

Explaining the Value of Human Beings

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In these pages, I offer an account of the value of human beings, and therewith, the ground of what is owed to human beings. The account is steeped in the Kantian tradition even as it looks to transcend it. It is steeped in the Kantian tradition insofar as it takes people to be bearers of a value that properly constrains our actions involving others and ourselves. It departs from the Kantian tradition insofar as it proposes that the value of human beings is not absolute but *relational*. The value of human beings is held to be relational in the specific sense that it turns on a propensity to be *good for* something or someone, where *good for* is synonymous with *beneficial*. I take the view that things owe their value to the fact that they are or stand to be good for someone, and that the value of human beings is no exception. More particularly, I develop the rather surprising proposal that the value of human beings lies in our capacity to be good for *ourselves*. As valuers, which is to say, as beings who have final ends that give meaning and point to what we do, we are able to lead flourishing lives in the way it is given to human beings to lead them, where the value of a flourishing life is most basically its value for the person whose life it is. In a phrase, we are of value because we can contribute in very particular ways to our flourishing, and we should relate to others and ourselves as such centers of a good life. Even as I respond to likely objections, I will not here defend this as the only or the best approach to the value of humanity. Instead, I devote myself to making a constructive, positive proposal.¹

In some ways the account proposed here breaks with orthodoxy and is even iconoclastic; but in other ways the project is rather traditional. For I am committed to some idea of *common*

humanity—to the idea that independently of race, sexual orientation, class, gender identity or identification, human beings are owed basic forms of ethical response. By the lights of some working in other reaches of the humanities, this is a quaint and even a naïve starting point. The literary critic Mark Greif gives voice to the familiar thought that the whole enterprise of thinking through the ground of our ethical significance is misguided (Greif 2015, 328).² Suffice it to say that I do not share this view. In her introduction to this volume, in the face of nearly twenty essays all grappling with the question of the value of humanity, Sarah Buss speaks to the significance she finds in our attempts to think and rethink this value. To see the point of this activity, Buss recalls us to the way we are disposed to react to instances of unapologetic expressions of contempt for human beings. At the same time, she notes just how difficult it is to make sense of the value of humanity “*in terms we ourselves can accept.*” I share her belief in the importance and difficulty of deepening our understanding of where we stand on the subject, and that is the first point of inspiration for this essay. Let me now share two more.

In defending a kind of relational theory of the value of humanity, I aim to reclaim the notion of benefit from its strong associations with exchange or market value and to return it to its original sense. Here I note the etymology of “beneficial,” with *bene* meaning good or well, and with *facere* from *facere* meaning making or doing, so that the beneficial is the *well-doing*. This way of thinking about the good is taken for granted in classical philosophical works. There it is not a lowly form of value that stands in contrast to something high like the distinctively moral good. As I see it, devaluing well-doing is part of Kant’s legacy, and it is a legacy I wish to interrupt—this is my second point of inspiration.

They say that every book, or as here, essay, is a symptom—a symptom in the psychoanalytic sense; and that is certainly true of this work. In this project I give a prominent place to the relation we stand to bear to ourselves—that is, I give a prominent place to the self. The idea that our relation to ourselves could be of ethical significance struck me with the force of revelation when I first encountered it as a student of philosophy. As if by reflex, I had shared the assumption of many contemporary moral philosophers that the ethical has to do with *others* and what we owe to *them*. This is not the case in ancient ethics, and it is not the case in Kant, where we find the fine idea of duties to self. The revelation for me was that how we tend to our own lives, or in a Socratic idiom, how we care for our souls, may actually be at the heart of ethics and of our capacity to relate well and meaningfully with others. This is a live concern for me, and it is at the center of the present undertaking.

SECTION 1: THE GOOD

The topic of the value of human beings comes up in first-order discussions of how we should relate to others, and it is at stake in metaethical treatments of the normative and its ground.³ Certainly, to think well about the first kind of question we must take a stand on a host of foundational questions, and it is with these that I begin. It is a first premise of this essay that value or the good, terms I am using interchangeably, is the ground of practical reason. Actions and temporally extended activities properly find their point in view of what is interesting, attractive, pleasant, enriching, excellent (and so on), and these are specific dimensions of the good.⁴ I expand on this starting point in what follows, taking a stand on *good for* as the primary evaluative notion, and sharing my reasons for giving up on the notion of absolute value.

Discussion of these questions is necessarily programmatic in a piece of this length,⁵ but it prepares the ground for the treatment of the value of human beings in the remainder of the essay.

Rather than assert a basic conceptual division between the right and the good, or between the moral and the non-moral good in such a way that the two represent distinctly different sources of normative concern, I begin with a good-centered monism⁶ in which the good (and its contrary) is the ground of all practical concern.⁷ Here I draw inspiration from the Greeks. As it happens, Henry Sidgwick puts the point I would make here very well when he says:

“What mainly marks off ancient ethical controversy from modern is their use of a generic notion instead of a specific one in expressing the common moral judgments on actions. Virtue, or right action, was commonly regarded among the Greeks as only a species of the good; and so, on this view of what the basic moral input is, the first question that offered itself when they were trying to systematise conduct, was: What is the relation of this species of good to the rest of the genus? This was the question that the Greek thinkers argued about, from first to last.” (Sidgwick 1907, bk 1, chap. 9)

What Sidgwick is saying here is that when the ancients are thinking about the thing to do in the circumstances, the analogue of our notion of obligation or right action, they are thinking of it as an aspect of the good. As I would put the point, the key concepts in classical ethics are virtue and the beneficial, and the guiding question is how to understand the relationship between them. My thinking in this area is shaped by two great philosophers, Judith Jarvis Thomson (1997) and Philippa Foot (2001). Both make use of a schema for thinking about the relationship between

virtue and the beneficial that goes something like this. Virtues are ways of doing and being that are necessary because and insofar as some human good hangs on them.⁸ On this way of setting things up, virtuous actions and states of motivation are good because and insofar as they protect, facilitate, produce, or realize a good for human beings. Key among “the ways of being good” are *being a good k*—being a good action or being a good person—and *being good for someone*—for example, being good for human beings. Both concepts play important roles in our life and thought, and on this view, *good for* is prior or fundamental.⁹

