

Love and Equal Value

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Abstract

This essay offers a way to avoid a clash between reasons of love and reasons of ethics that stems from a difference in the conception of the moral value of people. In moralities of lovers, the loved ones are due to be accorded a value superior to that of other people, whereas in ethics there is an inescapable presumption that people have a value that is equal among them. The usual way to avoid this clash has been either to make room in the ethical arsenal for reasons relating to particular agents, agent-relative reasons, or to acknowledge that love-grounded reasons legitimately compete with ethical reasons and that we need a method of negotiating them. Both escapes have serious problems. The essay proposes a third way. The first step is to reshape the notion of 'love,' in a direction where important characteristics of our common understanding are kept, notably the loved ones' uniqueness and incomparability, while the characteristic that is problematic in the present context would be eliminated, namely the you-and-me character of love that gives rise to reasons that are wholly personal and partial. The second step is to show how such a reformed notion of love coheres with the assumption of equal value. And the third step is, through this connection, to change our understanding of love as reason-giving, from generating reason directly to generating reason indirectly. This involves a shift of focus from reason to meta-reason, viz. that which makes our system of, or competence for, normative reasons reasonable. The advantage of the proposed solution would not only be that clash between reasons of love and reasons of ethics is avoided, but also that ethical reasons are seen as underpinned by love, which moreover offers the best ultimate explanation of them.

A Major Problem with Love

A major problem with love as reason-giving has to do with universalizability. Love, generally understood, has an inescapable reference to a relation between unique individuals.¹ This relation is such that the reasons grounded by it do not imply that others should share in them, and do not imply that the lovers should have the same

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reasons with regard to other persons even though relevantly like the loved ones in all their universal properties. The uniqueness of the loving relation means that the features of the situation may recur without you being logically required to make the same judgment about it in a relevantly similar situation. Hence, the reasons that are grounded in loving relations do not meet the requirement of universalizability. Reasons that articulate ethical concerns, on the other hand, are generally assumed to have an inherent universality, due to the non-personal character of the considerations involved. Such reasons are articulated with universal predicates (except for logical ones), that is, predicates that do not refer to any particular entities. They typically also involve principles, having all human beings, all persons or the like, as their scope. Therefore, natural as it seems that love gives us reasons for action, such reasons appear *prima facie* non-ethical.

What is most troubling with a clash between reasons of love and reasons of ethics is that it stems from a difference in the conception of the moral status, worth, or value (hereafter, only ‘value’) of people. This is problematic because it takes the clash from being a matter of practical conflict to be a matter of conflict in essence. In moralities of lovers, the loved ones are due to be accorded a value superior to that of other people, whereas in ethics there is an inescapable presumption that people have a value that is equal among them. That is the case even when our ethical principles, or the outcome of their application, are non-egalitarian in certain respects.

The assumption of equal value in ethics is evident already by the fact that ethical reasons apply equally to all individuals in an open-ended class. At the beginning of the utilitarian and consequentialist traditions one finds Jeremy Bentham’s dictum “each to count for one and no one for more than one”, later the principle of “equal consideration of interests.” On Kantian ground, it is a foundational thought that persons have an absolute, incomparable dignity, making them equal “ends in themselves.” In rights-theory, there is the idea of certain rights belonging to all human beings equally. And in virtue theory, especially in its modern forms, a central virtue is justice, or impartiality, in our treatment of people, implying not giving lovers, family, friends etc. special treatment in contexts in which that is not universally appropriate.²

In particularistic ethics, the assumption of universality in reasons is rejected in so far as this involves normative principles. A crucial aspect of it is maintained, however, through two closely connected assumptions. The first is that moral predicates deal with something objective, viz. moral properties in a realist sense. The second is that moral reasons pertain to objective moral facts and that objective truth thus belongs to them.³ That is to say, moral truth does not depend upon what any particular individual thinks or wants the case to be. Underlying these assumptions one may discern certain recognition of the equal value of people. Jonathan Dancy, for one, even considers it to be “*per impossibile*, no doubt” that some people are “more important (more morally considerable) than others.”⁴

