  $EV \langle s, w, c \rangle$ , first we determine all the states of affairs *other than  $s$*  that obtain in  $w$  but not in  $W \langle \neg s, w, c \rangle$ —call their conjunction 'the total consequence of  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$ '—and calculate the intrinsic value of the total consequence of  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$ . . . The intrinsic value of the total consequence of  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$  is equal to the sum of the basic intrinsic values of its conjuncts. Then we determine the conjunction of all the states of affairs that obtain in  $W \langle \neg s, w, c \rangle$  but not in  $w$ —call this 'what  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$  prevents'—and let the intrinsic value of what  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$  prevents be the sum of the basic intrinsic values of its conjuncts. Here, then, is the formula that determines the extrinsic value of  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$ :

BEV: For any state of affairs  $s$ , world  $w$ , and context  $c$ ,  $EV \langle s, w, c \rangle = IV(\text{the total consequence of}$

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<sup>9</sup>Bradley, 115-116.

<sup>10</sup>Bradley, 116.

$\langle s, w, c \rangle$ -IV(what  $\langle s, w, c \rangle$  prevents).

The basic idea is that we pick a contextually defined contrast world—the closest world in which a particular state of affairs does not occur—and measure the final value of the states that occur in that world against the final value of the states that occur in the actual world as consequences of the instrumentally good state.<sup>11</sup> The state is instrumentally good to the extent that the final value of the resultant states of the actual world are of greater value than the final value of the states in the relevant contrast world.

Of course, it must be said that Bradley's account is not an account of instrumental value *per se*, but is rather an account of extrinsic value. But, according to Bradley, instrumental value is one form of extrinsic value; as Bradley suggests, any definition of extrinsic value must provide a proper account of instrumental value. Hence it is clear that Bradley's BEV is intended to provide an adequate account of instrumental value. Furthermore, *that* the proper account of extrinsic value should provide a proper account of instrumental value is intuitive. After all, if  $x$  is valuable as a means, doesn't this in part depend on its relational properties, viz., its *being a means* to something else? With this being said, I think that Bradley's contextual analysis adequately corrects defects in the Moorean and Lewisian understanding of instrumental value. I think it is correct that, insofar as instrumental value is related to the actual consequences of a given state of affairs, it is related in the way Bradley notes.

One further virtue of Bradley's account is worth noting. Though Bradley does not discuss this possibility, his view can also account for the instrumental value of objects and events rather than simply states of affairs. For instance, one might say that the instrumental value of a particular five-dollar bill is determined by a comparison between the states of affairs that result in the actual world, and the world closest to the actual world in which the five-dollar bill does not exist. This, I claim, is a noteworthy feature of treating instrumental value as a special case of BEV.

In the next section, I argue that Bradley's account of extrinsic value is not an adequate analysis of *instrumental* value—successful though may be in correcting defects of previous accounts. In §2 I argue that BEV cannot adequately account for many plausible examples of instrumental value. In §3, I offer an alternative account, and in §§5-6, I argue that we should reconsider our commonsense commitment to instrumental value as a form of

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<sup>11</sup>Bradley later amends BEV to calculate the extrinsic value of an object via *all* a sum of all the states of affairs at  $w$ , and all the states of affairs at the relevant contrast world. For the purposes of this paper, this amendment makes no difference.

extrinsic value.

## 2. A Distinction

Recall Lewis's distinction between  $x$ 's being instrumentally valuable, and  $x$ 's being *instrumental* or *useful*. For Lewis, this distinction is important to keep in mind because something can be instrumental to the production of bad states of affairs, though we would never say that  $x$  possesses instrumental value on such grounds. But there is a further distinction worth making along these lines, one that, I believe, sheds light on Bradley's account of instrumental value *qua* extrinsic value.