According to the view that I endorse, the value of whatever is of value is ultimately a function of its actual or possible contribution to the good for someone or for their life. For the simple reason that *we* are the beings whose subject ethics is, ethics pays special attention to the good for human beings.¹⁰ As I read it, this is the program announced in the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle tells us that all individual and collective human activity is undertaken for the sake of living well, something we should have clearly in our sights so that we can know what truly to direct ourselves towards.¹¹ This is also the conception of the good that is at stake in countless Platonic dialogues. The good benefits and the bad harms—for Plato’s Socrates, these are conceptual truths.¹² I myself make the point, not as a claim about what good *means*, but as a claim about what good *is*. The good is essentially such as to change or alter something or someone in a positive way. The good is essentially *affecting*, not in the sense that it relates to states of feeling or emotion (though it may), but in the sense that it exerts an influence or has an effect. To my mind, this way of thinking about the good is borne out in a host of ordinary, evaluative explanations: of a nourishing meal, of a conversation with a friend, and of the vocation around which we structure a life.¹³ The examples bring out that there is more than one

way in which something can be good for us. As the point has long been made, some things are good for us by conducing to other things that are good for us, while others are good for us more directly or in their own right.¹⁴ If there is something to be learned from discussions of the distinctions in goodness, in my view it is that we can properly distinguish between instrumental, non-instrumental, and final value as species of the good for human beings.¹⁵ (This is a point I will come back to).

In contemporary discussions, the claim that good is good for tends to come up in a critical context.¹⁶ It is asserted against the idea—call it the idea of “non-relational value”—that some things are good whether or not they are or can be good for anyone.¹⁷ This idea of non-relational value shows itself differently in different traditions in ethics. In Kant the idea appears as absolute value, while in G. E. Moore it appears as the good simpliciter. Often, if the idea is trashed, it is trashed because it is thought mysterious, so that critique of value as a monadic property goes together with critique of metaphysical realism. I am not myself worried about spookiness, or mystery. And whatever concerns one has about Kant’s invocation of absolute value, it cannot be that it is a form of value that exists independently of practical agents. A relational theory of value dispenses with commitments that some people find extravagant, but as we will see, there is no denying that it collects others. What motivates my critique is not a concern with theoretical parsimony, but a supposition that value does not work the way Moore thinks it does, or the way Kant sees the value of the good will as working: as being what it is independently of what it does or can do (cf. 4:394).¹⁸ What I find difficult to understand is the idea of something’s being good independently of any propensity to affect, change, or alter the state of something in a positive way. That is because I see that propensity as the very essence of value.

In a clear sense, I am not offering a positive argument for a relational theory of value. Instead, I am taking the idea that value is relational—and again, I am using this phrase in the sense that good is good for—as a hypothesis. I have offered lines of thought that are intended to show that the hypothesis is well-taken (it is the classical conception of value that has lately found its way into contemporary discussions; it is motivated by a range of ordinary evaluative explanations), while recognizing that this does not constitute a full defense. My strategy is instead to see whether the hypothesis can cope with a hard case: what can it say about the value of human beings? If it can account for the value of human beings, then we have defended a relational conception of value against a potential objection, and in that way, we have provided further support for it as a starting point for investigation.¹⁹ But of course, it must ultimately be substantiated in other ways too.

What can we say to those who profess a failure to understand this way of thinking about value? For people certainly so profess. Indeed, some have told me they have no idea what I am talking about when I talk about the beneficial. It is unlikely that there is a single rejoinder. Accordingly, one must work on several fronts, responding to a range of questions:

(A) When something is said to be “good for someone,” is that the same as saying that someone is possessing something good (simpliciter), or that something good (simpliciter) is occurring in their lives? No. That way of construing the locution dates back to Moore, and it amounts to a rejection of the very idea of relational value in the relevant sense (Moore 1903, sect. 59). When something is said to be good for a person, it is not that the

thing that is good simpliciter has taken up residence in their life or mind, so that “for” signifies a relation of possession or location.

(B) *What then does the “for” in “good for” indicate?* As others have argued, the “for” signifies a *relation* of suitability or fit between something and someone. “Good for” picks out a genuinely dyadic form of value in the sense that value *consists* in this relation of fit or suitability.²⁰ As I put the emphasis, value is relational because it is instantiated in processes of positive change, alteration, or transformation.²¹ (I expand on this below.)

(C) *Is “good for” synonymous with instrumental value?* No. Something can be instrumentally or non-instrumentally good for people. For example, engaging with culture and the arts can be good for someone because it gives them something to talk about at a dinner party, or engaging can be good for them by being enriching, edifying, illuminating in its own right.

(D) *Does the relation being good for admit of analysis, or is it a primitive?* The relation can be elucidated, for example, I have said that it is essentially affecting, and I would add that it is an irreducibly evaluative relation.²² But apart from this, I am inclined to say that it is a primitive. We can say that what is good for human beings is advantageous, beneficial, fitting, salubrious, enriching, and suitable, and we can say that what is good for human beings promotes their flourishing, but these are ways of saying the same thing.

(E) *Is the relation being good for essentially attitude-dependent, or can it hold in an attitude-independent way?* While our attitudes can bear on the relation’s obtaining, so that whether someone would enjoy an activity is relevant to its standing to be good for them, as will become evident, I endorse a realist view according to which there are attitude-independent facts of the matter about the good for human beings.

(F) *In virtue of what do these facts obtain?* I take the view that they obtain in virtue of the character of the relata.

(G) *Can we give a compelling, philosophical account of what is good for human beings?*

Unlike Kant, I take the good for human beings to be a proper object of philosophical investigation, and I will give the outline of a valuing-based account below.

(H) *Should we see good for as a unified phenomenon, one that pertains to human beings, but also to other animals, plants, and artefacts?* I regard benefit as an evaluative term with richly descriptive implications that have to do with what contributes to and promotes a being's flourishing.²³ I am inclined to see it as having primary application to living beings (though I think we can speak of what is beneficial for artefacts in a secondary or extended sense), and I think we do well to situate the human good in the broader context of the good for living things generally.

