

Book Review

The Value of Humanity, by L. Nandi Theunissen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii + 159.

Why are we subject to the demands of ethics? Theunissen replies: because they are the proper responses to the value of humanity. That answer invites further questions. What makes humanity valuable? What is it for us (or anything) to be valuable? What is value? These are among the deepest questions of moral philosophy, and her answers are provocative. This concise, elegantly written, and engaging work will be at the centre of meta-ethical debate for years to come.

Theunissen's central thesis is that to be valuable is to be beneficial, and therefore the value of humanity lies in our capacity to benefit ourselves by living good lives and helping others to do so. Her heroes are Plato and Aristotle, in that they take reflection on the good life to be the central task of ethics. Kant too plays a leading role in this book because he proposes a radical break from the ancient eudaimonistic tradition. For Kant, the value of humanity is utterly different from the value of anything else. It is absolute; run-of-the-mill value is merely relative. Theunissen applauds Kant's insight that we are to treat others as ends-in-themselves and never as mere means, but she denies that this holds only if humanity has absolute value.

She also gives Kant credit for his observation that there is 'something so strange in this idea of the absolute worth of a mere will ... that ... a suspicion must arise that its covert basis is perhaps high-flown fancy' (*Groundwork* 4:394). 'Kant was right to be concerned', Theunissen says (p. 2), because there is no such thing as absolute goodness.

That is the negative component of her book. The positive component consists in its attempt to show what the relational value of humanity is, and how it provides the foundation for ethical obligation. To accomplish this, she faces what she takes to be the central challenge of G.E. Moore, another champion of absolute value. Moore worries that if good is always your good or my good, but not good simpliciter, there is no way to criticize the egoist. Why should one do anything simply because it is good for another, not absolutely good? Theunissen replies: if one is contributing to a good human life, the life of a valuing agent who benefits herself, that is all the reason one needs. That individual has value in that she is valuable for herself.

That she and the benefit one gives her lack *absolute* value does not nullify or weaken the normative force of the reason to help her.

‘Value’ and ‘good’ are terms Theunissen uses as merely verbal variants. But *The Goodness of Humanity* would be a misleading title – suggesting that as a rule people are morally good – and so it must be admitted that these words are not always interchangeable. Yet her thesis could be expressed in terms of goodness no less than in terms of value: there is something good (valuable) about humanity, namely, that we can have good lives. (‘Can’ is important here: Theunissen does not mean that human beings actually have good lives – only that they have the capacity to have such lives. Further, she does not insist that it is possessed by *all* members of the human species. She is speaking of what is ‘typical and characteristic of human beings’ (p. 26); her ‘account does not extend to people in whom there is not . . . a live possibility that their powers can be exercised — it does not extend to people in an irreversible coma, or people with profound disabilities’ (p. 25).

One might wonder whether her whole project is misconceived because it presupposes without argument that we can coherently ask about the value of humanity without first specifying what kind of value we have in mind. A ring might have sentimental value; many objects have instrumental value; some documents have historical value. So, if you are going to talk about the value of humanity, it might be said, you had better specify from the beginning what kind of value you have in mind. Is it moral value, for example? In that case, the value of humanity lies in our capacity or propensity to be morally virtuous, and to do what is morally good and morally right.

Theunissen is certainly not claiming that the *moral* value of humanity lies in our capacity to lead good lives. How then would she disarm the objection of the preceding paragraph? She can say: ‘When you read my book, you will see why your approach to moral philosophy is wrong and mine is right. This work explains why moral demands apply to us: they are underwritten by the value of humanity – our capacity to lead good lives. By contrast, your talk of “moral value” takes for granted what needs to be explained. Moral value bottoms out in the way morality is responsive to our capacity to lead good lives’. To cite her own words: ‘We should not begin ethical theory by asking what is owed to human beings. . . . [N]ormative reasons are grounded in values’ (p. 11). What we owe to ourselves and others is owed because human beings characteristically have value – not a peculiar kind of value unlike any other, but one we are familiar with: the value of having the capacity to benefit. ‘Human beings cannot be of value independently of their propensity to stand in relations of benefit to human beings or other beings because these relations are the very essence of value’ (p. 135).

That might make her sound like a consequentialist – but she is not. She accepts the critiques of consequentialism advanced by Elizabeth Anderson, Joseph Raz, and T. M. Scanlon. She has been persuaded by them that states of affairs are not the only bearers of values (people and other individual objects

also have value), and she denies that ‘production and elimination are the primary responses to values’ (p. 23). ‘It is not obvious that values should be met with the uniform response of maximization or production’ (p. 23). ‘That value is quantifiable, comparable, and fungible are dogmas in value theory’ – dogmas she associates with consequentialism, and that she rejects. These are aspects of market value, but, she insists, they are ‘not the distinguishing marks of the beneficial’ (p. 23).

