Do Human Beings Have Non-Relative Value?*

Modern ethics views human beings not just as *valuers*, beings for whom things have value, but also as *bearers of value*. It views human beings as bearers of a special kind of value. This is a distinctively modern achievement, which is central to many of our ideas about rights, toleration, and freedom, and also to our day-to-day interactions with others. I shall call this idea the **Special Value Claim** (SVC). It is widely assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that this special value does not depend on the evaluative perspective of human beings. Rather, the value of human beings is seen as a non-relative or **absolute** value. In this paper, I shall argue against this assumption. We should not rely on the intuition that human beings simply *have* special value, as a fact of moral reality and, as it were, from a view from nowhere.[1] Instead, we should adopt what I call a **Relative Conception of Value** (RCV).[2] According to this conception, human beings have value from the point of

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[1] I am here borrowing a phrase from T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986). However, as will become apparent, I am setting things up in a way that differs quite fundamentally from Nagel. Nagel thinks that key problems of ethics hang on the tension between the perspective from inside of our lives on the one hand, and an objective perspective on the other. As a valuer who goes through her own life, I see everything from the point of view of my life. But we are also capable of stepping back, assuming a more distanced or objective perspective. Importantly, Nagel does not think that, when we assume this objective perspective, we envisage the world from *all personal* points of view; on that picture, the world would appear to be crowded with value. Nagel thinks that the objective point of view makes everything seem unimportant. He suggests that, if we move too far into the objective perspective, we lose our grip on things. "If we push the claims of objective detachment to their logical conclusion, and survey the world from a standpoint completely detached from all interests, we discover that there is *nothing*—no values left of any kind: things can be said to matter at all only to individuals within the world." (1986, 146) Nagel argues that several standpoints—the personal standpoint and the impersonal standpoint (the subjective and objective standpoint)—are aspects of the self. This way of setting things up is indebted to key problems of modern philosophy, about the relationship between mind and world. For reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper, I think that ancient ethicists are right when they do not conceive of ethics within such a framework.

[2] A full defense of RCV far exceeds the scope of this paper. In this paper, I am starting from a special case: the value of human beings. I take it that the question of whether one can account for the special value of human beings is an important test case for one's theory of value. With this intuition, I am turning against what I perceive to be an unfortunate split between two debates. Ethicists who discuss the special value of human beings are often Kantians, and the focus of their work often is on normative questions of ethics (or the reconstruction of Kant's arguments). Those who discuss value in more general terms often do not ask

view of human valuers.

1. The Relative Conception of Value

First of all, note the difference between two ways of using the predicate “relative.” One way is rather loaded: it invokes a philosophical theory of considerable complexity, namely relativism.[3] I do *not* use “relative” in this sense. Another usage of “relative” is considerably weaker.[4] It does no more than indicate that there is some relevant relatedness or relationship. This is how I shall use “relative,” and I shall assume that this contrasts with a literal understanding of “absolute.” Here is my proposal:

RCV: If something is valuable (or has value), it is valuable for X (where X can be a human being or other natural entity), and it is valuable from the viewpoint of human beings.

RCV incorporates one move that was traditionally seen as leading toward relativism: the idea that whatever has value has value from a human point of view.[5] Consider the Greek formula for relativism, “man is the measure.”[6] This formula has two obvious meanings,

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how their meta-ethical theory fares when it comes to the value of human beings.

[3] There are many formulations of relativism, and I cannot explore here how relativism could plausibly be construed. I thus rely on a rather intuitive formulation of the difference between my position and relativism.

[4] This is, for example, the usage of “relative” that figures in the expression “agent-relative reasons”: these are reasons that are relative to the (personal or partial) perspective of the agent. An ethical theory can allow for agent-relative reasons without thereby adopting any kind of relativism.

[5] Peter Railton makes a similar point. He argues that even though value is (in his view) objective, the value in question is human value, and exists only because humans do. Railton captures this point by saying that value is *relational* without being relative (“Moral Realism,” 1986, 181). Railton takes “relative” to be immediately associated with relativism, which I do not.

[6] Even though I do not engage here with the question of what relativism is, I have some reasons for choosing this formula. Many brief formulations of relativism involve the notion of truth: truth is, according to relativism, in some way relative. The Greek formula “Man is the measure” does not rule this out. However, it puts the focus elsewhere: namely on the idea that the valuer herself supplies the *standards* ('measure') relevant to her judgment. Compare this, for example, to a kind of cultural relativism that

depending on whether we take "man" to refer to human beings in general, or to individual human beings.[7] In its first interpretation, the formula means that value is relative to human beings. This is the core of RCV: value judgments are true relative to human valuers. In its second interpretation, the formula contains a central intuition of relativism: that value is relative to *individual* human beings; or, in another formulation, that value judgments are true relative to *individual* valuers.[8]

However, even though the difference between these two readings of "man is the measure" is clear, they are not easy to keep apart. In particular, it might be argued that, if we accept that value is relative to human valuers, we are already conceding too much to relativism. Why? Because there is a structural analogy. Human beings are only one of many kinds of beings. If the valuable is that which is valuable from the point of view of human beings, then these other perspectives are dismissed as irrelevant to our truth-claims. This is analogous to not considering the perspectives of other human beings as relevant to one's truth-claims. Ancient discussions of these matters revolve around the question of whether we can admit the first idea—that value is relative to human beings—and stop there, not accepting the further claim that value is relative to particular human valuers.[9] I shall not

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assumes that value judgments are true and false according to some standards shared by a group of people. On such a conception, there are (i) value judgments, (ii) those who make the value judgments, and (iii) the standards they accept. The "Man is the measure" formula does not differentiate between (ii) and (iii). I cannot here explore the complexities of this difference. On the whole, it does not matter to my argument how precisely we should construe relativism.