(I) *Can a good for theorist give a compelling analysis of hard cases apart from human beings? How should such a theorist account for perfectionist values (works of art or cultural and scientific achievements)? How about right action or virtue? How should such a theorist account for the fact that it is proper for the vicious to be punished though it is bad for them?* I have lately written about the first two cases, answering, as I hope, in the affirmative.²⁴ I think we do well to probe the conception of punishment that is at stake in a doctrine of desert. I am rather dubious about Kant's claim that everyone, including the wrongdoers themselves, would agree that it is appropriate and morally good for someone to be thrashed for being a nuisance and provoking others (5:61). The ensuing discussion bears on this point.

What one says in response to these questions bears in deep ways on a host of foundational issues—about naturalism, about realism, about the nature of human beings, about whether happiness is a respectable object of study; and so on. My account of the value of humanity certainly has implications for these topics, and it brings me to the heart of many controversies in meta-ethics. Rather than engage directly in these controversies here, I want to turn to my positive account. In making a case for this account, I will implicitly be offering considerations in support of the meta-ethical commitments that are most congenial to it.

SECTION 2: FROM THE GOOD FOR HUMAN BEINGS TO THE VALUE OF HUMAN BEINGS

So far, I have given my reasons for taking seriously the hypothesis that good is good for, and for thinking that the good for human beings is a primary object of study for ethics. How do we get from a discussion of the good for human beings to that of the value of human beings? To formulate a related question, why would a relational theory of value of the kind proposed treat people as bearers of value at all? Here some stage-setting is in order. In particular, I need to recall a key line of argument from signature discussions of the value of humanity.

According to a prominent line of argument, one that is often put forward by Kantians or people who see themselves as marshalling lines of thought from Kant (henceforth, “the kantians”), what is good for human beings matters because we matter.²⁵ To put this point somewhat differently, what is good for us is positively significant only because we are bearers of value. The argument starts from a perfectly sound assumption about instrumental value—about what is *instrumentally*

good for something or someone. The assumption is that what conduces to something bad (or devoid of value) is not positively significant; it is not a form of instrumental value at all. That it would help the white nationalist cause is no reason at all to spread misinformation about the results of the election. Spreading misinformation is certainly *conducive* to white nationalism, but spreading misinformation is not instrumentally *valuable*, because white nationalism is not good—it is pernicious in the extreme. The point may be put by saying that if x is instrumentally good for y, and x is reason-giving, then y must be of value.²⁶

The Kantians propose to extend this point about dependence from instrumental to *non-instrumental* value. They contend that what is non-instrumentally good for people—engaging with cultural or intellectual pursuits is a common example—is of value and positively practically significant only if *we* are of value. In this way, a datum about the value of human beings is taken to fall out of the structure of evaluative explanation—of the explanation of the value of other valuable things. For proponents of this style of argument—David Velleman, Joseph Raz—the form of value that is in question when we are talking about human beings, the beings who lie at the end of a chain of dependence of goods, is non-relational. Indeed, they contend that the value of human beings must be non-relational on pain of infinite regress. If human beings were not valuable in a non-relational way, then none of the prior nodes in the chain of dependence of goods would be valuable. Just as the *instrumental* good for human beings would lack evaluative significance without the *non-instrumental* good for human beings, so the *non-instrumental* good for human beings would lack evaluative significance without the *value simpliciter* of human beings (without our being of value independently of being actually or possibly good for something).

In previous work (Theunissen 2018; 2020, chap. 3) I contest this latter claim: the claim that human beings must be valuable in a non-relational way for what is good for us to be of value. I develop the suggestion that our value may yet be relational—such that we are of value because we are or can be good for something or someone. Ultimately, I opt for a kind of reflexive explanation: we are of value because we are able to bear a relevant relation to ourselves, the relation of being good for ourselves. I conclude that a datum about our value *does* fall out of the structure of evaluative explanation—we must be of value for what is good for us to be significant. Against the Kantians, however, I contend that our value can be of the same sort as the value of the prior nodes. That is, I argue that it is perfectly possible for our value to be relational. And with the way apparently cleared, I go on to develop a relational view of the value of human beings.

As Kenny Walden has put it to me (2021), while I dispute the ultimate conclusion of the Kantians, I concede rather a lot to their way of setting things up. And I am now inclined to take a different, and less concessive, line. In short, I no longer think that a datum about our value falls out of the structure of evaluative explanation. Here I recall the distinctions I drew earlier between instrumental, non-instrumental, and final value. Instrumental value depends for its evaluative significance on non-instrumental value—on things that are good for us in their own right or for their own sake. Non-instrumental value is sometimes thought to depend for its significance on final value understood as the most complete good in the sense that other things are pursued for its sake though it is not pursued for the sake of anything (in the standard case, a well-lived life). Whether non-instrumental value depends on final value in this sense is somewhat controversial,

but it is a familiar Aristotelian claim. What seems mistaken to me now is that non-instrumental value, or final value, depends for its evaluative significance on the value of the person for whom it is non-instrumentally or finally good.

Let me illustrate this point with non-instrumental value. To recall, when something is non-instrumentally good for someone, it is directly good for someone, or good for someone in its own right. To take the above example, engaging with culture and the arts is good for us independently of whether it makes us interesting conversationalists—though that may be a welcome ramification. It is good for us in its own right in the sense that it necessarily involves the use of our imaginative, emotional, and intellectual powers, powers the exercise of which is a constituent of our good. The value *is* the alteration or transformation in the person that is marked when we say she is enriched, nourished, enlivened, moved, uplifted, consoled (etc.) by the work. The relevant form of value is a *relation*, in a simple case, a dyad, between an object, a state, or an activity, and a person. Rather than being derived from something that is independently valuable, the value of what is non-instrumentally good for someone is explained by the valuable *relation* itself. To return to the example, engaging with works of art can be non-instrumentally good for us—it can be by itself enriching for us—and that (suitably filled out) is a complete explanation of its value. At least, we do not need to invoke our being of value to explain the value of the work or the value of engaging with it. The value *is* the enlargement of imagination, consciousness, and so on, that is a function of appropriate engagement.²⁷ While there is a clear sense in which what is instrumentally valuable depends on something independently good, there is no comparable structure of dependence in the non-instrumental case.²⁸ As I see it, the mistake

made by the kantians is to assume that different evaluative concepts have analogous structures of dependence.

