

Irreplaceably good

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Introduction

Resistance to change is sometimes explained in terms of the irreplaceability of things. Certain persons or things should be retained, it is claimed, even when doing so means renouncing to persons or things of greater value.

The notion of irreplaceability is not as straightforward, however, as its recurrent justificatory role in our conservative attitude may suppose. People deeply diverge in particular about, first, the sort of things that qualify as irreplaceable as well as about what make something or someone valuable as such. Let us take a closer look at these two sources of disagreement.

Irreplaceability is consensually seen as a feature of *persons* whom we love or cherish. It may spare the beloved, children and friends from being replaced by a duplicate and not even by a better version of themselves. *Personal goods* are likewise valued as irreplaceable. However whether our conservatism remains reasonable when it applies to *things* is not always granted. The related bias, if it is one, will often be innocuous: no one will blame Ronnow-Rasmussen for not throwing away the poem he found in a drawer that his daughter wrote for him when she was young, however of little impersonal value the piece might be¹. Other cases will however not be as charitably considered. Whether pets cloning² (Williams 2008, p. 142, Grau 2010) and human enhancement technologies (Sandel 2007, Williams 2008, p. 252, Kahane 2011, Pug *et al.* 2013) are sane practices is debatable.

The possibility to further extend the judgement of irreplaceability to the class of *impersonal goods* (i.e. to goods which are good *simpliciter* rather than good *for someone*) will sound even more suspicious. Everyone will not follow Cohen when he resists the destruction of a mediocre Lippi for the purpose of the creation of a radically superior Picasso. Or when he expresses distress about letting Michelangelo uses his David to make Eve, i.e. an even more beautiful sculpture. To be sure, the uncertainty of the artistic

¹ “It was a typical child’s poem. Despite the fact that my room was cluttered with paper, *I could not throw it away*. The piece of paper, with its few lines of Swedish, had some value for me, i.e. it was a value that related in some way to me as a person in a way other valuable things do not” (Ronnow-Rasmussen 2011, p. 1 [my emphasis]).

² Note that one may condemn the cloning of pets without valuing the latter as irreplaceable.

enterprise is a reason to prevent the sculptor from re-using an existing master-piece of his collection for the purpose of creating another. But once the success of the enterprise is made certain, no reason to opposite it remains, some will say.

In sum, the property of irreplaceability has two contentious value-bearers. The common view is that only persons can be irreplaceable and *if* things are similarly assessed they are so by reference to persons: goods will have to be of the personal type, rather than of the impersonal type, for being valued as irreplaceable.

People also disagree about the notion itself of irreplaceability. After having been long overlooked, it is now offered widely conflicting accounts. The literature provides conflicting answers to the following questions: Is irreplaceability a dispositional notion? Are there degrees (or depth) of irreplaceability? Is irreplaceability conceptually related to the notion of destruction? Is irreplaceability the (exclusive) value of historical goods? Of intrinsic goods? Of final goods?

Irreplaceable goods, I wish to argue, are neither those that are historically valuable, nor those which are unique, not even those which are intrinsically valuable. Expanding on G.A. Cohen (2011, 2013), I propose to understand the value of irreplaceability in terms of a bias toward *existing* things of value in opposition to their non-existing, albeit also valuable, candidate substitutes. The discussion is not intended to convert anyone to conservatism. The goal is explanatory: it is to offer an explanation of the notion of irreplaceability, which should be comprehensible even to those who apply it less much often than the conservatives, if at all.

The discussion will be organized as follow. A dispositional definition of irreplaceability is first proposed (1.). The next section stresses the advantages of a realistic account of the value of irreplaceability, in contrast to a nihilist account, a subjectivist account and a fitting analysis (2.). The last sections discuss irreplaceability as the value of historical properties (3.) or as that of *existing* things of value (4.)

1 To value something as irreplaceable

Non-relevant cases of irreplaceability

All conservative behaviors are not always relevant to the sense of irreplaceability that is intended here. The following three cases in particular can be left aside.

Keeping things as they are may, first, be a commendable attitude when changing them is too risky. The new, it is feared, might very well not even be as good as the old, in spite of the contrary intention to create something better. Uncertainty may compromise the success of a renovating enterprise thus forcing the conclusion that something is irreplaceable. However, the sense of irreplaceability that is prescribed by prudence is not the one we are after. To assess something as irreplaceable is not dictated by the uncertainty of the success of the replacement. Even if the success of the enterprise to built things anew were guaranteed, we would still be inclined to resist it.

Secondly, a status quo bias may lead us toward certain conservative attitude. Keeping x as it is just is in this case not a choice but the default state of affairs. The possibility to replace x is then not even considered. We not only take the current state of affairs for granted, we also don't reflect on any others. Inertia may explain why things are not replaced. It seems however irrelevant as an explanation as to why they are irreplaceably good, even if it might be pleasurable to following the routine sometimes (see Scheffler 2009).

Thirdly, not to replace things may be dictated by the practical impossibility to do otherwise. This happens when *de facto* x has no duplicate³. Lack of better alternative may render certain things irreplaceable, that is, as a *faute de mieux*. This is, however, not the significant sense of irreplaceability we are after. If Crusoe loves Friday and values him as irreplaceable, this is not because, as a matter of fact, there is no one else for taking his place. Rather this is because no one else —no ship wrecker nor any captives— could take Friday's place near Crusoe. It is by supposing a *counter-factual* candidate substitute that the irreplaceability of persons and things is discovered.

In sum, the irreplaceability of goods is unrelated, in particular, to the uncertainty of a renovating enterprise. Nor is it related to our propensity to follow the routine or to the current unavailability of a candidate substitute.

Depth of irreplaceability

The notion of irreplaceability displays various degrees of depth (or, as some says, of meaningfulness). It is by varying the temporality of the existence and the amount of value of the candidate substitute that these various degrees of depth of irreplaceability can be discovered. The standards that are met by the candidate substitutes become higher and higher so that the choice to conserve the original is made increasingly difficult to make. Refusing a duplicate is not as conservative an attitude as refusing a better version. Refusing a *forthcoming* substitute is not as conservative an attitude than denying the possibility of a *past* substitute. by qualifying the candidate substitute in this manner, the following six notions of irreplaceability can in obtained:

- i Something is irreplaceable if, as a matter of fact, there is no duplicate can take its place.
- ii Something is irreplaceable if, as a matter of fact, there is no better version can take its place.
- iii Something is irreplaceable if no duplicate of that thing could take its place.