The way to avoid a clash has been either to make room in the ethical arsenal for reasons relating to particular agents, agent-relative reasons, or to acknowledge that love-grounded reasons legitimately compete with ethical reasons and that we need a method of negotiating between them.⁵ Both means have serious problems that I cannot go into here. Instead, I propose a third, less problematic but promisingly fruitful way. I take it to have three steps. The first is to *reshape* the very notion of ‘love,’ in a direction where important characteristics of our common understanding are kept, notably the loved ones’ uniqueness and incomparability, while the characteristic that is problematic in the present context would be eliminated, namely the you-and-me character of love that gives rise to reasons that are wholly personal and partial. The second step is to show how such a reformed notion of love *coheres* with the rough assumption of equal value. And the third step is, through this connection, to change our understanding of love as reason-giving, from generating reason directly to generating reason indirectly.⁶ This indirectness of love’s reason-giving involves a shift of focus from reason to *meta-reason*, viz., that which makes our system of, or competence for, normative reasons reasonable.

The advantage of the solution I propose is, I submit, not only that a part of the conflict between the uniqueness of love and the universality of ethics is overcome, but also that ethical reasons will be seen as underpinned by love, which moreover offers the best ultimate explanation of them.

The Assumption of Equal Value

The assumption of equal value between human beings, or persons, is a widespread and well-entrenched but yet obscure idea, for which reason it tends to appear mainly at solemn occasions. An example is the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976), according to which “the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,” these rights deriving “from the inherent dignity of the human person.” Another example is the first article of the first chapter of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), saying “Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected.”

Philosophers often take the assumption of equal value to be axiomatic but at the same time rather ideological, a background assumption, something at the dim end of justification. This obscurity has to do with the difficulty to defend or even understand the idea that all human beings have equal value. The difficulty stems from considerations about explaining why people would have such value, when they differ in all human qualities, like degree of personhood, rationality, moral decency, sociality, happiness, value to themselves and others, etc. We commonly take people to have value

according to their qualities, for instance, their economic, social, cultural, aesthetic and other contributions. And even though the constitution of most states hail the assumption of equal value, it is clear that they value citizens differently from non-citizens.

The assumption of equal value, therefore, is theoretically unjustified if one intends the total value of individuals, or any one of the various values mentioned above. It is a specifically *ethical* value, and as such it is of an *exceptional* kind, in that it would ignore the positive and negative qualities of people. Instead, it somehow applies to them “in themselves.” Possession of this value is basic and compatible with us differing in all other evaluative respects, ethical and non-ethical. In so far as ethical concerns override other kinds of concern, which it paradigmatically is taken to do, this ethical equal value of individuals overrides all non-ethical unequal values that they may have. It is furthermore a value that cannot be traded off by other ethical values.

What we otherwise recognize as values, viz. values of ends, final or intrinsic values – final values, for short – and values of means, instrumental values, is something that comes in degrees and denotes states that we may achieve and lose. Since we differ with regard to such values, let me call them ‘differential values.’ The value that would be equal among us cannot have degrees, and cannot be achieved or lost (so long as we live). I refer to this feature by calling it is an *inherent value*. The inherent value applicable to human beings, or persons, is incomparable, I submit. This is why inherent value is equal among us. Now, to many the idea of an inherent, equal ethical value is not only obscure but even repulsive; it would be an offence to assume that, for instance, Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King, Jr., in any way would have equal ethical value. To counter this objection appears difficult, yet love shows a way.

Before I take on this task, let me note that inherent human value must not be mistaken for another, similar, kind of value. Consider the idea that human life has a unique value compared to that of other life forms. Even though we cannot choose a non-human life, we consider human life more valuable than other forms of life, because we would prefer it to all other *if* we had the choice. This consideration is similar to the thought that it is better to be born than not to be born, and better to be a self-conscious creature than to be a non-self-conscious one. Valuations like these are preference-based and depend on the assumed differential values realized in various forms of life; to exist and to be self-conscious are preconditions for the realization of our cherished differential values. Even though these preconditions in a sense are inherent in us they differ from inherent value, which is not based on preference, final and/or instrumental value. They only amount to something one might call ‘preconditional value.’

