

Sentimental Value

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1. What Sentimental Value Is

For many people, among the first experiences they have of things as being valuable are experiences of things as possessing sentimental value. Such is the case in childhood where treasured objects are often among the first things we experience as valuable. In everyday life, we frequently experience apparent sentimental value belonging to particular garments, books, cards, and places. Philosophers, however, have seldom discussed sentimental value and have also tended to think about value generally in a way that makes it difficult for sentimental value to be a real kind of value.

It will be helpful to clarify the sense of “sentimental” meant here. There is a familiar and pejorative use of the word in which it is synonymous with “cloying,” “mawkish,” or “schmaltzy” and conveys cheap, or excessive, emotionality.¹ This is not the usage that we are after in investigating sentimental value. Instead, the word “sentimental” in “sentimental value” conveys a connection with sentiment or emotion-involving relationships or experiences. The pejorative sense of “sentimental” is often parasitic upon the sense of “sentimental” investigated here. The charge of mawkishness is leveled at someone for mistakes such as: being emotionally attached to the wrong kind of thing; being excessively attached to something; confusing a sentimental attachment to something with some other quality; acting inappropriately because of a sentimental attachment.

Some examples might help to make these criticisms clearer. We might describe someone as schmaltzy if he is sentimentally attached to a book, where our criticism is that although he is a good friend of the person who owns the book, his attachment is inappropriate because it is a book that the friend had read but to which he is utterly indifferent and which the two people had never discussed together. Alternatively, we might criticize someone for being excessively emotionally attached if she continues to

live in a house which, though a proper object of sentimental attachment, she cannot afford to live in without suffering undue hardship. Joel Feinberg mentions a similar example in which a sentimental attachment to an old shirt leads someone to wear it in “frigid gales where protection requires a shirt of heavier material” and comments that “it leads me to act against my interest for quite insufficient reason.”² We sometimes criticize people for being sentimental when they confuse a sentimental attachment to some picture, perhaps one painted by their child, with genuine aesthetic merit. Finally, to adopt another example from Feinberg, we might criticize the sentimentality of someone, if he acts inappropriately because of a sentimental attachment, such as if he wears his favorite sweater to a job interview, even though it is ragged. In all of these cases, there is an implicit standard of acceptable attachment against which the attachments and behavior are judged. As Feinberg nicely puts the point: “Innocent sentiment...when it becomes a reason for inappropriate action, becomes blameable sentimentality.”³

Having distinguished the pejorative sense of “sentimental” from the sense investigated here, let us look at a definition of “sentimental value.” We can give a definition along the following lines: something is sentimentally valuable if and only if the thing is valuable for its own sake in virtue of a subset of its relational properties, where the properties include any or all of having belonged to, having been given to or by, or having being used by, people or animals, within a relationship of family, friendship, or romantic love, or having been used or acquired during a significant experience. This is not comprehensive, not least because it leaves unanswered the important question of why it is that the relational properties sometimes generate sentimental value and other times do not. It also leaves out what can be a bearer of sentimental value. This is omitted from the definition because the range of sentimental value bearers looks very wide. It clearly includes objects and places but is likely also to include other kinds of things, such as pieces of music. We will focus on objects and places as bearers of sentimental value, but this should not be taken to exclude the possibility of other bearers.

The definition captures at least the core of sentimental value. It does not allow us to settle every case in which people might ascribe sentimental value to something but we should not aim for an analysis that will do this. There are, however, at least two issues on which a little more must be said. The first is the extent to which sentimental value requires the prior existence of particular sentiments. The second is whether the sentiments must be concurrent with the existence of the value.

A wide range of sentiments can serve to generate sentimental value. They include familial love, romantic love, and the sentiments involved in

friendship. The presence of at least one sentiment from the range is necessary for something to come to hold sentimental value. That at least one such sentiment is necessary is clear when we think about the incoherence of someone taking something to have sentimental value, because it has been used by someone else with whom the person only has a purely commercial relationship, such as an employer-employee relationship. For something to hold sentimental value it must have been used, for example, by someone with whom someone is in a relationship that involves or involved largely positive sentiments, and they are the sentiments that give rise to the sentimental value.