³ To say, as Zagzebski does (2001), that “if someone is irreplaceable in value, I assume that means that if we lose her, no one else, no matter similar to her, can replace her” (2001, p. 413) is strikingly ambivalent as to whether irreplaceability is a matter of *actually* having no duplicate or whether it rather is, as I suggest (see also Grau 2004, 2010, a matter of being irreplaceable, even if a substitute were available.

- iv Something is irreplaceable if no better version of that thing could take its place⁴.
- v Something is irreplaceable if no duplicate of that thing could have taken its place.
- vi Something is irreplaceable if no better version of that thing could have taken its place.

Note that the notion of irreplaceability only becomes an axiological notion at level iii, that is, when the candidate substitute is counterfactually defined. Only then is irreplaceability not the contingent relational property of not having any candidate currently available substitute. Also, to reject iii and v does not imply that one would replace x with its duplicate. *Indifference* could rather (and more plausibly) be the commendable attitude. A non-conservative confronted with two strictly equivalent things will not be able to prefer any (unless he has a preference for the one on the left side).

i Things which are cherished

One needs not have any actual state of mind toward that which one values as irreplaceable. The evaluative attitude is a *disposition*, which can, as a first try, be defined as a propensity to oppose their replacement by other goods. Irreplaceable goods would be, on this view, goods which one would not be disposed to swap with any others.

Irreplaceable goods (IG) = goods which would not be replaced by any other substitute candidate.

This first definition proved to be too strong, however, because valuing something as irreplaceable gives you only a *pro tanto* reason to resist its destruction. Something may both be assessed as irreplaceable and be voluntarily, albeit reluctantly, replaced. This happens when the reason to replace it trumps the reason not to. Pick any far-fetched dramatic reason, like someone's near death, which would urge the replacement of the Lippi with the Picasso. To cherish something is not necessarily to resist its destruction, but only to be *averse* to the latter.

To be a conservative seems to be disposed to merely have pro-attitudes toward certain things (rather than to actually do anything, although opposing change is, of course, an choice which the conservative may well make) which one does not have

⁴ I take Raz to have this sort of counterfactuality in mind when he says: "Think of parent's attachment to their child. Assume that it is reasonably successful, and is of fairly common kind. The parents regard the child as irreplaceable. They need not deny that if the child died they would have another, and that for all they know their relation with the new child would be as successful and rewarding. Acknowledging this they still regard the child as irreplaceable" (Raz 2001, p. 26)

toward their substitute candidate. Following Oakeschott, we may suppose that the conservative *prefers* what he has to what he could have⁵.

Irreplaceable goods (IG') = goods which are preferred to any substitute candidate.

The problem with this second definition is that it is too broad. One may have a preference toward things, like money bills or disposable napkins, which we do not only find replaceable but which we value precisely for being fungible. This seems to suggest that some thicker dispositional pro-attitudes, than a mere preference, seem to be involved in the valuation of things as irreplaceable. Irreplaceable goods are those we love (Grau 2013, Helm ?), cherish (Anderson 1993, Cohen 2011, 2013), care about (Frankfurt 2001), hold dear, revere (Cohen 2011, 2013) or to which we are attached (Raz 2011). Irreplaceable goods can accordingly be defined as the designated objects of these various thick pro-attitudes:

Irreplaceable goods (IG'') = goods which are loved, cherished, care for, held dear, revered, objects of attachment.

What points in favour of these various pro-attitudes is a conceptual relation, which Cohen stresses, between cherishing something and *regretting* its destruction. “We do not regard something as being worthy of being revered or cherish if we have no reason to *regret* its destruction, as such” (Cohen, *Unpublished manuscript*). Or, as he also says: “You do not cherish a Tintoretto if you happily replace it by a slightly better Picasso (Cohen, *Unpublished manuscript*)” (?). Cherishing the Tintoretto is compatible with the decision to *unhappily* replace it with the superior Picasso. While not necessarily disregarded, the choice to replace it will nevertheless always be mourned, regretted, or felt as a loss. The cherisher is disposed, *ex ante*, to be distressed at the prospect that the painting could be replaced. She will, conversely, be relieved when the replacement project fails to realize.

Now to define irreplaceable goods as the suitable objects of various pro-attitudes seem to restrict its scope to *personal* goods. Indeed, it is a common view that one is only attached to things to which one is *personally* related. Raz says, for example that “concrete attachments are good for those whose attachments they are; their value is within the sphere of personal meaning. The uniqueness of an object or pursuit established by an attachment is uniqueness to one person, not uniqueness impersonally judged (Raz 2001, p. 38-39). Likewise, Anderson opposes the impersonal valuation that is relevant to useful things⁶, on the one hand, to the valuation of “something for its personal attachment to oneself, as when one cherishes an heirloom” (Anderson 1993, 144), on the other. Attachment is therefore always of the personal type.

⁵ To be conservative is to be disposed to think and behave in certain manners: it is to prefer certain kinds of conduct and certain conditions of human circumstances to others; it is to be disposed to make certain kind of choices (Oakeschott 1991, p. 408).

⁶ The crutches of a peculiarly deformed person and the notes that can be used only by the writer who made them (cf. Menger 1871 offer these examples as things which are both useful and have no economic value, being un-tradable) are counterexamples to the claim that useful things are always impersonally valued.

Defining irreplaceable goods as those we cherish therefore gives right to those who are reluctant to consider that other things than persons and their personal goods can be irreplaceable. However, such a restriction of the scope of irreplaceability needs not be inferred. This is because not all of the previously mentioned pro-attitudes involved in the valuation of goods as irreplaceable are of the personal type. In other words, one may have a pro-attitude toward something to which one is not personally related. The attitude of cherishing seems to be a case in point. Unlike attachment, it seems that one can *cherish* something (or someone) without being personally related to it (or her): being acquainted with that thing suffices. It is possible to say of Edith Wharton's novels that they are to cherish without implying that they are good for their readers only. That things of impersonal value could be the objects of cherishment is in fact Cohen's view when he claims that "a thing that has intrinsic value is worthy of being revered or cherished" (Cohen, *The Truth in Conservatism*), thus allowing the attitude of cherishment not to be confined to goods to which one is personally related. Our definition of irreplaceable may thus according as designating goods which are cherished.

