

The Priority of Respect

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings and the things that are good for human beings are very different, yet we often group them together. For example, people may use the word “value” and argue that human beings have value. We also say that things have value. Using the same term for human beings and for things may be a very serious mistake.

INVIOLABLE SUBJECTS, FUNGIBLE OBJECTS

Law exists for the benefit of human beings. The goal of law is to produce and preserve whatever is of benefit (or of “value”) for human beings. Human beings themselves are thus not a result of law, but its starting point. The individuals who form our community are neither an end nor a means but a beginning. Since these individuals are a given, the law need not ask whether they are of value. Law needs to ask only “What is of value for them?” Human beings generate our legal values. They are the sources from which we understand what is valuable and what is not valuable. The logic of law does not include a decision about whether they themselves are valuable.

Why is this important? It is important because, in the structure of political thought, things that are merely valued are fungible, replaceable, substitutable. Things are not inviolable. For example, since shelter is of value for people, the law should facilitate the construction and conservation of housing. But particular houses do not thereby become inviolable. Houses can be torn down and new ones built without going against the aim and value of shelter.

However, the human beings with whom the law begins are not fungible but inviolable. They have individual dignity in a stronger way than can ever be possessed by things of value. *We can never purposely sacrifice some of our neighbors, even in a good cause, because it is only*

the givenness of our neighbors which lets us know which causes are good. Human beings are not so much to be valued as to be sources of value. Even when they are not themselves of value, they tell us what is of value.

VALUING LIFE EQUALS VALUING PEOPLE

However, contemporary discourse often erroneously lumps people and things together and says that people too, are of “value.” Sometimes this is said directly—for example, in the frequent pro-life claim that each of us is infinitely valuable. More often it is said indirectly, by making the claim that someone’s “life” has more or less value. But, in this world, existence and organic life are the same thing. Hamlet said it well: “To be or not to be, that is the question.” To say that Hamlet is alive is simply to say that he exists. If Hamlet’s life no longer has value, then his existence has no value and he himself has no value.

DANGERS IN VALUING PEOPLE

Trying to use the idea of value to express sufficiently the special dignity of human beings is very dangerous. Even the feel of value is degrading. Contrast “I love my wife” with “I value my wife.” The second puts me above her as her evaluator, and makes her something to be priced. Even a high price does not undo her degradation: to say “my wife has great intrinsic value” is still less than to say “I love her.” In fact, one point of my love is that I will care for her even if she ceases to have value in any objective sense.

There are times when additional human beings and human life do, in fact, have little value for us. Families and nations may decide that they do not wish an ever-expanding membership. A dying person may feel that a few additional weeks or months of life has not enough value to justify an “extraordinary” or “heroic” heart operation. If only life’s value were at stake, deliberate killing of infants or the sick would be justified whenever other costs outweighed the low benefit of more life.

Even when something has a very high value, it does not thereby become inviolable. Corvette collectors may well cannibalize some

vehicles to keep others going. If the price of sheep skyrockets, a sheep owner will be more, not less, ready to kill infertile ewes. Similarly, even if we believe human beings have infinite value, we may be led to kill. For example, if two siblings would die unless a third were killed for his organs, some would say that the high value of life demands that he be killed. (One counter-argument would be that the organ transplant would result in no net gain, in that one infinity is much as two infinities. But then there would be nothing wrong with killing two or fifty to save one, since an infinity of value would still remain. Either way, even infinite value does not stop killing.)

INSTANCES OF WHAT WE VALUE ARE REPLACEABLE

The problem with saying every human being has value, even infinite value, is that we have not explained why the individual matters. No amount of valuing of human beings can do this because particular instances of things of value are always fungible. People don't need a particular house for shelter; they only need some house.

Saying that every human is valuable because she is unique would not solve this problem. Unique beings are the same in being unique. Why not kill one unique human being if we can thereby save (or generate) two (or more) other equally unique persons?

Nor could we escape our conundrum by claiming that we do not really value human beings but rather Jerry, Mary and Martha. We would not have explained our reluctance to kill strangers, people of whom we know nothing except that they are human beings.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

We need to explain *how what we have in common can make us matter as individuals, how that in which we are the same—our humanity—can ground our separate significance.*

RESPECT DEFERS TO EVERY INDIVIDUAL

We need a word and an attitude that can express the *individual* dignity that most of us perceive, and that is the starting point of law. This

attitude should treat people not as things of value but as sources of value; not as ends or means, but as beginnings. One such word and attitude is “respect.” (Another would be “reverence.”)

The idea of respect is not so much to produce or preserve its object as to acknowledge and defer to its object, to let it be. *Because we must step back before that which we respect, we must step back before every individual instance of that which we respect.* We cannot leave something alone without leaving every part of it alone. Respecting humanity thus requires treating human beings as individually inviolable in a way that valuing humanity does not and cannot. Our fundamental problem is solved: Each individual has significance as an instance of the humanity we share. In recognizing our individual inviolability, respect matches up better than value both with our moral intuitions and with the political theory with which we started.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RESPECT

We can now avoid the ominous contradictions encountered earlier in this paper. How can we sometimes omit producing more children and yet never consider a lethal act aimed at killing them once they are conceived?

Obviously, in such a situation we do not highly value additional human beings, but we still respect them once they exist. Why do we not expend extraordinary effort in keeping someone alive a little longer, and yet refuse to kill him? We may simply think that our costly efforts confer insufficient benefit. This does not mean that he has become an obstacle that we aim to remove from the world. We ought not turn against those who seem to have lost all value, for they retain their human nature and the respect thereby demanded. A person who “vegetates” is a *person* who vegetates. Only thus is his condition tragic. We do not pity tomatoes.

But not every omission is permitted. The members of our human community are a given; their destruction must be therefore be unthinkable in the sense of unplannable. Although we are not able to benefit everyone at all times, we must never intentionally seek to destroy anyone, even by omission.

There are wider implications of respect for human life as a starting point. Only an attitude like respect, an attitude that seeks to respond

rather than to produce, necessarily has regard for every individual example of the object of its concern. All human rights may be well derivable from the fact that people are sources of value rather than mere things of value. If we respect them, we must let them be beginnings, let them surprise us in their freedom.

Respect also tends beneficially to exclude a consideration of value. Options lead to evaluations. If assisted suicide is legal, we may come to resent our grandmother's selfish refusal to make use of it. To allow killing leads us to evaluate and so to devalue those whom we might kill, even if we do not do so. Conversely, there is no point in evaluating that which is a given. We do not resent not being able to fly like birds. Where there is no occasion to compare grandmother's existence with her non-existence, one does not easily come up with the feeling that she (as opposed to her disability) is a disvalue. To take imperfect others as given lets them be the possible objects—and subjects—of appreciation and delight.

So, too, inviolability can require democracy. Because we cannot destroy those who oppose our plans, we must seek their consent. The equality of respect for human life leads logically to the equality of the vote.

Abortion and euthanasia thus eat deeply away at the foundation of democracy and of law itself, as Pope John Paul II has argued in the *Gospel of Life*. In them, the human community begins an inegalitarian examination of the credentials of its members, excluding those of insufficient value. The strong and healthy are not yet in immediate danger, of course, but even they have lost much of the respect they once had as subjects. They are on their way to becoming mere fungible objects of value.