

An Argument for Intrinsic Value Monism

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Abstract In this paper I argue that there is only one intrinsic value (i.e. intrinsic value monism). I start by examining three aspects of values that are often taken to count against this suggestion: that values seem heterogeneous, that values are sometimes incommensurable, and that we sometimes experience so-called “rational regret” after having forsaken a smaller value for a greater one. These aspects, I argue, are in fact compatible with both monism and pluralism about intrinsic value. I then examine a fourth aspect: That a very large amount of any one value can always outweigh a very small amount of any other. I argue that this aspect, which I call the nominal notable-commensuration principle, is compatible only with monism.

Keywords Axiology · Intrinsic value · Pluralism · Monism · Rational regret

1 Introduction

A central notion in ethics is that of intrinsic value. Stipulatively, a value is an intrinsic value if and only if it is valuable by virtue of itself. By contrast, a value is an extrinsic value if and only if it is valuable by virtue of other things that it helps realize.¹

In this paper I shall bracket common questions about the nature of intrinsic value and about what things are intrinsically valuable. The question I shall seek to answer is one of *quantity*: How many intrinsic values are there? If there is such a thing as intrinsic value at all—a premise that I shall take for granted—then a certain positive number must be the right answer. But what positive number is it? For the present purpose I shall distinguish between two views that jointly exhaust the realm of possible realist

¹By “value” I mean prudential value. Presumably, however, those who believe that all value is value simpliciter will also find my argument useful. I do not discuss moral value.

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answers: monism, the view that there is only one intrinsic value, and pluralism, the view that there are two or more intrinsic values.

My aim in this paper is to provide an argument to the effect that we should reject pluralism and endorse monism about intrinsic value. In order to do so, I shall first examine three aspects of values that are often taken to count in favor of pluralism: that values seem heterogeneous, that values are sometimes incommensurable, and that we sometimes experience so-called “rational regret” after having forsaken a smaller value for a greater one. These aspects, I argue, are in fact compatible with both monism and pluralism. I then examine a fourth aspect of values: That a very large amount of any one value can always outweigh a very small amount of any other. I argue that this aspect, which I call the nominal notable-commensuration principle, is compatible with monism only.

2 Heterogeneity, Incommensurability, and Rational Regret

These three aspects of values are often taken to count in favor of pluralism:

2.1 Heterogeneity

Values seem heterogeneous. Knowledge, happiness, life, freedom, and friendship all seem to be valuable, but they also seem to be very different, and it not clear that they all share a single value property by virtue of which they are valuable. This, in turn, appears to lend support to the view that there is not a single intrinsic value by virtue of which all valuable things gain their worth (monism), but rather, a plurality of values that are all valuable in their own right (pluralism).

2.2 Incommensurability

Some values seem incommensurable. If we are asked to determine the relative worth of, say, knowledge and friendship, it is not clear how we should respond. Indeed, it seems unclear if a definite answer even exists. As such, it seems, *prima facie*, that some values are incommensurable. This, in turn, appears to count in favor of pluralism, for if pluralism is true, it is understandable why some values are incommensurable: Some values are incommensurable because they are either different intrinsic values or they are means to different intrinsic values. If monism is true, by contrast, it is not so clear why any values would be incommensurable, for according to monism, all values are valuable exclusively by virtue of contributing to one supreme value. If monism is true, therefore, all values should be commensurable in a straightforward manner.

2.3 Rational regret

It sometimes seems that even if we have chosen the most valuable of two competing values, we regret—and have some reason to regret—that the lesser value was not realized. This has come to be known as “rational regret,” and rational regret can in turn be taken to count in favor of pluralism. Michael Stocker argues that in case there is only one intrinsic value, then

there is no ground of rational conflict because the better option lacks nothing that would be made good by the lesser. Correlatively, the lesser good is not good in any way that the better is not also at least as good. There is no way, then, that the lesser option is better than the better one. And thus, there is no rational reason to regret doing the better—i.e. to regret doing it rather than the lesser.²

John Kekes makes a similar point, using the example of happiness as a proposed unitary intrinsic value:

If, say, we thought that all values derived from whatever they contributed to happiness, then we would simply choose the value that gave more happiness, and we would not regret having forgone lesser happiness, since what we want is greater happiness.³

Stocker and Kekes take rational regret to count in favor of pluralism, since only if pluralism is true does it seem to make sense ever to regret that the lesser of two competing values were not realized. If monism is true, the lesser value will never have anything of worth that the greater value lacked, and as such, there would be nothing to regret once the greater value was realized.