The term ‘beneficial’ that plays a large role in Theunissen’s theory is often taken to refer to what is instrumentally valuable, so it is important to emphasize the distinction she makes between being derivatively and underderivatively beneficial. Instrumental benefits derive their status as beneficial from what they promote; what is non-derivatively good is what is good for someone ‘in itself’, as we might put it. ‘Eudaimonia is a paradigm example of something that is non-derivatively valuable’ (p. 31), she says, using Aristotle’s term for the highest human good. Her claim that the value of humanity lies in our capacity to benefit is in effect an endorsement of the thesis that the components of well-being (*eudaimonia*), whatever they are, ground claims about what is morally owed to human beings.

What are the components of well-being? Fully answering that question would be too large a project to undertake in this book, but she devotes a chapter to a partial answer: human beings are valuers and are capable of setting themselves long-term final ends. What they should pursue as their final ends will not be utterly uniform across all of humanity because we differ in our temperaments, abilities, tastes, and interests. Whatever genuinely enriches someone’s life is beneficial, in that it is a component of that individual’s well-being. One’s appreciation of a work of art, she suggests, is in this sense a benefit – not a means to some further end, but in itself an enrichment of one’s quality of life.

As I noted, Theunissen takes it to be a mere dogma, attractive to many consequentialists, that ‘value is quantifiable, comparable, and fungible’. She expands on this when she says: ‘I share Kant’s view that it does not make sense to ask how much value a person has’ (pp. 53–54). She adds: ‘[B]ut equally, if we ask how much value there is in reading Proust, or how to quantify the value of the air we breathe, then something has also gone wrong. . . . Kant was right to see that . . . we cannot say of someone that she has more value than someone else’ (p. 54).

I take her to mean that if someone says that Proust has 6.894 times more value than Galsworthy, something has gone wrong. Such precision is false to its subject matter. But what of the further claim that it does not make sense to say that one person has more value than another? This is not the thesis that all human beings have equal value. Rather, it is the thesis that to speak of the value of a person as being greater than, equal to, or less than the value of another ‘does not make sense’. This is so distant from a widely held belief in human equality that I am tempted to think that Theunissen has something

else in mind. She might mean that the value of humanity is not scalar. One has value or one does not – but one does not have a lot or a little of it. She allows that there may be severely deficient human beings who lack value because there is no practical possibility, given their limitations, of their living well.

That human value does not admit of degrees is an odd view because it is certainly not part of the concept of value (goodness) that it is non-scalar. Quite the opposite: if something is good, questions of comparison and degree are always in order. That does not prove Theunissen wrong. She might hold that every human being who has a capacity to lead a good life has as great a capacity to do so as every other. But that is open to question. Might some lucky people have a greater natural capacity than others to achieve the components of a good life? To answer that question, we need empirical information about human variability and we need a conception of what well-being consists in.

A related question is whether other forms of life – animals and plants – also have value, and if so, whether their lives have as much value as human life. Theunissen leaves open the possibility that other animals have a capacity to be good for themselves. In this respect, she departs from Kant, for whom humanity alone has the kind of value that grounds morality. What would she say in answer to the question ‘Does humanity have more value than other species?’ Cast in her terms, that question means: are we capable of a life that has more value (benefit) than theirs? The question, I think, makes sense.

Theunissen says that values are not always ‘comparable’. She tells the reader that when she was a child she was fond of asking her parents ‘Is a shark better than a crocodile?’ (p. 54). This is a nice example of a question that cannot be answered because we do not yet understand what is being asked – some context is needed. It could mean ‘Is a shark a better swimmer than a crocodile?’, for example. But many philosophers have found it illuminating to compare the quality of human and animal life. Aristotle holds that animals can live well if circumstances are favourable, but none so well as favourably circumstanced human beings. Animals cannot be *eudaimon* – only humans and gods can. Similarly, Mill claims that human well-being belongs to a higher order of value than any animal’s. These inter-species comparisons, as I have said, do not strike me as nonsense. They may even be true. Consider an unfortunate animal whose life is dominated by hunger, fear, and pain. Compare that to a human life that has the best of everything human. Can’t we and shouldn’t we say that one of them is better off than the other?

This leads to another worry having to do with degrees of value. Suppose someone said: ‘Human beings have value – but unfortunately, not much. Most people have bad lives, and even the luckiest of us have lives that are just barely worth living’. A long tradition of pessimism, running from Sophocles to Schopenhauer and Freud, endorses this outlook. Theunissen can brush it

off: she can point out that on her theory the value of humanity resides not in our *actually* having good lives, but in our *capacity* to lead good lives. But if she leaves her response to the pessimists at that, it is unsatisfying. One is left wondering how much value there could be in having a capacity that remains unactualized, or minimally developed, over the course of a lifetime. Theunissen's project is to show why ethical demands have the great weight normally attached to them by grounding them in the value of humanity. But if most human lives are blighted, our capacities to lead good lives left barely developed, how can she avoid the conclusion that although it matters whether we act morally, it matters very little?