Consider the difference between an object, event, or state's being *instrumentally valuable*, and an object, event, or state's being *instrumental to value*. Any object that is instrumental to value is an object that is actually causally implicated in the production of final value. In other words,  $x$  is instrumental to value—very roughly speaking—if its consequences are, on balance, good. Bradley's analysis of extrinsic value is an analysis—and, I dare say, a successful one—of any  $x$ 's being instrumental to value. Indeed, it seems to capture precisely what we want out of such an account. BEV seems, at least for the purposes of this paper, to be a plausible account of extrinsic value. But if being instrumental to value means being valuable in some way or other, this value is clearly extrinsic: it clearly depends on an object or state's relations with things that are finally valuable. Furthermore, for something to be instrumental to value, it seems relevant to compare its actual consequences with the consequences of its failure to obtain—if it is genuinely causally implicated in the production of value, the subsequent value of its world will be greater than the world in which it fails to obtain. Hence, in determining the extent to which  $x$  is instrumental to value, we determine the relevant contrast worlds, and we compare the on-balance value of the resulting states of affairs of the actual world and the relevant contrast worlds. If the consequences of the actual world are of greater final value than the consequences of the relevant contrast world,  $x$  is instrumental to value. For the purposes of this paper, I propose to treat Bradley's theory of extrinsic value as giving us a plausible theory of the concept of being *instrumental to value*.

However, Bradley does not seek to give us an account of a state of affairs' being instrumental to value. Rather, Bradley claims to analyze the concept of instrumental value, *qua* extrinsic value. Hence if Bradley's analysis of instrumental value is to succeed, it must be the case that  $x$  is instrumentally valuable if and only if and to the extent that  $x$  is instrumental *to* value. And

I think there are very good reasons to doubt this biconditional. Three cases, it seems to me, shed light on this—though in importantly different ways.

### 2.1. *My Expired Credit Card*

One way to see the distinction between being instrumental to value and being instrumentally valuable is to consider an object that *lacks* instrumental value, but that *is* instrumental *to* value.

Take, for instance, my expired credit card. This card possesses the property of being instrumental to value. In fact, it led to a number of pleasurable sensations for me and others, was instrumental to the improvement of my life, etc., in ways that my life wouldn't have improved lacking such a credit card. However, assume that this credit card expires at  $t$ . While it seems right to say that this credit card had instrumental value at times prior to  $t$ , it seems quite wrong to say that this card has instrumental value at  $t$ , and at times after  $t$ . Given its expiration, my credit card *lost* whatever instrumental value it once had.

If this is true, the property of being instrumental to value and being instrumentally valuable are non-identical. Why? Because though the card has expired, it remains true that had it never existed, the world would have been a worse place, at least for me and my cohorts. Given its existence, the final value of the actual world is much better than the final value of the contextually selected contrast world. But—leaving aside the possibility that it might, say, be made into an *avant garde* piece of women's fashion, or cut into makeshift guitar picks—it is not instrumentally valuable. It has expired.

One might object to my example here by pointing out what seems to be a shift in the proper tense of the contrasting property ascriptions. One might say, quite naturally, that my expired credit card *was* instrumental to value. However, the credit card *is* not instrumentally valuable. However, it does seem quite right to say that, past tense, the credit card *was* instrumentally valuable, at least prior to its expiration. If so, the credit card's lacking instrumental value *now* is no evidence that these properties are non-coextensive, because we might also say that the credit card is also—as of  $t$ —not *instrumental to value*.

This response fails for two reasons. First, as I define the notion of being instrumental to value, it is the property of actually contributing to final value. The card, at any time during its existence, has this property. The total value of its actual consequences is better than the total value of that which it actually prevents. In addition, assuming that we accept Bradley's account as the proper theory of that which is instrumental to value, the

expired credit card *is* instrumental to value. Even after  $t$ , the credit card possesses the property of being instrumental to value: its total consequences are better than that which it prevents. Hence if the expired credit card does not possess instrumental value, BEV cannot deliver an analysis of instrumental value. After  $t$ , the card lacks instrumental value, but continues to be extrinsically valuable, given BEV.