The Foundation of Inherent Human Value

What ground would there be for inherent human value? An initially plausible first suggestion is that we should expect it to parallel how the differential values are grounded. Both final and instrumental values are related to non-evaluative features, that is, supernatural or, which is more common, natural features. What would be especially relevant here is the shape of the relation between final value and such features; a thought underscored by the standard priority of final over instrumental value, but also by the currency of the Kantian notion of treating persons as ends. End-values and aim-values can be seen as varieties of final value (as David J. Velleman hints in his 1999 essay).

Theories of final value suggest the existence of a close connection between evaluative properties and non-evaluative properties. Such theories are generally to the effect that a difference in evaluative properties entails a difference in non-evaluative properties; evaluative properties are often claimed to obtain in virtue of the non-evaluative properties. A way of putting this is that final values *supervene* on non-evaluative states of affairs, similar to how mental states are believed to supervene on states of the brain. For example, utilitarians hold that ethical final value supervenes on pleasure. The relevant set of non-evaluative properties is the *supervenience base* of the final value.

What, then, would be the supervenience base of inherent human value? Two different ways of answering this question may be distinguished, ethical individualism and ethical collectivism. The first takes the value of the individual to depend on his or her non-evaluative properties. The second takes that value to be depend on non-evaluative properties that are characteristic of the collective that the individual belongs to, which here would be something like our species. Even though philosophers like Blumenfeld and Nozick have taken the latter position, there are good reasons to reject it (see, for instance, James Rachels 1990, p. 177ff, and Dan Egonsson 1998, ch. 9). It is odd to value people because of how their colleagues in general are, or how they are at their best or worst. Therefore I shall limit myself to ethical individualism.

It is a religious belief commonly held that we all are parts of a sacred creation and/or that we are created in the image of God, having immortal souls. It is hard to see, however, how these beliefs could be the supervenience base for our inherent value. Yet, that is not the belief in Jewish, Christian, or Islamic traditions, where the assumption of equal value might be traced. Furthermore, even if all human beings were created in the image of God, it appears that people may lose this likeness. People also seem to be valued differently, according to the degree to which they actually resemble God. Is not the ascending on such a scale what religious life is about? Ronald Dworkin (1993) has attempted a secular version of the theory of the sacredness of life, the point of which is that individuals are both products and representatives of the creative power

of life. Everything in nature has value in itself, but human beings would have exceptional value because they represent the combined creativity of nature and culture. Yet, as Göran Collste observes (2002, p. 59), in that way people would have unequal value depending on how much creativity they embody.

A common answer is that it is the fact that people are persons that gives them equal ethical value. This position typically relies on Kantianism, but its roots go back to Plato and Aristotle. By ‘person’ Kant (1785) means an individual (not necessarily belonging to our species) with autonomy and capacity to reason and deliberate about what to do, therein employing allegedly universal ethical principles that he or she embraces. One finds a variant of this view in the critique of human-centered, so-called speciesist ethics by James Rachels (1990) and Peter Singer (1993). They think that biographical life, in contrast to merely biological life, is the objective ground for the uniquely high value they consider human beings to have. Biographical life is characterized by the existence of an acting subject endowed with a personal history of meaning and importance, involving projects that can be pursued. That we are alive is only valuable as a precondition for leading biographical lives.

