

UNIQUENESS, INTRINSIC VALUE, AND REASONS

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ABSTRACT. Uniqueness appears to enhance intrinsic value. A unique stamp sells for millions of dollars; Stradivarius violins are all the more precious because they are unlike any others. This observation has not gone overlooked in the value theory literature: uniqueness plays a starring role recalibrating the dominant Moorean understanding of the nature of intrinsic value. But the thesis that uniqueness enhances intrinsic value is in tension with another deeply plausible and widely-held thesis, namely the thesis that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the good. It is argued that there is a second, distinct type of uniqueness that plays a more interesting and important axiological role: uniqueness imparts *irreplaceable value*. This gives occasion to develop the surprisingly undertheorized notion of irreplaceable value.

Key words: *uniqueness; intrinsic value; irreplaceable value; reasons.*

Uniqueness plays a starring role recalibrating the dominant understanding of intrinsic value. Since G. E. Moore, the orthodox view has been that intrinsic value is strictly in virtue of intrinsic properties.¹ But the orthodox view is no longer orthodox since it has been brought to light that something can have what seems to be intrinsic value in virtue of properties that are not intrinsic, but *extrinsic*.² Uniqueness may have

¹ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960 [1903]).

² This insight has prompted some philosophers to switch terminology to “final value” rather than “intrinsic value.” Most continue to use “intrinsic value” as I will here, and, throughout the paper, I understand intrinsic value as the value something has for its own

been the very first example ever used to illustrate this point: Monroe Beardsley describes a unique sheet of stamps where part of the image is printed upside down.³ Such a stamp is valuable for its own sake, observes Beardsley, since it is not valuable for the sake of anything else, yet its value is entirely a matter of how other stamps in the world are. Shelly Kagan draws from examples of uniqueness to illustrate the same conclusion:

Many people, I think, are attracted to a view according to which the intrinsic value of an object depends in part on how rare that object is, or (in the limiting case) on its being completely unique. Obviously enough, however, uniqueness is not a property that an object has independently of whatever else may exist in the world; it is a relational property, rather than being an intrinsic one. Thus if an object's value as an end can depend upon its uniqueness, intrinsic value need not depend solely upon intrinsic properties.⁴

Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen also take uniqueness to play this role:

A rare or unique thing may be valued even when this thing is neither a means to something valuable nor a part of some larger valuable whole. ... in this case, the final value of an object is supposed to *supervene* on a relational property:

sake, which may be in virtue of extrinsic properties. Although I am arguing that uniqueness is not a successful example of an extrinsic property that grounds intrinsic value, there nevertheless are others.

³ Monroe C. Beardsley, "Intrinsic Value," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXVI, 1 (September 1965): 1-17.

Beardsley was presumably inspired by the Inverted Jenny, a 1918 US 24¢ stamp in which the image on the stamp, an airplane, was mistakenly printed upside down. The error was known to occur for only one sheet of 100 stamps, making them exceedingly rare and valuable.

⁴ Shelly Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value," *The Journal of Ethics*, II, 4 (1998): 277-97, at pp. 282-83.

we value a thing *on account of* its being rare or unique.⁵

And so the formerly dominant view of intrinsic value was dramatically shaken in large part by counterexamples appealing to what I will call the *uniqueness thesis*: uniqueness imparts intrinsic value.

But just what is uniqueness and why is it a source of value, if indeed it is? Once the details of the nature of uniqueness come into focus, there is reason to be skeptical about the uniqueness thesis, or so I will argue. Instead, there is an entirely different sense of uniqueness that is more significant, albeit in a completely different way: rather than enhance intrinsic value, uniqueness can impart *irreplaceable value*.

In the first part of the paper, I develop an account of what I take to be the commonsense notion of uniqueness, *qualitative uniqueness*, and argue that the uniqueness thesis is in tension with a deeply plausible and widely-held thesis about intrinsic value. In the second part of the paper, I turn to explain the second type of uniqueness, *unreinstanciable uniqueness*, and show how unreinstanciable uniqueness imparts irreplaceable value, which better accounts for intuitions about uniqueness. This gives occasion to develop an account (or at least a sketch of an account) of irreplaceable value, which is surprisingly undertheorized.

Throughout, I am largely assuming a pluralistic substantive axiology, according to which certain objects such as works of art and historical artifacts (or states of affairs in which those objects exist or are appreciated) are intrinsically valuable, and I focus on degree of value and reasons toward it, as opposed to, say, patterns of its distribution. For people who hold that, say, all value is a matter of what's good for sentient beings: it is compatible with that view to also hold that e.g., works of art are constitutive parts of wholes that involve their appreciation.

QUALITATIVE UNIQUENESS

⁵ Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and for its Own Sake," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, C, 1 (June 2000): 33-51, at p. 40. Emphasis original.

As grammar sticklers love to point out when correcting the expression “very unique,” to be unique is to be “one of a kind.” Uniqueness is singular and kind-relative. The British Guiana 1¢ Magenta is unique relative to all other stamps; a handmade vase is unique relative to mass-produced vases. What characterizes uniqueness is a matter of being *qualitatively dissimilar*: something is unique when it has different qualities, or properties, than other members of its kind. Further, uniqueness is related to rarity. The Inverted Jenny stamps are not utterly unique, but they are very rare. There is a small number of them that are qualitatively dissimilar from other members of their kind. The same thing is true of Stradivarius violins. There is a relatively small number of them, and they are importantly distinctive from other violins.

