ABSTRACT. Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Brentano, Moore, and Chisholm have suggested “marks” or criteria of intrinsic goodness. I distinguish among eight of these. I focus in this paper on four: (a) unimprovability, (b) unqualifiedness, (c) dependence upon intrinsic natures, and (d) incorruptibility. I try to show that each of these is problematic in some way. I also try to show that they are not equivalent – they point toward distinct conceptions of intrinsic goodness. In the end it appears that none of them is fully satisfactory. Insofar as none of these succeeds, a fundamental problem remains for those who make use of the concept of intrinsic value. Precisely what do we have in mind when we say that some sort of value is “intrinsic”? 

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, axiology, Brentano, Chisholm, intrinsic value, Kant, Moore, Plato, The Good, theory of value

1. HYPERBOLIC REMARKS ABOUT INTRINSIC GOODNESS

The friends of intrinsic value (and here I include myself) often lapse into poetry when they try to describe the object of their common interest. They speak in metaphor, analogy, and hyperbole. Plato, for example, gave analogies, saying that The Good is in some way like the sun. He suggested that each is a source of immense value. And just as the sun is too blinding to observe directly with the naked eye, so the form of The Good is too dazzling to contemplate directly with the naked mind.

In a particularly high-flying passage, Plato compares a philosopher who has grasped the concept of goodness with a cave-dweller who has emerged from his subterranean cavern into the blinding light of the sun. He says:

In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness. Once it is perceived, the conclusion must follow that, for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light, while it is itself sovereign in the intelligible world and the
parent of intelligence and truth. Without having had a vision of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state.²

Those who perceive this blinding form of goodness will return to their cavern dazed and confused. Their former compatriots will think them ridiculous, and may even try to kill them.

Immanuel Kant likewise drew comparisons. In describing a thing he took to be good in some outstandingly fundamental way, he tried to make clear that this thing does not have its value because of its capacity to produce good results. For even if “by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature” it were to have no extrinsic value at all:

…it would still sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself. … Its usefulness would be only its setting, as it were, so as to enable us to handle it more conveniently in commerce or to attract the attention of those who are not yet connoisseurs, but not to recommend it to those who are experts or to determine its worth.³

G. E. Moore himself seemed to have trouble finding clear, literal words to describe this object. In one place, while struggling to express himself, he said this: “If I am asked ‘what is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.”⁴

It seems to me that we simply must do better than this. Metaphors and analogies and enforced silences will not help us to understand each other or the object of our common interest. I fear that by speaking in these confusing ways, we give aid and comfort to those who are no friends of intrinsic goodness. They are inclined to think that we don’t know what we are talking about (or maybe that we are talking about nothing at all).

It also seems to me that insofar as there is confusion about intrinsic goodness, there is even greater confusion about the other concepts of axiology and perhaps also those of normative ethics. For it is reasonable to suppose that other value concepts (extrinsic goodness, signatory goodness, etc.) are to be defined by appeal to the concept of intrinsic goodness. It is also at least somewhat reasonable to suppose that the concept of intrinsic goodness plays some role in the explanation of such things as moral rightness of actions, and virtuosity of character.

² Ibid.