The drawback in both cases is a confounding of valuing individuals in virtue of how they actually are and in virtue of how beings of their kind potentially and ideally are. The former is an instance of ethical individualism, the later an instance of ethical collectivism. We cannot have it both ways, but this is precisely what the mentioned philosophers try to do. As for Kant, he is mainly on the collectivist line, founding our dignity – our being “ends” – in an idealized personhood of autonomy and rational willing. Yet, he is on the individualist line when he takes human dignity to be compatible with the advocacy of rough, authoritarian methods in the schooling of children and in the handling of “savages” – both categories are denied respect for autonomy and integrity, the essential company of dignity. Such practices might be explained by personhood developing progressively, hence, as having degrees, but then it cannot ground our equal value. The concept of biographical being is wider than the Kantian concept of person, but since it too comes in degrees it will suffer the same weakness when it comes to marginal cases like small children, mentally disabled, and demented elderly, which may rank so low in biographical being that it makes the application of this category dubious.

The only way to avoid that weakness and to stay with ethical individualism appears to be the radical theory suggested by Egonsson (1998). The sole property in which we all are equal is, he contends, that we belong to the same species, *Homo sapiens*. Therefore, this alone can serve as supervenience base for our equal value, Egonsson argues. What is odd and arbitrary about this, is that mere membership of a species would ground the value of their members. Furthermore, as the basis for equal value between human beings, that idea has a distinctive smell of the prejudice of speciesism.

The proposals discussed above share an assumption that I think we must question, viz., that there is a supervenience base for inherent value. Its form is this:

Individual p has inherent value V in virtue of a certain set of supernatural or natural properties N becoming to p.

Apart from the fact that major candidates for *N* that one can think of come in degrees, it also seems that for any *N* one can always ask whether an individual having *N* also has *V*, and vice versa. This objection draws on G. E. Moore's classical open question-argument, but here the objection is stronger, since the openness is a matter of moral properties rather than semantics, as Moore took it to be. If the question is open to our moral intuition, then we probably have not caught the intimate connection of supervenience. The simple reason, I think, is that none of the proposals as to the identity of *N* touches the significant piece. No proposed *N* seems able to explain that which most needs explaining, viz. the unique power that our inherent value would have in regard to the whole system of ethics and practical morality.

For inherent human value, I submit, there simply is no supervenience base. We do not have inherent value in virtue of being such and such, no matter how we chose it. This explains why no satisfactory supervenience base has yet been found, which in turn explains why the assumption of equal value has remained so obscure and ideological: we have tried to apply a pattern of analysis that here is inapplicable. It is possible, nevertheless, to ground our equal value in ways other than supervenience. Its content can be characterized, and an account of its constitution be given. Furthermore, we can clarify the crucial role it performs for normative ethics.

Agapic Love

Inherent human value, I take it, needs to be shown as having such substance as to constitute a basic ethical meta-reason, viz., that which makes our ethical system of, or competence for, normative reasons reasonable. Such meta-ethical power of inherent value is what above all needs to be explained. And that is where love comes in. The account of inherent value that I suggest can be summarized thus: *human beings are worth loving*.

This idea is inspired by the notion of love in Christian tradition, which is the main source of the Western conception of inherent human value (see, e.g., Nygren 1930 and 1936; also Ramsey 1950). The thought here is that all human beings should be loved, which presupposes that they are worth loving. On the surface of it, this idea matches a central strand in contemporary value theory founded by Franz Brentano. According to Brentano (1889) the good or valuable is that which is worth loving. Brentano, however, considers things, events, and states rather than individuals, which makes him interpret

'love' and 'worth loving' in a limiting way. To love something is, according to him, to prefer it to something else. Consequently, worth loving would have degrees also, determined with reference to preference. The reason for this construal was that he needed a comparative concept of value that makes things differ in value – a concept of differential value, which is of no interest in this context.

The concepts of love and being worth loving that we find in the Christian tradition are not such. They are not comparative, have no degrees, but refer to a binary normative status: a matter of either–or, where we all are to find on the positive side. It is question of a love that is *unconditional*. Hence, to be loved and worth loving is a character of human beings distinct from what particular individuals may prefer or strive for. There is no argument of the structure “P is loved, because P is such and such.”⁷ In Christian tradition this unconditional love is called ‘agape’ and it is believed to be of divine kind. It stands in contrast to the individually motivated, human kind of love called ‘eros’ (see Nygren 1930, ch. 1). In the light of the reference to God, there is a theological content to agape, which to non-believers (like me) makes it problematic. I suggest a reformed, non-theological version of agape to be more fruitful; let me call it *agapic love*.