### 2.2. *Hank's Stolen Money*

Consider Sam Raimi's neo-noir thriller *A Simple Plan*. Hank, played by Bill Paxton, Hank's brother Jacob, and Jacob's friend Lou stumble onto a payload of 4 million dollars in cash in a downed airplane. The three men hatch a scheme to keep the money. But, as such schemes are wont to do, their plan unravels and eventually results in the deaths of Lou, Lou's wife, Jacob, and other innocent bystanders. Eventually Hank comes to learn that despite causing, directly or indirectly, the deaths of many people close to him in an effort to keep the money, his only course of action that will allow him to avoid prosecution for grand theft and murder is to burn the illicit pile of cash. We would surely say that the money Hank burns is *instrumentally valuable*. Indeed, so instrumentally valuable that he is led to kill for it. But of course this money is not instrumental to value. Indeed, the total consequences of the money's existence (assume, for the purposes of this argument, that the bills are newly minted and unused) are substantially worse than the total value of that which the money's existence prevents: four innocent people are dead, two more lives are simply ruined. But we would certainly *not* declare that, for this reason, the cash lacks instrumental value. Indeed, it seems quite right to say that the cash is as instrumentally valuable as any other pile of cash totaling 4 million dollars.

### 2.3. *Steinbeck's Oranges*

One further case is helpful here. Consider the following quote from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*:

The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land. Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten. And the failure hangs over the State like a great sorrow. The works of

the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Carloads of oranges dumped on the ground. The people came for miles to take the fruit, but this could not be. How would they buy oranges at twenty cents a dozen if they could drive out and pick them up? And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges, and they are angry at the crime, angry at the people who have come to take the fruit. A million people hungry, needing the fruit—and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.<sup>12</sup>

The oranges described in the passages here are clearly valuable. Their destruction, so searingly described by Steinbeck, is a terrible waste, especially for those whose lives depend on their consumption. But these oranges do not possess *final* value. Oranges are not properly valued as ends. Furthermore, these oranges do not possess *signatory* value. (If anything, the oranges possess *negative* signatory value, as they are a harbinger of extremely bad things, including the rampant suffering of rural Americans during the Great Depression.) They are, rather, *instrumentally* valuable. The tragedy of Steinbeck's story is that *instrumentally valuable goods are going to waste*, goods that might have helped Tom Joad and his family survive, goods that might have nourished, and given pleasure to, the hungry. But given their waste, we should say that the oranges are not instrumental to value. Their existence seems to have no finally valuable consequences at all: the world in which they exist is no better for their existence than the contextually identified relevant contrast world, viz., the world in which they never grew. But that does not lessen the extent to which merely letting them rot or incinerating them is a waste of instrumentally valuable goods. Hence, it would appear, being instrumental to value—as captured by Bradley's BEV—is not identical to being instrumentally valuable.

#### 2.4. Two Responses

I have so far been speaking of objects—such as my expired credit card, Hank's stolen money, and Steinbeck's oranges—as possessing instrumental value, or of being instrumental to value. But Bradley assumes that extrinsic value (and hence instrumental value) is borne by states of affairs, and not objects.<sup>13</sup> This move might be thought significant for the following reason. Defining the bearers of instrumental value as states of affairs seems to bring

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<sup>12</sup>John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1939), 476.

<sup>13</sup>Bradley, 112

toward convergence the properties under discussion here. Take, for instance, my expired credit card. If the card can be a bearer of instrumental value, we should say that it is instrumental to value, but is not, given its expiration, instrumentally valuable. However, if the card itself cannot be a value-bearer, this case ceases to function as a counterexample. The states of affairs that are instrumental to value, as concerns this credit card, are the states of affairs in which I possess this card *prior to its expiration*. However, I submit, these states of affairs are also instrumentally valuable. These states are realized only *prior* to the expiration of the card itself.

I think this is a powerful response. However, it is not sufficient to salvage BEV as an account of instrumental value. First, whether instrumental value can or should be ascribed to states of affairs only is certainly not obvious. It seems as though we often ascribe instrumental value to objects rather than simply states. But leave this point aside. Even if we allow this response to the case of the expired credit card, it certainly does not hold of the cases of Hank's \$4 million, and Steinbeck's oranges. The state of affairs in which there are budding oranges on California trees, or the state of affairs in which Hank possesses \$4 million are instrumentally valuable, though the instrumental value of these states of affairs, in essence, goes to waste; these states of affairs are not instrumental to value.