Irreplaceability and trades

The idea of replacement covers many different sorts of ontological changes, not all of which are relevant to the notion of irreplaceability that is intended here. The most straightforward and relevant cases are when x is physically *destroyed* and y takes its place, as in the Michelangelo's example.

Replacement needs not take such a dramatic form, however. The substitute candidate may only *remove* without involving the destruction of that which it replaces. In ordinary language, we speak of trades as involving the replacement of something with something else. Things that are replaced by exchanges are given up for the sake of some other things. There are certain goods, it is argued, which should not be commodified. The forbidden list of goods include friendship, biological organs, babies or sex. Among the various explanations offered in support of this ban, one appeals to the incommensurability of these goods with money (Kant 1785, Raz 1987, Anderson 1993, Radin 2001). The question to ask here is: "Are these goods valued as irreplaceable when their trades are thus condemned?"

It is not certain, I submit⁷, that the condemnation amounts to a valuation of these goods as irreplaceable in the sense we are after.

Things are not *necessarily* valued as irreplaceable when they are refused to be sold. Consider the case of someone who was given a bike by someone else and who promised his benefactor that he will never part with it. While he will renounce to sell the bike because of his promised to do so, his decision needs not be *also* based on the belief that the bike is more valuable than the money he could get from it.

It is, correlatively, not inconsistent to trade things which we believe to be irreplaceability valuable. First, one can have a reason to exchange something with something else without having to compare their respective value. It can still be in our

⁷ See also Matthes 2013, 38-39.

interests to replace one by the other. If we want to laugh more than we want to be sad, we replace our tragedy tickets by comedy tickets. In any case, there is nothing invariably wrong about doing so. Nor is there anything morally disputable with abandoning the ideals of the Japanese Bushido for the purpose of adopting the ideals of the English gentleman, when moving to England. However incommensurable these two ideals may be, replacing one with the other proves, in this context, to be the wise thing to do.

The proper way to engage with an incommensurable good like a family mansion is to find it special, unmatched by any alternatives. But in certain circumstance, that is, when the money gotten from its sale would save someone's life, the proper way to engage with the family mansion is to inquire about its price.

2 Nihilism vs. subjectivism vs. fitting analysis vs. realist account

Irreplaceable goods have so far been defined as goods which we cherish. This definition turns out to be compatible with various views about the value of the irreplaceable. It is, in particular, compatible with a nihilist view, a subjectivist approach, a fitting analysis and a realist account. The latter, I suggest in this section, is the most promising of them.

Nihilism

On a *nihilist* account, irreplaceable goods are nothing more than the affective pro-attitudes (i.e. cherishment) that we have toward certain things or persons. While our cherishment seemingly grasp a property of the thing or person to which it is directed, the nihilist says that this is in fact an illusion. What we cherish is just a thing and we are fooled to think that our attitude was ascribing, even less since tracking, any evaluative property of the thing. It is the nihilist's view that things or persons are not what they seem to be, that is, bearers of values. The only sense of irreplaceability which this view allows is the factual sense distinguished previously: irreplaceable goods are just those that, as a matter of fact, have no candidate substitute.

The nihilist will typically claim that this factual sense is all that there is, thus rejecting any other "deep" or "meaningful" one. This strikes me as being at odd with a common experience according to which when things are said to be irreplaceable they are not merely described. Something about their worth or their merit is also implied.

Subjectivism

Next to nihilism on the spectrum of views about irreplaceability stands the subjectivist view. All that is needed for a good to be irreplaceable, on this view, is that it is an object of cherishment.

Subjectivism: x is irreplaceably good = x is cherished

Our attitude of cherishment, on this view, dictates what count as irreplaceable. To be judged or felt as irreplaceable is to be so. It is an implication of the subjectivist's view that we are immune from error in regard to the ascription of the value or irreplaceability. People are never mistaken in the use they make of the notion. The sort of error they never make split into two sort. First, they never are guilty of error of omission: they never fail to value a good as irreplaceable. The subjectivist cannot therefore blame someone for swapping his children with their enhanced version. Second, people never commit any mistake of commission: they never cherish goods that do not deserve to be cherished. The subjectivist cannot but lump together pathological cases (e.g. hoarding) and sane, or sensible, conservative behaviours.

Fitting analysis

Adopting a fitting analysis represents one way of retrieving the possibility of error in regard to the ascription of the value of irreplaceability which the subjectivist unpersuasively rules out. A fitting analysis consists in qualifying the pro-attitude on which the value of the irreplaceably depends as one which we ought to adopt or as one which is suitable (i.e. fitting, appropriate) to its object⁸.

Fitting analysis: x is irreplaceably good = x is appropriately cherished.

The value of irreplaceability is construed as an appropriate respond-dependent notion. It is because S suitably finds x to be irreplaceable that it is irreplaceably good. S 's appropriate attitude has an authoritative power in regard to x 's value. In other words, irreplaceable goods are those that are worthy of being cherished.

The countless number of artefacts that the hoarder accumulates on his balcony will fail the test of the fitting-analysis: they will be taken as unsuitable objects of his cherishment. While accommodating the possibility of errors in our disposition to cherish, the fitting analysis raises a few other problems:

First, it is circular. Cherishing has values as their formal object: to cherish something is to represent it to oneself as being good. The value of irreplaceably is defined by a pro-attitude, which, in turn essentially involve an evaluation of something as good. Because both the explanandum and in the explanans refer to a value, the account is defectively circular (Mulligan 2009, Massin 2011).

The definition provided is also too encompassing. There are at least two natural objects of cherishment which seems to fall outside the class of irreplaceable goods. Gardens may, for example, be worthy objects of cherishment without neither of their constitutive parts (e.g. the flours, the bushes, the trees, etc.) being valued as irreplaceable. I may cherish my family mansion and yet be willing to replace each of its components (the latter therefore not being valued as irreplaceable) with the view precisely to preserve it. In sum, we may cherish things whose essential components we do not necessarily value as irreplaceable. It is also possible to *care about* something without having to go through any comparison with anything else. As Frankfurt says: "The question of what we

⁸ On an alternate version of the fitting analysis, an object is irreplaceably good implies the existence of a reason for having a pro-attitude for it.

are to care about is not settled by arriving at judgments as to the inherent or comparative merits of various possible objects of devotion” (1999, p. 106). A comparison with a candidate substitute will, by contrast, have to be made for something to be assessed as irreplaceable. The comparison may not lead to the judgement that the latter is superior, and it may even be conducive to its evaluation as inferior. Still, it seems that an implicit contrast to the latter is involved when something is valued as irreplaceable.