But consider the very archetype of uniqueness: snowflakes. Snowflakes are said to be unique, but it is hardly plausible that they are intrinsically valuable. The explanation is that there is a specific pattern of dissimilarity among members of a kind in cases where uniqueness is plausibly relevant for value. Contrast the patterns of dissimilarities among snowflakes with Inverted Jenny stamps: each snowflake is different from every other snowflake, but the few Inverted Jenny stamps are different from the very large number of all correctly printed stamps of that run. When uniqueness is relevant for intrinsic value, the pattern of dissimilarities takes this shape: there is a norm of homogeneity around which the majority of the members of the kind cluster, and apart from which the unique member stands out. But there is no norm of homogeneity among snowflakes. This is why it makes no sense to call a snowflake “rare.”

Consequently, there are two different patterns of dissimilarities within a kind that make for something to be qualitatively unique, but only one of these patterns is relevant for intrinsic value. Snowflakes are unique, but the pattern of dissimilarity that characterizes their uniqueness is not relevant for intrinsic value; in contrast, the pattern of dissimilarity that characterizes the way in which the 1¢ Magenta or a Stradivarius violin are unique is putatively relevant for imbuing intrinsic value. Qualitative uniqueness of the sort relevant for intrinsic value, then, amounts to this:

an object is qualitatively unique just in case it is dissimilar from other members of its class in some respect, on condition that the other members of the class are similar to each other.⁶

In the case of rarity:

an object is qualitatively rare just in case there is a very small number of such objects that are relevantly similar to each other, and these objects are relevantly dissimilar from the other members of the class on condition that the other members of the class are similar to each other.

The uniqueness thesis holds that both qualitative uniqueness and qualitative rarity impart intrinsic value.

However, there are obvious cases where qualitative uniqueness fails to impart intrinsic value. Suppose there is a malfunction at the toothbrush factory, and a toothbrush comes out curled up like a corkscrew. This toothbrush does not now have intrinsic value. It is in light of the possibility of such examples that both Beardsley and Kagan suggest that the most plausible understanding of the uniqueness thesis is that uniqueness *enhances* prior intrinsic value rather than bestows it altogether. As Kagan says, “only objects that are independently intrinsically valuable are such as to have their value enhanced by uniqueness,”⁷ and Beardsley makes a similar remark about rarity: “rarity cannot transform an object with no value into one with value; it can only increase certain sorts of value in things that already have some degree of it.”⁸ So according to the uniqueness thesis, uniqueness *enhances* intrinsic value.

However one might point out that the central examples to motivate the uniqueness thesis, namely rare stamps are, like currency, the very models of mere instrumental, not intrinsic, value. If a stamp accrues intrinsic value as a result of being

⁶ These characteristics come in degrees – something can be more or less dissimilar, and there could be greater or fewer similar things in the class. So it turns out that, if this is indeed an accurate characterization of uniqueness, it does, after all, come in degrees.

⁷ Kagan, “Rethinking Intrinsic Value,” *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁸ Beardsley, “Intrinsic Value,” *op. cit.*, p. 62.

unique, then uniqueness *does* impart and not merely enhance intrinsic value.

Yet stamps or coins can in fact have intrinsic value. Consider a discovery of thousands of Ancient Roman coins. These coins are not unique (there are thousands), but each one is intrinsically valuable in virtue of being a cultural artifact from a bygone civilization. Similarly, stamps such as the Inverted Jenny and 1¢ Magenta are not merely instrumentally valuable, but have intrinsic value because they too are cultural artifacts of bygone eras. Even if they were not unique, they would have this value. Their value, then, can be enhanced when they are rare and unique, as are Stradivarius violins, Medieval suits of armor, the Sword of Goujian, and so on.

According to the uniqueness thesis, then, qualitative uniqueness enhances intrinsic value.

REASONS AND UNIQUENESS

As plausible as it may be, however, the uniqueness thesis is in tension with another deeply plausible and widely held thesis about intrinsic value. This is the thesis that:

(PT) there is a pro tanto reason to promote intrinsic value.

If something has intrinsic value, its presence in the world makes the world better and it is deeply plausible that there is pro tanto reason to do what makes the world better. This amounts to promoting the good. PT has long been one of the dominant theses about the nature of intrinsic value. G. E. Moore seems to have held this view.⁹ Shelly Kagan also holds that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the good: “if something does have value as an end, then there is reason to “promote” it, to try to produce the valuable object.”¹⁰ PT is the

⁹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Kagan, “Rethinking Intrinsic Value,” *op. cit.*, p. 279; cf. Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ulrike Heuer, “Raz on Value and Reasons,” in R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith, eds., *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

foil for the rival buck-passing analysis of value.¹¹ In spite of the popularity of the buck-passing analysis, it is widely acknowledged even by primary proponents of the view that it suffers at least one deeply problematic flaw with unsettled attempts at solutions.¹² So we should be very interested in the integrity of traditional view that it was meant to supplant.

According to PT, if something has intrinsic value, then we have reason to promote it. If uniqueness enhances intrinsic value, it follows that we have pro tanto reason to promote uniqueness. But this turns out to be very peculiar. It is, as I will now argue, at worst incoherent, and at best either a case of mistaken identity or very implausible.

