

Evil Achievements and the Principle of Recursion

ABSTRACT. This paper looks at the value of achievements by examining the implications of a highly plausible axiological principle, the principle of Recursion, as developed by Thomas Hurka. According to Recursion, the pursuit of a good is itself good, and the pursuit of a bad is bad. I consider three possible ways of understanding how Recursion works, and the implications of these construals for the value of achievements. Doing so reveals not only a good way to account for the value of achievements, but also the best way to understand the principle of Recursion as an axiological principle. Ultimately, I conclude that Recursion is best construed as an instance of genuine organic unity.

Achievements, many people think, play a central role in the best kind of human life. Indeed, many people think that achievements are of such importance that they are worth pursuing at the expense of serious sacrifices. But just what makes achievements valuable? What makes running a marathon, writing a book, climbing Mount Everest, or decoding the human genome worth doing? There's a great deal to be investigated about these questions. In this paper, I look at one particular aspect of the value of achievements by examining the implications of a highly plausible axiological principle: the principle of *Recursion*. Doing so not only sheds light on the value of achievements, but also on how best to construe Recursion.

Let's suppose that an *achievement* has (among other features) the following structure: *a process that culminates in a product*. Writing a novel, for example, consists of a process of writing, which culminates in a product, the novel.

One question that we might have about the value of achievements is this: which of these two components of achievements, the process or the product, is the

source of the value for achievements? A natural thought is that achievements are valuable primarily because of the value of their *products* – developing the cure for cancer, for example, seems valuable because it results in saving many lives.

However, having a valuable product is clearly not necessary for an achievement to have value. Many paradigmatic achievements have products that are of zero value: the product of winning a chess match, for example, is having the pieces configured in a certain way, and this state of affairs alone hardly seems to make winning a chess match valuable. Similarly, being in a location 26.2 miles away doesn't have any particular value – certainly not enough to account for the value of running a marathon. Assuming there is something that is characteristic of all achievements that makes them valuable, it's clear that at least *some* of the value – if not all – of achievements is sourced in the process. Call this the *Process Thesis*: *the process is a source of the intrinsic value of an achievement*.

In this paper, I will assume the Process Thesis is true,¹ and turn instead to consider achievements that have products of positive or negative nonzero value. In particular, my focus will be products that have some negative value. How might the value of the product contribute to the achievement's value?

One highly plausible axiological principle that might be of service here is the principle of *Recursion*. Recursion as a value-theoretic principle captures the thought that, most broadly, *it is good to love the good*. In other words, given some thing of intrinsic value, the love of this valuable thing is itself of intrinsic value. Recursion also makes the corresponding claims that loving the bad is bad, and the good is bad, and hating the bad is good. Loving, here, is broadly understood as encompassing a range of pro-attitudes, including *desiring*, *wishing for*, *taking pleasure in*, and, most relevant to the issues at hand, *pursuit*. Hating, likewise, encompasses to a range of con attitudes: *avoiding*, *destroying*, *being pained by*. (Since pursuit is what's relevant to the issues here, that will be largely be the focus in what follows.)

The general idea has been rigorously formulated in the principle of Recursion by Thomas Hurka:²

¹ I defend the Process Thesis in “The Value of Achievements” (forthcoming in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*).

² *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), henceforth abbreviated as VVV. Hurka makes use of Recursion insofar as his view is that *virtue* is loving the good and

- (1) For some base intrinsic good, G, the loving of G is itself of positive intrinsic value; the hating of G is of negative intrinsic value.
- (2) For some base intrinsic evil, B, the hating of B is of positive intrinsic value; the loving of B is of negative intrinsic value.³

Thus, much like recursion in logic, value-theoretic Recursion concerns an operation performed on a base. We begin with a base intrinsic good, or a base bad, as the case may be. The operation is a particular attitude toward the base. Recursion applies to “attitudes” more broadly: particular pro and con attitudes, such as loving and hating. The particular aspect of Recursion that is relevant here is *pursuit* of a base good or bad.⁴ Taking pursuit as our form of loving, the pursuit of an intrinsic good is *itself* of intrinsic positive value. Similarly, the opposite of pursuit, avoidance, of intrinsic bad is of positive value. Mismatches of pursuit of values – pursuit of bad or avoidance of good – are, accordingly, of *negative* value.

Hurka’s formulation of Recursion is helpful because it crystallizes this value theoretic principle whose subscribers, in one form or another, appear to have included Aristotle, Brentano, Moore, Nozick and others.⁵ It’s arguable that a proto-recursive view is held by Aristotle, who holds that at least some good things – activities – have a fitting or “proper” pleasure.⁶ And, famously, that the pleasure

hating the bad, and vice is thus its opposite. We need not agree with this analysis of virtue, however, to make use of Hurka’s account of the principle of Recursion, which has independent plausibility as such.