Finally the analysis reverses the natural order of the explanation. Our attitude, it is argued, explains the irreplaceability of things. But why would we regret the removal and replacement of things by other things if we did not believe the former to *be* irreplaceable in the first place?

Realist account

A realistic account of the value of irreplaceability reverses the *analysans* and the *analysandum* of the fitting-analysis account: it is because something is irreplaceably good, the realists says, that someone cherishes it. While the realist will refer to dispositional pro-attitudes in the definition she provides of irreplaceability, she will conceive these attitudes as tracking some response-independent property. What bears priority in the direction of explanation is not the pro-attitude, but the property it is directed to. Something has a certain value, according to that construal, and it is the task of the dispositional attitude to grasp it.

A realist account is compatible with irreplaceability being a primitive notion, that is, an unexplainable axiological property. This conclusion cannot be entertained, however, before exploring the possibility that the notion irreplaceability can be further explained.

A realist account is also compatible with the value of irreplaceability being a disjunctive set of values. On this account, to say that something is irreplaceably good is just another way of saying that it is, say, beautiful. Subjecting this latest view to an open question argument shows what is wrong with it. If it were true that to be irreplaceably good was synonymous with, say, being beautiful, the question: “is this beautiful thing irreplaceably good?” would be tautological. Since it is not, one may conclude that to be irreplaceably good is not the same thing as being beautiful.

3 Irreplaceability as *historically* valuable

Consider Cohen’s eraser:

I have a pencil eraser (what in British English is called a “rubber”) which I have used ever since I became a lecturer forty-four years ago. It started out square, but now it has rounded edges, yet although it is small, most of it is still there. It is not because I make very few mistakes that most of it is still there, but because (a) I don’t use pencils very much; (b) it takes only a little bit of rubbing to eliminate a mistake; and (c) I don’t notice all my mistakes. I would hate to lose this eraser. I would hate that even if I knew it could be readily replaced, not only, if I so wished, by a pristine square one, but even by one of precisely the off-round shape and the same dingy colour that mine has now acquired. There is no feature that stands

apart from its history that makes me want to keep this eraser. I want my eraser, with its history. What could be more human than that?

Cohen cherishes his eraser because he cherishes his academic career and the rubber is something he has been using, even if only very occasionally, since the beginning of it. Cohen values the eraser in virtue of the way it externally relates to his lengthy academic activities. Maybe Cohen also likes that the value of his lengthy academic achievements is transferred to an object as insignificant as a rubber. The fact is that Cohen would be reluctant to replace the eraser with a whole new one. Or with one which is similarly worn but is not *his*.

In line with this quote, irreplaceability is often understood in terms of historical value (REF)⁹. What makes a good historically valuable? This section reviews various answers to this question (a-d), not all of which, as we shall see, are congruent with the idea that they also are *robustly* or *significantly* irreplaceable.

Historical goods as types of derivative goods

Historical goods are commonly defined as goods with value-making historical properties. These are goods whose history makes them valuable. “There is no feature that stands apart from its history that makes me want to keep this eraser”, says Cohen. The definition is lacking since we need to know what is it about the history of these goods which makes them valuable and also why their historical properties also makes them non-fungible with other similarly historically valuable goods.

The following definition, I suggest, will be of help in dealing with these two questions. Historical values, I submit, are those that accrue to things in virtue of their relation with past entities. Historical values, thus construed, are sub-cases of derivative values. Let us start with the latter. A derivative value, as Massin explains, is “the value that an entity exemplifies or possesses in virtue of the value of another entity. Entities of derivative value have their value because some distinct entities have some value. Derivative values are to be contrasted with fundamental or basic values: the values that entities have independently of the values of other entities” (Massin 2011, 152). (Derivative values, thus defined, are not equivalent to extrinsic values. While both kind of values depend on the property of other entities, only extrinsic values can depend on the natural properties of these other entities).

Derivative value: *x has a derivative value relative to y= x is (dis)valuable because y is (dis)valuable*

Drawing on Massin’s definition of derivative values, one may define an historical value as the value an entity exemplifies in virtue of the value of another *past* entity to which it is related. An historical value, thus construed, has the following definition:

Historical value: *x has an historical value relative to z= x is (dis)valuable because z is (dis)valuable and z is a past entity.*

⁹ A stronger claim, which, to my knowledge, no one explicitly makes is that the class of historical goods map onto that of the class of irreplaceable goods. That there are irreplaceable non-historical goods is however generally admitted.

On this view, historical values are values accruing to entities in virtue the relation which they have with some other valuable entity. One values x because one values z , x is related to z and z is a past entity. Historical values are sub-cases of derivative values in that the other valuable entity, namely z , needs to be a *past* entity. Depending on the sort of relation between x and z , the following cases of historical values can be distinguished:

- **Fetishist historical value:** one values x (e.g. Diana's dress) because one values z (e.g. Diana) and x was in proximity with (i.e. was touched by/belonged to) z . Another example (Cohen 2013): "If I had a paint brush that once belonged to Monet, I would value it as such, that is, because it once belonged to Monet". One values x (e.g. the paintbrush) because one value z (e.g. Monet) and x belonged to z .
- **Consecutive historical value:** one values x (e.g. Goya's drawing) because one values z (e.g. Goya) and x was made by z .
- **Instrumental historical value:** one values x (e.g. Hemingway's typewriter) because one values z (e.g. *A Farewell to arms*) and x was used to write z . Another example: One value x (e.g. Lincoln's pen) because one value z (e.g. the Proclamation of Amnesty) and x was used to write z .
- **Contributory historical value:** one values x (e.g. the remaining of a roman theatre) because one value z (e.g. the roman theatre) and x is a part of a valuable whole, z .

Note, however, that an historical good cannot be obtained by any kind of relation between x and y . The following, indeed, seem to be dubious cases of historical goods:

- **Cambridge historical value:** one values x (e.g. Xanthippe) because one values z (e.g. Socrate) and x was married to z .
- **Explanatory historical value:** one values x (e.g. Barnes's *Aristotle*) because one value z (e.g. Aristotle's philosophy) and x explains z .

