Value, as we understand it, can be categorized as extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic (or instrumental) value is commonly placed in our society and easy to comprehend from an early age; an object or service is instrumentally valuable because it is useful to someone. But upon first hearing the most common explanation for ‘intrinsic value’ as ‘valued for its own sake,’ my own personal reaction was abstract confusion, the worst of all confusions for a philosophy student to have. It took a few trial-and-error trains of thought for me to piece together how exactly ‘valued for its own sake’ translated into the world I live in, and this is how I came to understand the concept:

To be intrinsically valued means to be priceless, and to be priceless means to be irreplaceable. When talking of ethics, I mean to say absolutely irreplaceable, in the most literal sense of the word. Rarity, or complete uniqueness, creates intrinsic value, because it is the definition of something that makes its value reality, and when a definition is unique to something, that thing becomes impossible to replace with another. I begin my paper thus because I wish to make the claim that communication is proof between individuals of their own intrinsic value and, subsequently, all individuals should be treated with ethical equality.
Individuality

Considering the thesis of this paper, it is important that I define what makes an individual. An individual is separate from all else. It is defined as something singular, or distinguished in some way from a group. Based on my introduction and this definition, it must be clear that I consider individuals to be intrinsically valuable.

There must be something said about a skeptic’s approach to the world; beginning with Descartes, everything was to be doubted. It is in fact, however minimally, possible that everything I’m seeing and experiencing is not an actual reality. I could possibly be dreaming. The only thing that is absolutely indubitable is the fact that I, as a thinking thing, exist.¹ Certain existentialists, like Sartre, take this a step further, arguing that our choices are also indubitable, such that the consequences of actions may be illusory, but not the subject’s decision to take action.²

Realizing that the statement may be humorously redundant, I claim that it is more ethical to assume that others exist, so that we may act ethically. Ethics requires interaction. In order to have an in-depth discussion about ethics, it has to be established that there is more than one subject in the universe. To act in any ethical way, a person has to have some sense that they are doing something right for someone else; otherwise, we digress into absolute skepticism and discussions of ethics are useless.

Certainly, there are barriers to ethical interaction, since we have no absolutely indubitable way of knowing what is going on outside of our own conscious. But just as we are ethically obligated to assume that there are subjects outside of ourselves, not just automata or mere images, we invariably operate on the assumption that they have feelings similar to our own. As Bernard Rollin puts it: “When we use words attributing [emotions] and the like to other people… we are not just talking about the behavior; we are unavoidably referring to what the behavior is directly and essentially tied to—namely, a feeling which, while perhaps somewhat unlike mine, serves the same function in the other person’s life as the feeling in question does in mine.”³ We have to take our cues from our observations of others, because it is our only source of

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information concerning others, regardless of whether it is possible to completely remove our own feelings from our analyses.

And now the question is: How do we identify individuals? I hold that it is communication that identifies one thing’s separateness from another’s, in every possible situation. It is through communication that we know there is anything beyond our own existence.

**Communication**

I use the term ‘communication’ purposefully, because I do not mean to be trapped into only using language as means of interaction, as language has serious obstacles regarding interaction. To use Foucault’s logic, language is, by nature, exclusionary. It’s incapable of defining total reality:

> I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. In a society such as our own we all know the rules of exclusion.⁴

Abstract thought is inevitably tied to what words there are to use. Different languages create different realities and different modes of thought. Certain ideas that are associated with lingual negatives consequently manipulate the thoughts concerning those ideas, creating reality where those ideas are bad. While in another language, the same idea might be associated with positive words, or might not even be defined, changing the entire reality of that group of speakers and thinkers.

It would be ignorant of us who live in the current age to say we do not interact with anyone who does not speak our own language. With the assistance of technology, import/exports and media have increased in usage; Americans, at least, directly interact with all corners of the globe. Thus, it is morally relevant that our ethics stretch to accommodate all types of individuals and if language is not universal to individuals, it cannot be the basis of an ethic concerning all individuals. Every individual can make itself understood one way or another to us, by reacting.

One thing does not react to itself. It is necessary for two things to be present for a reaction to happen. And the fact that something reacts when it is

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acted upon means that it is something other than the thing acting upon it. The fact that it is capable of communicating something that is uniquely happening to itself means that it, itself, is uniquely individual. With every communicated message is the underlying message, “I am here.” I am here.