[7] Of course, there are in-between options. In particular, "man" could refer to *groups* of people. This is what cultural relativism assumes: that value judgments are relative to cultures (religions, etc.).

[8] By offering these alternative formulations (only one of which makes reference to the truth predicates) I'm aiming to remain neutral on the issues mentioned in n.6 above.

[9] Things are more complicated in the sphere of value judgments than in the sphere of other judgments. Consider, for example, gustatory qualities. Once we have reflected on the fact that things are likely to taste differently to other kinds of animals, because their physiologies and sense-organs are different, we shall have to admit that how something tastes is (whatever else is to be said about secondary qualities) relative to the kind of animal who eats or drinks it. The ancients who make this kind of argument (say, Plato in the *Theaetetus* and, with some alterations, the sceptics in the Ten Modes), assume that it makes sense to say

go into the arguments that can be adduced for either side. Rather, I shall assume that it is possible to make the first step without the second. However, while RCV is not meant to be a form of relativism, it self-consciously aims to endorse some ideas that figure in relativism about values—most importantly, that it is not clear how we could think about value without envisaging the activities of valuing.[10] Value does not seem to be a feature of the world that is independent from the presence and activities of valuers.[11]

In modern ethics, and in those contemporary theories that are indebted to the traditions of modern philosophy, one often finds the idea of an impersonal or impartial or objective perspective. This perspective can be construed in a number of different ways. For example, it might be the sum of all particular human perspectives. But it might also be envisaged as the perspective of a cognitively superior being, free from the limitations of a human mind. An impartial perspective of this kind is incompatible with RCV. However, the preference for the perspective of human beings that I propose does not only envisage animals with lesser cognitive faculties. Even if only hypothetically, it also envisages beings with higher faculties. To borrow a comparison from Plato, the human perspective

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that things taste a certain way to, for example, dogs. However, it is not clear that dogs assess actions as right or wrong, character traits as good or bad, or works of art as beautiful and ugly. That is, in the domain of ethical relativism or relativism about aesthetic taste, reference to other species may not be a relevant move. Perhaps these kinds of issues only figure in human ways of engaging with the world. However, we might still be able to make a similar point: if we were relevantly different from how we are, other things would be good for us.

[10] For this reason, I use the predicate "relative" rather than "relational," which might be preferable in terms of indicating that I do not propose relativism.

[11] I think that some version of this idea is implicit in most contemporary accounts of value. The details of this idea are difficult to get clear about. Joseph Raz (*The Practice of Value*, Oxford 2003) speaks of the "deeply entrenched common belief that there is no point to value without valuers" (27); as he explains, the idea that there is "no point" to value focuses on the question of whether value is *appreciated*, not on the question of whether it *exists*. Raz also speaks of the realization of values, a way of speaking that fits cases where, say, a certain kind of beauty is only appreciated in a given culture: "the value of things is inert, with no influence except through being recognized" (29). My proposals in this paper address different questions than Raz' book, which discusses the social dependence of values. However, his approach is similar to mine insofar as he concedes some points that are often associated with relativism, without putting forward a relativist account of value.

is preferred to that of pigs and to that of the gods.[12] Put differently, it is not assumed that, if we could supersede the human perspective, we would make greater progress in knowing the truth about values.

The point of view of human valuers includes the points of view of particular human beings; in some spheres, value might be relative to individual persons or groups of people. But my formulation aims to make room for a range of ideas that go beyond these particular perspectives, and that are hard to explain within relativism. Importantly, some things might be valuable for all human beings (in the sense that, even if not everyone values them, everyone ought to value them). Equally important, RCV assumes that value judgments can be false. RCV also supposes that others may know better than I do what is good for me.

Consider now the other component of RCV, that "valuable" means "valuable for X." In evaluative judgments, a particular valuer can see something as valuable for her, for others, for everyone, and so on. My proposal is that, either way, she judges it to be valuable for X. For example, she might judge something to be good for her sister, or for everyone, or perhaps even for the world as a whole. This point helps specify further what I take the predicate "relative" to mean. I am not proposing that all values (or, all value-judgments) are agent-relative, where this means that they are rooted in the *partial* perspective of one agent.[13] Similarly, I am not claiming that value judgments are partial to

[12] *Theaetetus*, 161c-166c.

[13] The distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral was introduced by Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford 1984), and figures in a number of ethical theories, for example, in Nagel (1984) and in Sam Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford 1994). For the most part, the distinction is understood as one between different kinds of reasons; however, it is also understood as one between different kinds of perspectives.

the human perspective. Value-judgments can be relative in my sense—and that is, relative to the perspective of human beings—and at the same time reflect an impartial perspective. For example, I might judge a certain climate to be good for a mountain, thinking that, if the winter was going to be cold this year, the ice might re-freeze sufficiently to slow down the erosion of the mountain. In this case, I do not envisage the mountain as a valuer, even though I think that some things are good for the mountain.[14] The value-judgment is relative to the perspective of human valuers (who make the judgment), but not partial to them.[15] In saying that "valuable" means "valuable from the point of view of human valuers" rather than "valuable for human beings" I thus mean to avoid the idea that things can only be valuable for human beings.