The above definition of historical values obviously requires further refinements in order to rule out these latter cases.

Historical goods as unique

Historical value, thus defined, does not yet warrant irreplaceability. Indeed, anything that relates to z in the way x does could in principle replace x . If what makes Diana's dress valuable is its proximity with Diana, why not think that it could be replaced by any other of her garment? If what makes *this* paintbrush valuable is that it belonged to Monet, why think that it could not be replaced by any other Monet's paintbrush?¹⁰ If what makes

¹⁰ Interestingly, Cohen considers a Manet's paint brush (a painter he prefers to Monet), rather than another of Monet's paintbrush, as a replacement contender:

the bottle valuable is that it once contained a nice wine, any other bottles that used to contain the same kind of wine could take its place. Likewise, any of the short and fat biscuits named Madeleine, beside the particular one to which Proust refers to, could serve the function of reminding him of his childhood, as a past remembering device.

To secure the irreplaceability of historical goods, it is therefore not sufficient that the latter merely relates to past things of value since the latter condition could be met by other things. To be valued as irreplaceable, something must relate to past things of value in a way that no other things could.

In order to obtain this unique relationship, one possibility is to have x relating to z *then* and *there*. If I value Diana's dress just in virtue of its proximity with Diana, I should value similarly any dress standing in the same relation to her. If, alternatively, I value the dress she wore *at that special occasion*, then its non-fungibility is secured. Likewise, while Monet had many brushes, *this* one he used to paint the *Water lilies*. While other bottles did contain the same kind of wine, only *this* bottle contained the wine we drank *that night*, etc. Non-fungibility is therefore secured by moving from the property "Being worn by Diana" to "Being worn by Diana this day", by moving from "Being used by Monet" to "Being used by Monet for painting the *Water lilies*"¹¹. While the first properties are exemplified by many x s, the latter are uniquely exemplified. The irreplaceability of an historical good is obtained by individuating the object of the past to which it is related.

The problem is that when the notion of irreplaceability is explained in this way, it is given a sense that fails to be the deep sense of the term we are after. While it is true that Diana wore *this* dress this day, and thus is non-fungible with any of the other dresses that she wore at other occasions, still Diana could have worn another dress that day. The dress she could have worn, it seems, would have been similarly found as irreplaceable as the one she actually wore. If this is so, the notion of irreplaceability that is here at stake does not seem to be very robust. While it resists a substitution with a duplicate or with another of Diana's dress, it fails to be irreplaceable with another dress that she could have worn this day. It just could have been any other dress. Compare now the non-fungibility of Diana's dress with that of the beloved whose irreplaceability, one may say, remains the same in *all* possible worlds, present, future *and past*. Your beloved, I submit, would not only remain yours in the circumstance in which some duplicate shows up. It would also

If I had a paint brush that once belonged to Monet, I would value it as such, that is, because it once belonged to Monet, and if it were removed and replaced by a more elegant brush, one that belonged to Monet, by a well-wisher who knew that I think Monet greater than Monet, and that I care about elegance in brushes, then I would know that the well-wisher would have failed to understand something, and I don't mean that he would have failed to understand the sanctity of private property. He would have failed to understand that wanting to keep what one (already) has is a special sort of wanting.

Cohen values x (e.g. Manet's paintbrush) because he values y (Manet's talent) and although y is thought to be greater than z (Monet's talent), still Cohen values w (e.g. Monet's paintbrush) more than x (e.g. Manet's paintbrush).

¹¹ Compare with Grau's example of Jimmy Hendricks's guitar (Grau 2004, p. 125).

have remained yours in the circumstance in which some duplicate had shown up¹². Your love for him would not tolerate being replaced by a substitute, neither in the future *nor in the past*. Not only could you only love him, it also is the case that you could only have loved him, couldn't you?¹³The point is that the same cannot be true about Diana's dress, it seems. While it is true that it could not *now* be replaced by any other dress, not even by a perfect duplicate. It is also true that any other dress would have *then* fit the bill. The irreplaceability of Diana's dress is confined to the present and the future and proves weak once the possibility of a past counter-factual is considered. Historical goods, this suggests, are (slightly) less robustly valued as irreplaceable than persons¹⁴. They, at most, display the level 5 of irreplaceability that was distinguished previously.

More crucially, Diana's dress is on the proposed account irreplaceable because it merely happens to be the unique instantiation of the historical property of being the dress she wore that day. Let Diana's dress endure mitosis, as in Parfit's thought experiment (Parfit 1984), and it would then have many perfect duplicates (the latter sharing by hypothesis with the original Diana's dress all its historical properties), which we would have no reason to value less than the original. But if Diana's dress loses its value of being irreplaceable once its historical properties are (thought-experimentally) replicated, the irreplaceability thus construed turns out to therefore have the "matter of fact", that is, the contingent kind of sense, which was previously ruled out as too superficial.

Historical goods as un-replicable goods

Having historical goods subjected to mitosis was a thought experiment. In reality historical properties are not replicable. While one can create a perfect duplicate of Diana's dress, it will still not be the dress she wore that day. This is precisely because historically valuable goods cannot be fabricated, that they cannot be replaced with one another. This is what makes historical goods irreplaceably valuable.

Our objection to this argument was to point to the superficial, i.e. matter of fact, sense of irreplaceability that is at stake. Matthes (2013) also finds this argument lacking but for a different reason. One cannot infer that something is not irreplaceable from the impossibility to replicate its historical properties, he claims. This is because, as he argues,

¹² I thank Alain Pe-Curto for pointing the possibility of defining irreplaceability by reference to a past counterfactual.

¹³ Christopher Grau pointed to me, in a personal communication, that "to say 'I could only have loved S' could mean quite a number of different things. On one understanding it is just false: of course I could have loved someone other than S, and perhaps the love could have even been stronger than the love I have for S. But I take it that is not the sense [Alain Pe-Curto] has in mind. Instead [he] means something like: 'I reject as equally acceptable (or preferable) a possible world in which I loved someone other than S'... This thought seems to me connected to (but not equivalent to) the idea that I affirm my love such that I'd do it all over again".