³ This is a modified version of the principle of Recursion as presented by Hurka, *Ibid.*

⁴ I will follow Hurka and take “pursuit” here as a *form of loving* (VVV, 11 ff).

⁵ Hurka attributes versions of Recursion to these philosophers, as well as Hastings Rashdall and W. D. Ross (VVV, 23-28).

⁶ From *Nicomachean Ethics*:

[S]ince activities differ in degrees of decency and badness, and some are choiceworthy, some to be avoided, some neither, the same is true of pleasures; for each activity has its proper pleasure. Hence the pleasure proper to an excellent activity is decent, and the one proper to a base activity is vicious; for, similarly, appetites for fine things are praiseworthy, and appetites for shameful things are blameworthy. (1175b25-30).

It’s unclear whether or not Aristotle’s view is that the pleasures in the respectively good and bad activities are *intrinsically* good or bad. Hurka takes this to be an expression of Recursion (VVV, 23) but also notes that there are differences between Aristotle’s views in *Nicomachean Ethics* and fully-formed Recursion. Moreover, it seems that Aristotle’s view is that the pleasure that “completes” the activity is *caused* by the activity, when the activity is

“completes” a good activity, presumably thereby augmenting its value, as “the bloom on youths.”⁷ Chisholm attributes a version of Recursion to Brentano, which is certainly in line with his definition of intrinsic value as that which loving is *correct*. Brentano, on Chisholm’s reading, also holds that correct love of the good is also good.⁸

A Recursive view is also often associated with G. E. Moore since a great deal of his discussion of organic unities involves the positive value of wholes involving loving the good or beautiful and hating the bad or ugly.⁹ Moore’s view, on one reading, is that the value accrued in situations involving a pro-attitude toward a good is accrued by the *whole* comprised of the attitude and base good. He explicitly says that the mere existence of a beautiful object on its own is of very little value, and the pro-attitude, on its own, would have hardly any value.¹⁰ In this respect, Moore’s discussion departs from Recursion as we understand it here, where the base indeed has significant positive intrinsic value.

There has been some debate over whether this is the best reading of organic unities: is the value accrued to a *whole*, or is it rather the case that the elements themselves *change* in value when put together?¹¹ The latter approach is the *conditional* approach to organic unities. This view ultimately denies that there is indeed a bona fide organic unity, holding instead that the value of the parts changes, rather than being a whole which has different value. Hurka’s account of Recursion is, in a sense, a relative of this view – the loving itself accrues value, rather than the attitude-plus-object whole.

As we will see, the view I ultimately endorse here challenges Recursion in this respect. After considering what value theoretic implications we would hope to

done the right way: he says it arises “as a consequent end” (1174b30), which seems slightly different from the relevant pleasure for Recursion. In any case, there is something of the spirit of the principle in Aristotle.

⁷ For example, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1174b20-25, 1174b30.

⁸ Chisholm, *Brentano and Intrinsic Value*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 63.

⁹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971 [1903]), 191 ff.

¹⁰ *Principia Ethica*, 190.

¹¹ For some of this debate, see Ben Bradley, “Is Intrinsic Value Conditional?” *Philosophical Studies* 107 (2002): 23-44; Johan Brännmark, “Three Kinds of Organic Unity” in Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen (eds.), *Patterns of Value – Essays on Formal Axiology and Value Analysis*, vol. 2. (Lund: Lund Philosophy Reports, 2004), 80-94; Thomas Hurka, “Two Kinds of Organic Unity” *The Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 299-320.

see for evil achievements, it turns out that the best construal of Recursion is indeed as bona fide organic unity.

Achievements, according to my earlier sketch, because of their process-product structure, involve the *pursuit* of some product. In cases where the product is of nonzero value (that is, some positive or negative value), then, Recursion entails that *something happens to the value of the process*, in virtue of it being the pursuit of some good or bad. If the product of the achievement is of positive value, Recursion entails that the pursuit of this product is good. If the product of the achievement is of negative value, Recursion entails that the pursuit of this product is *bad*.

The latter case is puzzling: according to the Process Thesis, the *positive* value of achievements is grounded in the *process*. But if the product is of negative value, and if Recursion is true, then *what happens to this positive value?*

I'm going to consider three possible ways of understanding how Recursion works, and the implications of these construals for the value of achievements – evil achievements in particular. Doing so will reveal not only a good way to account for the value of achievements, but also the best way to understand how exactly the principle of Recursion works.

