

Contextualism about Intrinsic Value

Contextualism about knowledge is a semantic thesis about epistemic language—in particular ‘knowledge’—and is primarily used as a strategy for coping with Cartesian-style skepticism. The Cartesian skeptic sets—or according to some, uncovers or accurately articulates—a seemingly impossibly high bar for knowledge. Yet surely, it is insisted, we know many things that, according to the Cartesian skeptic, we do not and could not know. Contextualism about knowledge tries to respect the skeptical challenge without conceding its radical conclusions by arguing that the truth conditions and propositional content of knowledge claims vary by context.

Descartes surely bears a large part of the responsibility for our contemporary preoccupation with epistemological skepticism. In value theory, the parallel distinction belongs to G.E. Moore. Prior to Moore, intrinsic value, or its nearest linguistic and conceptual cousins like the “valuable in itself” or the “good in itself” had not been analyzed so thoroughly, interpreted so literally, or made so inaccessible. Moore raised the bar for what counts as intrinsically valuable, and made the “intrinsic value club” not simply more exclusive than before but apparently devoid of members altogether.

Descartes presumably didn’t intend for his skeptical epistemological concerns to become such a large part of his legacy; he would likely have been disappointed that Cartesian *skepticism* has inspired a great deal more enthusiasm and concern than his attempted solution to this skepticism. His attempted solution, fairly or not, is commonly treated as cannon fodder for graduate students, a pedagogical tool rather than a formidable argument in its own right. Similarly, Moore’s rigorous analysis of intrinsic value apparently was not intended to generate skepticism about intrinsic value, but simply to give a clearer and more detailed understanding of the nature of intrinsic value. Contrary to his wishes, Moore’s analysis makes intrinsic value look like an impossibility. At least, deep skepticism about, if not outright rejection of Moorean intrinsic value seems to be the prevailing contemporary attitude among analytic philosophers. I won’t comment here on Descartes’ philosophical legacy, or whether a satisfactory solution to the skeptical doubts he raised have been settled—by him or by anyone else. With respect to Moore, though, I would like to say more.

The inadvertent “intrinsic value skepticism” fostered by Moore’s analysis of intrinsic value poses a substantial threat to moral theory. A number of central moral properties—such as moral rightness and wrongness, responsibility, virtue, rights and duties may depend upon the existence of intrinsic value. Implicitly acknowledging the difficulties with Moorean intrinsic value, a number of contemporary philosophers have attempted, with varying success, to give an account of intrinsic value that captures some of the virtues of Moore’s account without incurring its unacceptable costs. I offer in this paper a novel account of intrinsic value that is not only plausible on its own merits, but can additionally explain the variety and content of various contemporary versions of intrinsic value vying to take Moore’s place. I will argue that a contextualist account of ‘intrinsic value’, parallel in many ways to contextualist accounts of ‘knowledge’, allows for ascriptions of intrinsic value to be both unmysterious and true in a variety of important moral contexts.

Financial and Moral Forgiveness

In this paper I compare *moral* forgiveness—forgiveness of a person in moral debt—and *financial* forgiveness—forgiveness of a person in financial debt. I use this comparison to illuminate the shortcomings of various attempts within moral philosophy to characterize forgiveness; to develop my own account of forgiveness; and to clarify the kinds of considerations that can give one a reason to forgive.

In the first section of the paper I consider various well-known and prima facie attractive attempts to characterize forgiveness—starting with Butler’s justly celebrated account—and argue that these attempts are inadequate. I propose that a satisfactory definition of moral forgiveness ought to incorporate various structural features of financial forgiveness. Most importantly, a satisfactory

definition must instantiate a prominent feature of financial debt and forgiveness: namely, what I call the essentially interpersonal nature of debt and forgiveness. A familiar thought is that financial debt cannot be eliminated by anyone other than the debtor, and cannot be forgiven by anyone but the creditor. If I, the creditor, come into some unexpected money for instance, the money owed to me by my debtor is unaffected. There is a relational or interpersonal account between creditors and debtors whose balance is seemingly determined by *their* financial actions alone. I argue that moral debt and forgiveness is similarly interpersonal, and similarly insulated from various external circumstances typically thought to bear in important ways on the reasons one has to forgive. The alternative accounts of moral forgiveness that I consider fail to recognize this central feature of moral forgiveness. This failure exposes such accounts to various well-known criticisms, such as the charge that forgiveness is incompatible with self-respect. These are charges to which my account, I claim, is immune.

In the final section of my paper I offer an account of the reasons a person might have to forgive his or her wrongdoer(s), an account that is, obviously, informed by what I take to be important structural similarities between financial and moral forgiveness.

Moral Purity Analyzed

It is argued first that the virtue of moral purity has an interesting and perhaps unique logical structure that is separable in two ways from what is often taken to be its essential—and objectionable—content. It is conceded that its historical instantiations have indeed often been coercive, segregationist, and prudish. But nevertheless it is argued that the offensive *substance* of these instantiations is not determined by the structure of purity considered abstractly. I offer an analysis of purity as an abstract standard, and then consider what place, if any, moral purity should have in the character of a moral person. I argue that moral purity can in fact be virtuous for persons of certain character types. However, I claim that because of its peculiar logical structure—a structure that can discourage the development of an admirably rich and complex character—moral purity would not find a place among the character qualities of various morally admirable character types.

Utility and the Virtues

In this paper I challenge the utilitarian view of the justificatory relationship between virtue and utility. In particular, I defend the plausibility of a provocative but largely undeveloped claim by Philippa Foot: that utility is good simply because it is the end of the virtue of benevolence. In her defense I argue that the main arguments for the justificatory priority of utility vis a vis virtue can be used with equal success to show that virtue is in fact prior to utility with respect to justification. The paper is meant to “disarm” the utilitarian arguments that attempt to prove the relative priority of utility with respect to virtue.