ABSTRACT. Whether or not intrinsic value is additively measurable is often thought to depend on the truth or falsity of G. E. Moore’s principle of organic unities. I argue that the truth of this principle is, contrary to received opinion, compatible with additive measurement. However, there are other very plausible evaluative claims that are more difficult to combine with the additivity of intrinsic value. A plausible theory of the good should allow that there are certain kinds of states of affairs whose intrinsic value cannot be outweighed by any number of states of certain other, less valuable, kinds. Such “non-trade-off” cannot reasonably be explained in terms of organic unities, and it can be reconciled with the additivity thesis only if we are prepared to give up some traditional claims about the nature of intrinsic value.

KEY WORDS: additivity, basic value, intrinsic value, lexicality, G. E. Moore, organic unities

Many philosophers have assumed, with varying degrees of confidence, that intrinsic value is additively measurable. On this view, the intrinsic value of a “greater” object equals the sum of the intrinsic values of the “smaller” objects that are, in some relevant sense, its “parts.”¹ G. E. Moore’s principle of organic unities is often cited as an argument against this thesis of additivity. In the first section of this paper I try to show that the additivity thesis can, in fact, be reconciled with belief in organic unities.² In section 2 I argue, however, that there are other compelling evaluative claims that


create difficulties for the additivity thesis. A plausible theory of the good must, I submit, include a kind of “non-trade-off,” to the effect that the smallest amount of certain greater goods is more valuable than any amount of certain lesser goods. It is sometimes suggested that introducing a lexical ordering of the bearers of value makes it possible to combine additivity with non-trade-off. I argue, in section 3, that such lexical additivity is not a satisfactory solution. In sections 4 and 5 I go on to argue that non-trade-off is nevertheless compatible with additivity, but only if certain traditional claims about the nature of intrinsic value are abandoned. In particular, we must allow that either intrinsic value itself, or the bearers of such value, are “world-relative.” I leave it open whether or not this is a price worth paying for saving the additivity thesis.

1. PARTS, WHOLES, AND BASIC VALUE STATES

In his *Principia Ethica*, Moore stresses that “[t]he [intrinsic] value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the [intrinsic] values of its parts.” 3 He refers to this claim as “the principle of organic unities.” An organic unity, then, is a whole whose intrinsic value cannot be computed by summing the intrinsic values of its parts. It is commonly assumed that the existence of organic unities entails that intrinsic value, unlike attributes such as length and mass, is not subject to additive measurement. This seems not to be Moore’s view, however. He claims that the intrinsic value of a whole is “equivalent to the sum of the value which it possesses as a whole, together with the intrinsic values which may belong to any of its parts.” 4 “Value as a whole” Moore defines as “[t]hat value which arises solely from the combination of two or more things.” 5 That is to say, if something has value as a whole, this is due to a holistic effect, which confers on the thing in question a certain value that cannot be reduced to the values of its proper parts. Thus, for example, Moore holds that

[i]f it is true that the combined existence of two evils may yet constitute a less evil than would be constituted by the existence of either singly, it is plain that this can only be because there arises from the combination a positive good which is greater than the difference between the sum of the two evils and the demerit of either singly: this positive good would then be the value of the whole, as a whole . . . . 6

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