

A Sketch of Equal Human Value

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Abstract

An account of the widely accepted but vague idea that all humans have equal value is sketched. The essay evolves from a concept of inherent value as distinct from final, instrumental, and preconditional value. There is no supervenience base to inherent human value, it is argued. Still, it can be characterized, namely in terms of being worth loving. An account can also be given of its constitution, which would be by the agape-like love of an ideal observer faced with human beings in their wholeness. And its function as a master value of ethics can be analyzed; this is shown to depend on an essential bond with the value of human life.

Standard Belief with Many Facets

Fundamental to our culture is the belief that people have a special and equal status, or worth, or value. This belief is invoked in, for instance, the UN and EU declarations of human rights and is a part of what Western children shall be taught at school. Instead of ‘equal value’ and ‘equal worth’ other expressions are sometimes used, in particular ‘dignity of the human person’. Now, how exactly shall this belief, which Roger Wertheimer (1974, p. 108) has called the ‘Standard Belief’, be understood? Is it acceptable? How is it justified? Is it really “one of the shallowest assumptions of our time,” as Louis Pojman (1992, p. 622) has described it? In this essay I will sketch an account that attempts to answer these questions.

One can begin by pointing out that the Standard Belief has at least six different facets that are not always duly kept distinct:

- F1. *Human life* has a value in itself.
- F2. *Only human life* has a value in itself.
- F3. Human *individuals* have value in themselves.
- F4. *All human individuals* have value in themselves.
- F5. All human individuals have *equal* value in themselves.
- F6. The value that human life and/or human individuals have is *absolute*, or

inviolable.

F1 and F2 cover what the French call 'dignité de l'homme'. These facets regard us as species and can plausibly be taken to refer to the typical human life, and they involve a comparison between human and non-human forms of life, where the former is preferred and ranked highest. F3, F4 and F5 are about us as individuals and cover the French expression 'dignité de la personne'. These facets do not seem to build on a comparison between human beings. F6 is meta-ethical, indicating the ethical status of the other principles. This facet seems to say that the value of human life and/or the value of human individuals are unconditionally valid in some sense. Many would probably add a seventh clause (F7), namely that these values have an objectively valid character. The value of human life and the value of human individuals seem to form a *compound human value*, which appears to be the core of much traditional ethics.

During the last decades there has been an intense discussion about the value of human life compared to the value of other forms of life. I shall not continue it here, but presuppose that human life at least to us has higher value than the life of other species. Instead I shall focus on the value of human individuals, in particular the combination of F5 and F6. The thought that all human individuals have an unconditional, objectively valid value that is equal among them, I shall call *the principle of equal human value*.

This principle makes such a strong a claim that it even appears implausible or at least difficult to understand. We do describe others as having different value depending on what they mean to us. People can therefore be said to have unequal personal value. And even if the constitutions of many states hail the principle of equal human value, it is clear that states value their citizens differently from non-citizens. Further, we value people due to what we take to be their varying economic, social, cultural, aesthetic, or other contributions. As part of this we value differently the interests that they have, work on and manage to satisfy in those areas.

The conclusion is that the principle of equal human value does not hold if by 'equal value' one means the same value or the same importance, or if one thinks of any one of the various differential values mentioned above. Therefore it must be about a special kind of value, applying to individuals in themselves, the possession of which should be compatible with people varying in their possession of all other values. It must also be somehow connected to a regard in which we are all alike. According to our ethical traditions it is question of a value that has to do with us only as human beings.

Even though most of us consent to equal human value, we typically think of

people as good or bad, better or worse. To many it would be revolting to say that, for instance, Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler have the same basic ethical value. So, is this principle understandable and plausible?

Human Rights Instead of Value

That all human beings have equal human value has appeared so obscure that many philosophers have either tacitly taken it for granted or phrased it in virtue-terms, or perhaps in terms of rights, human rights. The former is hard to defend. The latter is more understandable. An example is Ingemar Hedenius, writing: "That all human beings have the same value means that they all have the same human rights and the same right to have them respected, and that no one in this respect is privileged" (1982, p. 19; my translation, RF).