As a second response, it might be claimed that the fact that an instrumentally valuable  $x$  can sometimes fail to be instrumental to value can be interpreted in the following way: the oranges, say, (or the state of affairs in which there are budding oranges on California trees) have a certain modal property: the property of *potentially* being instrumental to value. Hence it might be said that instrumental value is not properly ascribed of the oranges. Rather, it is correct to say that these oranges have *potential* instrumental value, given that they have the potential—as yet unrealized—to be instrumental to value.<sup>14</sup> This response would allow BEV to function as a proper theory of instrumental value: actual instrumental value (captured by BEV) is analyzed in terms of the actual consequences of the object—an object's being instrumental to value. *Potential* instrumental value is analyzed in terms of an object's potential or capacities: its ability or capacity to be instrumental to value.

I think this response is untenable for two reasons. First, it misrepresents our reaction to the cases given here. Steinbeck's image is so tragic because these oranges (or, perhaps, the states of affairs in which there are budding

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<sup>14</sup>See, for instance, Zimmerman, 255. Note, however, that Zimmerman claims that to be potentially instrumental to value is a *kind* of value.

oranges in California groves) *are* valuable; it is not because they might be valuable under some other conditions. Furthermore, it seems to me, there is no other way to explain their value than insisting that they are valuable instrumentally. Their value is actual; the tragedy is that the genuine value goes to waste. Second, it is unclear what precisely this form of “potential” is supposed to amount to. It could refer, for instance, to a simple modal property, viz., that these oranges are actually instrumental to value in another possible world. But this is not a satisfactory analysis of the case. Any object has instrumental value in some other possible world. However, there is something importantly different between the value possessed by the oranges and, say, the value possessed by the body of this dead fly, which is instrumental to value in another possible world in which dead flies are as rare, and as prized, as diamonds are in this world. The loss of a dead fly is not tragic—not a waste—in the way the loss of the oranges is. The oranges have, I claim, actual instrumental value—actual value that goes to waste.

Alternatively, one might define the “potential” of the oranges or Hank’s pile of cash in terms of a certain form of unactivated disposition—the disposition to be instrumentally valuable. But though I think the disposition to be productive of final value is certainly an important part of the story concerning instrumental value, I think it is a mistake to say that possessing this disposition is merely possessing a disposition to be instrumentally valuable. In fact, it seems right to say that the possession of this disposition is, in an important sense, explanatory of the value that the oranges possess. Recall a previously quoted passage from Lewis. Lewis writes that “A thing *A* will never be said to have extrinsic value or instrumental value, unless it is meant to imply that there is some other thing, *B*, to which it is *or may be* instrumental, which has intrinsic value,” (my emphasis). As Lewis notes, an object’s being instrumentally valuable can supervene on the potential it has to contribute to final value—in other words, its disposition to so contribute. This suggestion will be developed in greater detail in the following section.

### 3. *Instrumental Value as Power*

A *disposition* or *power* is a property that attributes to an object the tendency to behave in a certain way assuming certain conditions obtain. For each disposition, there is a manifestation, and for each object that possesses this disposition, there is a set of *activation conditions*, conditions that tend to produce the manifestation. The textbook example is *fragility*. An object is fragile, for instance, if it has the power to break given the assumption of certain activation conditions—for a wine glass, the activation conditions will

include being thrown against a brick wall, or being in the room when Ella Fitzgerald hits a high C#. For different objects, the activation conditions of the specified disposition may vary. Two fragile glasses may require different activation conditions in order to display the disposition's manifestation: one glass may require Ella Fitzgerald to hit a high C#, the other may not break in response to sound waves at all, but will crumble upon coming into contact with human hands. Both, however, are fragile. With this in mind, I submit the following account of instrumental value:

*Instrumental Value as Power:* An object, state, or event  $x$  is instrumentally valuable if and only if it possesses the disposition to be instrumental to value.

*Instrumental Value as Power* can treat the above cases adequately. Take, for instance, my expired credit card. My expired credit card has no power to function in the production of final value and the explanation for this is its being past the relevant expiration date. Before this date, the card *did* have instrumental value; it had the disposition, the manifestation of which was being instrumental to value, and the activation condition of which was, say, being used to pay for movie tickets. But once the expiration date passed, given the various financial conventions governing the use of credit cards, etc., it ceased to have such instrumental value: it lost its *power* to so contribute. Hence *Instrumental Value as Power* accurately characterizes the lack of instrumental value to be found in my expired credit card.