Here are the three construals: (1) the value of the process is *polarized* by the value of the product; (2) the value of the process is augmented or diminished *summatively*; (3) there is an augment or diminishment of value, but this is not strictly summative, but rather an instance of genuine *organic unity*. I'll examine each of these and ultimately conclude that the final option, although not without its drawbacks, is the best.

According to the polarization construal, Recursion simply governs the valence of value of the pursuit of a good or bad. When the product is of positive value, the process of an achievement is unaltered in value by Recursion. When the product has a *negative* value, such as an elaborately planned murder, the value of the process is *negative*. It thus undergoes a reverse polarization of value.¹²

¹² On this construal, then, Recursion has no effect on the *degree* to which the value of the process is of positive or negative value (this is governed by the features of the process itself) but Recursion determines the valence. A more sophisticated version of the polarization construal could also shape degree, i.e., the worse the product, the worse the negative value of the process. But this version would fail to help the polarization construal from the objection I subsequently consider.

However, polarization fails in two ways. First, a large part of the motivation for accepting Recursion as a general value theoretic principle is the thought that the pursuit of a good is *all the more good* in virtue of it being a pursuit of a good. So a pursuit that is otherwise valuable should accrue *more* value in virtue of it being the pursuit of some good. But the polarization construal of Recursion doesn't have the resources to account for such a bonus. Recursion only governs the *valence* of value on this view. The process is *already* good, and so Recursion has no further influence over its value.

Second, the polarization construal gives an overly restrictive account of achievements that have products of *low-level* evil products, such as practical jokes, or even moderate level negative value, such as art heists. These not-too-evil evil achievements, such as practical jokes, seem to have (at least some) positive intrinsic value. If the positive value of the process undergoes reverse polarization when the product is of negative value, as this approach to Recursion will have it do, then these achievements actually have *no* positive value whatsoever. This is schoolmarmish and overly restrictive. So we should reject the polarization construal of Recursion in favor of one that allows us to retain some positive value to petty evil achievements.

The second construal I now turn to consider does just this. The *summative* construal of Recursion holds that Recursion generates a value, V_R , that is summed with the value of the process – to be precise, V_R is summed with the value that the process would have, independently of the value of the product in which it culminates. V_R is positive when the value of the product (V_{prod}) is positive, negative when it is negative, and, we can further elaborate, proportionate to the value of the product in magnitude. Thus, for example, a very evil product results in a large negative value for V_R , a product of small positive value results in a small positive value for V_R , and so on.

Given the value that the process would have, independently of its product having any value, positive or negative (call this the *independent value* of the process, $V_{\text{proc indep}}$), V_R is added to $V_{\text{proc indep}}$, giving us the actual value of the process, V_{proc} . So according to the summative construal of Recursion:

$$V_{\text{proc}} = V_{\text{proc indep}} + V_R$$

Assuming the value of an achievement is the value of the process plus the value of the product,

$$V_{\text{ach}} = V_{\text{proc}} + V_{\text{prod}}$$

$$V_{\text{ach}} = (V_{\text{proc indep}} + V_{\text{R}}) + V_{\text{prod}}$$

The summative view thus gives the following desirable results. Achievements that have products of positive value accrue additional value. In a petty evil achievement, the value of V_{R} and V_{prod} will be a small negative value – not enough to outweigh the positive value of $V_{\text{proc indep}}$. Thus petty achievements come out as of *positive* value on this construal, which is just the result we were hoping for. In a significantly bad achievement, where the value of the product is very bad, the achievement is bad *overall*, since the negative value of the product outweighs the positive value of the process.

However, the summative construal fails to give a satisfactory answer in certain kinds of cases. In these cases, the achiever *believes* that the product he is pursuing has positive value, but turns out to have *no* positive value. For example:

Cure-All. Dr. Cure-All is a highly competent scientist working on the vaccine for a debilitating disease. Even though there was every indication as he was working on this medicine that it would indeed inoculate against the disease, years later it is discovered that the vaccine actually induces a much more horrible fatal disease in all who take it.

Dr. Cure-All's valiant pursuit of the vaccine is earnestly effortful and competent, and thus presumably valuable in the same way as the process of any achievement. The product of his efforts, namely the deaths of many people, is of *negative value*.

What does the summative construal of Recursion say about the value of Dr. Cure-All's achievement? Since the product is negative, V_{R} is negative. Thus $V_{\text{proc indep}}$ will be diminished. In this case, V_{R} is greater (ex hypothesi) in negative value than $V_{\text{proc indep}}$ is positive. Thus the summative construal tells us that the value of the process is *negative*. This means that all the hard work and dedication of Dr.

