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ON THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

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Moral philosophers often emphasize the importance of human life by attributing intrinsic value to human beings and thereby differentiating them from less revered objects like hammers, wrenches, and stilettos that have only extrinsic value. Extrinsic value is commonly described as instrumental value, or as a means to some further value; whereas, intrinsic value is self-sufficient, needing no end beyond itself for its justification. For example, if a dove has intrinsic value, the dove does not have it because the dove is valued for some purpose but because the dove's existence is itself precious. An intrinsically valuable object retains its intrinsic value even if the object is neither valued for or by anything nor valuable to anything.

If understood as idioms in the argot of moral philosophy, the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic value are useful for ethical analysis, but the logical grammar of these concepts as they are employed by philosophers should not be taken as evidence for ethical theories. Because of this misleading specialized usage, philosophers often characterize intrinsic value as an object, quality, or quantity that all people, and perhaps some other entities, have or possess. This characterization of intrinsic value invites several unnecessary questions. For instance, does one have intrinsic value in the same way that one has red hair, an abrasive personality, or a case of scarlet fever? Once in possession of intrinsic value, can one lose, destroy, or increase it? Is intrinsic value innate, or is it acquired at some moment after conception? Such pointless questions arise when intrinsic value is described as a possession or property.

But greater errors than mere pointlessness derive from the analysis of intrinsic value as a possessed quality or entity. One such error is the employment of a repugnant decision procedure that I will designate as "callous calculation." In callous

calculation, the sacrifice of human lives for the sake of inanimate objects, the lives of animals, or the lives of other human beings is considered in an attempt to maximize intrinsic value. It has been maintained that, if one human life has intrinsic value, several human lives must collectively have greater intrinsic value, and so the sacrifice of a few human lives is justified if many more are consequently saved. If inhuman objects are thought to have intrinsic value comparable to that of people, absurd questions like, "How many human beings are five Rembrandt paintings and a cocker spaniel worth?" are bound to arise.

Harry Truman's use of the atomic bomb to end the Second World War exemplifies the reasoning of the callous calculator. According to the most reliable estimates available to Truman, more people would have been killed by a continuation of the war than by a nuclear attack on Japanese cities; therefore, he dropped bombs to save lives (never indicating whether his responsibilities as President of the United States committed him to a "personal exchange rate" that specified the relative intrinisic value of Japanese and American lives). Because of these estimates, Truman claimed never to have suffered from remorse over his decision; but, the public considered his reasoning, if not his actions, to be disturbingly insensitive.

Another example of callous calculation appears in an article by John Harris. Harris claims that if medical science discovers reliable procedures for transplanting most parts of the human body, the redistribution of the organs of one healthy person among several diseased people would become not only morally acceptable but, furthermore, obligatory. Harris' flippant writing style suggests that he may not fully believe in such nonelective surgery, but he evidently maintains that our familiar concepts of morality would justify benevolent butchery.

Similarly, T. G. Roupas argues for the maximization of human life in an article concerning abortion. He argues that, if human life is intrinsically valuable, we are all obligated to defend, preserve, and propagate it to our fullest capacity. In order to protect us from having to reproduce with the frequency of termites, Roupas reminds us that overpopulation can result in ultimate extinction. Abstinance, birth control, and abortion would, therefore, serve the same purpose for humanity that controlled hunting serves for deer. Roupas also recommends that a woman should have an abortion if, for reasons peculiar to her case, she will have more children as a result of the operation than she would without it. However, on the basis of what may be called a principle of abundance, he discourages abortions that would ultimately decrease the human population. He does not explain how he would respond if Jonathan Swift's modest proposal could be shown to maximize human life.

If a government were to institute policies in accordance with the theories of Harris and Roupas, people would probably respond with the usual clichés about "playing God," "sacrificing the individual for the society," and so on, as they did when Truman explained his use of atomic weapons. Common clichés often express common sense, albeit in an inarticulate and unreflective manner. The fallacy underlying callous calculation is its supposition that intrinsic value can be measured in amounts—either in volume, as with crude oil, or in countable, discrete units, as with jelly beans. But, when the claim of philosophers that human life has intrinsic value is expressed in ordinary language, no reference is made to anything quantifiable.