Hedenius points to the long tradition formed by a series of declarations of human rights, for instance, the American of 1776, the French of 1789, and the UN declaration of 1948. He does not note, however, that in all of these the principle of equal human value is assumed and considered to *found* the rights in question. Likewise, The UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976), saying that "the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world," starts with the statement of the convening states that these rights "derive from the inherent dignity of the human person." Also, the first article of the first chapter of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) says that "Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected." Human dignity is seen as the basis for the fundamental rights.

Without that basis the declarations and conventions would risk to loose in power. If one does not believe that universal human rights rest on an objectively valid egalitarian moral order, they appear as something merely to be agreed upon by us. If parties would not want to enter such an agreement, it is difficult to see how they could be made to see the moral urge to do so. It is thus difficult to see why states would feel obliged to implement respect for human rights for other people than their own citizens.

Reference to the underlying principle of equal human value is also important since human rights do not have absolute status. Rights may collide and a certain right may be overridden. The right to freedom, for instance, is cancelled for criminals. The absolute, equal value of human beings is needed to justify decent treatment of people when they have been deprived of their right to freedom. It is the ultimate stronghold for a rejection of things like torture and capital punishment. For utilitarians like Hedenius such a stronghold should be

even more needed, since human rights for them shall be cancelled when the greatest happiness demands it.

Let me summarize the belief that equal human value is basic in general ethics in that it gives rise, justification and structure to our ethical principles, our rights and duties, and possibly also guidance in our weighing of these in case of conflict, by naming it a *master value* of ethics.¹ As such it presumably has a central motivating role for moral behavior also.

Different Kinds of Value

How would equal human value earn its standing as an ethical master value? We can start by having a look at our distinctions between kinds of value that things or states can have. This is a preliminary list:

- V1. *Value as an end* [the comparative value that desirable states or qualities in people's life have; states and qualities that people can and ought to strive for – let us call this 'final value'].
- V2. *Value as a means* [the comparative value that things, events, states or qualities have depending on their desirable effects – let us call this 'instrumental value'].
- V3. *Intrinsic value* [the comparative value that things, events, states or qualities have wholly in virtue of their properties].
- V4. *Extrinsic value* [the comparative value that things, events, states or qualities have but that is not wholly in virtue of their properties].
- V5. *Inherent value* [the non-comparative value that individuals have in themselves].

What is confusing is that V1, V3 and V5 are all described as 'intrinsic value' and 'value in itself'. It is evident, though, that V1, V2, V3 and V4 are not equally distributed among people. These values come in degrees. One can have more or less of them since value in these senses involves a comparative element that allows grading. This also seems to make the carriers of value replaceable. It

1. I am inclined to call it *the* master value of ethics, but since I want my account to be compatible with a wide range of ethical theories I abstain from this. There might be more than one master value, depending on how it is conceived; see, for instance, what Samuel Scheffler calls his moderate 'alternative construal of morality', claiming that "morality aims to accommodate not only the equal value or worth of all people, but also the individual moral agent's naturally disproportionate concern with his or her own life and interests" (Scheffler 1992, p. 123).

would be question of 'price values', as Kant puts it (1785).

Inherent value is different. This value is essentially non-comparative or non-differential, and does not have a price character. It is not something in regard to which we can be compared, ranked and exchanged. It is categorical in that one either has it or does not have it. As such it is not a direct function of valuable properties in what we have, are, or do. Therefore it is not something that we can increase or decrease; it does not even seem possible to deprive people of this value. The equal human value clearly has to be an inherent value.

There is yet another kind of value, somewhat similar to inherent value. Think of the idea that human life has a unique value compared to that of other life forms. Even though we cannot choose a non-human life, we consider a human life more valuable than other forms of life, probably because we would prefer it to the other if we had the choice. This consideration is similar to the thought that it is better to be born than not to be born, and better to be a self-conscious creature than to be a non-self-conscious one. Valuations like these seem to depend on the final and instrumental values that are realized in the more valuable forms of existence, since being born and being self-conscious are preconditions for the realization of our final and instrumental values. We could call it *preconditional value*. There may be some preconditional value related to inherent value as well.