One might respond to this argument by reasserting the comparison in something like the following way. Just as what conduces to something that does no good is not instrumentally valuable, so what is directly beneficial for someone may not be good. Here a distinction between the non-moral and moral good looks ready to assert itself.²⁹ It may be proffered that what enriches the sinner may be good for them but morally bad (because undeserved). Or it may be said that while taking pleasure in another's suffering may be good for the one who takes it, so taking pleasure is not ultimately practically significant because it is not morally good.

I submit that what drives the thought here is a degraded conception of the beneficial—the sort of conception that is at stake in a view according to which what is good for someone is to carry out their plans (of which taking pleasure in another's enslavement could be an example).³⁰ Foot claims that it strains ordinary English to say that something like that *benefits* a person, and she evidently hears the etymology of well-doing or well-making in talk of the beneficial (2001, 94). Regardless of whether we share the linguistic intuition, I find it quite surprising to think that, absent some special explanation, enjoying seeing another oppressed is good for the one who enjoys it. But the supposition that ill-will and its kin tend to be bad for human beings, and contrariwise, that compassion and the like tend to be good for us, is of course a familiar object of moral skepticism, and it is denied by people who hold certain attitude-constitutive accounts of the beneficial.³¹ Thus it emerges that my argument depends on a substantive conception of the good for human beings, one that is not ethically neutral. I will say something to motivate an

ethical conception of the beneficial in the next Section. As I will express it, living well for human beings involves participation in satisfying interpersonal relationships, engagement in meaningful work, enjoyment of significant forms of culture (etc.), activities that all presuppose the agent appreciating and caring about what she does in the right way. Here I must simply acknowledge that this is a juncture at which the proposal assumes theoretical burdens of its own. I reject a regress argument for non-relational value. More than this, I contend that a conclusion about our status as valuable does *not* fall out of the structure of evaluative explanation. But in dispensing with these commitments, I am taking on a view of the good for human beings that is *ethically* ambitious.

I have argued that we do not need to be bearers of value for other things to be of value. If something is non-instrumentally good for us, it does not follow that we are of value. And yet, I *do* think that human beings are bearers of value. Here is how I now think we can account for this fact. When philosophers talk about the property of being good or valuable, they are talking about a property possession of which makes something reason-giving. And what property is that?³² If one takes the view that the good is the beneficial, then good is a relational property. It is the property of being such as to conduce, indirectly, or directly, to human life and its flourishing—or more generally, to the good of all forms of life. Being capably or actually beneficial is what makes something practically significant. And now my point is that human beings bear this relation to other things and to themselves. That is, we instantiate the property of being valuable because we are such that we are or can be beneficial for something or someone. As I will now explain, human beings instantiate the property in an interesting and special way. We are not just

patients—beings for whom things are good—we are also agents, or as I will put the emphasis, *valuers*: beings whose valuing is crucial for our own good.³³

SECTION 3: ON VALUING AND LIVING WELL FOR HUMAN BEINGS

I have so far given my grounds for developing the view that human beings are of value because we are or can be good for something. If the reader is generous enough to grant my starting point, she will now naturally wonder who or what we are supposed to be good for. A reasonable suggestion is that we are or can be good for *one another*.³⁴ We are instrumentally good for others when we enable, support, or facilitate things that are directly good for them, and we are non-instrumentally good for others when we are part of their good by forming suitable relationships with them as family, neighbors, friends, colleagues, and so on. The proposal has much to recommend it in light of the deeply interdependent nature of the good for human beings—and indeed all forms of life—a point about which there seems to me terrible confusion in our political world. And yet, I can't help hearing a Kantian objection to the effect that a proposal of this kind would make the value of a person dependent on their role, or potential role, in *another's* life in ways that are at odds with how human beings should be treated: as ends in ourselves. I take the point of the Kantian injunction to be that we should recognize value in others independently of their role in our or another's life.³⁵ As I will adapt it, we should recognize and relate to people always as centers of a life to which they bear a special relation. These are my grounds for developing the suggestion, anticipated above, that the value of human beings is more basically explained in terms of the relation we stand to bear to *ourselves*, a relation of being good for ourselves. As “center of a life” implies, if the unusual phrase “good for ourselves” is to have a

sense, it should be taken to mean good for our *lives*. And this brings me to the question of what is involved in living well for human beings.

When Aristotle announced the good human life as the orienting subject for ethics, he began with considerations about what people in fact seek.³⁶ John Stuart Mill took a related approach, even as his formulations got him into trouble. To express a core Aristotelian idea in a contemporary idiom, people *value* things with a view to living well. We human beings value things in the sense that we have ends, things we mean to bring about or realize by way of our actions. Some of these ends are more architectonic than others in the sense that they play a more unifying or structuring role in our lives. If we have the study of philosophy as a more final end, then it shapes our actions here and now, for example, our decision to attend a conference on a Sunday morning rather than to lounge in bed. It was Aristotle's view that, while there are constraints on the kinds of end that will promote or constitute living well for us, and constraints on the character of our engagement with them (more on this below), human beings are not wrong to value things with a view to living well. It is by engaging appropriately with objects and activities of value—meaningful relationships, forms of work, intellectual and cultural pursuits—that we live well as human beings. The deeper explanation is that it is through valuing that human beings put characteristic agential, cognitive, and emotional powers to work, where putting powers to work in the right way is the schema for the good of whatever can do well or do badly. This is broadly the approach to the good for human beings that I find plausible. Human beings live well by valuing in characteristic ways, and I like the Aristotelian formulation in terms of final ends because it captures the sense in which some of what we value is more defining for us insofar as it plays a structuring role in our activities over time.