Furthermore, Hank's \$4 million is instrumentally valuable according to *Instrumental Value as Power*, because this pile of cash is disposed to be instrumental to value. The power, in this case, is unmanifested: the pile of cash does not become instrumental to value. Nevertheless, the power remains. The case is the same when it comes to Steinbeck's oranges. These oranges are disposed, possess a power, the manifestation of which is being instrumental to value, and the activation conditions of which include, say, being consumed by the hungry.

Hence *Instrumental Value as Power* conforms to considered judgments about instrumental value that Bradley's account of extrinsic value cannot. Though we may believe that being instrumental to value is a genuine form of extrinsic value, being instrumental to value does not adequately capture the concept of instrumental value. Instrumental value is not the property of being instrumental to value, but is rather the property of being *disposed* to be instrumental to value. In this way, we capture the ascriptions of instrumental value for objects or states—like Steinbeck's oranges or Hank's money—that do not manifest in being instrumental to value, and the lack

of instrumental value for objects like my expired credit card, the existence of which has contributed to final value, but where the power to do so has since been lost. Furthermore, *Instrumental Value as Power* can accommodate any case of genuine instrumental value accommodated by Bradley's theory of extrinsic value: in order to be causally implicated in the overall bettering of states of affairs, any  $x$  must have the *disposition* to do so under some range of specified activation conditions. However—given the examples above—it would appear that instrumental value does not track being instrumental to value, but rather tracks the disposition to do so. Hence it would appear that *Instrumental Value as Power* is well-suited to account for the concept of instrumental value.

#### 4. *Instrumental Value and Intrinsic Value*

If *Instrumental Value as Power* is true, this causes serious problems for the claim that all instrumental value is extrinsic value. Why? Because—at least on the most common understanding—dispositions are intrinsic properties. Necessarily, so the principle goes, if any object  $x$  is replaced with a qualitatively identical object  $y$ , and if  $x$  possesses disposition  $d$ ,  $y$  will also possess disposition  $d$ . In other words, as David Lewis puts the matter: “if two things (actual or merely possible) are exact intrinsic duplicates (and if they are subject to the same laws of nature) then they are disposed alike.”<sup>15</sup> D.M. Armstrong, when discussing the fragility (or “brittleness”) of a glass, writes that “[t]he possession of the disposition [of brittleness] must... depend upon *non-relational* properties of the glass,” which, according to Armstrong, generalizes to all dispositions.<sup>16</sup> George Molnar holds that one of the key intuitive judgments that any analysis of dispositional property ascriptions must accommodate is the judgment that dispositional properties are intrinsic properties.<sup>17</sup>

If *Instrumental Value as Power* is true, it would appear that not all instrumental value is extrinsic value. Why? *Because instrumental value is a form of intrinsic value*—value that supervenes on the intrinsic properties of objects, states, or events.

There is, however, an objection to the line of argument I have so far been running. Some have argued that the instrumental value of objects depend

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<sup>15</sup>David Lewis, “Finkish Dispositions” in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (1997), 147.

<sup>16</sup>D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 12.

<sup>17</sup>George Molnar, “Are Dispositions Reducible?” in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999), 3.

importantly on the relational—and hence extrinsic—properties of the bearers of instrumental value. In particular, there appear to be two important examples. First, Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen argues that, for any case of instrumental value, this instrumental value must supervene on a relation. In considering the suggestion that instrumental value can be identified in the *ex ante facto* (by, for example, identifying the fact that an object possesses a disposition to be instrumental to value, rather than identifying the fact that the object has, in fact, been instrumental to value), Rønnow-Rasmussen writes:

[S]uch *ex ante* usage appears to create a problem for anyone who wants to argue that instrumental value is a kind of extrinsic value, i.e., a value that supervenes on some externally relational property. The reason is that in these cases there appears to be no actual relation between x and y but only a potential one. . . Still, the *ex ante* usage need not be inconsistent with the idea that ‘instrumentality’ or ‘usefulness’ are relational properties. . . The mink coat, for instance, need not stand in a *direct* relation to some object of final value in order to be of instrumental value. When we claim that the mink coat has instrumental value, we seem to be implying (among other things) that if the situation had changed, the mink coat might in fact lose its instrumentality (say, the owner became allergic to fur). This suggests that there is in fact some relational property involved.<sup>18</sup>