The sentiments that are necessary for the generation of sentimental value need not co-exist with the value. Taken one way, this is clearly the case. Sentimental value does not require the continued felt presence of particular sentiments. While it might be plausible to think that someone must have one of a particular range of sentiments, such as the sentiments involved in romantic love, for some object to come to hold sentimental value, it does not seem to be the case that it will only continue to bear this value while the person has the particular conscious feeling. The person might continue to have the sentiment while not feeling it, as might happen if the person were angry or upset, but this need not mean that the object ceases to hold sentimental value.⁴ On this understanding of what it is to have a sentiment, sentiments that are necessary for the generation of sentimental value need not co-exist with the value.

A stronger claim is also true, however. The stronger claim is that even in a weaker sense of having a sentiment in which it can persist while not being felt, sentimental value can outlast the sentiments that generate it. Something may continue to hold sentimental value even after the relationship from which its value arose ends. In this circumstance, there is not only no relationship, it may also be the case that the people previously in the relationship in which the sentimental value arose may feel largely indifferent, and perhaps even negative, sentiments toward each other.

The clearest cases of this are when persons are no longer romantically involved. Nevertheless, in such cases, objects and places, for example, can continue to hold sentimental value. Sentimental value can outlast the sentiments that are necessary to bring it about.

2. Moore's View of Value and Korsgaard's Two Distinctions in Value

One explanation of why few philosophers have discussed sentimental value is that it is a type of value that philosophers influenced by G. E. Moore

would have difficulty recognizing. Moore recognized intrinsic value and instrumental value and argued that without intrinsic value there could be no value. His specific view of intrinsic value is captured in two claims. The first is that intrinsic value depends solely upon the intrinsic properties of its bearers. The second is a local supervenience thesis. Moore outlines the first claim as follows: “*To say that a kind of value is intrinsic means merely that the question whether a thing possesses it, and in what degree it possesses it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question.*”⁵ Moore then provides the local supervenience thesis as follows: “it is *impossible* for what is strictly *one and the same thing* to possess that kind of value [intrinsic value] at one time, or in one set of circumstances, and *not* to possess it at another; and equally *impossible* for it to possess it in one degree at one time, or in one set of circumstances, and to possess it in a different degree at another, or in a different set.”⁶ On Moore’s account, if an object possesses intrinsic value today, then its value depends upon its intrinsic properties alone, and it must also possess the same amount of value at any other time or place at which it exists.

Sentimental value, as characterized above, is a type of value that is grounded in extrinsic properties and is such that its bearers need not have it. For instance, an object might hold sentimental value because it was given to a person by a loved one, a type of value the same object would not have had if the person had simply found it. Moore’s claims about value suggest that sentimental value, being contingent and grounded in extrinsic properties could only be instrumental value.

Against Moore, Christine Korsgaard points out that to contrast intrinsic value with instrumental value is to obscure two separate distinctions.⁷ The contrast to something that is good as a means to something valuable is something that is good for its own sake or holds final value. Furthermore, the proper contrast to the value things have that stems from their intrinsic properties is the value that stems from their extrinsic properties, and this leaves open whether all of the value that something has for its own sake stems from its intrinsic properties. If we separate out these two distinctions, we open up the possibility of things holding final value at least partly on extrinsic grounds.