¹⁴ Historical goods, it may be said, violate the invariance thesis, which is the idea that if an object is valuable, it is normally the case that it carries this value in whatever possible world in which it is present. The beauty of Goya's drawings is unrelated to their reality. Yet Goya's imagined drawing could not have historical value because, unlike beauty, historical value only accrues to real things. If historical values were like any other value, it would supervene on certain properties regardless of the reality of these properties. Only existing real things, however, can be assessed as historically valuable.

the very same object could very well be replaced by another job which might be similarly valuable. The argument consists in showing that, sometimes, the historical properties are the only value-making properties of historical goods. Let us detail.

The value¹⁵ of historical goods, Matthes says, is to provide a connection with the past:

Though we cannot go back in time, the objects and places that were present in the past travel forward in time with us. The enthusiast who exclaims, “This is where Jefferson sat as he drafted the Declaration of Independence!” is not mistaken in her excitement: she values a connection to the past that has an immediacy that is otherwise completely impossible. While she cannot visit eighteenth-century America, the desk already has. It was there, and no desk that was not in fact there can be made to have this feature post hoc (2013, p. 61)

Jefferson’s desk is a time-travelling device. It is its capacity it has to connect us with Jefferson that resides its (instrumental¹⁶) value. Matthes then observes that the value of connecting us with the past may “persists even in the face of suitable replacements” (2013 p. 35). In other words, the function might be performed by other different historical goods as long as they have the relevant historical property. If two historical goods share the same value as memento, none is strictly irreplaceable. For example, the old fountain pen that Cohen happens to also have been using since he became a lecturer will be as valuable as the eraser. It will provide him a connection with his past just as well. Suppose, however, that there is no such fountain pen and that the eraser is the only thing with the relevant value-making historical properties. Cohen’s eraser would in this case be irreplaceable, Matthes concedes. But it would be so as a result of being, as a matter of fact, the unique object with the relevant historical property. The value of historical goods resides in their ability to put us in touch with the past in a way nothing else can and their irreplaceability, Matthes concludes, is a “merely contingent property”.

Let us first note that Matthes’ view of historical goods can be accommodated within our framework as follows. Historical goods would be cases of what we may refer to as “time-travel” historical value:

- **“Time-travel” historical value:** one values x (e.g. the taste of the madeleine) because one values z (e.g. one’s childhood) and x reminds oneself of z.

Accounting for historical goods in terms of their function as time-travelling device could raise the following concerns. First, the sense of irreplaceability involved here seems to be, one more time, the factual sense of uniqueness which was preliminary ruled out¹⁷. We want Cohen’s eraser to be irreplaceable in a more robust matter, that is, regardless of the current unavailability of other objects that could play the same function.

¹⁵ To the extent that Matthes points to what historical goods are good for, referring to their virtue, rather than to their value, seems to more suitable.

¹⁶ Although Matthes claims that historical goods are valued for their own sake, their alleged ability to connect us with the past supports the idea that they rather are instrumentally valuable.

¹⁷ The point is stressed by Grau in an « Ethics Discussions at PEA Soup: Erich Hatala Matthes' "History, Value, and Irreplaceability," with précis by Carolyn Korsmeyer, November 11, 2013.

To have irreplaceability only hinging on the non-existence of the fountain pen confers a trivial meaning to the notion.

Secondly, if the value of historical goods is to serve as a connector with the past, anything equally serving the same function would have to be valued in the same way. As it happens, to provide a connection with the past is something things without historical significance may do: pictures or memory enhancer drugs may be useful in enabling such connection without being rightly described as historically significant goods. Connecting with the past does not seem to be a sufficient condition of historical goods.

The fact that an historical good is related to some past entity endows it with the function of a memento. While historical goods may serve the function of connecting us with the past, they need not serve such a function. As Rønnow-Rasmussen and Rabinowicz (2000) argue, Diana's dress may be valued regardless of its ability to connect us with Diana:

The dress is valuable just because it has belonged to Diana. This is what we value it for. But, one might object, is it really a case of a non-instrumental value? Diana's dress is perhaps valuable merely as a means: merely because it allows us to establish an indirect connection to a person we admire or find important in one way or another. Having such a connection may be something that we set a final value on. Couldn't this be what is going on here? Not necessarily. Even if the desire to establish such an 'affiliation' with Diana may well be a part of the causal explanation of our evaluative attitude towards the dress, this does not imply that the evaluative attitude itself is of the instrumental kind: if we idolise Diana, we do not simply find the dress useful for some purpose; we ascribe an independent value to it. Compare this with O'Neill's example: The wilderness is not simply instrumental in allowing us to come into contact with something (otherwise) untouched by humans. Even if we could never visit the wild area, it would still keep its value from our point of view. Rønnow-Rasmussen and Rabinowicz (2000, p. ?)

An historical goods is replaceable, according to Matthes, in the sense that its ability to connect us with the past could be performed by any other goods with the appropriate historical properties. Implicit in this claim is the idea that the connection with the past can be voluntarily triggered. Pick an object with the relevant historical property, hold it in your hand and the connection should follow. A travel in the past, it may however be replied, may not be as easy to elicit as that. If something has proved to provide such connection, one may certainly *continue* to expect that it will continue to bring about such an effect at will. But could such a connecting power be ascribed to something that is not already thus empowered with the such ability to revive the past? Suppose Cohen lost his eraser. It is not certain he could ascribe to his fountain pen the same function, even if, like the eraser, he has had it since he became a lecturer. One may suspect that the affective dimensions (e.g. the nostalgia, the joy, the regret) which characterize the experience of being connected with the past are not subject to the will, as it would have to be if the connection could be deliberately assign to anything with the proper history. While it might be too strong to say that the related state of mind of being connected with one's past is entirely *uncontrollable*, it seems also overtly optimistic to assume that it is *directly* controllable. To assume the latter is perhaps to commit the managerial mistake of taking what is only very indirectly subject to the will to be relatively easy to control (cf. Elster 1983). Resurrecting the past could very well be an essentially by-product of these historical goods.

4 Existing things of value

The conservative and the maximizer

The opponent of the conservative is not the socialist but the maximizer (more commonly referred to as the utilitarians). The maximizer considers values as what ought to be promoted, promulgated, multiplied, propagated, amplified, etc. The conservative, Cohen says, “exhibits a bias in favour of retaining what is of value, even in the face of replacing it by something of greater value” (149). The attitude is a conservative one not only because it is about keeping things as they are. But because it is about keeping things as they are at certain cost: it is about keeping things as they are rather than letting them go for the sake of allowing better things to come. The conservative will not preserve *all* existing goods. He first requires that the latter be *sufficiently* valuable. Replacement is justified when the amount of value to be preserved falls below a certain threshold (161). He also demands the goods to be intrinsically valuable¹⁸.