This argument can be taken in two ways. First, it might be said that any ascription of instrumental value depends, in some sense, on a relational property. But this could be true even if instrumental value is an intrinsic property. Indeed, in order for a fragile glass to break, it must be, say, smashed by another object or force. In this way, relations are an essential part of understanding the nature of fragility: without a particular relational property being present, the disposition will not manifest. Similarly for instrumental value. It might be that one activation condition of the mink coat’s instrumental value is being owned by someone who is not allergic to it. But this would still allow instrumental value to be intrinsic, for any intrinsic duplicate of the coat would still have the same disposition and the same activation conditions.

However, one might read Rønnow-Rasmussen’s argument in a slightly different way. For any given mink coat, we would say that it is instrumentally

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<sup>18</sup>Rønnow-Rasmussen, 30.

valuable, but *only on condition* that certain extrinsic properties hold, for instance, that its owner is not allergic to mink. If so, however, it must be the case that the instrumental value of the mink coat supervenes, at least in part, on the extrinsic properties of the object. It might be that, in this case, the relation is not an activation condition, but is rather an *ascription* condition of instrumental value. If this is true, then, for any instrumentally valuable mink coat, a qualitatively identical twin might not be instrumentally valuable (depending on the allergies of its owner).

As an aside, I don't think this reading of Rønnow-Rasmussen's mink coat argument is particularly plausible as a rejection of *Instrumental Value as Power*. In fact, just to note my own gut linguistic intuition, it does not seem to me to be the case that we would describe a perfectly good mink coat as losing instrumental value when its owner becomes allergic. Rather, we would say that in order for the instrumental value of that coat to be *manifested*, it must be owned by someone who is not allergic. I would claim, then, that rather than being a condition of the coat's instrumental value, being owned by a someone who is not allergic to mink is in fact an activation condition. A coat owned by someone allergic to mink is instrumentally valuable—but, like Steinbeck's oranges—will not be instrumental to value (unless, for instance, its ownership is transferred).

This is my gut reaction to the case, which may not be shared by all, so I propose to leave it aside and consider another case in which the instrumental value of a particular object appears to *clearly* supervene on its relational properties.<sup>19</sup> Consider, for instance, Hank's pile of cash. Any given bill in that pile is instrumentally valuable. But this instrumental value depends crucially on the *place of origin* of the bill. United States currency is only instrumentally valuable (or only instrumentally valuable in the standard way) if it is printed under the auspices of the United States Bureau of Engraving and Printing, or—at the very least—is *thought* to be so printed. The qualitative duplicate of a genuine 100-dollar bill is instrumentally valuable only if that qualitative duplicate was also printed by the US government—if its qualitative duplicate fell from the sky, or was printed by Joe Counterfeiter, or merely popped into existence, this bill is not instrumentally valuable. Hence it would appear that the instrumental value of Hank's pile of cash depends crucially upon a relational property, viz., the property of having been printed—or at least not being thought not to have been printed—by the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

If so, it would appear that *Instrumental Value as Power* is in trouble. If

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<sup>19</sup>Many thanks to Chris Heathwood for pressing this objection.

powers are intrinsic properties, and if the instrumental value of Hank's pile of cash supervenes, at least in part, on its relational properties, instrumental value cannot be accounted for in terms of dispositional properties or powers.