First, one might attempt to promote uniqueness by creating more of the objects that are unique, say, by issuing more inverted stamps. But doing this, of course, undermines the very property in virtue of which these things are valuable, namely, being rare or one of a kind. Promoting uniqueness understood in this way is therefore incoherent. This construal fails to promote uniqueness insofar as it mistakenly promotes the number of objects which currently instantiate the property of uniqueness, which has the effect of de-instantiating the relational property of uniqueness.

A more accurate construal of promoting uniqueness is to increase the number of objects that are different from the other members of their kinds by, say, creating newly unique objects. If the uniqueness thesis is true, then we indeed have a pro tanto reason to do this.

2004), pp. 129-52; Errol Lord and Barry Maguire, "An Opinionated Guide to the Weight of Reasons" in Errol Lord and Barry Maguire, eds., *Weighing Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 3-24, at pp. 16-17.

¹¹ T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹² Namely, the "wrong kind of reasons" problem. See Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-Attitudes and Value," *Ethics*, CXIV, 3 (April 2004): 391-423. The debate continues, in e.g., Jonas Olson, "The Wrong Kind of Solution to the Wrong Kind of Reason Problem" *Utilitas*, XXI, 2 (June 2009): 225-32; John Brunero, "Consequentialism and the Wrong Kind of Reasons: A Reply to Lang," *Utilitas*, XXII, 3 (September 2010): 351-59. For recent full development of the buck-passing account, Richard Rowland, *The Normative and the Evaluative: The Buck-Passing Account of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Prima facie we have such reasons. We encourage creative people to create unique works of art and we think that the world is a better place for it. We think that it is better to have a cupboard full of unique artisanal pottery, rather than factory-made plates, and that there is something better about having an original artwork than a poster of Monet's water lilies.

But looking closely, uniqueness *per se* is not a reason to create just anything, regardless of its artistic merit. Often the result of creative activities is unique, but the uniqueness is a mere sign or byproduct of creativity. So uniqueness as such does not generate reasons to be promoted in this way.

Alternatively, we might take a currently existing non-unique object in a homogeneous kind and make it dissimilar from the other members of the kind. Say you have bought a new house in a suburban development, which is virtually identical to all the other houses on the block. You might take yourself to have good reason to make your house distinctive – perhaps you decide to paint the front door a different color or plant an attractive front garden.

But do you have reason to do such things *just because* it would make your house unique? You wouldn't want just *anything* to make your house distinctive. Rather, the reason to do these things is to make your home more comfortably your own, or to express your good taste. Again, uniqueness as such is not a source of reasons, but is instead a byproduct. Moreover, if uniqueness gave everyone reasons to make their house unique, this too would be self-undermining.

So far we have been considering ways of promoting uniqueness by promoting the number of objects that instantiate the property of being unique, and not found any clear examples. Perhaps we will find more promising examples if we understand promoting uniqueness as enhancing the property of uniqueness itself where it is already instantiated, that is, enhancing uniqueness by increasing the dimensions of dissimilarity: we can enhance the degree to which something is different from the other members of its kind.

As intriguing as this idea might be, it turns out to be very unappealing. We can enhance the uniqueness of a Stradivarius violin by altering it to make it even more distinctive from other violins, say, by painting it with green and white stripes or adding an extra string. But we clearly

have no reason at all to these things. Further, since there are currently several Stradivarius violins that still exist (approximately 650), we can enhance the uniqueness of one of them by destroying all the others. The last Stradivarius would then be even more distinctive than all other violins. But we have no reason whatsoever to destroy Stradivarius violins. To be sure, the loss of the value of the destroyed Stradivarii counts against their destruction, but if we accept PT, we must claim that the value accrued by the uniqueness of the last remaining Stradivarius counts as *some reason* in favor of destroying the others. The same line of reasoning holds also for other examples, such as endangered species. There is some reason to kill off all but one of the last remaining sea turtles, giant pandas, and blue whales, and to destroy all but one Ancient Mayan temple or Shakespeare folio. If we discover another planet with life, it follows that there is some reason to destroy it given by the uniqueness of Earth as the only planet with life. It seems to me that there is *no* reason at all to do any of these things. But if uniqueness is a property that makes things valuable, and value is that which we have reason to promote, then we have reason to promote uniqueness.

A natural conclusion to draw from these examples is that the value accrued from uniqueness is *very, very slight*. So the reason that counts in favor of destruction is very small – so small that it is grossly outweighed by the loss in value of the destroyed violins, and as a result are virtually undetectable. Perhaps, then, we should be skeptical about intuitions about negative reasons.¹³ Fair enough, for the time being, although as we will see shortly, this concession leads to counterintuitive implications down the line.

In any case, we might take a different tack. We have been focusing on different ways uniqueness can be promoted, but perhaps what needs reconstrual is *promoting* more generally. So far we have been taking the reasons to promote value as reasons to make or realize more of it, either by making more of the objects that bear the good-making property, or enhancing the good-making property itself. But what if we understand promoting not as *making more* but instead as *promoting continued existence*. This reconstrual avoids all the counterintuitive implications considered so far.

¹³ E.g., Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 93.

Now, there is much at stake concerning how promotion is construed. It is important for proponents of PT to construe promotion as *making more* because many philosophers who are attracted to PT use PT as a bridge to consequentialism. But even if one is not interested in defending consequentialism, it is nevertheless a very compelling thought that there is a pro tanto reason to make more good when possible, other things equal, and PT is accepted by consequentialists and nonconsequentialists alike. If A makes some already good X better, that fact pro tanto counts in favor of bringing about A, so if, in some cases, there is *not* a pro tanto reason to bring about more good, but only a reason to promote its continued existence as is, there needs to be a principled explanation.