Unfortunately, Anthony Hatzimoysis goes wrong in trying to apply Korsgaard’s distinctions to the question of sentimental value.⁸ He begins with some putative examples of extrinsic final value discussed by Korsgaard having to do with handsome china and gorgeously enameled frying pans, which she contends might be chosen partly for their own sakes but under condition of their usefulness.⁹ Hatzimoysis claims that Korsgaard’s examples and her claims about them can be taken in a way that “plays into the hands of an opponent” of sentimental value.¹⁰ His explanation is that:

“if those objects are chosen primarily as a means of keeping oneself warm, serving tea or cooking chips, then their value is above all instrumental. At best, this view renders the final value of objects parasitic on their usefulness. It would thus, without any argument, preclude sentimental value from counting as a type of final value: as I have noted already, some emotionally valuable objects, from broken ivory combs to sea pebbles, are things that have ceased to serve, if they ever had, a useful purpose.”¹¹ There are two issues here. One is that it is unclear what Hatzimoysis means in claiming that the value of the objects is above all instrumental. If it means that it is merely instrumental, then it is just a denial without argument of Korsgaard’s claim that it “is equally absurd to say of such a thing that it is a mere instrument, just because its value is conditioned.”¹² Alternatively, if by “above all instrumental” Hatzimoysis means that it is conditioned upon, then it is simply a reaffirmation of Korsgaard’s point.

The second issue is that Korsgaard’s examples are only intended to show how functional items can have final value despite it being conditioned upon their usefulness. She does not contend that all objects that hold final value on partly extrinsic grounds do so on condition of being useful. Korsgaard’s distinctions can allow for a range of extrinsic properties to play a role in bringing about final value. They could include usefulness, rarity, and historical significance, as well as extrinsic properties relevant to sentimental value.

Someone might point out that in Korsgaard’s examples, the extrinsic properties seem to occupy a different role from the role that they have in sentimental value. In her examples, extrinsic properties are a condition for the final value of the objects, but they need not be among the final-value-making properties of them. By contrast, in the case of sentimental value, the extrinsic properties are themselves final-value-making. While there is a difference between the role that extrinsic properties play in Korsgaard’s examples and in what is sentimentally valuable, this does not undermine the point that a proper recognition of Korsgaard’s distinction between final value and intrinsic value is vital to the aim of opening up the space for sentimental value.

3. Sentimental Value and States of Affairs

Recently, the distinction between final value and intrinsic value has been resisted by philosophers who hold that all intrinsic value is final value and vice versa. Philosophers who are inclined toward this equivalence, which may be called the reductive view, often claim that states of affairs are the only bearers of final value¹³ When presented with an instance of apparent

extrinsic final value, Shakespeare's quill pen for example, they argue that the bearer of final value is not in fact the pen that was used to produce great works itself but, instead, a state of affairs such as "the pen used by Shakespeare to produce great works existing." The idea is that by making states of affairs the sole bearers of final value, the reductive view prevents intrinsic and final value from coming apart. What would be an extrinsic property of the object, its having being used by Shakespeare to produce great works, is an intrinsic property of the state of affairs. If this property grounds value, it can only be intrinsic value. With this, we assimilate final value and intrinsic value and thereby rule out extrinsic final value.

A proponent of making states of affairs the sole bearers of final value might claim that this strategy does not rule out sentimental value. Instead, he might say that it simply makes the relevant relation an intrinsic property of the state of affairs. The relation is no longer an extrinsic property, but it is still there.

There are two issues here, one general and one specific to sentimental value. A general problem, discussed by Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, is that with the reductive view it appears that we are unable to explain the final value correctly in this kind of case.¹⁴ If we assume that states of affairs can bear final value, though they are not the only things that can, then it looks like the final value of the state of affairs "the pen used by Shakespeare to produce great works existing" stems from the final value that the pen itself has.¹⁵ But if the state of affairs alone is supposed to hold final value, then it is unclear how this can be so because it is difficult to see how the existence of an object can be finally valuable without the object itself being finally valuable.

The second issue, specific to sentimental value, is that the concept of sentimental value is such that its bearers include things such as objects and places. This can be kept separate from the issue of the concept actually having application. Some philosophers will be uneasy with the thought that we are making it a conceptual truth that sentimental value is borne by objects and places instead of a substantive claim. But while accepting that it is preferable to leave open these kinds of issues where possible, trying to make states of affairs alone the bearers of sentimental value is too much at odds with how we think and talk about sentimental value, and how we take ourselves to engage with it. As with aesthetic value, people talk of sentimental value accruing to objects and places in a way that cannot be squared with sentimental value being borne only by states of affairs. For example, people talk of the sentimental value of bicycles, pebbles, books, and ties.¹⁶ It is not only the state of affairs of the pebble given by a loved one existing that they ascribe sentimental value to. It is the object itself.