In ordinary use, the meaning of the phrase "intrinsic value" varies with its context and bears little resemblance to its frequent use among philosophers. In the ordinary sense, the intrinsic value of a coin, for example, is not the value that it maintains by its mere existence but the value of the metal as opposed to the face value. The intrinsic value of the coin is literally within it in a spatial, physical sense, but philosophers do not attribute this kind of intrinsic value to people's lives. A painting can have intrinsic value in an altogether different way; to the art patron, the intrinsic value of the painting is neither the value of the canvas, paint, and so on, nor the philosophic intrinsic value, but the aesthetic value in contrast to the price, although for the salesclerk the opposite

may be true. In general, intrinsic value is not a property or possession but a value that the evaluator considers to be most closely related to the important aspects of an object in contrast to relatively incidental values. Determining the absolute intrinsic value of an object without reference to a contrasting value is, therefore, like describing politicians as "opposed" without reference to anything that they might be opposing or like describing a color as "clashing" but against no other color.

The philosophic concept of intrinsic value as I have described it would be clarified if ordinary words and expressions could be found that best express its meaning and reveal its implications. The following list includes words that often occur in evaluative discourse. If an ideal formulation cannot be discovered from the list, perhaps at least some general conclusions concerning the nature of the special status of human life may be inferred.

noun	*adjective*	*verb*
value	valuable	to value
worth	worthy	- - - - -
importance	important	- - - - -
good	good	- - - - -
desirability	desirable	to desire
credit	creditable	to credit
esteem	estimable	to esteem
honor	honorable	to honor
reverence	reverend	to revere
sanctity	sacred, saintly	to sanctify
merit	meritorious	to merit
deserve	deserving	to deserve

This list is not exhaustive, but it contains the words most frequently used with reference to life and its value. Although all of the words have different uses, the verb forms are similar in that they are all transitive. Furthermore, among the verbs, all except "merit" and "deserve" require that the valued entity be the object of an attitude, sentiment, or action of an animate

being; when a person is the direct object of "desire," "credit," "honor," "revere," or "sanctify," an animate being must function as the grammatical subject and, therefore, must bestow or attribute something. Those verbs do not express the meaning of the philosopher when speaking of intrinsic value, which value belongs to an object independent of any attribution by another person or object.

Another inapt feature of the words in the above list is what may be described as their overstatement. In order to be intrinsically valuable in the philosophic sense, a person need not be honorable, estimable, meritorious, or even desirable. With the possible exception of a few quintessential scoundrels, people retain their intrinsic value even if there is nothing remotely respectable about them. The least reverential words must be found.

Although "deserve" is perhaps still too strong, it is the most apt word on the list for our purposes. It is one of the two words that do not require a bestower; one can deserve something or be deserving without any attribution or bestowal by anyone, even oneself. Second, although "deserve" overstates somewhat, its overstatement is not as extreme as that of "merit," "sanctify," and so on. Though only a few people are deserving of great awe and worship, even the lowly and depraved deserve some favors from the rest of us. But, if still weaker words are required, the words "due" and "undue" might suffice: a fair trial is due even the most despicable mafioso, while drawing and quartering are undue even to Idi A'min.

"Deserve," "due," and "undue," the words that seem best able to express in ordinary language the philosophical concept of intrinsic value, are similar in a respect that is germane to callous calculation. The use of these words does not suggest the attribution of a quality, quantity, or object; instead, to describe someone as deserving, due, or undue something is to recommend treatment, benefits, or punishment that he or she ought to receive. This suggests that to describe individuals as having intrinsic value is not to describe them as having some property or possession but to imply that they ought to receive certain considerations. Harris and Roupas mistakenly suppose that

intrinsic value is a quality or property that is maximized when the human population is maximized, and so they recommend any action that permits the greatest number of people to live. These actions might not be countenanced if the question, "How should all of the people involved be treated?" was considered instead of the question, "How can the number of intrinsically valuable entities be increased?"

When someone is appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States, we are not tempted to suppose that, upon appointment, a new possession or quality is acquired. We recognize that the appointee is allowed new liberties and that we must now treat the justice somewhat differently, but we are not under the illusion that a new substance has been bestowed. We nevertheless are often misled into believing that, upon being born, all human beings acquire a quality or object called "intrinsic value." Just as the status of a Supreme Court justice commands the respect of other people, the minimal status that all individual persons enjoy by virtue of their humanity mandates the behavior that is appropriate toward them. One's "intrinsic value" amounts to nothing more than a specification of that behavior.

Such a specification could avoid callous calculation. For example, let us suppose that, as Kant suggests, to ascribe intrinsic value to human life is to prohibit its treatment merely as a means to another's end. Callous calculation would thus be forbidden because to kill one person for the benefit of another entails the use of a person merely as a means to another's end. One need not, however, be as restrictive as Kant; one might merely claim that to ascribe intrinsic value to human life is to prohibit its treatment as a means to the preservation of other human lives.

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EDITORS' NOTE

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