2. Setting Aside Kant

As applied to the value of human beings, RCV primarily means that human beings have special value from the point of view of human valuers. But how different is this really from the position I am arguing against? Here is a story that offers a simplified reconstruction of the history of SVC, a history in which Kant plays a major role.[16] Kant

[14] I am here assuming (without however offering an argument) that it makes sense to say that something is good for a mountain, where this means that it sustains the mountain (not that we, human beings, prefer the erosion of the mountain to be slowed down).

[15] Nagel envisages a distinction between the subjective and objective standpoint where they are both part of the self. It is part of how we think that we also look at things from an objective standpoint. But it is also an aspiration and part of the search for knowledge (in our case, ethical knowledge). That is, a distinct kind of effort may be involved in pushing further toward an objective standpoint. In this latter context, Nagel sometimes comes close to invoking the kind of radically absolute perspective (no one's perspective) that I consider incomprehensible when it comes to values (this might be different in other domains).

[16] I think that a similar story could be told with respect to the kind of utilitarianism that stipulates that there is a perspective from nowhere from which states of the world can be assessed as better or worse. Arguably, this idea seems plausible to us because it has a long history within religion: God's perspective is something like this perspective from nowhere. However, it is not clear to me that we can move from religion to philosophical ethics by, on the one hand, no longer referring to God, and on the other hand, holding on to the idea that there is a perspective from nowhere that assesses states of affairs. I realize that this kind of 'story' about the history of our ethical notions is highly contentious; not only from the point of view of religion, but perhaps more immediately from the point of view of those who insist that the moral point of view is the impartial point of view. However, I think that impartiality can be unpacked without reference to

sets out with Christian intuitions, believing that some of the things he finds in the *Gospels* capture the deepest truths about morality. One of these ideas is that human beings have special value. In the Bible, they have special value *in the eyes of God*. The ethical side of religion is that we should view each other as God views us. God looks at each of us as valuable, and so should we; our actions should reflect this perspective. Kant's project is to provide philosophical arguments for this idea (or a version of it) without appealing to religious belief. Accordingly, God looking at us, and the relative component of the notion of value that comes with God's perspective, must be eliminated.[17] Human beings have special value—as it were for no one. They just *have* this value. A religious and relative conception of value thus turns into an ethical conception of absolute or non-relative value.

Kant scholars might protest, and argue that we must take more seriously Kant's ambition to provide a non-religious philosophical ethics. As part of this project, some scholars think that he does precisely what I think we should be doing: explain how the value of human beings has something to do with us as valuers, thus providing a relative conception of the value of human beings. It will be helpful to consider at least the most obvious way of construing this type of Kantian position.

The following passage from the *Groundwork* might be a starting point:

> The ground for this principle is: *rational nature exists as an end in itself*. This is

a point of view from nowhere, or without an absolute conception of value.

[17] I think that the truth Kant finds in the *Gospels* is expressed for example in the parable of the Lord as Shepherd, who knows each of his sheep by their name. This is a core Kantian intuition: we are each valuable as individuals. We are not looked at *en masse* and judged to be *equally* valuable; rather, we are each looked at specifically and judged to be especially valuable. Velleman asks whether this is a paradox—that everyone is special ("Love as Moral Emotion").

> the way in which a human being necessarily conceives his own existence, and it is therefore a *subjective* principle of human actions. But it is also the way in which every other human being conceives his existence, on the same ground which holds for me; hence, it is at the same time an *objective* principle from which, since it is a supreme rational ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will. The practical imperative will therefore be the following: *Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*[4: 429]

Consider a line of interpretation that we can call Universalization. Universalization says that Kant (i) points to the fact that I value myself as an end in itself, and (ii) the further fact that everyone else does the same, and (iii) concludes that rational nature exists as an end in itself. For this argument to go through, we must supply several intermediate steps. In particular, we must explain why the fact that everyone else values themselves as an end in itself is *normatively relevant to me*.[18] Otherwise, the fact that everyone necessarily values themselves in this special way might be purely descriptive: we all take ourselves to be uniquely important. In order to move from here to the recognition that everyone should view everyone else in this way, more must be said. Contemporary reconstruction of Kant's ethics often aims to fill in the gaps. It thus reconstructs, in effect, a relative conception of the value of human beings: human beings have the value they have from the point of view of human valuers.

Another line of interpretation, and one that I find more convincing, might be called Rational Nature. Rational Nature finds a different sequence of thought in the text. It says that fact (i), namely that I value myself as an end in itself, and fact (ii), that everyone else does the same, is grounded in (iii), that rational nature exists as an end in itself. Even

[18] This is how Adrienne Martin interprets the argument, in line with a number of influential recent interpreters, such as Korsgaard, Wood, and others ("How to Argue for the Value of Humanity," *Pacific Philosophical* Quartely 87 (2006), 96-125). On this reading, the interpretive task is to supply the missing steps in Kant's incomplete argument.

though this is less intuitive from today's point of view, I think that this is what Kant says. Kant does not ground the absolute value of human beings in the fact that we all necessarily value ourselves as ends in ourselves. Rather, he says that we all necessarily value ourselves in this way because of an antecedent fact: that rational nature is an end in itself. This suggests that Kant does not propose a relative conception of the value of human beings.