We must decide between two possibilities here. The first is that there is no sentimental value, because our concept of it requires things other than states of affairs to be bearers of final value, which they are not. The second is that there genuinely is such a type of value, and its bearers include things such as objects and places.

4. Other Forms of Resistance to Sentimental Value

It is also necessary to examine two objections that people might raise against sentimental value that do not arise from prior commitment to particular positions in value theory. The objections do not arise from a commitment to the equivalence of intrinsic and final value, or from the view that the only bearers of final value are states of affairs. They could be raised even by philosophers who accept a plurality of final value bearers, including physical objects, and also by philosophers who recognize at least the possibility of extrinsic final value.

One form of resistance to sentimental value will likely consist of the strategy of assimilating sentimental value to instrumental value. This view is exemplified by someone claiming that an object purported to have sentimental value is not really finally valuable but simply instrumentally valuable because it brings someone pleasure, or comfort, or pleasurable memories, for example. Though such instrumentalist accounts of sentimental value seem implausible, it is doubtful that there is an argument that can conclusively show this. As such, it might be better to try to tease out the non-instrumental value of sentimentally valuable things by looking at replacement and regret.

Let us start with replacement. For whatever non-instrumentally valuable things the instrumentalist account would have us take sentimentally valuable items to be merely instrumentally valuable in promoting, we must ask whether people would refuse to exchange their sentimentally valuable items for anything capable of promoting that same good to any higher degree and whether it would be reasonable for them to do so. In fact, people would refuse to make the exchange. People clearly do treat such items as giving them more than pleasure. The same will be true for any set of goods that an instrumentalist suggests sentimentally valuable items are valuable solely as a means to obtaining.

It is probably the case that although people will refuse to exchange sentimentally valuable items for any slightly more efficient means of generating pleasure, there is some level of non-instrumental value for which they will exchange their sentimentally valuable items. For example, although a person would not swap his sentimentally valuable sweater for

any more efficient means of producing pleasure, there is some level of pleasure or other valuable thing that he would exchange it for. Someone tempted by an instrumentalist account of sentimental value might take this to show that sentimental value is merely instrumental value. This would be a *non sequitur*, because believing that sentimental value is a real kind of value does not commit us to holding that any amount of it is more valuable than any amount of another value. Instead, the only thing that someone opposed to the instrumentalist account must admit in this case is that there is more than one value at stake here. This leads us on to the issue of regret.

We see more of the non-instrumental nature of sentimental value by looking at the likelihood of regret in the case where the person gives up a sentimentally valuable item for some non-instrumental good. If it were the case that the purported sentimentally valuable things have only instrumental value then, in giving up the sentimentally valuable thing for some other non-instrumental good or means to it, there should be no ground for regret. All that the person would be doing is choosing a larger amount of the same good over a smaller amount. But there seems to be clear scope for reasonable regret in the sort of case we are considering. This suggests that in the case in which the person forsakes what is sentimentally valuable for some large amount of pleasure, something of value is present before the exchange and absent thereafter. The most plausible candidate for what is lacking is sentimental value.

More generally against instrumental accounts, it seems false to say either that sentimentally valuable items generate only positive reactions, such as favorable memories, or even that they always generate a positive set of memories or states on balance. While many sentimentally valuable items perhaps do have uniformly positive effects upon their possessor, there are a great deal of sentimentally valuable items the engagement with which is painful for people both on a particular occasion and generally over time. This will often be the case with items of sentimental value whose relation is to a deceased friend, spouse, relative, or pet. People often know that they would be less unhappy without such items but cherish them nonetheless, and it does not seem mistaken for them to do so. The range of different effects sentimentally valuable items can have upon us, and especially the class of sentimentally valuable items with an overall negative effect upon us, seem difficult for a reduction of sentimental value to purely instrumental value to capture.