What Ground for Inherent Human Value?

Theories of final (or intrinsic) value typically suggest that there is an intimate connection between the value property and some non-value property, typically some set of natural properties. Such theories formulate principles to the effect that wherever the one exists, the other also exists. The value property is believed to exist in virtue of the non-value property. Another way of putting this is that the value in question *supervenes* on the non-value property, like mental states would supervene on states of the brain. An example is the idea that ethical value supervenes on pleasure. The non-value property is said to be the *base* of the supervenient value property.

What would the supervenience base of inherent human value be? Two different strategies for answering this question have been attempted: moral individualism and moral collectivism. The first takes the value of the individual to be a function of some non-value property that he or she has. The second takes this value to be a function of some non-value property that is characteristic of the collective, i.e. the species to which the individual belongs. Even though the latter position has been taken by some philosophers (e.g., Blumenfeld and Nozick) I think there are good reasons to reject it (see Egonsson 1998, ch.

9). For one thing, it would make our equal human value depend on a most uncertain evaluative comparison between the lives of species. And I think that many who reject the Standard Belief with regard to our species as speciesist would still believe that all humans have equal value. I therefore limit myself to the strategy of moral individualism.

In religious traditions it is commonly held that we all are parts of a sacred creation or that we all are created in the image of God, having immortal souls. On a commonsense understanding of these views, however, they are either implausible or do not work. If God's creation is sacred then individuals of all forms of life would have the inherent value, but this is not what is believed. And if all humans are images of God, or endowed with an immortal soul, still people are essentially valued very differently depending on the degree to which they are good and thereby resemble God. Is not ascending on such a scale what religious life is about?

Ronald Dworkin (1993) has made an attempt to develop a secular version of the theory of the sacredness of life. His point is that individuals are created by and representatives of the creative power of life. Everything in nature has value in itself. Humans have exceptional value because they represent the creativity of both nature and culture. But, as Göran Collste underlines (2002, p. 59), in that way people would have unequal value depending on how much cultural creativity they embody. Dworkin's theory does not do the job either.

The most common answer is that the fact that people are persons gives them inherent human value. This position typically relies on Kantianism, but its roots go back to Plato and Aristotle. By 'person' Kant (1785) means an individual (not necessarily belonging to our species) with freedom to act and capacity to reason and deliberate about what to do, therein employing allegedly universal moral principles which he or she embraces.²

A variant of this view is found in the critique of speciesist ethics by philosophers who claim to reject moral collectivism. James Rachels (1990) and Peter Singer (1993) advocate the idea that biographical life, in contrast to a merely biological life, is decisive for having the uniquely high value that they think human life has. Biographical life is characterized by the existence of an acting subject with a personal history of meaning and importance, involving projects that can be pursued. That we are alive is merely a precondition for

2. I think Kant and Kantians confound intrinsic (or final) value and inherent value when they suppose that a human being 'as an end in itself' has dignity – human value – 'in virtue' of being a person, which makes this value conditional and comparative in a way that intrinsic (or final) value otherwise is.

leading biographical lives (Rachels 1990, p. 199).

In both cases, however, there is a choice between valuing individuals in virtue of how they actually are and in virtue of how they potentially are. The former seems to be Kant's preferred choice when he considers his principle of human dignity to be compatible with advocacy of rough, authoritarian methods in the schooling of children and in the handling of "savages" – both categories are denied respect for autonomy and integrity. Such practices might be explained by personhood coming in degrees, but then personhood itself would not ground a substantial equal value of humans. The concept of biographical being is surely wider than the Kantian concept, but since it also has degrees it exhibits the same weakness when it comes to handling marginal cases like small children, the mentally handicapped and demented elderly.

If, on the other hand, potential personhood or biographical life is what matters, then both too few and too many would have to have inherent human value ascribed to them; too few because there are people with irreparable damages in their genetic or mental equipment for personhood/biographical life, and too many because human fetuses normally have sufficient the genetic equipment and the prospect of other things necessary for it. The latter point also applies to a radical theory that has been advanced by Dan Egonsson (1998; 1999). The only property in which we are all equal is that we belong to the biological species *Homo sapiens*, and therefore only this can be the supervenience base, Egonsson argues.