Let us first stress an ambiguity in the opposition between these two attitudes. Values are promoted either when there are more things of value or, alternatively, when an unchanged number of goods have even more value than what they used to. This is in turn compatible with (i) having the already existing goods displaying a greater amount of the same type of value (e.g. beautiful things being made even more beautiful) or by (ii) having the same goods displaying a higher type of value. I suppose a political constitution may be improved by being made *more just* at the expense of being less *elegantly* written. Still alternatively, values can be promoted by (iii) having existing things of valued being destroyed and replaced with things with a greater amount, or a higher type of value. Now the conservative attitude Cohen defends is not against having more valuable embodied values as such. That already existing goods are added more values, as in (i), is an option he should not oppose. He also, I suppose, have no quarrel with (ii) even if he might be worried about the identity of the good being conserved when the type of value it bears has changed. He will however oppose (iii).

¹⁸ Matthes refutes Cohen’s view that objects of intrinsic value are ipso facto irreplaceable by means of the example of two handfuls of flowers. “If the flowers are indistinguishable in their beauty”, he argues “it seems that any handful of flowers will be as good as any other” (Matthes 2013, p. 43). It is not sure however that the conservative, on Cohen’s definition of the term, will not have any quarrel with the idea that one ought to be indifferent between the two equivalent handful of flowers. Indeed, it is consistent with Cohen’s view that the conservative might be indifferent between a Lippi and its exact *existing* copy. His conservatism will not even give her any reason to value the *original* Lippi more than its *copy* (but note that if she values the original Lippi more than its copy, she will not be valuing the two paintings as being strictly equal, unlike the two handful of flowers in the example, none of which can stand as the original and the other as the copy). I take Cohen’s view to be that the conservative will value differently two exact handful of flowers only when (i) one of the two handful of flowers already *exists* (ii) the other is not yet existing and (iii) the non-existing handful of flowers would require the destruction of the already existing one in order to exist.

The maximizer should not have any difficulty in recognizing the possibility of goods with a certain amount of intrinsic value. Still, he would not see what is wrong with sacrificing a few of these goods if doing so is the way to fill in the world with more value(s), either qualitatively or quantitatively.

So Cohen needs to qualify the opposition between the two in a way that makes them irreconcilable. It is to this effect that he invokes a somewhat curious distinction between, on the one hand, valuing the value-bearer for the value it carries and, on the other hand, valuing it for the particular thing which it is. The former, Cohen takes to be the distinctive form of valuation of the conservative and, the latter, that of the maximiser.

The conservative cares about the value-bearer and not only about the value that is carried by the latter. He will value the painting “as the particular valuable thing that it is” (148), thus extending his appreciative attitude from the value of beauty which it bears to *it* the bearer. The latter ceases, in virtue of this form of appreciative attitude, to be valued as a mere value-bearer. In this case, and as Cohen says, the “valuing of it, the particular, is not merely a valuing of the intrinsic value that it has, but also a valuing of it, the particular itself” (153). “The Lippi”, Cohen says, “represents a particular form of embodiment of the value of beauty, and it is this given form of embodiment, as mediocre as it might be, which he values, not only the value itself”. We may say that when assessing the merit of the Lippi, the conservative will both value it as a *beautiful* thing and as a beautiful *thing*. “Value” as Cohen also says with some pleasant oddity, “is not the only thing that is valuable: so are particular valuable things. And the desiderata sometimes need to be traded off against each other” (155).

The metaphysics of the conservative supports his conservatism. If goods were treated as mere value-bearers, they would be replaceable with any other goods, as long as the latter proved capable of *bearing (of embodying, of exemplifying)* more value.

His opponent, the maximizer, shows no concern for the value-bearer independently from its capacity to carry some value. Things are valuable only they make possible the exemplification of value. The maximizer values things or persons “for the value of what they instantiate” (p. 148) or “as a function of the amount or type of value that resides in it.” (147-148). He cares about value, rather than about what is of value.

His metaphysics also served his un-conservative attitude. If a certain value-bearer happens to carry less value than a substitute candidate, there is no reason, he believes, to preserve the former if doing so would prevent the latter from existing.

What is the exact nature of the opposition between the two?

The opposition between the conservative and the maximizer should be such that the latter’s position cannot be conceptually accommodated within the former, nor vice versa. It is a presupposition of Cohen’s view that goods which do not yet exist cannot be valued as the particular thing which they there. This is because preserving is, according to Cohen, the only attitude which suits the latter, and non-existing goods cannot logically be preserved. The conservative attitude cannot be extended to that which does not exist yet. Cohen submits to our attention what seems to be a challenging example, offered to him by Otsuka:

Suppose that you come to learn that, after the extinction of human beings (and any other creature capable of enjoying beauty), a most beautiful patch of wilderness... will come into existence. It will, however, not last long, as a small asteroid will land on it, thereby transforming it into a nondescript, barren crater. I agree with you that you would have reason to ensure that this beautiful patch is preserved by now destroying this asteroid. Now suppose that you come to learn, in a variant of the above scenario, that the asteroid will hit this spot on earth before the beautiful patch would have begun to emerge, thereby rendering this spot inhospitable to the emergence of anything beautiful. If, however, you destroy this asteroid, then the beautiful patch will come into existence. It is an implication of your view that you would have less reason to destroy this asteroid in this scenario, as such destruction would not preserve an actually existing thing of value. Rather it would instead allow for the coming into existence of a thing of such value. (Cohen, 2013, p. 166)

If the conservative sincerely valued particular things of value, he would enable the future realization of the patch of wilderness by destroying the asteroid. If the conservative intervened in this manner, he would not preserve anything. Rather he would enable the *future* realization of something of value: he would in fact act as a maximizer. The latter proves as able the conservatism as a valuer of particular things of value.