Looking at it one way, it seems that there is indeed a principled explanation. The first attempt to examine “promoting uniqueness” considered in this paper shows that it is in some sense *impossible* to promote uniqueness on grounds of being self-undermining. One might then conclude that whenever it is impossible to promote a good by creating more of it, there is instead reason to *promote its continued existence*. This explains why we do not have reason to promote uniqueness, but do have reason to promote currently existing unique things.

But it is false that it is impossible to promote uniqueness. Uniqueness can be promoted by enhancing the dimensions of dissimilarity and thereby enhancing the uniqueness of currently existing unique objects. But, as we have seen, this way of promoting uniqueness involves destroying Stradivarius violins and Ancient Mayan temples and so on. It is *deeply* unattractive.

The solution, it seems, is to claim that uniqueness enhances value only by only a very small amount, and so the reasons for destruction are easily outweighed.

But, as I hinted earlier, this too turns out to be inadequate. Suppose that there were indeed only one remaining Stradivarius violin. It would be incredibly precious. It would be very important to go to great lengths to protect it from damage and to ensure that it survives as long as possible. Some people would be moved to donate large sums of money to ensure its protection and safekeeping (speaking for myself, I would take a bullet for it). Consider in contrast what we have reason to do to protect any of the currently existing 650 or so

Stradivarius violins. We do have strong reasons to preserve them, of course, but musicians play on them, and take them on airplanes and in taxicabs. In contrast, the measures of protection that we would grant the last remaining Stradivarius are *considerably* more intense and elaborate. The point is this: the reasons vis-à-vis the last remaining Stradivarius violin are considerably stronger and more urgent than the reasons to act toward the currently existing several Stradivarius instruments. There is significant jump in the strength of reason to preserve a Stradivarius when it is utterly unique as opposed to merely rare.

Yet we have just concluded that uniqueness enhances value only by a very small amount. There is only a very slight increase in value of the violin as a result of its uniqueness, and so the increase in strength of reasons to protect the last remaining Stradivarius violin must only be very slight as well, on the assumption that strength of reasons tracks amount of value. But this does not appear to be the case at all. The reasons to preserve the last remaining Stradivarius are considerably stronger than the reasons to preserve any Stradivarius while there are still several in existence. While I might be willing to take a bullet for the last remaining Stradivarius, I'm not so sure that I would be willing to do it for any of several.

As a result, either we must maintain that there is nothing particularly remarkable about the strength of reasons to save the last Stradivarius, Mayan temple, or Shakespeare folio than if there were many such things, or that we have a surprisingly strong reason to destroy Stradivarius violins, Mayan temples, Shakespeare folios, and other such treasures. Both of these options are significantly counterintuitive.

I suspect that many proponents of PT will feel more strongly about maintaining their position with respect to the pro tanto reason to promote intrinsic value and the connection to consequentialism than about protecting Mayan temples and Stradivarius violins, and so, as proponents of this view typically do in the face of counterintuitive implications, will be willing to bite the bullet rather than take it. Consequently, to maintain the position that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the good, the PT proponent should reject the uniqueness thesis.

Now, one may wish to suggest that PT only holds for what we may distinguish as *moral* intrinsic value, that is, the kind of value that morality requires us to promote, whereas these examples are largely instances of *aesthetic* value or historical value.¹⁴ As, say, epistemic value does not (without argument) give rise to reasons to be promoted, perhaps it's the case that other kinds of value such as aesthetic value also do not.

To be sure, aesthetic value has its own normativity. But, like Moore, I think it is plausible that works of art themselves or objects with aesthetic value *also* and in part for that reason have intrinsic (moral) value. Moreover, only some of the examples of intrinsic value in virtue of uniqueness are aesthetic. It's a stretch to think that the only significance of an original Shakespeare folio is its aesthetic value (which would reside in the work, not the folio), likewise for Mayan temples or endangered giant sea turtles. One may point to historical value as an alternative for some of these (I consider this later) but in all cases it seems that it is good simply that these things exist (or exist and are appreciated) – which is to say that they have intrinsic value. Now, one may reject this and maintain that all instances of apparent value-enhancing by uniqueness are cases of strictly aesthetic value. This, in short, would be to reject the uniqueness thesis.

Nevertheless, there would remain the question of why there is reason to preserve unique aesthetically valuable things. I believe what I say in the next section will answer that question.

However, in a similar vein, we might take PT's incompatibility with the uniqueness thesis to be a reason to reject PT in favor of affirming a wider range of responses to value. Proponents of the buck-passing and fitting-attitudes accounts of value often support their views by observing that there is a range of appropriate responses to value.¹⁵ Values call for proattitudes construed broadly, including desiring, favoring, respecting – not simply a matter of promotion.

¹⁴ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

¹⁵ Yet pluralism about responses to value is not tied strictly to either buck-passing or the fitting attitude account. One can be a pluralist in this way without affirming either such as the view in Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

However, this by itself only goes so far. We are still left with the question of how to *account for* the difference in the character of the reasons regarding uniqueness. *Why* do we have reason to promote the continued existence of unique objects, but not have reason to create more? Why is there a jump in the strength of reasons from rare to unique? These questions need principled answers. Indeed, for all the discussion of buck-passing and fitting-attitudes accounts, there is surprisingly little work that attempts to account with precision for the range of responses that befit value. It is often noted that a great deal turns on this – that the vacation will be pleasant gives a reason to take it, but certainly not to *respect* it, and so on. As far as I know, little has been done to sort out why different values have these crucial differences. The view that I propose in the rest of this paper does just this, for one important category of value.

