

## Reviews

There may be good answers to these questions. Even if there are not, *Real Likenesses* is an original and important contribution. It contains many interesting discussions and ideas there has not been space even to mention here. Its provocative, sometimes eccentric, but fascinating and carefully thought through proposals should help refocus debate in the philosophy of the representational arts onto what are perhaps its most challenging issues.

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*The Value of Humanity* by Nandi Theunissen (Oxford University Press, 2020).

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Nandi Theunissen's *The Value of Humanity* tackles the distinctively modern topic announced in its title – one most famously associated with Kant's moral philosophy – by providing an account that is explicitly inspired by the ancients. According to Theunissen, Plato and Aristotle held that what it is for anything to be good, or valuable, is for it stand in a relation of benefit to something. Theunissen's book is an extended argument for the application of this general conception of value to human beings in particular. Theunissen thereby hopes to provide an alternative to the Kantian understanding of human value, which she takes to be centered around the claim that human beings differ from all other things of value in virtue of being good 'in themselves', i.e., independently of any relation they stand in to anything else.

In Chapter 1 Theunissen makes a series of distinctions concerning value – including the relational/non-relational distinction central to the book – and defends the idea that the ethical significance of human beings is best explained as a species of recognition they are due in virtue of their being valuable. She goes on to voice initial skepticism in Chapter 2 about the Kantian notion of 'absolute' or non-relational value before defusing the argument, in Chapter 3, that states some things must be valuable in themselves if a vicious regress is to be avoided. She concludes that there need be no such regress if we recognize that something can stand to itself in a reflexive relation of self-benefit. Chapter 4 gives a positive account of the all-important relation in which we stand to ourselves. The way in which we benefit ourselves is by exercising our capacity to lead good lives – which capacity is the

capacity to *value*. The book concludes, in its fifth chapter, by defusing a concern, grounded in Moorean scruples, that the conception arrived at is untenable, and addresses the question of what ethical behaviour the account can make sense of.

*The Value of Humanity* tackles a wide range of topics with admirable clarity, and Theunissen often draws connections between questions that are treated in isolation by philosophers working in their respective specialties. However, the book's most noteworthy feature consists in the application of an ancient framework to a modern question. As Theunissen herself points out, Aristotle is not exercised by the question: in virtue of what are human beings valuable? What he investigates is what living well consists in for us. Theunissen's suggestion is that we can connect the ancient and the modern concerns: we are valuable in virtue of our capacity to benefit ourselves *by* living good lives. Many readers will naturally be interested in whether Theunissen's account can thereby deliver an account of the value of human beings that underwrites their ethical significance. However, in order to gauge that, one must first grapple with Theunissen's central notion of self-benefit. In what remains therefore, I will confine my attention mainly to that aspect of the book.

At the core of Theunissen's account is the idea of benefit as a relation in which it is possible for us to stand in to ourselves, and in virtue of which we are valuable. To the extent that human beings possess value, for Theunissen, their so doing turns on their ability to lead good lives and thereby benefit themselves – but what is it to lead a good life? According to Theunissen, the capacity 'to value' just *is* the capacity to lead a good life. More specifically, 'valuing' consists in having 'a stable motivation to pursue final ends that [the agent] finds worthwhile, that she is appropriately emotionally responsive to, and that play a structuring role in her deliberations over time' (p. 100). Drawing these strands together, Theunissen writes that:

The explanation [of human value] is that the capacity for having final ends explains the value of a person because having it is good for that person, and it is good for that person because its exercise enables that person to have a good life (a life that is good for them). People are of value because they can be good for something – they can lead good lives. (p.108)

What benefits human beings is the good life, and so the good life is valuable. Human beings are valuable because by living a good life they benefit themselves. Importantly, for Theunissen, there are matters of fact about what sorts of ends are genuinely worth pursuing; to lead an actually good life one's 'valuing' must track these.

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An initially striking feature of Theunissen's conception of self-benefit is that it apparently requires thinking of agents as benefitting their lives. (The diagram of her position (Fig 6., p. 81) suggests this, as well as her repeated claim that humans are 'good for' leading a good life.) There are two sides to what we might call the 'circle' of self-benefit: I benefit my life, and my life benefits me. But is one's own life something one benefits? Since my life is, at least in large part, my own activity, it is tempting to say that for it to be benefitted just *is* for me to be benefitted – and not because it, through some act of its own, then benefits me (as someone might return a favour.) A similar concern may lead us to query the other side of the Theunissen's circle. In what sense can I benefit *from* a good life? A good life, one might think, is its own reward; it is not something I derive benefit from, in the sense I might benefit from an insurance policy. There is a danger, then, that Theunissen's account renders the agent peculiarly separate from her own life, instead of being – as she sometimes puts it – something at 'the center of a life'.