How might a monist about intrinsic value respond to heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret? There are two main paths open to the monist. One path is to deny that values are heterogeneous, incommensurable, and apt to cause rational regret. This path, I think, is off the table, for there is undeniably some truth to all of the above observations. The other path, which I shall pursue, is to argue that heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret, being real aspects of our evaluative practices, are in fact compatible with both monism and pluralism, and count neither way in the monism/pluralism debate.

2.4 Heterogeneity (monist reply)

Monists may concede that values are heterogeneous without abandoning monism. The reason is that monism is a theory, not about values as such, but about *intrinsic* value, and although monism is (arguably) committed to the view that what is intrinsically valuable is homogeneous, it is not committed to the view that extrinsic value is homogeneous. To illustrate this, consider the perhaps simplest monistic theory, hedonism, according to which pleasure is the only intrinsic value. If hedonism is correct, it makes sense why things as diverse as knowledge, life, happiness, freedom, and friendship are all valuable. They are all valuable, a hedonist would say, because they are all either pleasurable (like happiness), preconditions of pleasure (like life), or things that are instrumental in gaining pleasure (like knowledge, freedom, and friendship). My point here is not that hedonism is correct, but that monism is not committed to the view that all values are equal, or even similar, in nature. Presumably, the only thing all values must have in common is a contributory relationship to an intrinsic value. Things can stand in a contributory relationship to an intrinsic value, moreover, even if they

² Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 272. Arguments along the same lines have been advanced by Bernard Williams, “Ethical Consistency” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 172–75; Ronald de Sousa, “The Good and the True,” *Mind*, Vol. 83, No. 332, 1974, p. 534–51; Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 171–74; and Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 120–23.

³ John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 57.

have very little (else) in common. For this reason, the fact that many of our everyday values are heterogeneous does not, by itself, make us justified in rejecting monism.

2.5 Incommensurability (monist reply)

Monists also have resources to account for incommensurability. First, monists might, without abandoning monism, concede that weighing knowledge against friendship is impossible, for it might be that while certain forms of friendship contribute more to the one intrinsic value than certain forms of knowledge do, certain forms of knowledge contribute more than certain forms of friendship do. Accordingly, there might be no definite answer to the question of what, in the abstract, is most valuable of friendship or knowledge. This helps the monist account for incommensurability. Even if we focus on particular instances, however—say, the value of your particular knowledge of Ancient history versus the value of a particular friendship of yours—a monist could still admit that you face an enormous challenge in trying to commensurate the two. The only thing a monist would have to concede *qua* monist is that in all particular cases, commensuration problems are epistemic, not metaphysical. Metaphysically, there would (barring the possibility of metaphysical vagueness) be a definite answer to the question of the relative worth of any two particular competing values. The reason is that granted monism, all values inherit their worth exclusively by virtue of standing in a contributory relation to the one intrinsic value, and as such, they can be commensurated according to how much they contribute. It is compatible with monism, however, that the exact level of contribution might be extremely hard to discover or might even be epistemically inaccessible. The question of what is most valuable, your knowledge of Ancient history or a particular friendship of yours, might have the same epistemic status as questions such as “How many times did Socrates scratch his head?” or “How many mosquitoes died in Russia last week?” Though there is a definite answer to both of those questions, our limited epistemic capacities make it impossible for us to gain anything close to precise knowledge of such matters. The fact that a commensuration problem is epistemic, not metaphysical, moreover, does not make it any less real or any less daunting. For this reason, both monism and pluralism have resources to account for incommensurability.

The monist’s case for incommensurability is further strengthened by the case for rational regret.