What I'm going to say isn't exactly a rejection of PT, although it will put some pressure on it – it will explain why there is a jump in the strength of reasons to, e.g., promote the continued existence of the last Stradivarius, even though it does not bear a greater quantity of value in virtue of its uniqueness. It is therefore compatible with PT (or a version thereof), as well as pluralist views, and, moreover, it is potentially compatible with the buck-passing and fitting-attitudes structures of the metaphysics of intrinsic value as well as a traditional Moorean view.

UNREINSTANTIABLE UNIQUENESS

My proposal is that there is another type of uniqueness. It is not the uniqueness of being *one of a kind* that matters in these cases, but the uniqueness of being *one and only*. This kind of uniqueness does not imbue intrinsic value. Rather, it can shape the way in which an object is valuable. What I will call *unreinstanitable uniqueness* is a matter of being the bearer of certain properties that, as a matter of historical fact, cannot be newly reinstated.

Properties, traditionally construed, can be multiply instantiated. The property of *redness*, the property of *being a human being*, or the property of *having a high school diploma* are instantiated by many things. Many properties, including these ones, can also be newly reinstated: a property *p* can

be instantiated at t_1 by some object O, and later at t_2 , p can be instantiated in object R.

But some properties are such that they cannot be newly reinstated. For example, a piano that belonged to the late Glenn Gould has the property *belonged to Glenn Gould*. This property is unreinstatable. Therefore, there is a kind of uniqueness that is imparted by having such a history: by having properties that cannot be reinstated, these objects are unique. Nothing else can have these properties. When an object has unreinstatable properties, it is the only thing with these properties, and the only thing that could ever have these properties; or rather, in some cases, the only *things* that could ever have these properties, since some properties that cannot be newly reinstated are instantiated multiply. *Painted by Monet*, and *worn by Princess Diana* are properties that several objects have, but they cannot be instantiated anew. These properties are multiply instantiated, and they are unreinstatable. Hence objects that have such properties aren't unique insofar as they are the *only* objects bearing these properties; rather, they are the only objects that have or could have these properties. They too have unreinstatable uniqueness, or one might say unreinstatable rarity. Hence unreinstatable uniqueness is, in this sense, also related to rarity. So,

an object is unreinstatably unique just in case it is the only object that bears properties that cannot be reinstated.

In the case of rarity,

an object is unreinstatably rare just in case it bears properties that cannot be reinstated.

Of course, virtually everything that exists has some properties that are unreinstatable, consequently virtually everything is unreinstatably unique or rare.¹⁶ So the task is to discern in

¹⁶ I will simply say "unreinstatable uniqueness" rather than "unreinstatable uniqueness or rarity," unless making a distinction between the two is relevant.

virtue of which properties unreinstantiable uniqueness is significant.

My proposal is this: it is when (at least some of) an object's *good-making properties* are unreinstantiable that unreinstantiable uniqueness is relevant for value.¹⁷ Further, it is *irreplaceable value* that unreinstantiable uniqueness imparts.

IRREPLACEABLE VALUE

Irreplaceable value is surprisingly undertheorized.¹⁸ The general idea is that irreplaceable value is value that, if lost, can't be wholly replenished in the same way.

¹⁷ Raz articulates something similar to irreplaceable value, although the focus of his discussion is somewhat different (namely our individual attachments to uniqueness): “[t]he object of an attachment is unique if one of its properties, essential to the value it in fact has, and which is responsible for at least part of the value of the attachment to it, is such that it can only be instantiated once” (Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28). But Raz’s focus concerns personal attachments, whereas I am discussing impersonal irreplaceable value. There is a similarity as well to Grau’s view that we value “something as irreplaceable (as possessing a unique value) [when it] involves a kind of final value that derives from certain extrinsic or relational properties of the object” (Christopher Grau, “Irreplaceability and Unique Value,” *Philosophical Topics*, XXXII, 1&2 (Spring & Fall 2004): 111-29, at p. 126). Specifically, unique value occurs when “objects that have relevant extrinsic properties that are *not* shared by another” (*Ibid.*). On my view, it is not necessary that unreinstantiable good-making properties are extrinsic (although one may view unreinstantiability as an extrinsic metaproperty).

¹⁸ Related discussions can be found in, e.g., Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment*, *op. cit.*; Grau, “Irreplaceability and Unique Value,” *op. cit.*; Christopher W. Gowans, “Intimacy, Freedom, and Unique Value: A “Kantian” Account of the Irreplaceable and Incomparable Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXIII, 1 (1996): 75-89; G. A. Cohen, “Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value,” in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman, eds., *Reasons and Recognition: Essays in Honor of T. M. Scanlon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 203-30; Erich Hatala Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability,” *Ethics*, CXXIV, 1 (October 2013): 35-64; Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Things: In Touch with the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

This is often illustrated by what some call a “swap test” – things with irreplaceable value resist being exchanged, even with something of equal value.¹⁹ I will challenge the swap test later, but the general idea remains that irreplaceable value may be measured in amount, but cannot be precisely matched in kind, so to speak.