Kant's view of the value of human beings is grounded in his rationalism. Kant thinks that empirical considerations may not figure in what he calls the metaphysics of morals. The moral law is constructed by our practical reasoning, thus having its origin in us, or rather, in our reason. But our reason is here decidedly not seen as part of the empirical world. Such moral facts as that human beings have a special kind of value are not relative to us as valuers, where this capacity is understood in empirical terms. Obviously, this is a more complicated view than the simple story I offered initially. But insofar as Kant and Kantians do not see the special value of human beings as relative to us as empirically conceived valuers, they see it as what I refer to (and what Kant refers to) as absolute value.[19]

[19] Kant himself uses the terms relative and absolute in the way that I have in mind. Relative value, he thinks, has something to do with our empirical natures, our wants and needs. Absolute value is not of this kind. "All the objects of inclination have only a conditional worth; for if these inclinations and the needs based on them did not exist, their object would be worthless. But inclinations themselves, as sources of need, are so far from having absolute value to make them desirable for their own sake that it must be the universal wish of every rational being to be wholly free of them. Thus the value of any object that is to be acquired by our action is always conditional. Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature still have, if they are non-rational beings, a relative value as means, and are thus called things. Rational beings […] are called persons because their nature marks them out as ends in themselves—that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means—and consequently imposes restrictions on all choice making […]. These are then not merely subjective ends, the existence of which is caused by our actions and has value for us; they are objective ends […]. For if this were not so, there would be nothing of absolute value anywhere. But if all value were conditional, and thus contingent, then no supreme principle could be found for reason at all." [4: 428, tr. in part my own, Italics Kant, Bold KMV] One of my core disagreements with Kant lies in this contention: I do not think that anything has value for us in a way that is unrelated to our empirical natures (and I assume that the way we think is part of our empirical natures).

These considerations may become clearer once we ask what precisely Kant considers as the bearer of special value. Importantly, to recognize the value of human beings is to recognize the noumenal nature of human beings. That is, the special value of human beings is tied to the nature of human reason, and more specifically, the nature of practical reasoning. This line of thought can be pursued in at least two ways (both of which are complex and allow for a number of different construals).

First, practical reasoning is the source of action—human beings are rational agents. Practical reasoning is tied to viewing oneself as responsible for one's actions. One's phenomenal self is subject to the laws of nature, but this is not how we view ourselves when we act. We see ourselves as acting for reasons, and in that sense as rational agents. To respond adequately to the value of persons means to see others in the same way: to see them as responsible agents, who have reasons for their actions.[20] I shall return to this proposal below—in my view, it misdescribes how we see ourselves as agents, and it accordingly leads to a misguided norm of how we should value others as persons.[21]

A second prominent line of interpretation says that, for Kant, our capacity to adhere to the moral law lends us the special value we have. But arguably, this proposal is even more difficult, for at some points Kant speaks as if only those who are motivated by duty (that is, those whose motivations are morally good) have the relevant kind of value.[22] But since

[20] These ideas are central to the work of Christine Korsgaard. Cf. for example “Creating the Kingdom of Ends. Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992), 305-332.
[21] David Velleman describes the relevant capacities of practical reasoning as “capacities for valuation” (“Love as Moral Emotion”). This is closer to the account that I propose below. However, insofar as it is meant to be a Kantian proposal, it is tied to Kant's focus on our noumenal selves.
[22] See Stephen Darwall “Kant on Respect, Dignity, and the Duty of Respect” (2008) and “Two Kinds of

he at the same time emphasizes how difficult it is to be good, it might seem that hardly anyone has the relevant kind of worth. Or, even worse, Kant might be taken to argue that the object of valuation is the moral law, not persons.[23] If this is what Kant says, then he might after all *not* be the arch-proponent of the idea we are interested in: that all human beings have special value.

I shall not pursue these issues of interpretation. RCV differs from the culturally inherited idea that human beings simply have absolute value, and from its more complex Kantian cousin. Both have in common that they do not conceive of the value of human beings as a value that is relative to *empirically* conceived human valuers. My main disagreement with Kant lies here: I do not see why the special value of human beings should be so radically disjunct from their empirical natures.

3. Reason-Giving Properties

Respect," *Ethics* 88 (1977).

[23] Raz (*Value, Respect, and Attachment*, Cambridge 2001) accepts the Kantian formulation that human beings are ends in themselves, but reformulates it as the idea that something is valuable in itself. I am not adopting these kinds of expressions. In the *Groundwork*, Kant uses an influential formulation: human beings are ends in themselves ("*Zwecke in sich selbst*"). But it is difficult to understand what this should mean (a difficulty that, I think, to some extent is hidden by the familiarity this thought has achieved). It could mean that human beings have non-instrumental or intrinsic value. However, this would not be enough, because other things too have non-instrumental or intrinsic value. More plausibly, it means that we should treat human beings as valuable even if they serve no purposes: that is, even if someone had nothing to contribute, no favorable features, and so on—*qua* human being, she still has value. I think that this is Kant's intuition. But we should not forget that the *Groundwork* is deliberately 'intuitive.' In the *MM*, Kant moves away from the expression "ends in themselves." He now speaks of "objective ends," which are "ends we should have." We should not make human beings our end; rather, we should make the *happiness* of human beings our end. That is, in his later (and in my view more compelling) formulation, Kant recognizes that, in treating others as ends, we treat *their ends* as ends. This is a very different point from the idea that everyone has value, even if they are criminals with nothing to recommend them. Does Kant give up on this earlier idea? I don't think that he does. However, the earlier idea is complicated by the fact that, what really is of value here is our capacity to recognize and follow the moral law. And as Darwall points out, Kant's position on this issue keeps shifting. At many points, it looks as if merit played a role—as if the value of human beings had something to do with them actually living by the moral law (not just being, *qua* humans, capable of doing so).