While the pleasure and memory-generating based reductions of sentimental value to instrumental value are the reductions that people most often make recourse to in discussion, there are innumerable other forms of instrumental accounts of apparent sentimental value. Someone might

suggest widening the conception of instrumentality used in such an explanation and claim that a putatively sentimentally valuable object is purely instrumentally valuable to the end of some aim such as honoring a deceased relative or previous relationship. As evidence for such a proposal, someone might suggest that a person might exchange a sentimentally valuable item for something that furthers the aim of honoring the deceased relative to a greater extent, such as funding a charity supported by them. While such a proposal is perhaps better than the simple instrumental accounts considered above, it again seems more plausible to see this situation as a conflict between the sentimental value and the distinct value of honoring the deceased relative. This will show up in the form of regret for the loss of the item. If the person were to sacrifice such an object, it would be reasonable for him to feel regret, even while knowing that it was sacrificed as part of an aim that more greatly honors the deceased relative.

Although the connection between sentimentally valuable items and the aim of honoring deceased relatives seems to be something more than a connection of means and end, the role that sentimentally valuable items play in honoring a deceased relative brings out the way in which sentimental value belongs within a wider class of objects with extrinsic final value. Aside from the example of Shakespeare's pen considered earlier, there are many items that hold extrinsic final value, such as public monuments, war memorials, and historical documents and artifacts. The distinctive feature of the value of such things is that it cannot be accounted for in terms of their intrinsic properties alone. The items hold their final value because of their connection with significant people and events and are part of a wider class of extrinsic final value that includes sentimental value. Seeing the place of sentimental value within this wider class should dispel any remaining sense that sentimental value is only a trivial concern of the mawkish.

The second objection to recognizing sentimental value stems from the fear that to recognize it as a genuine kind of value would be to greatly increase the amount of value that there is and the reasons that we have in an overly-demanding way. For example, we might not only be required to look after people but also be required to look after their sentimentally valuable items.

There are three points that should help to address such concerns, granting the assumption that sentimental value is reason-providing. First, if sentimental value can only be created within relationships of friendship, family, or romantic love, and we can only have limited amounts of these things, then there will be comparatively few opportunities for us to create sentimental value. Second, sentimental value does not seem to be a type of

value that can be deliberately brought about. Instead, it seems to arise only if it is not consciously aimed at, and is parasitic upon something else such as a valuable experience or relationship that may or may not be deliberately aimed at. Even within relationships we have in which it can arise, we need not be concerned about facing a requirement to bring it about. Third, the sentimental value that arises within the relationships of others or our own may call for nothing more than for us to simply respect it. This means that a person should not destroy or damage the things of others that hold sentimental value but may not be required to do anything more with regard to them, including, for example, paying for their maintenance or repair, even though others might be required to do so.¹⁷

Notes

1. See Joel Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfilment: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 98–123; also see Tom Hurka, *Virtue, Vice and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 139 and Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Dover, 2006), p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See for instance Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 62; also see Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 60.
5. G. E. Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” in Thomas Baldwin, ed., *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 286.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 286–287.
7. See Christine Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” *Philosophical Review*, 92 (1983).
8. See Anthony Hatzimoysis, “Sentimental Value,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53 (2003), pp. 373–379.
9. See Korsgaard, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
10. Anthony Hatzimoysis, “Sentimental Value,” p. 377.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Christine Korsgaard, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
13. See Ben Bradley, “Extrinsic Value,” *Philosophical Studies*, 91 (1998); also see Fred Feldman, “On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures,” *Ethics*, 107 (1997), Noah Lemos, *Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Michael Zimmerman, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).
14. See Wlodek Rabinowicz, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, “A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and For Its Own Sake” in Wlodek Rabinowicz, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, eds., *Recent Work on Intrinsic Value* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), p. 122.

15. See Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 26; also see Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, “Tropic of Value,” in Wlodek Rabinowicz, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, *op. cit.*
16. See Anthony Hatzimoysis, *op. cit.*, p. 374.
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