We seem to be in an impasse. The way out, I suggest, is through a series of turns that will be opened up in the following sections.

A Basic Shift

The proposals discussed above all share an assumption that can be questioned, namely that there must exist a supervenience base of inherent human value. Its form is this:

P has inherent human value V in virtue of a certain set of natural or supernatural properties N becoming to P.

This is not satisfactory. Apart from the fact that most candidates for *N* that one can think of have degrees, it seems that one can always ask whether an individual having *N* also has *V*, and vice versa. It is, for instance, a much too open question whether just belonging to *Homo sapiens* grounds inherent human value. This is an objection that draws on G. E. Moore's classical open question-argument. But here the argument is stronger, since the openness of the question is a matter of moral intuition rather than of semantics, as Moore

took it to be. If the question is open to our moral intuition, then we probably have not got hold of the intimate connection that is supervenience.

The reason is that no suggestion as to what *N* is seems to go to the heart of the matter. No suggestion seems to be able to explain that which needs explaining and what in particular needs that is the unique power that inherent human value has in regard to the whole system of ethics and practical morality. This is what gives it superior status. A supervenience relation of the mentioned form only seems to work for final or instrumental value. But for inherent human value there is no supervenience base, I suggest. We do not have inherent value in virtue of being such and such. Inherent value is rather an ultimate pillar of normative reason, belonging to the metaphysical department of meta-ethics. This simple observation explains why a supervenience base has not been found. It is possible to base inherent human value in other ways, though. Firstly, its value content can be more closely characterized, secondly, an account of its coming into being, its constitution, can be given, and thirdly, inherent human value can be analyzed in its essential bond with the differential value of human life.

Worth Loving

A closer characterization of inherent human value would have to show up an evaluative substance to it strong enough to carry indubitable power to structure the system of ethical principles as well as to guide in practical morality. It has to spell out what it is that gives inherent human value its unique normative import; that it commends the central, structured set of attitudes and acts that normative ethics articulates. The best candidate I have found can be expressed thus: *human beings are worth loving*.

A sign of the adequacy of this characterization is that it is morally inconceivable that a person with inherent human value is not worth loving, or that a person worth loving does not have inherent human value. There is no open question here. In this relation it is clearly that we are worth loving that is the substantial, for ethics and practical morality forceful property.

Something like this is actually assumed in Christian tradition, the main source of the Western conception of inherent human value (see, e.g., Nygren 1930 and 1936; Ramsey 1950). This idea also goes well with a central strand in contemporary value theory founded by Franz Brentano. According to Brentano (1889) the good or valuable is that which is worth loving. Brentano, however, considers things, events, and states more than individuals, and he interprets 'love' and 'worth loving' in a limiting way, namely that to love something is to prefer it to something else, and that to be (positively) worth loving is a matter

of degree of preference. The reason for this construal was that he needed a comparative concept of value – one that is of no interest in this context.

The concepts of love and being worth loving that are needed here are different. They would have no degrees, but would be a matter of either – or. It is a love that is unconditional and unmotivated; there is no “P is loved, *because* P is such and such.”³ In Christian tradition this unconditional love is called ‘agape’ (Nygren 1930, ch. 1). There is normally, but not necessarily, a theological content to this term that is problematic to non-believers (like me). A reformed, non-theological version of agape is useful, I suggest. I call it *agapic love*.

The character and the existence of agapic love have to be more carefully spelled out, and a plausible meta-ethical basis has to be offered for the thesis that all humans are worth loving in this sense. I believe these two issues are intertwined. Let me for the time being skip an examination of agapic love. For the present sketch it suffices to show that something of this kind exists and can be incorporated into a plausible meta-ethics. I start with the latter.