Putting this together with what has been said, I am proposing that the value of human beings turns on valuing, for valuing constitutes living well and in that way being “good for ourselves.”³⁷ That the value of human beings in one way or another lies in valuing, or better, in a capacity to value, is an oft-made proposal. While I reject the suggestion that it is Kant’s own approach, it is the approach to the value of humanity taken by the kantians of Section 2, and many others besides. These proposals differ according to their accounts of what it is to value something, and they differ according to their proffered explanations for why the capacity to value grounds our value. For some, valuing makes us inventors of value. For others, valuing allows us to pay homage to things that are good in themselves. For still others, being a valuer means that we meet the criteria for bearing the distinctive value that persons are traditionally thought to have. I accept the common supposition that people are of value because we have the capacity to value.³⁸ But I offer a distinctive explanation for why valuing makes a person valuable. The explanation is that the capacity to value is of value because its exercise is valuable, where its exercise is valuable because it constitutes a person’s flourishing, and a person’s flourishing is of value because it is good for the person whose flourishing it is.

So much for my proposal. Earlier I said that I am committed to an ethical conception of the good for human beings, and I need to offer some support for that claim now. I need to offer some support for that claim now because without an ethically significant account of the good for human beings, I will be stuck with a view according to which the value of human beings could turn on a capacity to value in harmful ways (for this will be said to satisfy the relevant explanans). That ethical virtue is a dimension of living well for human beings is of course a

familiar claim of ancient ethics, or at least, a familiar locus of argument and counterargument in which the questions are difficult in part because they are both conceptual and empirical. I have thrown in my lot with a view according to which what is good for human beings is to engage in activities that are characteristic of the kind of being we are. This style of proposal is familiarly put to work to generate an ethical conception of the good for human beings as follows.³⁹

Characteristic activities of a living being are constitutive of its good, or at least a key determinant thereof. If rational activity is characteristic of human beings, and if a dimension of rationality is what we antecedently recognize as responsiveness to the dictates of ethical virtue, then it follows that being just, temperate, beneficent, courageous and wise is good for human beings. Activity in conformity with the virtues is good for human beings.

This is a venerable form of argument, and it is also a fraught one; it has the air of convenient, or hopeful, stipulation. When a version is given early on in Plato's *Republic*, there is express concern that Socrates has done no more than play with words. Short of providing a full account of our moral psychology, what is needed to begin to respond to this concern is to bear out or substantiate the argument in light of what we know of ourselves and one another. That is, we need to be shown how forms of ethical behavior and motivation facilitate or constitute what we can pre-theoretically recognize as good for human beings. The dimension of virtue that is often asked about in this context is justice, a virtue that concerns fair dealings with others. When Socrates is given the task of showing that justice is advantageous to the one who is just, he is asked to show that what is advantageous is really *being*, as opposed to merely *seeming*, just. Accordingly, Socrates is asked to show how the *inner* dimensions of justice, the underlying attitudes and motivations of a just person, could be for their good; the task is to show that

fairness of *mind* is good for the one who is so. Of course, Plato sought to answer that question by giving a full theory of the human soul. But he also sought to bear out that theory by offering portraits of people whose lack of justice, whose lack of fairness of *mind*, was in one way or another crippling for them. This is the work of substantiation, and it is the kind of work that is helpful here.⁴⁰

So, let me offer an example. Think of the friend or family member who habitually gets in touch when they need something and not otherwise. Perhaps they lack support in their life and things are hard. They make routine inquiries about one's health and happiness, but one knows from the *way* they ask, or from experience over time, that the interest is not fully meant. They know enough about the outward form of relationships to make a show of concern, but they do so, narrowly, with a view to gain. It is natural to wish that this sort of person would *really* take an interest. Why is that? Certainly, being genuinely interested in others would make them better as people. No doubt, being better in this way would make our relationship with them better *for us*. But my sense is that, particularly when we care about the person in question, we wish they would really take an interest because it would be better *for them*. To be without the motivations and affections that are constitutive of genuine concern for others is to be deprived of the pleasure of intimacy or friendship itself, something we can easily recognize as good for human beings. In that case, having the underlying attitudes and feelings of the just person is good for the one who is so because it is part of what constitutes a good whose status as beneficial can be understood in pre-philosophical ways.

In the spirit of using something *better known to us* to clarify something that is less well understood, I have offered a homely example that is meant to help us to see how having certain sorts of affective and motivational orientations towards others is good for the person who is oriented in this way. Justice is often taken to be a hard case, but I have clearly said nothing about how the point generalizes to other dimensions of virtue. Evidently, I have given no more than the outline of a response to the worry that bad or misguided valuation *eo ipso* grounds our value because it satisfies the explanation offered here for why valuing makes us valuable in terms of a well-lived human life. Here I will simply add that people who in fact value badly do not thereby relinquish the capacity to value in the right sorts of ways, so they are not being excluded from the purview of my account.⁴¹

SECTION 4: THE REASONS WE HAVE

I have offered an account of the ground of the value of human beings. According to the account, human beings are of value in virtue of a capacity to value where that is understood in terms of having final ends. This capacity makes us valuable because its exercise makes us good for ourselves in the sense that it makes us able to live well, where a well-lived life is of value (minimally) because it is good for the person whose life it is. The explanation of our value is, as I put it earlier, in a way reflexive: human beings are of value because we bear the relation, being good for, to *ourselves*. I have just offered some reason to think that responsiveness to ethical virtue is a dimension of the good for human beings. In what remains of this essay, allow me to bear out the implications of my account for what is *owed* to human beings—for the forms of ethical behavior to which our value gives rise.

First, I must respond to a basic challenge to the account's standing to generate forms of ethical behavior at all. It is a Moorean complaint about relational value that, to the extent it has a distinctive relational character, it has a limited normative significance.⁴² If something is good for one person then it is clear enough how it is reason giving for them, but not clear how it is reason giving for others. The problem arises for me in a special way. If I am proposing that a person is of value because she is good for herself in the sense that I have made out, then how can others have reasons in regard to her? An account of the value of human beings was supposed to ground core forms of ethical behavior owed to one another. Precisely by dint of its relationality, the account looks poised to fail. I appear to be stuck, as David Sussman put it to me, with rational egoism, or as I have put it elsewhere, a kind of solipsism.⁴³

In short, my solution to this problem lies in the realist approach to the good for human beings. According to the approach, what is good for human beings is to devote ourselves to meaningful work, relationships, cultural and intellectual activity, in characteristic ways. This is good for us because it makes use of capacities or powers it is good for human beings to have and exercise. To show how this helps with the problem of the generality of the reasons to which we give rise, I need to recall a distinction between impersonal and personal forms of relational value.