Cure-All toward curing a debilitating disease actually has negative value – the summative construal entails that the process has no positive value at all.

This doesn't seem right. It seems there should be at least some positive value in Dr. Cure-All's pursuit of what he believed, albeit falsely, was a cure for a debilitating disease. The implausibility is even more evident in contrast to the efforts of Dr. Kill-All,

Kill-All. Dr. Kill-All labors intensely to design a terrible toxin, which he intentionally administers and thereby kills many people.

Surely Dr. Kill-All's efforts are worse than Dr. Cure-All's efforts. But the summative view as stated has no way of distinguishing the value in these two cases: in virtue of their equally evil products, the summative construal of Recursion says that Dr. Kill-All's efforts are just as bad as Dr. Cure-All's.

A large part of the motivation of accepting the principle of Recursion is to capture the thought that there is indeed *positive* value of in effort such as those of Dr. Cure-All – that is, that the *pursuit* of the good is itself good, even if the good toward which it aims fails to come to fruition. The summative construal fails to be able to distinguish the value in between the efforts of Dr. Cure-All and those of Dr. Kill-All.

We can revise the summative construal. The best way to understand Recursion is looking to the value of the *intentional object* of pursuit, rather than the actual, resulting product.¹³ By “intentional object” I mean that toward which the pursuit is aiming. The intentional object of Dr. Cure-All's pursuit is what Dr. Cure-All is aiming for, namely, the vaccine.

Not only does this version of the view best capture the distinction between Dr. Cure-All and Dr. Kill-All, but it also gives better results in other, non-achievement cases where the principle of Recursion is at play. For example, taking pleasure in non-existent goods, products that never come to fruition, or wishing for goods; i.e., in contrast to taking pleasure in non-existent bads, pursuing bads that never come to fruition, or wishing for bads. If we construe the principle of Recursion

¹³ I believe that this is very close to what Hurka has in mind.

as taking the *intentional object* of the pursuit as the element that figures in the value generated by Recursion, this gives a much better account than if we look to the value of the product of the achievement.

So, on the revised summative construal, the value that the process accrues from Recursion is generated from the value of the intentional object of the process, V_{obj} , rather than the value of the actual resulting product. To be precise, intentional objects themselves do not have any actual value, so V_R is generated from the value that the object of the intentional object would have, were it to come about. It is this value, V_R , which is the amount by which $V_{proc\ indep}$ is augmented or diminished.

The overall value of the achievement on the revised summative construal will be a matter of the value of the actual product and the value of the process. The value of the process, as I have just described, is the $V_{proc\ indep}$ plus V_R , where V_R is positive just in case the intentional object of the process would be positive, and negative just in case the intentional object would be negative. To the value of the process we then add the value of the actual product, which gives the value of the achievement overall. This allows the summative construal to avoid counterexamples such as Cure-All.

But even with this refinement, the summative construal runs aground. It entails that we can have a case like the following.

Zero Case. Villain is striving with great ingenuity toward a heinous end, which he succeeds in achieving. Accordingly, $V_{proc\ indep}$ has a positive value (according to the Process Thesis), V_{prod} has a negative value, and V_R is thus of negative value. In this case, it just so happens that $(V_R + V_{prod})$ is the same amount in *negative value* as the $V_{proc\ indep}$ is of *positive value*. Thus the value of the achievement overall is *zero*.

To be precise, in the Zero Case:

$$(V_R + V_{prod}) = - (V_{proc\ indep})$$

$$\text{Thus } V_{ach} = 0$$

In Zero Case, V_{prod} and V_{R} are negative to a degree such that they *exactly negate* the positive value of the process. As a result, the overall value of the process of the achievement is zero. It is entirely *neutral in value*. This means that an ingenious, heinous, evil murderous scheme has no value whatsoever, positive or negative. This seems inaccurate.

Now, one might reply that the case isn't so bad: after all, there really is something of negative value, namely the product. It just so happens that its negative value is exactly counterbalanced by the positive value of the process. So even though there is indeed an achievement here that has no value at all, we are reacting to the value of its components.

I don't find this particularly satisfying, since we are evaluating the value of the *achievement*, which is still zero in this case. To really get to the heart of the matter we would have to take a stand on the status of values of the individual components when they are summed within a single thing or state. (Do these values still "count" in some sense, even though they are outweighed?) Nonetheless resolving these issues is unnecessary since there is a more troublesome version of the zero case for the summative account.

*Zero Case**. Villain is striving with great ingenuity toward yet another heinous end, which, by luck, does not come about. Thus, V_{prod} is zero, and V_{R} is negative. But it just so happens that V_{R} is the same amount in *negative value* as the $V_{\text{proc indep}}$ is of *positive value*. In other words, V_{R} is as bad as $V_{\text{proc indep}}$ is good. So the overall value is zero.