The Loving Ideal Observer

I simply presuppose the ontology of inherent human value to be secular and, in a sense, subjectivist, meaning that inherent human value and hence the property of being worth loving are somehow constituted by a *valuing subject*. I invoke no God or any man-independent objectively existing order of values. Most natural is to consider the relevant valuing subject to be of a human kind (this move can be made without becoming a speciesist, as I have argued in my 2002 article). But exactly which human kind? One strategy that may be employed to answer this question is to identify the relevant kind with empirical human beings; another is to identify it with a so called ‘ideal observer.’

The former strategy is what, for instance, Dan Egonsson adopts (1998; 1999). He thinks that equal human value is constituted by a more or less universal preference of human beings for human beings. Probably there is such a preference. But its existence does not suffice to constitute the inherent human value of individuals; to prefer one category to another category does not imply a similar or equal preference for each member of them.

The latter strategy is adopted by Peter Singer in (1993). Singer embraces

3. Gene Outka in his analysis of agape speaks about human beings as ‘irreducibly valuable’ (1972, p. 12). A parallel between non-gradable human worth and unconditional love is noted by Gregory Vlastos, who also appeals to the metaphor of a ‘loving family’ to defend egalitarianism (1984).

a value constituting meta-ethics that is based on preferences, but actual are replaced by rational preferences of an idealized human observer. What such a preference concerns is the optimal life of different species. If we tried all lives, had memories of all of them and had to choose (rationally) which one to live, then the human life would rank highest and thus be chosen, Singer argues. Apart from the oddness and impracticability of this idea Singer, like Egonsson, just ends up with preference for a category that cannot automatically be transferred to individuals. Moreover, were this idea applied to the lives of individuals, a thesis of unequal human value would follow.

What is needed of the ideal observer is some value-constituting reaction to human *individuals*. In Christian tradition there is the thought that we humans all belong to the same family with God as our father, and that it is his love for every one of his children that constitutes our human value (see, e.g., Nygren 1930; Collste 2002). God's love is directed at each individual and it is of the unconditional agape kind. This theory, with a personalized God, is quite clearly modeled on paternal and maternal love. The currency of the latter bears witness to the existence of agapic love in human life and it may reasonably be said to found the inherent value of family members. The question is if we are permitted to project the same kind of love toward all of mankind – without presupposing the existence of a benevolent God.

I think we can. Man has again and again, in different times and cultures, conceived of idealized humans loving all men. It may suffice here to mention Kung Tzu, Buddha, and Jesus. In our time we seek to identify persons that more or less incarnate this ideal, like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Janusz Korczak. And these are the figures that most people probably would accord the position of judge of our value as only human.

To appeal to the reaction of an ideal observer is also sound meta-ethics in the tradition of David Hume. Hume assumed the existence of a universal but often hidden human sympathy. According to him it is purified sympathetic reactions in the face of what happens to people that make up our evidence for the valid principles of ethics. But Hume's view is not adequate in the present context, since sympathy on his theory is directed towards events, mental states and traits of character, and grounds liking and disliking of a comparative and ranking kind. Also, on this theory we ethically react and are reacted to only as a generalized other, as Seyla Benhabib (1992) has put it, and not as unique persons.

The ideal human observer in the present context has to regard and react to individuals as unique beings, but not to respond to them because of what they presently are or do. Agapic love is a love for people in their wholeness, love

in full knowledge of their complex conditions, character and history, seeing their difficulties, defeats and victories, and understanding their sadness and joys, hopes and longings. This would single them out as fantastic, complicated, awesome and sensitive brothers and sisters.

The crucial assumption is this: were an ideal human observer, equipped with capacity for agapic love, to fully know and understand every single human being in their varying conditions, then this observer would react with such love to them. As wholes, people are fundamentally incomparable and this love therefore does not grade. Love is here a *holistically verdictive* reaction. It is thus all humans are loved equally, constituting their being worth loving and thereby their inherent human value. Since the former is equal, the latter is equal also. Inherent human value on this construal is objective in that it is something everyone has, regardless of what people may think and feel, and that no one can deprive them of.