The character and mode of existence of agapic love have to be spelled out more carefully, and a plausible meta-ethical base has to be offered for the thesis that all humans are worth loving in this sense. I believe that these two issues are intertwined. For the present purpose I think it suffices to show that something of this kind exists and can be incorporated into a plausible meta-ethics. Let me presuppose the ontology and metaphysics of inherent human value to be subjectivist in a sense, in that some kind of subject somehow constitutes the inherent human value and hence our being worth loving. I furthermore take it to be secular, in that it does not invoke a God or any man-independent, Platonic order of values, but consider the valuing subject to be of some human kind.⁸ What would that be? One strategy is to identify a relevant set of empirical human beings, another to identify a relevant human yet ideal observer.

The first strategy stems from the Brentano tradition in value-theory and is what, for instance, Egonsson (1998) adopts. Egonsson considers our equal value to be constituted by a more or less universal preference of human beings for human beings. But it is not clear what the relevant comparison class would be. With regard to ghosts, rats, and pigs, yes, probably there is such a preference – but with regard to friends, and members of the same nation, religion or culture, probably not. The main problem, however, is that the preference Egonsson takes to exist would not manage to constitute the equal value of human individuals. Preferring one category to another does not imply equal preference for their members, unless one employs the method of ethical collectivism earlier rejected.

Peter Singer, for one, employs the second strategy. He forwards a theory of value-constituency based on preferences, but which replaces actual preferences with rational

ones, viz. those of an idealized human observer. What the preference of that being would consider is the optimal life of different species. If we could try all lives, had memories of all of them, and had to choose rationally which one to live, then human life would rank highest and therefore be chosen, Singer argues (1993, p. 107). However, even if one disregards the impracticability and hazardous character of this method Singer, like Egonsson, would only end up with preference for a category, which only ethical collectivists could transfer to equal preferences for its individuals. Moreover, were his method applied to the lives of classes of individuals, unequal value would follow.

On both strategies, the value-constituting human subject has to regard human individuals, and its value-constituting reaction has to be equal to all. On the first strategy, the latter requirement is quite inconceivable already by the dependence on comparison and preference; one cannot imagine everyone viewing everyone else without evaluatively preferring some to others, where those preferred surely would vary among them. There remains, then, only the second strategy. It is in the Christian notion of God in the shape of an ideal man, together with the notion of agape, I think one finds the view that offers a way meet to the above requirements.

The character of Jesus in the New Testament is a godlike man, the Son of God, with power to change our God-given laws. As such he is a kind of ideal observer, with constitutive authority in fundamental ethical matters. It is essential to his character that he, while being a man, incarnates divine agape. Interestingly enough, it is a human form of love that in this way returns sanctified to us. The pattern for divine agape is provided by the love of human parents for their children. In Christian tradition, which on this point joins with Jewish tradition, agape is part of a wider notion of God as father, and with “us, His children” as members of one and the same family. It is God’s fatherly love for his children that gives us inherent value (see, e.g., Nygren 1930 and Collste 2002). God directs his love at each individual in his or her uniqueness. It is indiscriminating, all-embracing. This is possible because it is unconditional with regard to the qualities of the individuals, and so is without reason. It is a love that we in human context would articulate through the seemingly empty but still highly meaningful phrase “Because you are you!” That we are members of God’s family is a merely a preconditional value. It is neither the cause of God’s love, since God’s modes of being are without cause, nor the reason for it, since his love is not conditional on any feature we may have.