In Thomas Nagel's influential discussion (1989, chaps. VIII and IX), some of the things that are good for us are evaluatively and practically significant in a general way. For Nagel, pleasure and pain are like this. When we think about pleasure and pain, our understanding of their value and disvalue properly detaches in thought from the particular perspective of the person whose pains

and pleasures they are. For Nagel that means that pleasure and pain license reasons of a general form—reasons that do not include essential reference to the person whose pains or pleasures are in question. Anyone has reason to want a person’s pain to stop, or their pleasure to continue. He extends these impersonal values for human beings from simple pleasure and pain to the basic resources of life, and to my mind it is here that his point becomes more obviously compelling. I have reason to want you to have shelter, and enough to eat and drink, no matter who you are and no matter what relation you bear to me. I have reason to want you to have access to opportunities and, he adds, to freedom. That these are good for you does not require me to enter into your peculiar subjectivity. They are *human* goods and in that way such that they have general practical import.

Of course, Sussman’s critique will apply to Nagel’s observations about pains, pleasures, and the basic resources of life. Rather than defend Nagel’s position, I simply want to emphasize what his argument implies about my own account of the value of humanity.⁴⁴ I am accepting Nagel’s basic point that if we can properly appreciate something as a general form of the human good, then it is practically relevant to all of us. Indeed, I propose to extend this point. In doing so, I depart from an influential aspect of his account. I have so far spoken of Nagel’s treatment of impersonal values for human beings, values that have general practical significance in the sense that they are reason-giving for all human beings (or all human agents). But he thinks that not all relational goods are in this way impersonal. Some relational goods have practical relevance only for the agent for whom they are good. His much discussed example of a personal good is someone’s end of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro (1989, 167). This is a form of value that does not detach relevantly speaking from the evaluative perspective of the person who has that end, and it

is in that sense merely *personal*. In my view this is a mistaken characterization. Climbing mountains may not be something we ourselves do—it may not be one of our final ends. But we can surely recognize it as a form of the human good. Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro is an activity that involves the skillful navigation of difficult terrain. It is an activity people undertake in communities, or on their own, so that it involves relations of trust with others, or feats of self-reliance. It requires knowledge of a particular environment, its climate, animals, and species of plant. It holds opportunities for engaging with another culture, language and so on. It is the kind of thing one needs to train for over time. In these and other ways, it is a very good candidate for a suitable final end. If the pursuit of final ends is the primary way human beings can affect the quality of their lives, its value for an agent perfectly well detaches from their peculiar perspective. A person's end of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro should be counted as an impersonal form of relational value, and it should be counted as something that generates reasons for others.⁴⁵

Though I disagree with Nagel's treatment of the example of climbing Mt Kilimanjaro, the point I am making turns, as it does in his original discussion, on questions of impersonality or objectivity. To repeat, if we can properly appreciate something as a general form of the human good, then it is practically relevant to all of us. I am claiming that the goods that bear on our status as valuable are like this. That is, I am claiming that the final ends that ground our value are intelligible as impersonal goods.

If Nagel's basic point is right, a relational account of the kind given here has normative credentials. What forms of ethical response are licensed by the account? According to the good-

centered monism of the kind developed here, the value of what is of value shows us the reasons we have. I join with others in thinking that our basic reason in response to whatever is of value is to protect it so that it can serve as the valuable thing it is.⁴⁶ I have taken the view that the value of people, our function if you like, is to live flourishing lives. So, I am proposing that we have reason to protect other people's capacity to value, and therewith, to live well. More than this, since doing its work as the valuable thing it is requires not just non-maleficence but, more positively, support or furtherance, I am proposing that we have reason to support others in their exercise of this capacity. Obviously, we cannot support the ends of all people. I share Kant's view that we fulfill our standing responsibility to others by coming up with a coherent plan of action. Perhaps we choose a vocation where we are activists, or we are a head of a household who provides for children and grandparents. There are many possibilities. In these capacities we have reason to help others find out what makes sense for them to value with a view to their life as a whole, and to support them in valuing those things. Here we do not seek to make judgments about which final ends are better (simpliciter) than others. Instead, we aim to help people judge for themselves what is better for them, and to support them in pursuing those things.⁴⁷

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¹ In this essay, I draw from but go beyond lines of argument developed in *The Value of Humanity* (Theunissen, 2020). Richard Kraut, David Sussman, Kenneth Walden, Andrea Sangiovanni, and Kevin Powell have responded to *The Value of Humanity* with thought provoking questions that inform my treatment here. I am grateful to Sarah Buss for exceedingly constructive and generous feedback on an earlier draft, and to Robert Audi for the same. I am also grateful for spirited and helpful conversation about relational value with Tom Hurka and David Hunter at the Reason, Action, and Mind Speaker Series (virtual) at Ryerson University, and to audience members at the Central APA in Chicago, especially Karl Schafer.

² I discuss Greif's remarks in Theunissen 2020, 133.

³ Making the value of humanity a topic for metaethics is one of Christine Korsgaard's key innovations and legacies in ethics.

⁴ Joseph Raz is a prominent contemporary defender of this style of approach, and my thinking owes much to his work. My formulation deliberately recalls Raz 1999a, 30.

⁵ I explore them at greater length in other forums. See Theunissen 2018; 2020; forthcoming; n.d.

⁶ I take the helpfully descriptive phrase "good-centered monism" from Kraut 2020, 7. In this and the following section, I respond to questions Richard raised for my approach in his contribution to an author meets critics session on *The Value of Humanity* at the Central APA in February 2021. If I hear him right, many are likely to be questions he has at some point asked of himself. It will be apparent that some of the ideas advanced here share much with Kraut 2007; 2011.