RCV is not committed to the claim that "to have value" or "to be valuable" is a first-order property.[24] With respect to the value of human beings, this means that RCV is not committed to the view that, among the other properties we have, we have one property of particular importance, namely the property "valuable." More likely, human beings have some other property or set of properties, on account of which we say that they have value.

Think of some other valuable things, for example, chocolate and houses. In such cases, it would seem that value is conferred on the object of value by a combination of features that give us reasons to value them. For example, houses are places where one finds shelter from heat and cold. These properties of houses give us reasons to value them, and they confer value on houses. Importantly, it would not make sense to say that these properties make houses valuable, without implying that they are valuable for human beings.[25] If this is a general account of value, then human beings also have their value by virtue of a certain combination of properties.

This proposal is similar to Scanlon's analysis of value. According to Scanlon, when we say that something is valuable, we say that it has *other* properties, and these other properties provide us with reasons (96). "To value something is to take oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes towards it and for acting in certain ways in

[24] With respect to human beings, it seems strange to say that they are valuable. "To be valuable" suggests, different from "to have value," that the value is quantifiable. However, I shall use "valuable" with the explicit proviso that this is not implied.
[25] Even though I shall not have room to discuss this, the conception I propose is a non-teleological account of value. On a teleological account, houses would be good (or 'ends') because they serve other ends, such as shelter, protection from the weather, privacy, and so on. These other ends would again depend on even higher ends, such as, say survival, a good life, and so on. Scanlon (1998) discusses some problems with such teleological accounts.

regard to it." (95)[26] Scanlon's position reacts to a long-standing meta-ethical puzzle: that it is not clear what kind of property 'good' or 'valuable' is. To many, 'good' or 'valuable' seems quite different from 'square' or 'wooden' and so on. Rather than deny the reality of value-properties, or argue that they are entirely ordinary (so-called 'natural') properties, I shall assume that 'valuable' is a second-order property: something is valuable if it has some other relevant property, or a combination of them, so that this set of properties gives us reasons to relate in particular positive ways to it.

When looking at the things that we find good, it does not seem that there is one distinctive feature, goodness, which they all have. Rather, they have all kinds of features. I suspect that we cannot compile a complete list of good-making features, or come up with one formula for what must be combined for the property of goodness to be present. Consider, again, chocolate and houses. The kinds of features that make houses valuable certainly do not make chocolate valuable. Think of a very solid house, and of a very solid piece of chocolate—the former is good, the latter uneatable. At the same time, it would appear most strange to assume that, next to the various properties that chocolate and houses have, they each have the property "good."[27]

As I shall assume, goodness is a second-order property that depends on the presence of

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[26] Scanlon develops his position by engaging with G. E. Moore. Moore suggests that, when we ask whether something is valuable, we should ask ourselves whether the world would be a better place with it. However, this is a rather strange question. Should we ask whether the world, as it were from an absolute perspective, would be better with a certain thing in it? For whom would it be better?

[27] I am here implying that the distinctions between 'good' in the ethical sense and its various non-ethical senses are not so that one would need entirely separate theories for each given domain. This is a contentious assumption for which I cannot argue here. Of course, it does not preclude that specific things are to be said about each domain; my assumption is that one nevertheless can start from some general premises that apply to all domains.

other properties or combinations of other properties, as well as, as explained above, human valuers. On this premise, the claim that human beings have value amounts to the claim that human beings have a property (or set of properties) that gives us reasons to have very particular positive attitudes towards them.[28]

This property, I think, is that human beings are valuers.[29] With this proposal, I am in agreement with a widely-shared intuition: special value is conferred on human beings by properties relating to their capacities for practical reasoning. The Kantian versions of this proposal construe these capacities in a non-empirical fashion; they focus on the way in which we see our reasoning as the source of our agency, on our capacity to legislate the moral law for ourselves, and so on. Contrary to this, I propose that we should think of these capacities in an empirical fashion.

4. An Empirical Conception of Valuers

I suggest that we should leave behind the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal on the one hand, and the noumenal on the other, as well as the related distinction between empirical considerations and a metaphysics of morals. In particular, the idea that we see

[28] According to Scanlon, the notion of value entails the notion of reasons, and is thus explicable by reference to the notion of reasons. Scanlon argues that the notion of reasons is basic: we can give no further account of it. I am not sure that I agree with this thesis. In particular, I find it noteworthy that, up to the 1950ies or so, philosophers tended not to use this notion. If it were as basic as Scanlon says it is, it should be expected that others in the past would have needed it in order to explain deliberation and action. However, these matters are not immediately relevant. I am adopting reasons-talk as a kind of convenient shortcut. My own formulations of the issue at hand would be more convoluted: I would say that objects which we value have properties that are *practically relevant*, which, depending on the circumstances, almost all properties can be. A practically relevant property is one that we pick up on in deliberating about what to do and how to respond to the features of the world. Very different properties can stand out as practically relevant to us (and would at other times not be practically relevant): consider that such different properties as “wooden,” “small,” “tasty,” and “unfair” figure in our deliberations. Practically relevant properties supply us with things to consider when we deliberate about what to do.

[29] Joseph Raz (2001) also adopts this formulation.

ourselves as responsible and rational agents seems one-sided. We also see ourselves as empirically constituted, causally impacted agents.