The use of the family metaphor I think bears witness to a long-standing presence of agapic love in human life, and furthermore testifies to it as a widely accepted explanation of the existence of a basic, inherent value of individuals.⁹ The question here is whether we are entitled to generalize such optimal parental love as becoming to all human beings, without assuming the existence of God and supposing us to be children of God. We can, I submit. Man in diverse cultures has time and again operated

with idealized beings, more or less human, loving all. It may suffice to mention Kung Tzu, Buddha, and Jesus. In modern time, we seek to identify compassionate and unselfishly loving persons that more or less incarnate this ideal, persons like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Janusz Korczak, and Nelson Mandela. And it is loving figures like these that most people, if they were in a position to sincerely and reflectively choose, would accord the position of judge as to their value as a human being. Hence, to appeal to the reactions of an ideal observer is an age-old and received methodological strategy in meta-ethics. It is current also in, for instance, the philosophical tradition after David Hume.

Hume assumed the existence of a universal but in practical life often hidden human sympathy. According to him, it is purified sympathetic reactions in the face of what happens to people that constitutes our evidence for the valid principles of ethics. Yet, the Humean view is not appropriate in the present context, since on his theory sympathy is directed towards events, mental states and traits of character, and grounds liking and disliking of a comparative and ranking kind. Also, on this theory the ideal observer reacts ethically to us merely as a “generalized other,” as Seyla Benhabib has put it (1992), and not as the unique persons we are. Her point is appropriate also when one considers the Kantian notion of respect for human dignity, which we as pretended lawmakers for the Kingdom of Ends are to bring to our acts. That respect is roughly equal to love as a moral emotion, claims David J. Velleman (1999, p. 360ff). However, what that ideal respect, or love, regards is not individuals in their unique particularity, but in their “true self,” which is a type, viz. universal, rational being.

In Christian tradition, God sees us as we are, sees our whole life, and still loves us. Similarly, the ideal human observer would consider us as unique individuals, yet not respond lovingly to us because of how we are or what we do at one time or another, but do so unconditionally. His or her agapic love would be a love for people in their *wholeness*, with full knowledge of their complex conditions and history, seeing their difficulties, defeats and victories, sorrows and joys, hopes and longings. This, of course, is out of reach for actual people. But the conceptual construct of such an all-knowing, all-understanding and compassionate ideal observer, in a context of value-constituency pertaining to individuals, is perfectly feasible. Considering the capacity for the kind of unselfish, unconditional love that, for instance, a parent can have for his or her children, this construction is also, as we saw, well entrenched. It is conceivable and reasonable, I would say, that such a human observer, faced with every human being and fully knowing and fully understanding him or her, would react with agapic love to all.

Agapic love, I suggest, is a *holistically verdictive reaction*. As reaction, it is emotional and cognitive in character, but does not have a conative component. The reason for this is that the reacting subject is not an actor in relation to us. It is emotional, in that it is loving feeling towards the contemplated individuals. It is cognitive, since that feeling is

joined to knowing and understanding the individuals. This combined emotional and cognitive reaction is verdictive, by summative positing worth in them, which minimally is being worthy of the observer's love. It is holistic, finally, by knowing, understanding and judging them, not as occurring in a certain slice of space and time, but as complex wholes stretching over space and time. This means that the ideal human observer would see us somewhat like a god would. Since the observer is the idealized version of a human being, loving human beings once they are fully known and understood will come naturally.

I hope it should be clear by now how agapic love grounds inherent value. In people's lives there are better and worse conditions and events, as well as better and worse acts, all in different respects, and this makes us quite incommensurate when our whole life is considered. It is meaningless to measure us as wholes. So, were a knowing and understanding observer with capacity for unconditional love to react to us as unique wholes, then, I submit, we would all evoke a measureless loving reaction. This hypothetical love, ideal but reasonable, suffices for our being worth loving, and therefore suffices for our inherent human value. Since the former is incommensurable and in this sense equal, the latter is so as well. On this construal our equal value is also objective, in the sense that everyone has it and cannot lose it (so long as they live), regardless of what they or other people think, feel, and do.