2.6 Rational regret (monist reply)

There are several ways by which monists can account for rational regret. First, as Thomas Hurka suggests, Stocker is wrong in claiming that on monistic accounts, the better option never lacks any of the virtues of the lesser option.⁴ This is most obvious in cases where the values of different subjects are involved. To use simple hedonism again, for the sake of illustration, a hedonist may well hold that if we are forced to choose between giving subject *A* 10 units of pleasure and giving subject *B* 8 units of pleasure, then the better option (giving *A* 10 units of pleasure) does in fact lack something of value that the lesser option has: *B*’s 8 units of pleasure. This, in turn, can account for rational regret: Though we did realize the greater value, it is still true

⁴ Thomas Hurka, “Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret,” *Ethics* 106 (April 1996), p. 555–575.

that *B*'s pleasure—which is also valuable—was not realized. The point is perhaps even clearer in cases where we are forced to choose, not between realizing *A*'s or *B*'s pleasure, but between alleviating *A*'s or *B*'s pain. Even if *A*'s pain were more intense than *B*'s, and we managed, thankfully, to alleviate *A*'s pain, *B*'s pain might still be a significant evil and we might rationally regret not having been able to alleviate it.

Monistic hedonism can also account for agent-internal rational regret. Hurka touches on this point, and invites us to compare the pleasure of eating a bagel with the pleasure of discussing philosophy.⁵ Hurka suggests that even if we are monists, we can rationally regret having forsaken one kind of pleasure for the sake of achieving another.

This borders on what I take to be the monist's most central response to the rational regret objection, namely that in every case where we are given the option of realizing only one out of two competing values, we might—even though we have in fact chosen the greater value—regret the fact that not both values could be realized. It is regrettable, even granted monism, that we must often sacrifice one value in order to secure another. This, moreover, explains rational regret.

In assessing the strength of the rational regret objection, we must also keep in mind that we often develop fond emotions for the things that we value, and that we can regret their absence even in cases where it seems obvious that the things are not intrinsically valuable in their own right. Houses, for example, are presumably not intrinsically valuable, but still it is plausible that if I had just sold my old house, I could, over the next few weeks, experience regret over no longer being able to live there. I could feel this even if I were convinced both that houses are not intrinsically valuable and that my new house, all things considered, is superior to my old house. Emotional attachment, it seems, has the power to explain why we sometimes regret that a lesser value was not realized even though a larger value was. Our psychological ability to be emotionally attached, moreover, is compatible with both pluralism and monism.

For these reasons, I think heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret are compatible with both pluralism and monism, and as such, that they do not settle the monism/pluralism debate. Let us now turn to a fourth aspect of our evaluative practices.

3 The Nominal-Notable Commensuration Principle (NNC)

Though it seems plain that we sometimes face commensuration problems, it also seems plain that sometimes we do not. One example of such a circumstance is when one value in question is very large while the competing value is very small. In such cases it seems that irrespective of how different the two values are, we are always able to determine which particular value is more valuable.

Ask yourself, for example: What is most valuable, your closest friendship or your knowledge of contemporary American soap operas? Here, I assume, it seems plain that the friendship is more valuable than the knowledge. Consequently, if you had to forsake one in order to keep the other, then you should—all else equal—forsake the knowledge and keep the friendship. As such, it seems that in this case we are able to arrive at a clear verdict regarding the relative worth of the two competing kinds of values.

⁵ Ibid., p. 569.

We also seem to be able to arrive at a clear verdict when we switch which kind of value is made large and which kind of value is made small. Ask yourself: What is most valuable, a peripheral friendship of yours or all your knowledge of philosophy? Here, I assume, it seems clear that all your knowledge of philosophy is the greater value, so if you could keep the knowledge only by forsaking the friendship, it seems that—again, all else equal—forsaking the friendship is what you have most reason to do.