And not only is the individual’s message, “I am here,” but also, “You are here.” Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, makes the very real argument that our own ideas about even ourselves are tied up in what others are communicating to us. “Man… makes himself known to himself from the other side of the world and he looks from the horizon toward himself to recover his inner being.” A dog barks because it is assuming that there is something that listens. It means to send a message somewhere where it will be heard. Whether or not the dog truly rationalizes the fact that the thing-that-listens has a brain and is a subject of its own life is beside the point. Humans alone may be gifted in the art of thinking about themselves, and that it might bring important thoughts to the forefront of their brains, but I am not concerning myself with that in this argument. This paper is solely focused on interactive experiences and how they conjoin into a sphere of reality that makes ethics relevant.

**Equality**

If my argument is sound, everything and anything, from a rock to a chair to a bird to a dog to a human to a business to a country to a thunderstorm, is intrinsically valuable and is worthy of ethical consideration. This is a very broad and frightful answer to the question at hand indeed.

Despite the fact that all my studies and discussions have continually expressed concern over the line that must be drawn, with those worthy of ethical consideration on one side and those without on the other, I do not shy away from my assertion. The reason for my confidence is the fact that we individuals are all different and do not expect the same treatment as others. Peter Singer illustrates this idea best by saying,

Many feminists hold that women have the right to an abortion on request. It does not follow that since these same people are campaigning for equality between men and women they must support the right of men to have abortions too. Since a man cannot have an abortion, it is meaningless to talk of his right to have one. Since a pig can't vote, it is meaningless to talk of its right to vote…

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“The extension of the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way, or grant exactly the same rights to both groups…. The basic principle of equality, I shall argue, is equality of consideration; and equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights.\textsuperscript{6}

The difference in treatment comes from what individuals communicate to others. Humans especially are capable of discovering just how individuals can communicate. Illustrating this, Giorgio Agamben, as a contemporary Heideggerian philosopher, writes about reactionary responses in his work, \textit{The Open}. Using the findings of an Estonian biologist named Uexkull, Agamben explains the world from the point of view of a tick, explaining the narrow scope of its awareness through its limited biological indicators for perceiving the world.\textsuperscript{7} The tick, being without eyes or ears, functions only by following scents and temperatures, finding roadblocks with the sensors on its feet or husk. Its instincts give it a drive to drink the blood of mammals, but it is biologically evident that a tick does not even taste the blood it drinks. The tick, under my reasoning, is an intrinsically valuable individual, but it is senseless to speak to a tick that has no way of hearing.

Moving forward from what I have claimed so far, I must make another assertion: all ethical behavior must begin with understanding what other individuals are communicating to us and no earlier. It is impossible to presume what every individual will want upon meeting them; practice and exposure make guess work easier, but it is not immune to failure. I stated earlier that all we truly understand are our own thoughts from our own perspectives. It is folly to assume that any individual outside of ourselves should be treated the way we want to be treated; though we comprehend that our understanding of others is tainted by our separateness from the others, it is ethically wrong to say we cannot understand their separate needs, because they communicate their differences to us.

What does a chair tell us when it groans as we sit on it? That it is old or structurally unsound. Our current understanding of deadwood and metal suggests that a chair does not care if it is sat on. A plant sends up a smell if it is damaged; researchers find that these smells are calling insects that are beneficial in their repair.\textsuperscript{8} A wasp clasped between two fingers stings its captor in efforts of causing pain and being released. A bird with broken bones sits in an unusual

\textsuperscript{6} Peter Singer, “All Animals are Equal,” excerpted from \textit{Animal Rights and Human Obligations}, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 149.
\textsuperscript{7} Giorgio Agamben, \textit{The Open: Man and Animal}, (California: Stanford University 2004), 45.

Ethical blunders and misdeeds have invariably come about by misunderstandings or by denying individuals the ability to communicate to us. It is the furthest thing from my mind to presume that we know the ways in which everything communicates. But, with the help of these esteemed philosophers and researchers that I’ve quoted, I am claiming that it is an ethical imperative that we find ways to listen and understand, and the first step is allowing that everything communicates.
Works Cited