Some Objections

What about fantastic beings other than humans, might they not be loved with agapic love by an ideal human observer and thereby gain inherent human value, which hence would undergo inflation and appear absurd? Most other beings, however, are not possible for an ideal human observer to understand and could therefore not be embraced by the holistically verdictive loving reaction to humans. If they could be understood, the ideal human observer would not be able to identify with them, which seems necessary for love towards them. Even if the ideal observer could identify with them – as we somewhat can with other primates – this identification would not feed the emotional bond that we have with other human beings that “might have been *me*.” The latter, I believe, is a condition for the agapic love of the ideal human towards us. However, even if we would grant inherent human value to, say, other primates, this would not be highly consequential. It is not obvious that their inherent human value would incite us to adopt an equal motivational structure with regard to their well-being; there are good reasons to let them flourish according to their specific (non-human) mode of being. Furthermore, the supreme value of human life, bridging inherent human value to normative ethics, is not present here.

A related question is whether my suggested construction does meet the objection raised against other secular defenses of the assumption of equal value, that they either do not

accommodate marginal cases like small children, the mentally handicapped and demented elderly, or else accord inherent human value to fetuses. I think that it does. The agapic love of an ideal human observer presupposes that there is someone with a life to which he or she can react. Being a living, elementary person is a preconditional value. Fetuses are not elementary persons with something we would call a human life. Small children, on the other hand, are such persons and they have a life, even if this would happen to end early. The mentally handicapped are elementary persons with a life also. As to the demented elderly, even those with radically reduced personality, their condition is merely a phase of their life as a whole, and the latter is the proper object of agapic love. Furthermore, as far as they to some degree can realize some differential values characteristic of the supreme value of human life, they are proper patients of our ethical concerns.

Another doubt is whether an ideal human observer actually would have agapic love towards people such as Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Saddam Hussein. Are there not monsters unlovable even for an ideal observer? There certainly are several hard cases. Yet, since we have to do with specimen of the fantastic, complicated, awesome and sensitive *Homo sapiens*, we do not know all the facts in the problematic cases, and furthermore we cannot fully represent the reactions of an agapic-loving ideal observer, I believe it to be a fair strategy to give such cases the benefit of doubt. When we do that, we also create a moral margin to compensate for the bad luck that people may have.

Several considerations support this strategy. For one, the ideal observer does not react to people at some, perhaps monstrous, time. Rather, the ideal observer reacts to their life as a whole. That scope, as narratives in biographies, novels and films repeatedly show, changes the view and evaluation of people; monsters as well as saints turn out to be recognizably human. One should therefore not be surprised that it seems possible always to find people – a parent, wife, child, friend – who love, in spite of everything, those that others regard as monsters. Perhaps the ideal human observer would be on their side. Furthermore, the idea of evaluating us as wholes is inevitable in another crucial context also, viz. when the life of our species is evaluated. Were it judged from what it is at horrible times, then it is far from certain that an ideal human observer would prefer it to lives of other species.

There are philosophers who have problems with taking a kind of Christian universal love as basic in ethics. One objection is that such love is something too far fetched for ethics. Ingemar Hedenius, for instance, rejected the idea as an “expression of the moral Super-ego of Western culture at its maddest” (1982, p. 18; my translation). What the bulk of such criticism seems to concern, however, is not agapic love in the specific meta-ethical shape that I have cast it. Objections like Hedenius’ rather aim at virtue-ethical or act-oriented ethical stances, prescribing that we love everyone and love them equally. I agree with the critique of that position as unduly moralistic; ethics should not, in spite of its universalistic and impersonal character, demand of people always to

mirror that strictly in their moral practice. I adhere to the ideal of a moderate and what Samuel Scheffler calls 'human morality' (1992, p. 122).

Another objection, focused on love as foundational for ethics, is Kant's thought that this would make ethics overly emotional, which is a problem since emotions are unstable and subject to the laws of our animal nature. They are not something of rational nature, and for Kant the core of ethics has to be rational (Kant 1785). The one thing does not exclude the other, and I have construed agapic love with both cognitive and emotional components. Since the loving reactions are those of an ideal human observer, occurring in hypothetical situations where individuals are viewed and verdictively reacted to as wholes, they are not due to be unstable. That such loving feeling plays a founding role for normative ethics speaks for rather than against my account, since it makes ethics inspiring in a way that the thought of binding law does not.