Consider, for example, a great work of art, such as Michelangelo’s ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. If the Sistine Chapel were destroyed, no amount of newly created value could truly replenish the value that has been lost – no creation of new works of art, even more beautiful or virtuosic, would wholly compensate for its loss. New artistic creations could be equal or even greater in amount, but even still, their value would not be the *same*.

Unreinstantiably unique objects, such as Michelangelo’s frescoes, are irreplaceable insofar as they bear properties that can no longer be reinstated. When the good-making properties of an object are unreinstantiably, the way in which these objects have value is, we can see, irreplaceable. Indeed, to be valuable in virtue of unreinstantiably properties is, I submit, what it is to have irreplaceable value.

This, then, is my contention about the role that uniqueness plays in shaping value. Qualitative uniqueness is less significant for value than we have thought; rather, it is unreinstantiably uniqueness that is significant for value. But it is not significant because it imbues objects with conventional intrinsic value; rather, it is significant because it can imbue objects with a distinct kind of intrinsic value: irreplaceable value.

Since I promised a view that would be equally attractive to the buck-passing and fitting-attitudes views, we need a translation, as it were, of this account of irreplaceable value.

While this may be obvious to proponents of these views, the view here can be understood as compatible with a buck-passing analysis of value by understanding good-making properties as those properties that have the property of giving rise to certain reasons. On the buck-passing analysis of value, properties are “good-making” insofar as these properties give rise to reasons. For example, the property *Picasso-made* can be said to give rise to reasons. Giving rise to such reasons is what

¹⁹ Grau, “Irreplaceability and Unique Value,” *op. cit.*, Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability,” *op. cit.*

it is for the property *Picasso-made* to be “good-making” on the buck-passing construal. Similarly, for fitting-attitudes views, properties are good-making when they explain the fittingness of a certain attitude.²⁰ *Picasso-made* can be said to make it the case that the attitudes of preserving, respecting, admiring, and so on, fit. I will continue to talk as if it is the properties themselves that are good-making, rather than the metaproperty of being reasons-giving or fit-explaining, but nothing in the arguments turns on where the normative buck stops, and the view of irreplaceable value is therefore compatible with the traditional, buck-passing, or fitting-attitude views.

Intrinsic value that is not irreplaceable, such as, say, wellbeing, is fungible in the sense that one unit is just as good as any other, a unit lost can be replenished with another. Good-making properties for most wellbeing states, are, plausibly, reinstantiable: an experience today can be pleasant, and an experience tomorrow can be pleasant. The property *pleasant* can be reinstantiated, and pleasure forgone can be fully replenished with pleasure regained (we do this often – declining dessert this afternoon so we may indulge this evening).

Unreinstantiablely unique objects, in contrast, have good-making properties that, unlike *being pleasant*, cannot be reinstantiated. Unreinstantiable good-making properties nevertheless also imbue the object with value *in amount* and so *can be* measured quantitatively. New art, as we saw above, could be created that is greater in amount of value than the Sistine Chapel, even if it would not fully replace it. The property of *painted by Monet*, for example, imbues a painting with *more* intrinsic value than the property of *painted by Thomas Kinkade*, simply because the property *painted by Monet* imbues

²⁰ That’s not to say that the good-making properties are thereby the *fundamental* source of normativity. “Fittingness first” views argue that fit is fundamental (e.g., Richard Yetter Chappell, “Fittingness: The Sole Normative Primitive,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, LXII, 249 (October 2012): 684-704; Christopher Howard, “The Fundamentality of Fit,” in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): pp. 216-36. Such views nevertheless take explanations for why an attitude fits – that is the role that what I call good-making properties here would do for such views.

an object with a greater amount of value than the property of *painted by Thomas Kinkade* (or so I'm assuming). This is true even though both the property of *painted by Monet* and *painted by Thomas Kinkade* are unreinstantiable – the paintings of Monet as well as Kinkade, as a result, have value that is irreplaceable, even though a painting by Monet is more valuable than a painting by Kinkade. The very same good-making-properties that imbue these objects with a quantity of value also imbue the irreplaceability of that value. So irreplaceable value has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

Importantly, irreplaceable value has a distinctive relationship to reasons. We have reason to preserve and respect things that have irreplaceable value. We have reason to preserve and treasure the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the sword of Goujian, or a Mayan temple. Irreplaceable value, however, resists being promoted in the sense of “making more” because in an important sense we *cannot*. Because the good-making properties of objects with irreplaceable value cannot be reinstantiated, we can't promote their irreplaceable value by making more of it since this would involve reinstantiating properties that are unreinstantiable. We can, however, *promote the continued existence* of things with irreplaceable value, and indeed this is what we have reason to do.

One might think that it is possible to promote irreplaceable value in the sense of creating more, especially concerning art – original artwork can have irreplaceable value and there is reason to create it. But recall the earlier discussion of reasons for creating art. These reasons are more plausibly reasons to engage in creative activity, which is intrinsically valuable, in the quantitative sense. Just as qualitative uniqueness can be a byproduct of creative activity, unreinstantiable uniqueness and irreplaceable value can also be byproducts of creative activity. The fact that some artworks are irreplaceably valuable is not what explains why we have reason to create art. That is explained by the aggregative intrinsic value of art or creative activity.