As I read him, Kant's search for an alternative (non-eudaimonistic) framework for ethics owes something to this pessimistic tradition. He takes happiness to be not impossible but elusive and indefinite. We are all too vulnerable to suffering and misfortune. A lucky few are cheerful souls who are naturally kind to their fellow human beings, but the rest of us face a life of frustration and burdensome obligations. Certainly, we should not look to moral virtue as the secure path to happiness. If human life matters, and matters as much as our sense of duty suggests that it does, then something other than our capacity to lead good lives must be its foundation. We should transform our desire for happiness into a desire to be deserving of happiness in a future life. Learning to live without happiness is a valuable skill. We must have the moral courage to do what is right even if we continue to suffer. What is to be most admired in human nature is our power to break free at any time from the forces of nature and affirm our membership in the moral community, however great a sacrifice this requires. It would not be a robust critique of this outlook to point out that even if happiness is fragile and elusive, as Kant claims, we nonetheless have the value that underwrites all of ethics, because we are *capable* of leading good lives. How does that capacity compensate for life's evils, if it remains dormant or inchoate?

Even if one does not share this gloomy outlook and its conception of freedom as a contra-causal escape from nature, one can find reasons to hold, with Kant, that morally motivated actions can have value apart from any benefit they achieve. Think of an act of great courage that fails to attain its goal – a soldier killed in an unsuccessful rescue mission. This deserves our admiration, and admiring something is one way of valuing it. Should we say that this act has relational value – that it is valuable to or for someone? No. By hypothesis, no one is benefited. That act of courage is rightly valued, and so it is valuable, but it is not good for anyone. Other sorts of examples are available: for example, refraining from intervening in another person's life in a beneficial way because that individual has a right to make his own choices, even when he is harming himself. That restraint can be admirable, even though it allows harm and does no good. These sorts of examples do not constitute knock-down arguments against Theunissen's thesis that the beneficial is the source of all value, but they must be addressed if that thesis is to be sustained.

Theunissen does an excellent job undermining some Kantian arguments that purport to show that relative value cannot exist unless it is undergirded by absolute value. Kant begins with the insight that not all value is market value, but, as she notes, it would be a confusion to infer that the value of humanity must be absolute. Besides market value and other forms of instrumental value there is the relational value of the components of a good life: these are relational (of benefit to someone) but non-derivative.

Another argument with a Kantian flavour, defended by Joseph Raz and David Velleman, rests on the premise that although one good can derive its goodness from some second good, which in turn depends on a third, this chain must at some point terminate; what it ultimately depends on must be independently good, and therefore good absolutely. Not so, Theunissen points out. For one thing, chains of value-dependence can be circular. Suppose A is of value in that she provides some benefit to B; and B is of value because she provides some benefit to A. All of the value involved is relational. With this point in hand, Theunissen makes the obvious next move: one's value might consist not only in being beneficial to someone else – one might also have value because one is of benefit to oneself. She notes: 'Contemporary moral philosophers tend to take the subject matter of ethics to be – in T. M. Scanlon's apt phrase – what we owe to others. But there are older traditions in which ethics also has to do with our relationship with ourselves. ... The good person ... has something to offer another because she is master of one – she has knowledge of how to be well in her own life' (pp. 78-79).

One feature of the Kantian legacy that Theunissen does not directly address is its dualism of the right and the good – a dualism fully brought to the fore in the book of that title by W. D. Ross. This can be read as a correction of the monism of the Aristotelian tradition to which she is so sympathetic. For Aristotle and other eudaimonists, the good is that under which all human action is subsumed – the relational good, that is. Theunissen takes Kant's most important challenge to this tradition to be the affirmation of non-relational good, but when one reads Ross, one finds no mention of the absolute goodness of humanity. I read this as a tacit rejection of that aspect of Kant's ethics. For Ross, it is not true that 'moral reasons are grounded in values' (p. 11). On the contrary, as anyone who has been morally educated can see, some things should be done simply because we have a duty to do them. Ross would say the same about acts that bring about some good. There is no need, he thinks, to posit the value of the individual who receives that good. The full justification of doing what is good is simply that it is good, just as the full justification of fulfilling some obligation is simply that it is an obligation. Ross would reject Theunissen's equation of the good with the beneficial. He would also see no need to posit the value of humanity.