In this respect, RCV is inspired by ancient ethics.[30] I find compelling a certain kind of empirical mind-set that can be associated both with Aristotle and the Stoics. An important starting-point here, which I think is right, is that ethics takes a quasi-biological perspective, from which it is clear that human beings live in groups. Think of a biologist who studies wolves. She would not start by analyzing one particular wolf and his actions. In fact, that might appear impossible to the biologist. Rather, she will describe how the wolves live in a pack, and what kinds of things matter in their interactions. Particular actions—even those that appear irregular—might then be accounted for within this framework. The perspective of the ethicist I have in mind is similar, but also different; it is only a quasi-biological perspective.[31] It differs from a biological (evolutionary) ethics through a human-specific observation, which sums up an important way in which human modes of evaluation go beyond modes of evaluation that we might ascribe to other animals: human beings do not just want to live, they want to live well.[32] People form

[30] Broadly speaking, ancient ethics conceives of human beings are valuers—subjects for whom things are valuable. In our deliberations, we see them as valuers. Their concerns ought to matter to us because we recognize that they are related to us (in particular communities or relationships, but ultimately as fellow human beings). This step—from seeing them as valuers to a normative demand on us to concern ourselves with what matters to others—is obviously crucial. I cannot explore it here. However, I think that ancient ethics offers the resources for a Relationship Conception of Morality, along the lines of ideas today explored, for example, by Sam Scheffler.

[31] Importantly, this perspective does not deny that ethics is a field of rational inquiry, where we develop and refine concepts, and explore difficult questions through arguments. These are points that Nagel emphasizes in “Ethics without Biology,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge 1979), 142-146. However, my proposal that we should think of human beings as living in communities nevertheless goes against the spirit of much of what Nagel says. My account as a whole moves away from the modern intuition that we are starting from within our own mind, working our way outward toward the world and others.

[32] This is Aristotle's point in *Politics* I.2, and I think it is right (and makes a real difference). Aristotle thinks that humans are living beings that live in communities, as do other kinds of living beings. Contrary to other 'political animals,' human beings have speech (*logos*), which—as Aristotle at this point says—is crucially for forming and expressing ideas about the good, bad, beneficial, harmful, just, and unjust. I discuss some implications of the claim that human beings want to live *well* and form conceptions of a good

conceptions of how they want to live, and much of what individuals do reflects what *they* (as individuals or as groups) consider good. That is, the observation that human beings live in groups looks at two aims: life (or survival) and a good life.

Here is a sketch of some of the empirical aspects in how we view ourselves and others as agents.[33] First and most basically, we see others and ourselves as creatures of need, affected by natural events and the actions of other people; in short, part of the empirical world. Ethical demands are often tied to this perspective—to the fact that others do not have enough to eat, are suffering under oppressive rulers, are affected by grief, and so on. In seeing these conditions, we do not only remind ourselves that the right ethical outlook is Kantian: that we should see them as the sources of their actions, acting on reasons (even though we also remind ourselves of this). We also see the many ways in which human beings are vulnerable to adversity, tend to be harmed by mean treatment, and so on.

Second, we see ourselves and others as empirical beings whose psychologies can be studied by empirical methods, and are probably not entirely subject to change.[34] Suppose

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life in "Background Motivation in Aristotle and Beyond."

[33] This sketch is by no means comprehensive or exhausting.

[34] Throughout my discussion of these issues, I do not mean to imply that there is no important role for seeing ourselves and others as responsible and rational agents. I do not propose that, *within* a distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, we focus exclusively on the phenomenal; rather, I propose to give up on this distinction. Elijah Millgram attacks the Kantian outlook rather forcefully, in ways that I think are again one-sided. He argues that, when we look at people as rational agents in the Kantian sense, we are really not attending to them at all: "If you're going to treat people as rational wills, be my guest, but don't pretend that you're obeying Murdoch's injunction to "really look" at them. And if you're going to treat people lovingly by really attending to them, be my guest, but please don't pretend that what you see are Kantian rational wills." ("Kantian Crystallization," *Ethics* 114 (2004), 511-513). Against this, I consider it an important feature of agency that, as an agent, one sees oneself as acting on reasons, and that there is something inescapable about this perspective—even though one *also* sees oneself as empirically conditioned and affected. I think that we go back and forth quite seamlessly between these two perspectives; and accordingly, I do not think that they really are *two* perspectives in the strong sense of a

we observe that our sister is less attracted to sweets than we are. We think that such attitudes can be molded and shaped; but we don't expect this to be possible without limitation. We ourselves might choose a path to work where we don't walk by the bakery, because we know that otherwise we are likely to get ourselves a croissant. In this particular respect, we don't rely on our powers of rational agency; rather, we take into account psychological facts about ourselves, such as our too great propensity to eat pastry. At the same time, we might suppose that our sister need not go to such lengths in order to stay away from excessive consumption of sweets. We observe such differences between people and integrate them into the ways we interact with others. But we also make use of more generalized or even statistical scientific insights. In spite of individual differences, research suggests that human beings in general have a genetic predilection for sweets. It might be rational to study such aspects of our motivations in an empirical fashion, and to decide based on such insights how best to steer ourselves toward a healthy life-style, rather than insist that we must see our practical reasoning as sole source of our agency.[35]

Third, we see others as valuers in quite complicated ways, which go beyond basic needs. Insofar as it is a feature of human valuing that people want to live *well*, we see others as the sources of *their* conception of how they want to live. We see them as the centers of their lives—as taking on this-or-that occupation, developing friendships, interests, and so

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deep division (which Korsgaard envisages, and which is implied in the distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal world).