⁷ One of H. A. Prichard's objectives in his classic "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" was to defend the view that concepts of obligation or right action, moral goodness, and virtue, each plays important and irreducible roles in our life and thought. According to Prichard,

attempts to explain right action in terms of the good strain our intuitions. For when we ask ourselves why we feel we ought to pay our debts or tell the truth, our thought is not that by doing so we would be producing something good (Prichard 1912, 25). John Rawls is part of this legacy in insisting on a basic division between the right and the good, and of course Rawls's treatment is roundly influential (Rawls 1999, 21). Rawls is inheriting less from Prichard than from Kant whose discussion of two senses of good, the moral and the non-moral, in the second *Critique* (5:58-5:63) is naturally paired with Rawls on the right and the good (Rawls 1999, chap. 1, sect. 5 & 6). In rejecting evaluative explanations of right action, Prichard and Rawls set themselves against consequentialism, and for understandable reasons, it is quite common to push against good centered or teleological approaches in ethics by attacking this prominent, modern representative. Scanlon (1998, chap. 1) is a notable spokesman here. As will become clear, I look to non-consequentialist teleological traditions in ethics.

⁸ Foot credits Elizabeth Anscombe with the central idea, and in Anscombe's example, keeping our promises is a virtue because human beings need to bind one another by word and not force in the cooperative activities that are given to us as dependent, social beings (Anscombe 1969). In Foot's example, kindness and compassion are virtues because every one of us needs help in facing the losses and difficulties that are inevitable for us (Foot 2001, chap 7).

⁹ The expression "ways of being good" is Thomson's, and it recalls a line from Aristotle to the effect that the good is said in many ways (1096a24). In examples that bear her signature, Thomson offers being good for use in making cheesecake, being good as Hamlet, being good to look at, and being good with children (Thomson 1997, 276). One has the impression that she enjoys playing up the range, and to that extent she is naturally read in conversation with Von Wright 1963. But as Thomson recognizes, and Aristotle with her, we do not here have to do with

mere “happenstance clutter” (289), and I share her view that *good for* is in the end basic. I explore and defend this position in Theunissen forthcoming.

¹⁰ Compare Raz on humanism in 1986, 194.

¹¹ This is a central point of emphasis in the reading offered by Vogt 2017, chap. 5, sect. 2.

¹² See, for example, *Republic* 379b; *Apology* 41c; *Meno* 77-78b; *Euthydemus* 280b-282; *Protagoras* 333d-334a.

¹³ Richard Kraut has suggested to me that the best strategy that is available to a good for theorist is one that appeals, not to questions of explanation and metaphysics, but to ethics. His point is that the way of being good to which we should assign the largest role in our practical reasoning is that in which something is non-instrumentally beneficial. I do not myself draw a distinction between ethics and metaphysics of the kind Richard recommends. That is because I think we should be reasoning practically in accordance with things as they are.

¹⁴ Plato introduces related distinctions in Bk II of the *Republic* at 357; and Aristotle in Bk. 7 of *Nicomachean Ethics* at 1097a.

¹⁵ Discussion of these distinctions begins with Korsgaard 1983.

¹⁶ This is the case in Kraut 2011, and Korsgaard 2013.

¹⁷ “Relational” and “non-relational” are terms of art and I use them in a proprietary sense, the sense that is at stake in an important early discussion by Railton 1986.

¹⁸ References are to the volume and page number of the Preussische Akademie edition.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Felix Koch for discussion of the status of my argument.

²⁰ As Connie Rosati (2008, 329) has made the point, “The relational complex, *X is good for P*, does not include the monadic property *good* at all. Instead, it includes the relational property *is good for P*: it has X and P as relata and *is good for* as a dyadic relation. So the logical form of X

is good for P is not: (*X is good*) for P, but rather, xGp (using ‘G’ to express the relation *is good for*). See also Kraut 2007, 87; Raz 2004, 273-274

²¹ As Hurka (2021, 810) has observed, the claim that value is relational may mean one of two things. It may mean that the ground of the proposed value is relational, i.e. that the properties that make for the value are relational properties, or it may mean that good for value itself, *qua* value, is relational, i.e. that the value the ground makes for involves a relation. He is right that relational value theorists are not always clear about this difference (though cf. Theunissen 2020, 28-33). In making the proposal that value is essentially affecting, I am claiming that good for value itself, *qua* value, is relational.

²² Hurka is right to see that the relation is irreducibly evaluative for the relational value theorist. However, Hurka takes this to preclude its being understood naturalistically (2021, 809). In correspondence, David Hunter told me that he is enough of an Anscombean to be suspicious of the proposed distinction between the natural and the evaluative. I could not have said it better. Though I can’t discuss it here, this point bears on Hurka’s treatment of the value of health (eg. at 807). Separately, that the relation is irreducibly evaluative means that “good for” as it is used by relational theorists is something of a technical term. Sundry uses (eg. “guns are good for killing”) are not targets of the analysis. Hurka discusses related questions at 805-809.

²³ Here I follow Kraut 2007, 131.

²⁴ See Theunissen 2021; n.d.

²⁵ The argument is defended by Raz 1999b, 273-302; 2001, 145-158; Velleman 1999; 2008. A distinct version of the argument is given by Korsgaard 1983, 177-18; 1986, 190-197. I do not discuss Korsgaard’s version of the argument here, but see Theunissen 2020, 139-142. “Kantians” is something of a misnomer for proponents of the argument because it is not an argument that

Kant himself makes (and I will register this by writing “kantian” with a small k). In saying this, I broadly follow Timmermann 2006.

²⁶ See Raz 2001, 145-6; Conee 1982. The point is implicit in Velleman 2008, 192. I note that Kant’s own treatment of instrumental value is somewhat different. For Kant, an outcome does not need to be good for it to be true that what conduces to it is instrumentally valuable, just as an end does not need to be valuable for it to be the case that we are rationally enjoined to take the relevant means. According to Kant, there are two distinctly different forms of value (the moral and the non-moral), just as there are two distinctly different kinds of rational imperative (the moral and the instrumental). Where Kant’s treatment aligns with that of the kantians is in supposing that the *normativity* of what is instrumentally good for someone is constrained by its moral permissibility or impermissibility. As we might rephrase Kant’s position, where someone has an immoral end, taking measures to facilitate it, while “good for” them, will not give decisive reasons for action because the normativity of morality trumps that of the non-moral good. For Kant’s treatment of the non-moral good, cf. 5:58-5:63 and 4:414. For Kant’s treatment of the instrumental should, cf. 4:414-4:417. As I indicate below, and argue more fully in Theunissen forthcoming, I think Kant (and Rawls following him) works with an inadequate or degraded conception of “good for.”