Good-making properties, such as aesthetic value or creativity, can involve properties that are reinstantiable, unreinstantiable, or a combination. Reasons that e.g. artists have to create new works can be attributed to the *quantitative* dimension of intrinsic value. But once the work is created, if its

good-making properties are unreinstantiable, that value is *also* irreplaceable. But it is not the irreplaceability *as such* that contributes to the sum total value in the world, as it were. The world doesn't become a better place just because there are more things in it that are irreplaceable. It becomes a better place when there is more value in it, simply put, regardless of whether or not this value is irreplaceable.

Interestingly, there is a sense in which irreplaceable has a *second* quantitative dimension. One might think that irreplaceable value is singular, by definition, and therefore does not admit of degrees. Indeed, Matthes articulates a principle of irreplaceability like this: “[a]n object is meaningfully irreplaceable if and only if *all* candidate substitutes would fail to be valuable in the same way as the original.”²¹ Now, Matthes is giving an account of personal historical value, not irreplaceable value, but his principle of irreplaceability is nonetheless relevant. To Matthes, an object only counts as irreplaceable if nothing else exists that is valuable in the same way. Yet in many cases, value can be irreplaceable yet valuable in the same way as other objects, such as Stradivarius violins, paintings by Monet, and pieces of the Berlin wall. Irreplaceable value is not utterly singular – it is a matter of having properties that could not as a matter of contingent fact be reinstantiated. It is possible for more than

²¹ Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability,” *op. cit.*, p. 38, emphasis original. Matthes’ rationale for this principle is intuitions surrounding the irreplaceability of objects of personal historical value such as family heirlooms or attachments to familiar objects that become beloved, delightfully illustrated by Gerry Cohen’s cherished eraser. Matthes quotes Cohen: “I would hate to lose this eraser. I would hate that even if I knew that it could be readily replaced, ... even by one of precisely the same off-round shape and the same dingy colour that my eraser has now acquired. ... I want *my* eraser” (*Ibid.*, p. 36, quoting Cohen, “Rescuing Conservatism,” *op. cit.*, p. 221). The account I give here concerns *impersonal* irreplaceable value, i.e., value that concerns reasons that *anyone* would have toward the impersonally irreplaceably valuable object for its own sake; Matthes is concerned with an account that covers both personal and impersonal value; I am giving an account of irreplaceable value, whereas Matthes is focusing on historical value. For discussion of personal value and its relationship to impersonal value see Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, *Personal Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

one object to bear the same unreinstantiable properties. If any of the currently existing Stradivarius instruments were destroyed, its value could not be replenished in kind. This is true in spite of the fact that more than one thing bears this irreplaceable value.

This is why, as I intimated earlier, the “swap test” for irreplaceable value is somewhat misleading. It has been claimed that, for example, silkscreens by Andy Warhol do not have irreplaceable value because, if a Warhol silkscreen were destroyed, it would be rational to accept another virtually identical one as a replacement.²² While that may be true as far as, say, your personal art collection goes, it is false to conclude that the value of the now-destroyed silkscreen is not irreplaceable. The silkscreen can be replaced in your art collection, and hence the sum total value of *your art collection* has been replenished in amount, but the value in the world overall, while it possibly could be replenished in amount by the creation of new artwork, will be forever different, since nothing will be able to fully replenish the value in kind of the silkscreen. This is because the good-making property of *created by Andy Warhol* cannot be reinstantiated. The objects that instantiate that property now are the only ones that can in the future. Whether or not it is rational for *you* to accept another silkscreen has no bearing on the irreplaceability of the value impersonally.

Further, if, say, the number of Stradivarius violins were smaller than it currently is, the irreplaceability of each would be heightened – the reasons that we have to protect them would be even stronger. So irreplaceable value is *degreed*.

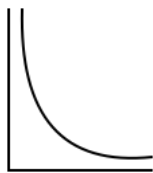
Earlier, we saw that irreplaceable value can come in greater and lesser *amounts*: a painting by Monet is more

²² Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability,” *op. cit.*, p. 38. Matthes discusses this issue, and introduces another principle, being “resistant” to replacement, to capture such cases. The idea is that objects such as the Warhol silkscreens, although not entirely irreplaceable, “resist” replacing – i.e., depending on the interests, it could be rational for someone to accept another artwork, perhaps a different piece by Warhol, to replace the value of the lost Warhol silkscreen. But my concern is not with the value of the Warhol *to* someone, but instead its impersonal value and the reasons *anyone* would have toward its preservation or potential replacement.

valuable than a painting by Kinkade; but both the values are irreplaceable. Now I am establishing that irreplaceable value has *another* quantitative dimension. Holding the amount of irreplaceable value constant, the *degree* of irreplaceable value increases as the number of unreinstantiably rare objects decreases.

We see this most clearly when considering the strength of reasons to preserve increasingly rare objects. Consider the large increase in strength of reasons to protect either of two last existing Stradivarius instruments to the strength of the reason to protect the single last existing Stradivarius. I might be willing to take a bullet to save the last, but perhaps not the second to last. This intuition supports that there is an increase in degree of irreplaceable value.

Moreover, the increase is nonlinear. As the number of remaining unreinstantiably rare objects decreases, the strength in reasons to protect the remaining objects increases at a faster rate, thus creating increasingly strong reasons as the number of objects gets smaller, and the strength of reasons is largest when there is only one remaining unreinstantiably unique object. That is to say, the strength of reason to protect an unreinstantiably rare object resembles the multiplicative inverse of the number of objects existing. This can be represented in a graph such as $y = 100/x$, for example.