An Essential Bond

Is really inherent human value, by being unconditional and non-differential, powerful enough to form a master value of general ethics? The inherent human value resulting from agapic love does not logically imply an active interest in enhancing people's lives, since being worth loving goes back to a holistically verdictive reaction of the ideal observer. No matter how they are and live they will, on the whole, be loved by the ideal observer. Were we to base ethics and morality on this alone, we would risk ending up with the view of a complacent and non-interfering God.

What is lacking is an imperative normative impetus, which requires the felt recognition that certain conditions are more favorable than others in human life, certain states are more desirable than others, and certain attitudes and acts are more commendable than others. Only against that background does the meta-ethical fact that people are worth loving acquire a drive that naturally translates into structured principles of ethics and considered acts of morality. Hence, inherent human value *binds essentially* to a differential value with regard to the lives of humans.

The obvious essential supplement for general ethics is the absolute, unique value of human life (F1, F2 and F6 above). As such it serves as a bridge between the meta-ethical inherent human value and the normative ethical, which specifies humanistic values and norms. It is semi-conditional in that it is not a direct function of any one particular set of final and instrumental values, even though it depends on the existence of some such set. As was hinted at in the beginning of this essay, the inherent value of human beings and the general

value of human life forms a compound human value appearing to be *the* master value of traditional general ethics.

Of the two constituents in this compound it is clearly inherent human value that is the core, because the value of human life can be seen to grow out of it. The verdictive love of the ideal observer must be expected to psychologically entail an unending concern for the well-being of those loved, arising from joy at their happiness and grief at their unhappiness. Provided the ideal observer is human this is plausible. So far as he or she is the proper meta-ethical judge of inherent human value, his or her reactions are due to have systemic and practical import. An example of how this could work might be taken from Ingmar Persson: "No human being is from the beginning worthy of or deserving a life that is better or worse for her than that another person is worthy of or deserving" (2004, p. 204; my translation, RF).

The construal given makes my account of inherent human value avoid a serious objection. Fantastic beings other than humans might well be loved with agapic love by an ideal human observer and thereby gain inherent human value, which then undergoes inflation. There are several drawbacks to this argument. Most other beings would not be possible to understand for an ideal human observer and could therefore not be loved with the unconditional love with which humans would be loved. Even if they could be fairly well understood the ideal human observer would not be able to identify with them, which seems necessary to have love for them. And even if the ideal observer could identify with them – as we can with other primates – this identification would not feed the emotional bond that we have with other human beings that "might have been *me*." The latter, I think, is a condition for the agapic love of the ideal human toward us.

The ultimate countering, however, leans on the supplement value of human life. Most plausibly the life of humans, and probably the life of our closest relatives among the animals, will, on the whole, be more highly valued by a human ideal observer than the life of other species. The inherent value of human individuals having an essential bond with the differential value of the life of our species, then, makes for a compound human value that escapes inflation.

The Benefit of Doubt

So far my suggestions have mainly been in the ontology and metaphysics of value. But a theory of equal human value must have a shape that makes it usable for practical reasoning and decision making. Moreover, there has to be a fair amount of assessment for its assumptions. I therefore have to say something about epistemology in my theoretical sketch.

There appears to be a serious problem here, since obviously we shall never be able to know that an ideal human observer who was to meet every human being with full understanding of them would actually react with agapic love to them all. There are so many different personalities living under so many different conditions that we cannot even imagine their existence and inner life. And we cannot expect to have a clear conception of the response of our ideal human observer to all, since we shall never actually attain the ideal.

To a large extent these problems are shared by similar meta-ethical constructions that are widely accepted in ethics; just think of David Hume's ideal observer mentioned above or, a more extreme example, Richard Hare's 'Archangel'-judge of right and wrong (Hare 1981). In spite of their metaphysical character such constructions are usually taken to form a reasonable background for practical considerations of everyday morality. The challenge is to have metaphysical arguments that are reasonable. I believe that my version is at least more so than Hare's, since I invoke not an angel but an idealized human being.