We can, however, circumvent these concerns by interpreting Theunissen's schema for self-benefit in the context of the Aristotelian framework she is sympathetic towards. According to Theunissen, her account

... is Platonic and Aristotelian in the following sense. The good *for* a being centrally involves engaging appropriately in the activities that are characteristic *of* that being. If what is characteristic of people is valuing, then faring well for people involves valuing in the appropriate ways. (p. 103)

These remarks provide a hint for how best to interpret the self-benefit schema. For Aristotle, a substance fares well to the extent that it engages in its characteristic activities. Indeed, properly understood, a given substance just is that which has the capacity to engage in the activities distinctive of its kind – it is understood, as the kind of substance it is, through those very activities. Now to say that living a given life is '*good for X*' or '*benefits X*', on this conception, is equivalent to saying that, in living such a life, X is engaging in the activities that are characteristic of its kind. There is no *further* question as to whether those characteristic activities benefit X, since there are no separate criteria for what it is for X to *be* benefitted other than whether X is engaging in those activities. Interpreting Theunissen's circle of self-benefit in this light helps to assuage the concern that it drives a problematic wedge between agents and their lives. The two 'benefitting' relations in which I stand to my life are best understood as the relations something stands in to its characteristic activity. We

can say that a human being is ‘good for’ their life in the sense that they have the capacity to engage in it; we can say their life benefits them insofar as engaging in their characteristic activity just *is* what it is for them to be faring well.<sup>1</sup>

However, if we read Theunissen’s schema in this way, a structural similarity between a Kantian account and her own potentially puts pressure on her emphasis on the distinction between ‘relational’ and ‘non-relational’ accounts of human value. For Kant, as for Theunissen, human worth derives from our capacity for a certain sort of activity. Theunissen explicates the key difference between Kant’s non-relational conception of human value and her own relational model in terms of the observation that, for Kant, the supremely valuable thing, the good will, need not be ‘good for’ someone’s life. The capacity for moral action, in other words, is good ‘in itself’, and not in virtue of standing in a benefitting relation to an agent. Theunissen’s agents, by contrast, actually benefit themselves by exercising the capacity to value. From one perspective, the contrast could not be clearer. Kant thinks that the capacity to act well, when exercised, does not guarantee pleasure, happiness, stability or ‘enrichment’ (to use a favourite term of Theunissen’s). Nor need it, in order to preserve its (and thus the agent’s) worth. Nevertheless, what prevents a Kantian from saying that one’s life fares better if one wills correctly, simply in virtue of having done so? Even if you find yourself at the mercy of the wicked, or if one’s intentions are thwarted before one can realize them – hasn’t one’s life gone better, in a significant sense, just insofar as you determined to do the right thing for the right reasons?<sup>2</sup>

Theunissen would presumably want to maintain that even if there is *a* sense in which possessing a good will by itself ensures that one ‘fares well’, this sense is compatible with the agent themselves not being *genuinely* benefitted. If the proper exercise of the will brings no benefit to the agent except the mere fact that one has willed correctly, one might think it does not benefit the agent in any meaningful

<sup>1</sup> It does seem to strain the ordinary meaning of ‘good for’ to say that one’s capacity is ‘good for’ or, especially, ‘benefits’ its exercise, but I ignore this in what follows.

<sup>2</sup> To characterize Kant as holding that the good will is of supreme value because it ‘benefits us’ sounds precisely backwards – but that is only because those words normally suggest some *further* benefit, or good, than that which is contained simply in willing correctly. We can instead say: Given the sort of beings we are according to Kant – finite rational agents – the activity proper to us, and through which we are faring well, is that activity associated with the good will.

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sense. At this point in the dialectic, it is natural to wonder whether the real dispute is whether the capacity in question – that capacity on which our value depends – must be one that benefits us or not. Perhaps the real dispute has to do with what *kind of activity* faring well (being benefited) consists in.

That this might be the real bone of contention is suggested by the structural similarity between Theunissen's account and the Kantian account that I mentioned above. In both accounts, the exercise of the capacity on which human value depends need not bring any benefit to the agent *except* that which is internal to that capacity's exercise. If the 'benefit' derived from exercising the capacity only extends that far, then both accounts could, in principle, be 'relational' accounts – since for Theunissen *and* for Kant we can say the agent fares better (benefits themselves) *by* exercising the capacity in question. If, alternatively, we understand 'benefit' to be something that *must* be obtained in addition to the capacity's activity, then both accounts could, in principle, be considered 'non-relational' – since neither account requires that the agent receives any benefit that comes in addition to those that are internal to the exercise of their respective capacities. The real dispute, therefore, may concern what sort of capacity (and so what sort of activity) genuinely benefits an agent, a dispute that has at its heart an ancient question as to what is ultimately to our advantage.

The structural parallel between Theunissen's account and a Kantian one would fail to hold if Theunissen were to claim that the benefit an agent gains by valuing must be additional to that which is contained within the activity of valuing itself. However, this would be tantamount to rejecting the broader Neo-Aristotelian framework Theunissen is working within, for it would require establishing criteria for what counts as being benefited that go beyond the explication of our 'characteristic activities'. It would also reopen the pressing question that prompted us to draw on that framework to interpret Theunissen's circle of self-benefit: in what sense should we say that an agent benefits her life, or that her life benefits her?

I have only been able to touch on a central strand of Theunissen's rich discussion here – readers will no doubt find much else of interest in *The Value of Humanity*, both in terms of its central argument and its historical inspiration.

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