This example suggests that the difference between the maximizer and the conservative could be better captured than by the opposition between the two sort of valuations that Cohen describes. Here are, in this regard, a few alternative explanations:

One may first be tempted to think that while the conservative values the Lippi as a repository of *taste, delicacy, depth, grace, elegance*, that is, as a repository of thick values, the maximizer, having less refined tastes, values the Lippi as a repository of *beauty*. A slightly different way of construing the opposition between the two is to say that conservative values the Lippi as a repository of familiarity, tradition, etc. which are additional, non aesthetic, values. These explanations are however not convincing because they contradict the assumption that the maximizer and the conservative are not opposed in regard to the amount of value which the paintings respectively have.

Another way of describing the contrast between the two is to say that, for the conservative, value properties are bearer-specific. If the Lippi is beautiful and the Picasso is beautiful, then the Lippi's property of being beautiful is numerically distinct from the Picasso's property of being beautiful. The conservative are advocates of bearer-specific properties. They claim that these are parts of their bearers. The maximizer, on his part, takes value properties not to be bearer-specific. On his view, if the Lippi is beautiful and the Picasso is beautiful, then there is one property of being beautiful which each of them exemplifies. In other words, the property of being beautiful is not bearer-specific (or, as some say, it is universal).

Still another way of contrasting the maximizer with the conservative is to argue that they do not share the same view about what makes the two paintings intrinsically good. Surely, they both believe that intrinsic values supervene on the object's internal properties. But while the maximizer considers axiological properties to be supervening on the object's *value-making*, internal properties, the conservative considers them as supervene on both the object's internal value-making properties and their non-value making properties.

Alternatively, we may say that both the conservative and the maximizers believe the Picasso is better than the Lippy and that the conservative can even share the maximizer's opinion when he says that he *prefers* the former to the latter. But only the maximizer believe that this preference allows him to further prefer the state of affairs in which the Picasso exists to the state of affairs in which the Lippy exists. Why does the conservative resist this conclusion? Maybe it is because to preferring the Picasso does not imply, on his view, preferring for the state of affairs that it exists. Unlike the maximizer, the conservative has no quarrel with the possibility that preferences have concrete objects rather than state of affairs as their content. He may therefore prefer an object to some other object without preferring the state of affairs in which the former obtains to the state of affairs in which the latter obtains.

The most promising way of contrasting the maximizer and the conservative, on my view, is to consider the possibility that the conservative sees a difference between existing things of value and not yet existing things of value. Both the maximizer and the conservative take Michelangelo's David to be beautiful. Only the conservative takes the existence of Michelangelo's David to *also* be valuable. The existence of David confers to the latter an advantage over any non-existing sculptures which Michelangelo could make David. The conservative not only values the David's beauty. She also values David's existence. She thinks it is a good thing that the sculpture exists. As Cohen says, the conservative has "tenderness towards already *existing* value and... to whatever value merely happens to exist" (p. 147). From the maximizer's point view, existence does not confer any additional value to value-bearers. Real beautiful things have no privileged position over their unreal counterparts.

The goodness of existence

It is a common view that, while certain values, like beauty, are by nature values of objects, the reality of the objects need not be assumed. According to Scheler, "aesthetic values are values of objects whose posited reality (of any form) has been suspended" (2013, p. 86). The claim is however one with which (if our interpretation of Cohen is correct) the conservative disagrees. For the conservative it is not indifferent that David is a real thing, rather than the merely content of Michelangelo's imagination. He certainly would say that it is a good thing that David exists. If this is so, one may press the question to the conservative: "Why is it so?". The following answers can in this respect be put forward.

What is valuable, one may first submit, is not David's existence but rather David's *continued* existence. A modified version of the example of David, propose by Pugh (2013) supports the idea that it is not merely the existence of David which is valuable but rather its continued existence or its longevity (*Pace* Cohen¹⁹). Here is the variant:

¹⁹ The hypothesis is one Cohen explicitly rejects : "Even if the picture was painted only five minutes ago", he claims," there is a reason not to destroy it in order to use its pigment to produce a better one. (Cohen 2013, p. 157)

This time, suppose that his creation of the even better Eve would not require the destruction of David; there is just enough material left for one more beautiful sculpture, which Michelangelo then uses to create Eve. However, immediately afterwards, Michelangelo announces that he has a better idea for creating an even better sculpture than Eve. But its creation would require the destruction of the newly-created sculpture, Eve. Here, there intuitively seems to be a much better case for replacing the recently created sculpture than there was in the case of David. (Pugh *et al.* 2013 p. 337)

Unless “it is not the continued existence of a thing that is good, but rather it ceasing to exist that would be bad”, as Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen further suggest (2000). The idea is that we ought to prevent the destruction of existing things of value before thinking about making good, like creating things of value.

I will, as a way of concluding the discussion still point to another explanation for valuing the existence of the value-bearer, in addition to the amount or type of value which it bears, is that it is impossible to relate to *non-existing things of value* in ways that are appreciative to their value. Non-existent value-bearer may be valuable, but there is not much point to that. The point is nicely put by Raz:

Think of something of value. Not only is the appropriate response to it to respect it and to engage with it in virtue of that value, but absent this response its value is somehow unrealized. It remains unfulfilled. The goodness of a good fruit is unrealized if it is not enjoyed in the eating. The same sense of lack of fulfillment applies to a novel destined never to be read, a painting never to be seen, and so on. Not all good things can be thought of in that way. The thought does not quite work for my wonderful friendship with John that is destined never to come about. There is no similar sense of waste here, or of something missing its fulfillment. In such cases the thing of value does not yet exist. Only things of value that exist can remain unfulfilled. Nothing is unfulfilled simply because something of value could exist and does not. (Raz, p. 2001, p. 126)²⁰.

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²⁰ While Scheler defends the idea that the bearers of value needs not be real, he also comes close to Raz when he says that aesthetic values “are valued of objects because of their *intuited picturelikeness* (in contrast to merely “thought” objects)” (1973, p. 86). This explanation is one Cohen would disagree with. He indeed argues that certain values would still be valuable in a world of blind people: “let us distinguish between a world of blind people and a world of no people, or other relevant perceivers. In the first case I think the blind people could value the fact that their world contained such beauty, even though no one could appreciate it. So it might indeed follow from my position that it is good that unperceived aesthetic value exists. But I do not find that embarrassing. And if it also follows from my position that aesthetic value would be valuable in a wholly perceiverless and conceiverless world, then some will no doubt get off the bus there, but I would ride on even then.” (2012). I wish I could wish Jerry a good ride.

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