Along the y axis is the strength of reasons to protect an object bearing the relevant unreinstantiable good-making property, and the x axis is the number of objects bearing the relevant unreinstantiable good-making property. When there is a relatively large number of objects, the strength of reasons is relatively weak; when there are very few, or one in the limiting case, the strength of reasons is high.²³

²³ There is more to explore here than space allows. For instance, the function is most likely not precisely $y=100/x$ for all values, since that

Returning to the uniqueness thesis, if we were to capture the jump in strength of reasons as a matter of an increase in intrinsic value from qualitative uniqueness, as the uniqueness thesis claims, then we would be committed to the claim that there is a correspondingly strong reason to destroy remaining existing members of the kind. But when augmented strength in reasons is understood as corresponding to augmented *degree* of irreplaceability of value, we avoid this outcome. There is no reason to destroy any rare objects. Nothing accrues any additional *amount* of value from uniqueness – amount of value is a matter of good-making properties. In contrast, degree of irreplaceable value is a function of rarity. So there is nothing but strong reasons to protect rare and unique objects with irreplaceable value, reasons that increase in strength as numbers dwindle.

Irreplaceable value thus has two quantitative dimensions. It comes in *amount*, and it comes in *degree*. Amount of irreplaceable value is a matter of axiology, e.g., *painted by Monet* imbues more value than *painted by Kinkade*; degree is a function of rarity, as the number of unreinstantiably rare objects decreases, degree of irreplaceability increases.²⁴

So, then, when it comes to irreplaceable value, for any particular object that has irreplaceable value, it cannot be promoted in the sense of “making more,” since we cannot. But we do have reason to promote its continued existence.

This is just the principled distinction that we are looking for. We now have an explanation for why, in some

would mean that there is an even stronger reason to preserve, say, half of the last remaining (now broken) Stradivarius than there would be to preserve it when it was the last remaining intact Stradivarius, so the function applies to all $x \geq 1$.

²⁴ One might now wish to know about the relative strengths of the reasons yielded by the different dimensions of value – quantity of intrinsic value overall, amount of irreplaceable value, degree of irreplaceable value. If one could save either a merely mediocre Monet, or a work of genius by a living artist, does the irreplaceable value of the Monet outweigh the greater quantity of value of the other? Could enough Monet replicas have a great enough quantity of intrinsic value to outweigh saving just one authentic? To answer these questions, we need a complete trade-off schedule of the relative strengths of reasons from the different dimensions of value – a project that will need to wait for another day.

cases, we do not have reason to promote in the sense of “make more” but we do have a reason to promote in the sense of promoting continued existence. What this amounts to is precisely what we have been saying about irreplaceable value – we have reason to preserve, respect, and treasure it.

With this account in hand, we are now in a position to map the terrain of reasons that we have toward many historical artifacts, antiques, art objects, and perhaps certain features of the natural world. For instance, Matthes argues that irreplaceable value is neither necessary nor sufficient for historical value.²⁵ My view supports Matthes’ conclusion that having uniquely irreplaceable value is neither necessary nor sufficient for something to have historical value. That is because the distinction between unique unreinstantiability and rare unreinstantiability is one of degree rather than kind. With my account, by and large historical artifacts have irreplaceable value, and we can see in virtue of what, precisely, an historical object has irreplaceable value. All historical objects have unreinstantiable properties, and in most cases, some of those unreinstantiable properties are good-making properties, and so those historical objects have irreplaceable value.²⁶ These historical objects are irreplaceably valuable, even if they are not uniquely unreinstantiable.

One might wonder about *persons*. While persons may indeed have irreplaceable value in virtue of unreinstantiable good-making properties, surely this does not exhaust the irreplaceable value of persons. Irreplaceable value of the sort under discussion comes in different quantities, yet the

²⁵ Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability,” *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁶ I qualify this claim because one might take “historical value” to mean “historical significance” rather than “irreplaceably valuable in virtue of historical properties.” Some objects of historical significance may not be *intrinsically* valuable, but may have signatory value, or instrumental value, that is, they may have value in virtue of representing or signifying the presence of some event, or they may be useful in illustrating an important point. Nazi memorabilia are an apt example: it’s not entirely clear that Nazi memorabilia have good-making properties, but it certainly seems important to preserve them, perhaps *not for their own sake*, but for what they represent and help us remember. There is far more to say, of course, and as much as I would love to elaborate on the complexities of historical value, it will have to wait for another time. For crucial and thorough discussion see Korsmeyer, *Things*, *op. cit.*

irreplaceable value of persons is traditionally thought to defy quantity – persons have, in the Kantian sense, not a price but a dignity. Moreover, unreinstantiable uniqueness is a matter of contingent fact, whereas the irreplaceable value of persons is something necessary about persons as such, and is presumably in virtue of something homogeneous across persons, and therefore entirely reinstantiable. So this account pertains primarily to the irreplaceable value of objects such as works of art and historical artifacts, and it does not fully explain the irreplaceable value of persons. Far from being an objection to this account, it goes to show that there is even more to say about uniqueness and irreplaceable value, which will have to wait for another time.

Overall, then, I have argued for two different ways in which uniqueness can be construed. Qualitative uniqueness, although appealing *prima facie* as a source of intrinsic value, is not, it turns out, particularly promising in this respect. What I have called unreinstantiable uniqueness plays a more interesting value-theoretic role in irreplaceable value.²⁷

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