Ross's dualism of the right and the good facilitates his opposition to utilitarianism; part of the appeal of his alternative to a good-centered monism lies precisely there. That is certainly how it was taken by Rawls. By contrast, because Theunissen seeks to make value the ground of rightness, she accepts Aristotle's good-centered monism, and so she must find a different way out of consequentialism from Ross's dualism of the right and the good. Her opposition to consequentialism rests instead on her rejection of the dogma that 'value is quantifiable, comparable, and fungible'. She is certainly right that people are not fungible. But is value not quantifiable? Nor comparable? On the contrary, whenever A and B are benefits, it is always in order to ask whether one is more so than the other – even if we are often limited to replying in vague terms that one is much better, or only slightly better; or that they are roughly equal. It is therefore unclear how Theunissen can maintain that ethics is *all* about doing what is good for people (and some animals), but resist the consequentialist's thesis that the more good we do the better. Must rightness always produce some benefit, but not be held to the higher standard of producing the most good?

There is something to be said for Ross's refusal to engage in a discussion of the value of humanity. Suppose an individual is in great pain, and you can easily remove the pain at no cost to yourself or others. All I will tell you about this individual is that he or she or it is a creature of some sort – we might be talking about a human being or an animal. I take Theunissen's view to entail that we should intervene only when that individual has value. More precisely, that individual must have the capacity to be good for herself – to lead a good life. After all, if that individual lacks value, then it does not matter that he or she or it is suffering. But it is tempting to say, against this: 'Suffering is suffering – the way it feels is by itself a reason to alleviate it; we need not first assure ourselves that the one suffering deserves our attention because he, she, or it has value'.

Theunissen recognizes, at one point, the temptation to dismiss the issue of the value of human beings or animals. As she notes, it could be said, in the spirit of Bentham: '... the question is not, "Are they of value?" but "Can they suffer?"' (p. 71). That strikes me as a serious challenge to the guiding assumption of her book. If an animal, trapped by a fallen tree, is suffering horribly, and I can help it by lifting the tree, why should I have to presuppose not only that this is a state of affairs that is bad for it, but also that it is a creature that can be good for itself and others? Does it have to deserve my solicitude?

Neither Plato nor Aristotle, as I read them, affirms the value of humanity, in the sense at issue in Theunissen's book. For her, as for many contemporary moral philosophers, if we are to be justified in benefiting a human being or any other form of life, there must be some property possessed by the individual in question that shows that he, she, or it should matter to us – some special feature (such as intelligence, self-awareness, or moral emotions) that

makes its well-being worthy of our concern and support. As the question is sometimes put: What gives an individual ‘moral standing’? Do animals have it? Does it admit of degrees? Theunissen’s answer is that we and perhaps some other animals are such stuff as can benefit ourselves and others – this is what gives us moral standing. But we find no such discussion in the Greek and Roman philosophers. The eudaimonistic tradition simply assumes that we should act for the sake of well-being – our own, that of our friends and political community, or that of the cosmopolis of human beings and gods. But benefiting human beings needs no justification.

It should not be assumed without argument that these philosophers, so read, have left unexplored a genuine and vital problem for ethical theory. After all, when I act for my own good, I do not need to presuppose that I am justified in doing so because I have value – because I have the property of being potentially good for myself. (Nor do I suppose that I have absolute worth.) Rather, I take the fact that an action will be good for me as by itself a reason to perform it. I should matter to myself – but that is just to say that self-interest is a reason I should respond to. That being so, it seems equally otiose to ground my treatment of other people, or of animals, in their value. I do what is good for others simply because it is good for them – and if I follow Ross, I do what is right because it is right.

Needless to say, if someone lacks the capacity to be benefited – if something in him resists all efforts on his behalf – then it is pointless to seek his good. But it is not similarly pointless to benefit someone who cannot benefit himself or others. And it is the possession of this active capacity – the capacity to lead a good life and help others do so — that figures in Theunissen’s account of human value.

The topic of the value of humanity takes on vital importance in Kant, but then disappears in such Kantians as Prichard and Ross. Moved by Kant as well as by eminent philosophers of our own time, Theunissen assumes from the start that there is such a thing as the value of humanity. For her, the hard questions are what value is (answer: it is the beneficial) and what the basis of human value is (answer: the fact that we are capable of living good lives). But there is a third hard question: do we need to show why we must do what is right and good by grounding our doing so on something good already present in those on whose behalf we act? (A further question: if they already have something beneficial – the value of their humanity – could that make it less urgent that they receive additional benefits?)

These are the components of Theunissen’s book that I question. But I am delighted to express my conclusion by using her favourite term: *The Value of Humanity* is a work of immense philosophical value. Valuable in what way? Yes, she is right: it is good for us. To borrow another term she relies on, it

enriches the philosophical conversation. I found it a joy to read and reflect on, and I expect it to win many other admiring readers, whether they accept its arguments or not.

*Department of Philosophy
Northwestern University
Kresge Hall, 1880 Campus Drive
Evanston IL 60608, USA
rkraut1@northwestern.edu
doi: 10.1093/mind/fzaa029*

RICHARD KRAUT