Now imagine a different case involving two other values that are often deemed to be intrinsic values in their own right: achievement and freedom. Here again it is true that in many cases, we are unable to commensurate. For example: What is most valuable, making a significant scientific breakthrough or being free to travel abroad for the next seven years? For most of us (or for me, at least), it is hard to tell, for the two options appear to be approximately equal in value. If we make one value sufficiently large and the competing value sufficiently small, however, it is no longer hard to tell. Would it be worthwhile to give up your freedom to travel abroad for a week in exchange for making a Nobel Prize level scientific breakthrough? It seems plain that it would. Switching which kind of value is made large and which kind of value is made small, we might ask: Would it be worthwhile to give up your freedom to leave your bedroom for the rest of your life in exchange for the achievement of inventing a slightly better tasting chewing gum? It seems plain that it would not. Your freedom to move outside of your bedroom for the rest of your life is clearly more valuable than the achievement of making a small contribution to the science of chewing gums. So again, we seem to be able to arrive at a clear verdict.

The point I am aiming at here is that when we seek to commensurate two kinds of values, then no matter how different they are, we always seem to be able to arrive at a clear verdict when one of the values in question is made sufficiently large while the competing value is made sufficiently small. Moreover, it seems not merely that we are drawn, psychologically, to arrive at this verdict, but that we are *justified* in doing so. To make this point clear, I suggest that you to come up with two values that you consider to be very different in kind, and then conduct a thought experiment in which you make one value very small and the other value very large. Having done so, ask yourself if it has been made clear that one is greater in value than the other. Then change which value is large and which value is small, and ask the same question again. My prediction is that though you might get into many commensuration problems along the way, you will always manage to make such problems disappear once you make one value very large and the competing value very small—and this is what the NNC says: That a very large amount of any one value can always outweigh a very small amount of any other.

NNC, it seems, is a fact about the way we intuitively reason about values. Arguably, it is an aspect of our practice of valuing on par with heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret. How can monism and pluralism, respectively, account for NNC?

4 Monism, Pluralism, and NNC

If monism is true it is understandable that nominal-notable cases work the way they do. On monistic accounts, different values gain their worth exclusively by virtue of standing in a contributory relationship to a single intrinsic value, and for this reason,

all values can in principle be ranked according to how much they contribute. Though we might face commensuration problems on monistic accounts, monism holds that such problems are epistemic, not metaphysical, and when one value is made very large while the competing value is made very small, the limits to our epistemic capacities are no longer significant: The contrast is so great that we see it through the epistemic blur.

If pluralism is true, by contrast, it is not clear how nominal-notable cases could be of help in solving commensuration problems. The reason is that on pluralist accounts, the values we seek to commensurate will sometimes be intrinsic values in their own right, and in such cases, our commensuration problems will be metaphysical, not epistemic. If the problems are metaphysical, moreover, it is puzzling how nominal-notable comparisons could help clear things up, for then removing epistemic blur will not be of much help. If achievement and freedom, say, are both intrinsic values in their own right, then the two values belong on different value scales, and accordingly, it is not clear how the two could ever be weighed against each other. To weigh two things against each other, we need a single scale on which both can be weighed. Pluralism, however, is precisely the view that in value matters, we do not have a single scale, but plurality of scales. As such, if pluralism were true and we tried to commensurate two different values that are both intrinsic values in their own right, it seems that we should never be able to do it, even in nominal-notable cases. Pluralism, therefore, appears to face a challenge in accounting for the fact that we seem to be able to arrive at clear verdicts in nominal-notable cases.

Most pluralists deny that this challenge poses a serious problem for pluralism. Bernard Williams writes that radical incommensurability allegations are “utterly baseless” and that pluralism can in fact account for commensuration across different intrinsic values.⁶ Williams does not, however, explain how pluralism can account for it, and as we shall see, pluralists tend to run into trouble when offering their explanations. In *The Right and the Good*, W. D. Ross writes:

The ‘greatest wave’ now awaits us—the question whether virtue, knowledge, and pleasure [all of which are intrinsic values according to Ross] can be compared with one another in value, whether they can be measured against one another. I do not pretend that the views I shall express are certainly true, still less that I can prove them to be so. I will only say that they are the result of a good deal of reflection about the comparative value of these things, and that they agree, so far as I can judge, with the views of many others who have reflected on it. I think, then, that pleasure is definitely inferior in value to virtue and knowledge.⁷

What does Ross’ “reflection” consist in? What does it mean that pleasure is “inferior” to virtue and knowledge? “Inferior,” in Ross’ context, presumably means “lower in value.” But what does “lower in value” mean when we face, not a single ultimate value scale, but a plurality of ultimate value scales? This is not clear. On the subsequent page, Ross writes:

⁶ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 17.