[35] Note that, on this account, it is not a *second-best* solution to take empirical facts about ourselves into account, as it were when our rational powers fail us. Rather, there might be cases where it would be harmful and unreasonable to work against empirical facts about ourselves. For example, to fully aim to silence one's desire for sweets might not lead toward an Aristotelian virtue of moderation (that is, virtue that goes beyond control—where one only wants what one should want). Rather, it might lead to eating disorders, which are serious illnesses.

on. The Kantian proposals neglect that, in valuing things, we do not just assess them (things, actions, people, states of the world, and so on), judging what is more or less valuable. We also make things valuable to us, which gives content to our lives.[36] As a valuer, every human being has a privileged status in determining what is valuable for her. This does not mean that she has privileged access to her preferences, or to facts about what is good for her. Often, a third party might be able to make a better judgment. But it does mean that, when we deal with human beings, it not only matters what in fact is good for them. It also matters what *they* think, based on their conceptions, is good for them. Of course, this does not mean that one should support everything that others value (in many cases, we might disapprove). My point regards our attitude to others as valuers, and how we see their capacities of valuation. We see these capacities not just as concerned with assessing value, but also with the activities of 'making valuable.'[37]

Fourth, ethical consideration should single out human beings, but not in a way that makes consideration of other living beings entirely discontinuous with it. Human beings are valuers of a specific kind; their capacities for valuation are different from the capacities even of rather intelligent animals. But it is not clear that other animals could not, in other ways, also be valuers (or valuers of a different sort), and this may matter to the ways in which we owe them ethical concern. Accounts that focus on aspects of human practical

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[36] I think that Harry Frankfurt is right in his claim that the question of what we care about (what is important to us, what matters to us) identifies a domain that philosophy traditionally neglected ("The Importance Of What We Care About"). This domain constitutes an important aspect of our practical faculties.

[37] Kant argues that, in making the happiness of others our end, we must respond to what they think is good for them, not what we think is good for them (of course, within the limits of other moral duties—so, for example, we are under no obligation to help others commit crimes). However, he does not think that our conception of human practical reasoning, and the value that we attach to rational nature, takes into account how people make things important to them.

reasoning that are independent from our empirical natures may conceive of the gap between human beings and other animals in too drastic ways.

I think that some famous Kantian ideas about the special value of human beings can be re-interpreted with these empirical considerations in mind.[38] For example, one might see every human being as unique by seeing her as having the particular properties she has, and as the center of her life—as someone who makes things valuable to herself. Similar considerations seem relevant to the idea that no human being can be substituted by another and that the value of one human being cannot be measured against the value of another, or indeed against the value of any other kind of entity or thing.

In relating to human beings as bearers of special value, I think that all these ideas matter. When we see others as valuers, we do not only see the things that Kant says we see or should be seeing. We see more. We see deliberators and agents (so far I agree with the Kantian point of view). But we also see beings who need things, who are affected by things, to whom things matter in ways that relate to who they in particular are, and who make things important to themselves.[39]

[38] Cf. for example Kant's discussion of dignity (the kind of value he ascribes to human beings: value beyond price): "In the realm of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price is such that something else can also be put in its place as its *equivalent*; by contrast, that which is elevated above all price, and admits of no equivalent, has a dignity. That which refers to universal human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; […] but that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have merely relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth, i.e., dignity. Now morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, because only through morality is it possible to be a legislative member in the realm of ends. Thus morality and dignity, insofar as it is capable of morality, is that alone which has dignity." [Ak 4:434-5]

[39] While my account is inspired by the ancient perspective on human beings as valuers, it differs radically from ancient virtue ethics by considering human beings as *bearers* of special value. Various differences between modern ethical theories and ancient virtue ethics have been noted, and—from different points of view—these differences make virtue ethics either more or less attractive than other approaches. However, one feature of ancient ethics goes, to my knowledge, unnoticed: that ancient ethics has no notion of the value of human beings. The idea that human beings are not just *valuers,* but *bearers* of value, is absent

5. Valuing Human Beings

When we see others as valuers of this kind, we see them as *fellow* human beings. We see that, in all these ways—in being affected by things, making things important to themselves, and so on—they are like us. This likeness, I think, constitutes a relationship, It is the framework within which we value others as human beings.[40] I shall explain this point by comparing it with the Kantian position, as I see it.

Kant addresses the question of whether we stand in normatively relevant relationships with everyone in the context of friendship, and in the context of our duties to help and support others.[41] For Kant, friendship is the exception. With most people, we do not stand in any kind of relationship. Many of us have friends, and this is something we long for—as Kant sees it, friendship is a place of trust that we feel we need in a generally hostile social world.[42] But what about our attitudes to everyone else? Kant asks whether we

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from these theories. Theorists often complain that, according to the ancients, human beings do not have *equal* value. This kind of interpretation already reads too much of our present outlook into the ancient texts: human beings are neither seen as having equal or unequal value; they are simply not seen as bearers of value. Hierarchical relationships are explained in terms of different cognitive faculties (for example, Aristotle thinks that women lack capacities for following through on decisions) or different natural talents.