The argument just presented is valid but unsound. In particular, *Intrinsic Value as Power* is only vulnerable to this argument if we accept the premise argued for by Armstrong and others that all dispositional properties are intrinsic properties. But this claim should be rejected. Indeed, Jennifer McKittrick has, to my mind, done much to show that dispositional properties *can* be extrinsic: in other words, the ascription conditions of some dispositional properties involve the presence of extrinsic properties. Though not all of McKittrick's examples are equally plausible, the following example seems to do the trick. McKittrick discusses the example of *weight*: "x has *weight* n iff x has a disposition to depress a properly constructed scale so as to elicit a reading of n pounds in x's [current] gravitational field."<sup>20</sup> This disposition is clearly extrinsic—it supervenes not only on the object's mass, but also on the presence of the object in a gravitational field that will allow it to depress a properly constructed scale by *n*. However, weight, as McKittrick defines it, bears all the relevant marks of a dispositional property.<sup>21</sup> In the face of McKittrick's examples, Michael Fara states that "an insistence that dispositions must be intrinsic properties starts to seem like simple prejudice."<sup>22</sup>

Hence it seems right to say not that *Instrumental Value as Power* is false, but rather that instrumental value can *sometimes* be an extrinsic property. In the case of Hank's pile of cash—and perhaps Rønnow-Rasmussen's mink coat—the instrumental value of these objects clearly supervenes on extrinsic properties. But this simply goes to show that, in these cases, the disposition to be instrumental to value supervenes on extrinsic properties of the object, state, or event. It does not show that instrumental value is not a disposition.

### 5. *Is Instrumental Value an Extrinsic Property?*

*Instrumental Value as Power* better captures our judgments about instrumental value when than Bradley's account of extrinsic value. However, it remains to be seen whether instrumental value is *always* an extrinsic

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<sup>20</sup>Jennifer McKittrick, "A Case for Extrinsic Dispositions" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003), 160.

<sup>21</sup>See McKittrick, 156-8.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Fara, "Dispositions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/dispositions/>>.

property, i.e., whether the disposition to be instrumental to value always supervenes—at least in part—on the extrinsic properties of objects. And I think the answer to this question is clearly “no”. Take again Steinbeck’s oranges. As Stephen Mumford notes, when we ascribe dispositions, we do so in context:

To say that something is soluble is to say that it will dissolve, in liquid, in a context relative to the ascription. The ascription in the actual world is relative to actual world conditions. It is also relative to actual world conditions that can vaguely be understood as ‘normal’... In making an appropriate and useful disposition ascription I am saying that, in ordinary conditions for the present context, if a particular antecedent is realized, a particular manifestation usually follows.<sup>23</sup>

Mumford is right in noting that dispositional property ascriptions are grounded contextually. After all, as Mumford notes, a stainless steel cup will break upon being hit if the temperature is cold enough.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean, however, that the stainless steel cup is properly described as fragile. This is because ascriptions of fragility take it as given that the ascription is given under *normal* conditions. In this way, one might say, “normal” conditions are *folded into* the activation conditions of any given dispositional property ascription: a given object is water-soluble only if it will dissolve when placed in water under *normal* conditions. But it *is* true of Steinbeck’s oranges that they will be instrumental to value when eaten by humans—under normal conditions. Furthermore, it is also true that *any qualitatively identical twin* of any of the oranges also has the disposition to be instrumental to value when eaten by humans under normal conditions. Thus when it comes to Steinbeck’s oranges, instrumental value is an intrinsic property—it is a property shared by any intrinsic twin.

Thus it seems that instrumental value, depending on the object or state, *can* be an example of intrinsic value. In the case of Hank’s cash, instrumental value is a case of extrinsic value. In the case of Steinbeck’s oranges, instrumental value is a case of intrinsic value. Whether the disposition to be instrumental to value is intrinsic or extrinsic for a given object, state, or event, will depend on whether the ascription condition of the disposition to be instrumental to value depends on extrinsic properties or does not. In the case of the oranges, the ascription conditions of instrumental value are

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<sup>23</sup>Mumford, 89.

<sup>24</sup>Mumford, 88-9.

not dependent upon extrinsic properties: any intrinsic duplicate of an orange will be identically disposed to be instrumental to value (given that the presence of vaguely “normal conditions” is taken as an essential activation condition). In the case of the money, it is not the case that any intrinsic duplicate will be identically disposed to be instrumental to value, because that intrinsic duplicate might not have been printed under the auspices of the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Hence even though instrumental value is, on occasion, an extrinsic property, it is also *often* an intrinsic property. Hence instrumental value is *often* a form of intrinsic value. Hence it would appear that the view that identifies final value with intrinsic value is also mistaken. Mooreanism about final value is false: it cannot properly distinguish final value from instrumental value.