⁷ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 149.

[A] certain larger amount of pleasure would more than outweigh the given amount of virtue and intelligence. But if we take this view we are faced by the question, *what* amount of pleasure is precisely equal in value to a given amount of virtue or of knowledge? And to this question, so long as we think that *some* amount is equal, I see no possibility of an answer or of an approach to one.⁸

It is understandable that Ross cannot give a general answer to how much pleasure you need to weigh up for virtue or knowledge or intelligence. In the abstract, such questions might have no answer. The relevant question, however, is how, in particular cases, a “larger amount of pleasure would more than outweigh the given amount of virtue and intelligence,” for if value *A* shall ever outweigh value *B*, it seems that there must be a common scale on which both *A* and *B* can be weighed and that *A* must be weightier than *B*. In the absence of such a scale, weighing *A* against *B* is like weighing speed against size or liquidity against mass. This, moreover, must surely be impossible, for no amount of speed can outweigh any amount of size. Not even the speed of a jet-plane can outweigh the size of a peanut.

James Griffin argues that value pluralists can account for commensurability because a plurality of intrinsic values is compatible with the existence of a unified value scale. Griffin writes:

It does not follow from there being no super-value that there is no super-scale. To think so would be to misunderstand how the notion of ‘quantity’ of well-being enters. It enters through ranking: quantitative differences are defined on qualitative ones. The quantity we are talking about is ‘prudential value’ defined on informed rankings. All that we need for the all-encompassing scale is the possibility of ranking items on the basis of their nature. And we can, in fact, rank them in that way. We can work out trade-offs between different dimensions of pleasure or happiness. And when we do, we rank in a strong sense: not just choose one rather than the other, but regard it as worth more. That is the ultimate scale here: worth to one’s life.⁹

Griffin’s reasoning is not clear. I, at least, do not understand what it means that a notion of “‘quantity’ of well-being ... enters through ranking,” nor do I understand what it means that “quantitative differences are defined on qualitative ones” or that these constitute “informed rankings.” I do understand the idea of holding “worth to one’s life” as one’s ultimate value scale. The problem is that if pluralism is correct, “worth to one’s life” is not a unified scale.

Michael Stocker argues, in a manner resembling Griffin’s, that we can commensurate values even if there is no supreme value as long as we introduce what he calls a “higher level synthesizing category”:

Suppose we are trying to choose between lying on a beach and discussing philosophy—or more particularly, between the pleasure of the former and the

⁸ Ross, p. 150.

⁹ James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 90.

gain in understanding from the latter. To compare them we may invoke what might be called a higher-level synthesizing category. So, we may ask which will conduce to a more pleasing day, or to a day that is better spent. Once we have fixed upon the higher synthesizing category, we can often easily ask which option is better in regard to that category and judge which to choose on the basis of that. Even if it seems a mystery how we might ‘directly’ compare lying on the beach and discussing philosophy, it is a commonplace that we do compare them, e.g. in regard to their contribution to a pleasing day.¹⁰

It is indeed commonplace that we compare different values, but if it seems a mystery how this can be possible granted pluralism: Does not this count in pluralism’s disfavor? Very little in Stocker’s argument sheds light on how commensuration is possible granted pluralism, and Stocker does not make clear how anything can work as a higher level synthesizing category without being a unified intrinsic value. In virtue of what does the category synthesize? Wherefrom does it get its authority? It seems that the only way in which a higher level synthesizing category could be effective is indeed by being a unified intrinsic value. For Stocker’s argument to succeed, therefore, it must collapse into a monistic theory. The collapse into a monistic theory is actually hinted at by Stocker himself in the claim that “we may ask which will conduce to a more pleasing day...” Here Stocker isolates one single value, the hedonic one, and evaluates the relevant evaluand (the day) according to this one scale. This is fine if monistic hedonism is true. If pluralism is true, however, the extent to which a day is pleasing will only be one part of the story about that day’s value.