[40] I shall assume that, in the case of human beings like in other cases, it is appropriate to value that which has value—it is in this sense that I am speaking of 'valuing human beings.' Cf. Velleman, "A Theory of Value" *Ethics* 118 (2008), 410-436, 410: "[v]alue is what something has when it is valuable, and being valuable is just being appropriate to value." Accounts of valuing tend to focus on the roles that beliefs and desires have in valuing. Philosophers ask how valuing relates to desiring (whether to value is to desire, or 'to desire to desire,' and so on), and how it relates to believing (whether to value X is to believe that X is valuable). I shall not discuss these matters in any general way. But it is clear that valuing human beings does not consist in desiring human beings (indeed, it is not clear what this would mean); and it does not consist in believing human beings to be valuable (philosophers of different persuasions seem to agree that some attitudinal component is also important). Cf. Scheffler (forthcoming) on valuing and desiring.

[41] Velleman proposes something like this as a Kantian account of love in "Love as a Moral Emotion." He argues that we do not have the psychological resources to fully appreciate everyone's specialness. When we love one particular person, we open ourselves up to her value as a human being.

[42] In these respects, Kant seems to be influenced by his culture: friendship is, for him, the place of disclosing secrets. Can one ever trust anyone? Ultimately, Kant thinks we should only tell our friends things that we would be happy to have told them were they to turn our enemies. In a tone that readers of the *Groundwork* might find surprising when they turn to his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant recommends to his

should love all human beings. With unmistakable Prussian distaste for this idea, he hesitates. He argues that misanthropy—an attitude of looking dismissively at humankind and finding humans, quite generally, despicable—is morally wrong. But in order to value others in the right way, one need not actually try to befriend them. In the absence of special relationships, we should love mankind in the sense of looking with joy at the happiness of others and assuming a generally well-meaning attitude. And, of course, we should respect others.[43]

Neither Kantian love of mankind nor respect imply any relationship. In the case of respect, the focus even is on 'leaving alone' and not interfering.[44] Contrary to scholars who find this side of Kantian ethics coldhearted, I think that Kant captures something of importance. He envisages respect for others as a multi-faceted attitude, which in part aims at enabling them to preserve their *self*-respect. This idea provides side-constraints. Not all modes of interacting that at first glance look as if they are supportive of others meet this standard. Kant thus seems right in emphasizing that keeping-a-distance can figure in responding adequately to the value of others.[45]

But his position is misguided in a more basic way. The attitudes he envisages are relationally neutral. That is, they presuppose that we do not stand in any relationships to those who are not our friends. Against this view, I propose that valuing human beings

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students to envisage their friends as their future enemies.

[43] *Doctrine of Virtue* [399-403, 448-449, and 471-473 (§47)] and end of "Friendship" in the *Lectures on Ethics*. German idealism added another idea of great historical influence: that one must *recognize* this value. The notion of recognition and its relationship to respect is much debated (recently for example by Stephen Darwall).

[44] *Doctrine of Virtue* [*MM* 6:499-453].

[45] Cf. Vogt, "Duties to Others: Demands and Limits," ed. M. Betzler, *Kant's Doctrine of Virtue* (Berlin 2008), 219-243.

involves that we see others as valuers of the same kind we are, thus becoming aware of a connection with them: in important ways, they are *like us*. Our evaluative perspective is one that implies a relatedness to all humans, simply by virtue of the fact that they too are human beings. To fully understand this relatedness is difficult.[46] In particular, it is hard to get clear about the precise ways others are separate individuals, while at the same time they are beings who are related to us. But notwithstanding these difficulties, my key point is that we see others as valuers from *within* a relationship among fellow human beings.

This is a contentious claim. Philosophers who discuss the obligations that attach to special relationships such as being someone's sister, neighbor, friend, or fellow-citizen often argue that the notion of a 'relationship with everyone' is empty. And insofar as they look at *special* relationships, they think that the idea of a relationship with all human beings is non-sensical—it is the very opposite of a special or particular relationship. Against this view, I want to employ an Aristotelian argument. Aristotle thinks that, when one meets a stranger from a different part in the world, one undergoes a remarkable experience: the realization that this person too is a human being.[47] He argues that our interactions with this person then are framed by the relationship that is recognized. I think that something like this is true. It is in some sense impossible to stand in a relationship with everyone—namely, if this is taken to imply that one would interact with everyone. But in interacting with just any person of the world, one can realize that, in fact, one is related to her as a fellow human being. When one's thoughts wander to people in far

[46] These are things that I think are right in Stoic ethics, even though much of the physics that goes into this account appears rather outlandish from today's perspective. For a detailed analysis of the Stoic view that all human beings are related, see my *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City* (Oxford 2008).
[47] NE VIII.1, 1155a16-23.

away countries, the same kind of realization takes place: they too are people—and that means, they too want their lives to go well, they too suffer under all kinds of afflictions, and so on. In this sense, I think that there is a relationship among all human beings, one that we can become aware of in particular contexts of thinking about some people or interacting with some people, but that also exists when we are not attending to it. This is not a relationship that violates considerations about the separateness of individuals, or one that would be blind to the importance that keeping-our-distance can have. It is a relationship of recognizing that 'humanity' (as Kant calls it) is a normatively relevant kind of likeness between us and everyone else.

To sum up. Kantian respect, and even Kantian love of humankind, is tied to a perspective that sees human beings as unrelated others, others who simply *have* absolute value—an idea that I argued should be abandoned. On my account, we look at human beings as fellow human beings, and as such, as related to them. We understand their special value from *within* this relationship. An evaluative perspective 'from nowhere' is not only incomprehensible. If it were possible to look at human beings from that perspective, then it would be misguided to do so. The properties of human beings that are normatively relevant are seen from a perspective that makes visible that others, insofar as they are human beings, are *like us*.