There is, however, a special problem with my construction, since the ideal observer is expected to react with agapic love, which is more complex and demanding than, for instance, liking or preferring. But liking and preferring are apt for evaluation of particular events, states and traits. For an ethical evaluation of persons the proper thing is a complex and demanding reaction which takes all the conditions and the full life story of people into consideration.

Still, would for instance Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein really be loved by an ideal observer? Are there not monsters that are unlovable even for ideal observers? Something like this has recently been expressed by Lars Bergström (2004). There certainly are many hard cases. But since we have to do with specimen of the fantastic, complicated, awesome and sensitive *Homo sapiens*, since we cannot know all the facts in the problematic cases, and since we cannot properly represent the reactions of an agape-loving ideal observer, I believe it to be a fair strategy to give such cases the benefit of doubt. When we do that we also create a moral margin to compensate for the bad luck people may have.

A number of considerations support this strategy. One is that the ideal observer shall not be understood as seeing people only at some, perhaps monstrous time, but at all times of their life – this is what it means that they are known in their wholeness. That scope, as biographies, novels and films again and again show us, surely changes the view and evaluation of people; both saints and monsters become recognizably human. Further, the idea of wholeness advocated is also what must be adopted if the life of our species (which is often conceptualized as a kind of individual) should be evaluated. Were it judged only from what

it is at some horrible time, it would hardly be preferred to the lives of other species by an ideal observer, human or non-human.

A Plausible Sketch?

I have obviously proved nothing, and several assumptions make the sketched theory impossible to prove. Still, is this sketch fairly plausible? I shall end by defending it against some objections.

One objection is that I move in a circle, that I have tailored an ideal observer to yield my desired result. That we have equal human value would be a thesis that I prove with the help of an all too fitting construal. An independent defense is needed for the agapic loving ideal observer. My answer is that such a defense has been given, building on the existence of ethical model-figures that are widely hailed and widely held to be preferred ethical judges. Also, if we look deeply into ourselves I think most of us shall find something like these models forming the core of our moral conscience.

Another objection is that it is doubtful that such an ideal observer really would love all persons in the same way and to the same degree. Would he or she not love the innocent child more than the villain, the victim more than the perpetrator, the loving more than the hateful? Yes, probably. Also in the New Testament Jesus loves the pure children more than the hypocrite Pharisees. But this is of no relevance. That the ideal human observer equally loves and thereby values all only as human beings is compatible with his or her differently valuing how they are and what they do. There are many kinds of love and the one referred to in the objection is a conditional personal, social etc. love and not agapic love.

Yet another objection is that universal love for humans is unfit as a basis for ethics. Hedenius even rejected the Christian teaching of love as an “expression of the moral Super-ego of Western culture at its maddest” (1982, p. 18; my translation, RF). But such criticism does not affect the specific meta-ethical shape that I have given to the Christian idea of agape love. Objections like Hedenius’ are aimed at virtue-ethical or act-oriented ethical stances saying that we should love everybody. I also have a resistance to this; ethics shall not make too heavy and strictly impartial demands on people. Hence, I share the ideal of a moderate and what Samuel Scheffler calls ‘human morality’ (1992, p. 122).

A fourth objection is that stressing universal love would make ethics too emotional, which is a problem because emotions are unstable and not something we can rationally affect. This is the Kantian objection; the core of ethics is reason and principles (Kant 1785). But the one thing does not exclude the

other, as we have seen. I have formulated meta-ethical principles that give a central place to feeling. But since the feeling in question is located in a hypothetical ideal human observer, occurring in hypothetical situations, it is not unstable. A central place in ethics for such a morally strong feeling as agapic love actually speaks for my theory, since this has the power to make ethics morally engaging in a way that the thought of law does not.

Finally, does my construction meet the objection raised against all other secular defenses of the principle of equal human value, namely that they either cannot accommodate marginal cases like small children, the mentally handicapped and demented elderly, or else accord inherent human value to fetuses? I think it does, since the agapic love of an ideal observer presupposes that there is in fact someone there to love, someone that only in an elementary sense has to be a human person. Small children, the mentally handicapped and demented elderly are such persons, but fetuses are not. To be an elementary human person is a preconditional value.⁴

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