An argument similar to Stocker’s has been advanced by Ruth Chang. Chang suggests that we can commensurate values as long as we have a “covering value” under which the values that we seek to commensurate can be subsumed.¹¹ Like Stocker, however, Chang does not explain how anything can play the role of a covering value without being a unified intrinsic value. In fact, Chang does not to wrestle with this problem at all, for she takes as her starting point that there is a plurality of intrinsic values and that these can be commensurated, and then infers that since both of these premises are true, there must be a covering value. She does not, however, provide independent support for the view that a covering value exists nor does she say much about the supposed nature of this value, other than suggesting that other values might properly be described as “parts” of the covering value. Saying little else, she concedes that a covering value is indeed an “axiological mystery” and that we do not have a name for it in our everyday value vocabulary. For this reason, Chang refers to the covering value as a “nameless value,” and writes:

Whether in the end one believes that there are such nameless values depends on whether more traditional accounts of rational conflict resolution can do the job of putting together values instead. ... Even if at the end of the day one remains

¹⁰ Stocker, p. 72.

¹¹ Ruth Chang, “Putting Together Morality and Well-Being” in *Practical Conflicts*, P. Baumann and M. Betzler (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 118–159.

skeptical of nameless values, the case for them, I believe, raises a serious challenge to the usual way in which the determination of rational conflict resolution is understood.¹²

I think Chang is right that in the absence of a nameless covering value, pluralist theories face commensuration problems. If covering values do not exist in our ordinary value vocabularies and they are also axiological mysteries, however, it seems that a natural conclusion to draw is that pluralism cannot in fact account for the ways in which we commensurate values, which is what I suggest.

A move that has been thoroughly discussed by both Chang and others is a retreat from commensurability to comparability. Commensurability is cardinal rankability, i.e. rankability in terms of absolute values. Comparability is ordinal rankability, i.e. rankability in terms of relative values (“more” or “less”). In our debate, however, a retreat from commensurability to comparability cannot help the pluralist, for though comparability might be less demanding than commensurability, it cannot help the pluralist account for commensuration across different intrinsic values. The reason is that the question of cardinality versus ordinality concerns exclusively whether the scale in question is relative or absolute, and thus both cardinality and ordinality presuppose the existence of a unified scale. The existence of a unified scale, moreover, is what pluralists reject, and this is what makes it troubling for pluralists to account for nominal-notable comparisons across different intrinsic values.¹³

The only way in which a pluralist could account for commensurability across different intrinsic values seems to be by holding that the same one value property is present in various things such as pleasure, knowledge, and friendship, and that a certain amount of pleasure has the same amount of value attached to it as has a certain amount of knowledge of friendship. On such a view, the value attached to various pleasures, items of knowledge, and friendships could in principle be added and subtracted in a way that allows commensuration. The problem with this proposal, however, is that it is in its essence monistic, not pluralistic. The proposal is monistic because it holds that value is exclusively one thing, and it is by virtue of its monism that it can account for commensuration. Had the theory been genuinely pluralistic—i.e., if it had held that there are several different things that are valuable—it would still be puzzling how the value of pleasure and value of knowledge could be added together and weighed against each other.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have presented an argument for intrinsic value monism that appeals to pluralists’ lacking ability to account for commensuration across different intrinsic values, even in nominal-notable cases. This, I have argued, counts in pluralism’s

¹² Chang, p. 120.

¹³ For a discussion of the retreat to comparability, see Anthony Marc Williams, “Comparing Incommensurables,” *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2011, p. 267–277. In Williams’ view, “Lacking a common measure or standard for comparison, it is ostensibly false that one item is better than another, and it is false that the two are equal in value.” Williams, p. 267.

disfavor, for nominal-notable commensuration is so central to how we intuitively reason about values that any plausible value theory must be able to account for it. As such, to the extent that heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret are compatible with both monism and pluralism, and the nominal-notable commensuration principle is compatible with monism only, we have a reason to favor monism and disfavor pluralism about intrinsic value.