To be precise, in Zero Case*:

$$V_{\text{proc indep}} = -(V_{\text{R}})$$

$$\text{Thus } V_{\text{proc}} = 0$$

$$\text{And } V_{\text{prod}} = 0$$

As a result,

$$V_{\text{ach}} = (V_{\text{proc indep}} + V_{\text{R}}) + V_{\text{prod}}$$

$$V_{\text{ach}} = 0 + 0$$

$$V_{\text{ach}} = 0$$

In Zero Case*, the negative value of the intentional object of the achievement generates an amount to be deducted from the independent value of the process that is *the same in amount as the independent value of the process*. As a result, the overall value of the process of the achievement is zero. It is entirely *neutral in value*.

This means that the attempt of an ingenious, heinous, evil murderous scheme is equivalent in value to a sneeze: neutral. This seems incorrect. And here is an argument to support this position: we can take what we consider to be appropriate reactions to things as evidence of their value. If a pro attitude is appropriate, this is an indication that something is of some positive value; if a con attitude is appropriate, this is some evidence that something is of negative value. It seems clear that some kind of con attitude is appropriate toward the evil pursuit – even if unsuccessful. In any case, it certainly seems clear that *neither* a pro nor con attitude is appropriate toward the sneeze: this is evidence that it is of neutral value. It certainly seems like *some* attitude is appropriate toward the murderous scheme. This is evidence that there is some sort of value to the murderous scheme. But the summative view fails to give us this result.

There is a response that can be made on behalf of the summative view. The explanation for why it seems that some attitude is appropriate in Zero Case* is because of the *instrumental value* that the pursuit of an evil process would have, typically. Even though there is no *actual* bad (or good) here, had the process come to fruition, there would have been some bad in the world. Thus the process has a kind of instrumental value that is negative, and this is the source of our reaction.

This is a possible way that we could go if we really want to support the summative construal, and were there no other appealing construals of Recursion, I might be inclined to find this response adequate. But I am far more inclined to say that it is not an adequate response: indeed, there *really is something in the world that is bad* in Zero Case* – the attempt of an evil – and something that is good – the difficult and competent pursuit. These things aren't merely instrumentally good and bad, and aren't merely possibly good and bad: their value is actual.

Moreover, a good part of the theoretical motivation behind the principle of Recursion is to capture the negative value of the pursuit of evil. And the summative construal fails to say that there is *anything* that is actually evil in Zero Case*.

To pinpoint the source of the problem with the summative construal, note that according to the summative construal the value that is accrued or lost via Recursion is the actual value of the process. That is, Recursion governs the *value of the process*. This, it seems, is the source of the problem with zero cases: Recursion can result in the process having very little or even *no* value whatsoever, and thus, in some cases, the achievement has *zero* value.

I propose, then, that we adopt the third construal of Recursion, which allows the process to retain all its value. On this construal, Recursion is such that the value that is accrued or lost is not gained or lost by the process – that is, the value located in the process is *not* what is affected by Recursion. Instead, Recursion governs the value of the *whole* – process *and* product together, as a unit. In addition to the process, and the product, there is an entity that is composed of the process and product – the achievement itself. This whole is the location of the value accrued from Recursion. While the previous construals of Recursion located the recursive value *in* the process part, this construal does not do this. The process, on this construal, *retains* its independent value: the *actual* value of the process is its independent value. The recursive value is located in the whole, not in the process. The parts of the whole thus retain their independent intrinsic value. As a result, the value of the whole, process and product, may *not be equal* to the sum of value of the process and the value of the product.

In value theory, of course, we have a name for such an occurrence: *organic unity*. Organic unity occurs when the value of the whole differs from the sum of the values of the parts.¹⁴ On this approach, then, Recursion is an instance of true organic unity.

¹⁴ This rough gloss shouldn't be taken as an authoritative definition. There is debate about precisely what characterizes organic unities (Moore appears to characterize organic wholes as such that the value of the whole "bears no regular proportion to the sum of the values of its parts" (*Principia Ethica*, 27), but Fred Feldman shows that this is problematic (*Utilitarianism, Hedonism and Desert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112-124. Chisholm offers a different analysis (*Brentano and Intrinsic Value*, 75), with which Lemos takes issue (*Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant* (Cambridge: Cambridge

To elaborate, an achievement is a whole with a process and product, in which the process, according to the Process Thesis, is always of some positive value. On the organic unity construal, Recursion entails that an achievement in which the product is of positive value will have positive value as a whole, and an achievement in which the product has negative value will have negative value as a whole.