²⁷ That engaging with works of art can be non-instrumentally good for us is not controversial. That its standing to be non-instrumentally good for us is a *complete explanation* (suitably filled out) of its value, is considerably more so. Some people take the view that a work of art must be good simpliciter for it to be good for us, and this claim is sometimes generalized to whatever is non-instrumentally good for us. The thought is that whatever is good for us is so because it is good. This raises a nice challenge for a relational theory of value (it is one I take up in

Theunissen, n.d.), but it is not a challenge that concerns us here. The present argument concerns the question of whether we need to posit the value of human beings to make sense of the value of engaging with art (or whatever is taken to be non-instrumentally good for us).

²⁸ As I noted earlier, there is a view according to which when we say that something is “non-instrumentally good for someone,” we mean that there is a relation of possession to something that is good (simpliciter). So understood, when something is non-instrumentally good for someone, there is a form of dependence on something that is (in that sense) independently good. But that is to give up on the notion of non-instrumental value that is at stake for relational value theorists, and for the kantians. The kantians are not denying, as the Mooreans are apt to deny, that relational value of the relevant kind makes sense, or that it is genuinely different from the non-relational good.

²⁹ Cf. fn. 26.

³⁰ The conception of benefit and the example are due to Rawls 1999, 27-28. For discussion, see Kraut 2007, 21-24. Rawls’s account is close to Kant’s (and avowedly drawn from him). Cf. 5:58-5:63

³¹ Thomson’s (1997, 294-298) is another example.

³² My formulation deliberately recalls that of Thomson 2008, 14-17. Interestingly, Thomson here rejects the answer to this question that is proposed here on grounds that *being good for* is a trivial property that everything has. To my mind, her view is encouraged by the examples she uses, examples such as being good for use in making cheesecake. In Theunissen 2020, 6-8, I contend that the examples, amusing as they are, are misleading.

³³ I have urged that we do not need to posit our value to explain the value of what is noninstrumentally good for us. What are the implications of this position for the good for other

forms of life? I am prepared to accept that the noninstrumental good for any living being is practically relevant for us. Questions about how the practical relevance of the good for human beings compares with that of other creatures requires fuller treatment than I can give it here. In arguing that relational value theorists face difficulties in making well-being comparisons, Hurka (2021, 820) urges, “If one act will promote A’s well-being while another will promote B’s, we can only determine which act is right by determining which outcome is in some sense better. But this can’t be a relativized sense of ‘better.’” In making this argument, Hurka adduces a contentious (consequentialist) premise. I may appropriately prioritize A’s well-being because A is my sister, and I need be under no illusion that her flourishing objectively matters more than that of a stranger. I would extend the point to interspecies comparisons. I do not find it obvious that human well-being objectively matters more than the well-being of other animals. (Here I am in agreement with Korsgaard 2018, 5). Though I cannot argue for it here, I think we do well to probe the presuppositions of lifeboat scenarios that appear to force this conclusion. We should also remember that anyone who cares for companion animals or devotes their life to protecting the habit of a given species is acting in a perfectly reasonable way, though the same resources could go to human beings in need. As Karl Schafer suggested to me, it is also open to me to allow that the character of the reasons to which human beings give rise is affected by the fact that we, as valuers, can contribute to our flourishing in the distinctive way I go on to describe. In his contribution to this volume (sec. 4), Andrea Sangiovanni develops the thought that since human beings, and other sentient beings, have a perspective on their own flourishing, a perspective from which their own flourishing matters to them, then unlike plants which lack such a perspective, their flourishing matters in its own right and for its own sake. I think he is right to emphasize the fact that perspective makes a normative difference, and I share his view that we should not mark

this difference in terms of the possession of distinct kinds of value. I have learned much from his insightful discussion.

³⁴ A proposal that I cannot here consider is that we are good for other valuable things. This proposal is thoughtfully developed by Buss 2012, and I offer a response in Theunissen 2018, 354-356.

³⁵ Here I follow Raz 1999b, 294.

³⁶ Vogt (2017, chap. 2) develops this point at length, describing Aristotle as taking an agential perspective on the good.

³⁷ Or rather, the activity of valuing is what agents contribute to their own flourishing, where this leaves open that circumstances may affect it in a way that does not bear on their worth.

³⁸ Drawing on the work of Samuel Scheffler (2010), I elsewhere develop an account of what it is to value. According to the account, to value is to have a final end, where having a final end involves believing that one's end is worthwhile; it involves treating the end as practically significant in relevant contexts; it involves being guided by the end in long-range deliberation; and being vulnerable to a range of emotions regarding the success or failure of one's end (Theunissen 2020, chap. 4). The account helps to make the proposal developed here more determinate because it takes a stand on the more particular attitudes and dispositions that ground our value.

³⁹ Here I appeal to the function argument of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7.

⁴⁰ This is the line explicitly taken by Kraut 2018, 6-11; and by Foot 2001, chap 7. I take up these questions at greater length in Theunissen forthcoming.

⁴¹ I discuss questions about the scope of my account in Theunissen 2020, chap. 1.

⁴² The objection is forcefully developed by Regan 2004.

⁴³ I am grateful to David for raising thoughtful questions of my account at the above-mentioned author meets critics session at the Central APA, 2021. I discuss these questions about normativity in Theunissen 2020, chap 5.

⁴⁴ I would need to say more to defend Nagel's claim that we have reasons in regard to what is impersonally good for human beings. Andrea Sangiovanni (2022, chap 10, note 44) makes a related point. I am grateful to Andrea and to Sarah Buss for helpful discussion.

⁴⁵ I have drawn several sentences in this paragraph from Theunissen 2020, 123.

⁴⁶ In Raz's (2001, 158 *passim*) terminology, these are reasons of respect.

⁴⁷ Here I am closely following Theunissen 2020, 129-130.