Although this is the result we were hoping for in the case of achievements that have significantly evil products, it is not the result we wanted for petty evil products: the intuition here is that petty evil achievements such as practical jokes have some positive value. Indeed, the organic unity construal entails that, *as a whole*, the value of an achievement with a negative product will be negative.

But there is more to be said. We can avail ourselves of Moore's distinction between value *as a whole* and value *on the whole*.¹⁵ The value *on the whole* is the sum total of the value of the whole as a whole, plus the values of its parts. Tallying the value of all the entities – process, product, whole – gives us a sum total of the value of the whole *on the whole*. The parts, after all, in an organic unity, retain the value that they would have independently from the whole. Thus we can add up the value of these parts, and then add this sum to the value of the whole itself as a whole. This gives what we might call the net value of all the entities – that is, as it's called by Moore, the value of the whole *on the whole*.

In a petty evil case, then, we have a product with a small negative value, a process of high positive value, and a whole, of small negative value. Added together, two small negatives and one large positive, we thus have a *positive* value on the whole. The positive value of the process is positive enough to outweigh the negative value of the product and the whole. Petty evil achievements thus have a positive value. This is indeed the result that we were hoping for.

In a significantly evil achievement, we would be hoping for the view to tell us that the achievement is of *negative* value on the whole. And it does. In a significantly evil case we have an achievement with a product of very large negative value, and a process of positive value, and a whole of negative value. Here, if the negative value of the product and whole are negative *enough*, as they would be in a

University Press, 1994) 196-200; and also "Organic Unities" *The Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 323-324).

¹⁵ *Principia Ethica*, 214-216.

case of a very evil achievement, they outweigh the positive value of the process. Thus, the value of the very evil achievement is on the whole negative.

On this construal, however, unlike the others, there is still some *positive* value that is retained by the process in the evil achievement. Thus there is still some respect in which the evil achievement is good. I'm inclined to say this is a plausible implication: after all, given the process thesis, the evil achievement shares the very same good-making features that make non-evil achievements valuable. An incredibly ingenious and clever yet diabolical plan to commit the perfect crime is nonetheless ingenious and clever, and, assuming it is an achievement, it shares the other features common to all achievements, including those features that make them valuable. Yet, the organic unities construal of Recursion tells us that the value of the very evil achievement on the whole is *negative*. As a result, things over all would be better off *without* the evil achievement. So it is overall bad, even though there is a respect in which it is good. This captures quite nicely what we might be inclined to say about very evil achievements. Thus the organic unities construal succeeds in giving us yet another nice result.

The organic unity construal similarly gives us the implications we want to see in achievements with products of positive value: there is an additional bonus of value – the value of the whole as a whole is positive, thus adding a bonus of positive value to the whole as a whole. Thus overall the organic unities view captures the implications about achievements that we wanted, and so fares better than the other construals considered so far.

But surely the organic unities construal is subject to a version of Zero Case objection as well. Couldn't it be possible, after all, that the value on the whole could be zero? In such a case the positive value of the process exactly counterbalances the negative value of the product and the negative value of the whole as a whole. Thus the value of the whole on the whole amounts to zero.

Indeed this is possible. However, what is problematic in the objection to the summative construal is no longer problematic. The objection to the summative construal is that in Zero Case* there is *nothing* of intrinsic value whatsoever. The elaborate pursuit of an evil end is equal in value to a mere sneeze.

But given the organic unities construal, even if the value of the whole on the whole sums to zero, the parts *retain their original intrinsic value*. On this construal,

in every case of achievements the process *retains* its value. And the whole as a whole, in an instance of an evil achievement, retains its negative value as such. So even if the overall state of the value of the whole on the whole adds to zero, there are still components of the achievement that retain their original value, positive and negative. This was the original complaint with the Zero Case on the summative construal: because the summative construal is such that the actual value of the *process* is determined by Recursion, it is susceptible to cases where the process has *no* value (and also where the whole achievement had no value). But the organic unities construal is not susceptible to this problem.

One might raise a further worry, however, that the organic unities construal is unable to account for the disvalue of *unsuccessful attempts*. The organic unity construal of Recursion governs the value of wholes, which are, in achievements, made up of two parts: the process and product. But if no product is produced, Recursion appears to have nothing to say about the value of the whole, which consists of only one part, namely the process.

Consider a different case with Dr. Kill-All:

Kill-All 2. Dr. Kill-All wants to kill lots of people by making a terrible toxin. He labors intensely designing his toxin and the way in which he will administer it, but the plan is foiled, and no one gets killed.

Here we have a process, which, according to the Process Thesis, is of some positive value. The product would have negative value, but does not, since it doesn't exist. The whole, then, appears to consist only of the process – there is no evil product that is a part of this whole. Now, this is indeed an unfortunate implication, since of course a great deal of the motivation for accepting Recursion is to capture the negative value of processes such as this one here. How can the organic unity construal of Recursion account for the value of evil achievements in cases where there is no evil product to shape the value of the whole?

The issue concerns organic wholes more generally. In some organic wholes, the intentional object of a pursuit or, more broadly, attitude, does not *exist* in what we might call a metaphysically robust sense, yet we are inclined to think that the intentional object shapes the value of the whole nonetheless. For example, take a

case of cruelty, where A cruelly enjoys B's pain. Proponents of organic unities accounts are inclined to classify such instances of cruel pleasure as an organic whole that is disvaluable as a whole; moreover, cruel pleasure is a disvaluable whole *regardless* of whether or not the intentional object of the pleasure – B's pain – is real, or is imagined. Moore, for example, holds the view that cruelty is intrinsically bad regardless of whether or not the pain that is the object of enjoyment is imaginary pain or real pain: in other words, cruelty is characterized by enjoyment of another's pain, and is disvaluable as such; the enjoyment of the pain is *equally bad* regardless of whether or not it is *actual* pain that is being enjoyed.¹⁶ Suppose that B's pain is indeed merely imagined by A. Here the organic whole consists of two putative parts: the pleasure, and its intentional object, the imagined pain. But the intentional object of the pleasure here is a pain that does not exist. How can the nonexistent pain be said to be a *part* of the whole, and thus shape its value as an organic whole? To put the same puzzle in our current context: how can the nonexistent product of an evil achievement be said to be a part, and thus shape the value of the achievement as a whole?

This question, many think, can only be answered by appealing to the going definition of *parts*. But it turns out that it's a difficult matter just what it is for something to be a "part" of a whole and there is contention over how this is to be defined.¹⁷

However, it is my view that looking toward an account of "part" in order to resolve this question is unnecessary. We do not need to know the correct analysis of "part" in order to resolve this issue. Rather, we have a very strong grasp on the position that intentional objects *can and do* shape the value of wholes even in cases where they do not exist in a robust sense. Cruel pleasure in another's pain, as we just considered, is bad *regardless* of whether the pain is real or imagined. The pain,

¹⁶ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 210.

¹⁷ Much of the debate appeals to the Brentano-Chisholm definition of "proper parts" (Chisholm, *Brentano on Intrinsic Value*, 73) but this view entails the intentional object of an attitude is not a part of a whole. Hurka says that this is a peculiar understanding of "part" and prefers to see an attitude-plus-intentional-object as a single thing with *no* parts ("Two Kinds of Organic Unity"), but this means that, e.g., malicious pleasure is *both* intrinsically good and intrinsically bad, and I agree with Lemos that the same thing cannot be good and bad all over at the same time (Lemos, "Organic Unities," 326).

which is the object of malicious pleasure, shapes the value regardless of whether or not it is *actual* pain being experienced by someone, or if it is just *imagined* the person who is enjoying it.

Whatever it is that we have in mind by “part” – where we mean the components of an organic whole that shape its value – the intentional object (robustly existing or not) counts as one of these. Intentional objects *are* parts in the relevant sense insofar as they clearly shape the value of the whole. Our impression of the negative value of malicious pleasure or of the negative value accrued to the pursuit of an evil end that fails to come to fruition are *evidence* that intentional objects are “parts” in the sense that is relevant for organic unities. That is to say: we have a stronger grasp on the truth of this premise, namely, that intentional objects shape the value of organic wholes, than we do on the truth of any analysis of part-hood. Thus, we should take capturing the former as a desideratum of the latter, and accept that intentional objects are the relevant components of organic wholes.

To be clear, in this paper I am arguing for the relatively narrow conclusion that the organic unities construal is the best understanding of the principle of Recursion, that is to say, instances of loving the good and hating the bad. Whether or not all instances of organic unities are best understood on a similar construal (as opposed to a conditional account, for example, according to which the values of the parts change within the context of the whole) is another matter. But I do take it that my points here about part-hood and its status in organic unities to apply to organic unities more broadly.

As a result, there is no concern that the organic unities construal of Recursion will have difficulty accounting for cases of failed attempts at evil achievements. Thus we safely can take the following as how the organic unities construal will account for failed attempts at evil products. Given a difficult attempt of a very evil goal that is not attained, the pursuit, according to the Process Thesis, has positive value. The intentional object, were it to come to fruition, would be of very negative value, but is of zero actual value. The organic unities construal of Recursion holds that the pursuit of an evil end is of negative value as a whole. Since the product has zero actual value, the components that we add together to tally our value *on* the whole will be the positive value of the process minus the negative value

of the whole as a whole. Assuming the positive value of the process is not greater than the negative value of the whole as a whole, on the whole it is of negative value. Of course, *were* the product to be attained, the negative value of the product would further be added to our calculation of the value of the whole on the whole: thus a *successful* attempt at an evil end would be *worse* than an unsuccessful one. This seems correct. So the organic unities construal captures the desired results.

However, we might now worry that if the pursuit of the evil end is significantly elaborate (and so has to a great degree those features that make achievements valuable), then on the whole a *very* evil achievement could be of positive value. Could the positive value of the process outweigh the very negative value of the product and the whole as a whole?

The organic unities construal, like any construal of Recursion, reports on proportionality: the pursuit of a very evil end is *worse* as a whole than the pursuit of a less evil end, and so forth. In cases where a very evil end is being pursued, Recursion can say that as a whole it will be much worse than in a case where there is a pursuit of a merely minor evil.

Yet it seems possible nonetheless that there could be a very valuable pursuit of a significantly disvaluable end, such that the positive value of the pursuit outweighs the negative value of the product and the whole as a whole, meaning that an incredibly elaborate attempt of a very evil end could be on the whole good.

However, Recursion captures a second kind of proportionality as well: it is worse to pursue an evil *more intently* than it is to pursue the same evil less intently. Similarly, it is better to pursue a good more intently than it is to pursue it less intently. Hurka's full account of Recursion includes such a consideration to capture proportionality here, as well as in the earlier sense, so I won't go into the ensuing details.¹⁸ But the point is here that any construal of Recursion indeed has the resources to accommodate the potential counterexamples we are currently entertaining.

Yet even after adjusting for proportionality, the possibility appears to remain open that on the organic unity construal, an evil achievement could ultimately be of *positive value* on the whole. These would be cases where the pursuit is so very

¹⁸ VVV, 58 ff.

impressive and elaborate that its value in virtue of these features would be so great as to outweigh the negative value of the product and the whole as a whole, even after the value is adjusted in response to proportionality.

But whether or not such a case would indeed be of positive value on the whole is a delicate balance: as the effort of the pursuit increases, so does its positive value, but so does also the *negative* value of the whole as a whole, as a result of the second kind of proportionality. Whether or not the positive value could be greater than the negative will depend on the details of the numbers. But even if it *is* of positive value on the whole, given the organic unities construal, we can reassure ourselves that it is nonetheless of great negative value *as a whole*.¹⁹

Be that as it may, the organic unities construal does very well at capturing our intuitions about the value of evil achievements, and avoids the implausible implications of the alternative construals.

The view is not without peculiarities, however. The organic unities construal is considerably more complex than the alternative construals of Recursion. Adding all these extra features – whole as a whole, whole on the whole, and so forth – may seem akin to Ptolemaic epicycles: bordering on Byzantine, and should be avoided if there is a more theoretically streamlined approach available. But the more theoretically streamlined approaches that are available – the polarizing and summative views – have been *rejected* for their counterintuitive implications. I've argued that the organic unities view gives better results for the cases we've

¹⁹ The degree to which this implication is unpalatable will vary according to intuitions about, say, ingenious art heists. I'm inclined to say that indeed evil schemes of that sort could be of positive value on the whole, and so I see this implication as appealing rather than as a bullet to bite. For those who are less inclined to agree, I might point out that we typically think that it is perfectly appropriate to enjoy and admire elaborate art heists in fictional depiction, and so it seems that there is at least that to be said to motivate the intuition for their having some positive value. Could there be a case with a very, very evil product – such as a heinous murder? Again, this might be possible, but the negative value of the whole as a whole would presumably be so great as to outweigh the positive value of the process in most cases. If indeed the balance was just so, and even the pursuit of a heinous murder could be of positive value on the whole, then so be it. Once again we can take refuge in the fact that there is nonetheless a great deal of negative value – the whole as a whole. Moreover, if the pursuit were indeed so unimaginably clever and ingenious, then perhaps we wouldn't find it so counterintuitive to say that it could be of positive value. If we're still inclined to think that the real thing ought to be deemed of negative value on the whole, bear in mind as well that our intuitions may be pulled in that direction since to be sure one could make a case that evil schemes are of negative value *instrumentally* – on some account or other of instrumental value – in that *typically* such a scheme would cause something of negative value.

considered. I don't really find the epicycle objection a compelling one²⁰ – if the world is complex, our theories should reflect that.

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²⁰ Motion is, after all, relative.