Finally, is there not a special problem with my construction, viz., that it is tailored to yield the desired result? That we are worth loving would be a thesis that I prove with the help of an unconditionally loving ideal observer. We need an independent defense for the agapic loving ideal observer. I agree, and think that I have sketched such a defense. It builds on the existence of widely recognized meta-ethical role models, preferred ethical judges, like Jesus, Mother Theresa, and Nelson Mandela, who in essential respects are similar to my ideal human observer. When we scrutinize ourselves, I think most people will find something like him or her at the core of their moral conscience.

Love as Meta-Reason

Let us assume that agapic love grounds incomparable inherent value, and thereby equal human value. Does this mean that agapic love through that relation becomes a basic meta-reason with regard to ethics, viz. that which makes our ethical system of, or competence for, normative reasons reasonable? The issue seems to be whether inherent human value, so construed, can fill that foundational role for ethics. Since the ideal observer's agapic love lacks a conative component, the resulting inherent human would seem to value lack such a component also, one might think. And if so, neither agapic love nor inherent human value appears to entail an interest in enhancing people's lives, especially when one considers that this value applies to them as contingent, historical wholes, that is, when their lives are seen as having come to an end. No matter how people are, live, and act the ideal observer would love them and they would be unconditionally worth loving. Were ethics to be based on these assumptions, we risk having it in the image of a complacent, non-interfering God.

What seems to lack is a normative impetus from unwillingness to accept all states of affairs in human life, and willingness to forward the states, lives, attitudes and acts that

are desirable. Only with such substance, the meta-ethical fact that people are worth loving seems to acquire the drive that naturally translates into principles and systems of ethics, or into formation of moral competence, some kind of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, giving us direct reason for loving actions and practices. So, if inherent human value is to have such normative impetus it needs to bind essentially to something other than our inherent value, viz. to our differential values, values that regard the changing, actual qualities of our lives. This is a considerable objection, but I think that it can be met, on three lines of argument.

First, our being worth loving looks different from the side of its constitution and from the side of its functioning in our moral practice. From the former side, to be worth loving does appear to entail complacency, by its establishment through the reactions of an ideal but non-acting human observer. And this cannot be otherwise, since he or she sees our lives as complete wholes. From the latter side, however, this is not the case. Once our inherent value is established, it makes us worth loving by non-ideal, actual and acting human beings also. By sharing in the foundational idea of our inherent and therefore equal value, we so to say touch the agapic love of the idealized observer. This involves taking all to be worthy of our love even though we cannot see their life as a whole. And since we are agents at particular times and places, surrounded by real people, it gives us reason, on whatever scene we act, to adopt a combined cognitive, conative and emotional structure that at least in principle regards the well-being of all people. Herein one finds reason enough to make a pillar for ethical systems and moral competence. It may in passing be noted that the character of Jesus in the New Testament, the believed god-man said to have wandered around preaching and showing brotherly love for all, marks a transformation from divine and non-interfering agape to a human, interfering universal love. One could also illustrate this with the other presumed religious, moral and political ideal figures mentioned above.

Second, though being unconditional and inspiring to normativity, agapic love and inherent human value do not dictate a specified content to ethical principles or moral competence. All it dictates is attitudes and behaviour that express respect for people's inherent value, their being worth loving. I quite agree with Derek Parfit, writing that "people have dignity or value in the [...] sense that, given their nature as rational beings, they must always be treated in certain positive ways" (Parfit forthcoming; I quote from a preprint version). This means that various ethical systems, and various versions of moral competence, may claim reasoned support from assumptions of agapic love and inherent human value, which is also what one finds to be the case. That, of course, does not mean that they would be equally valid. The indecisiveness notwithstanding, the meta-reasons in question are important for our choices of ethics, since one may well argue that one ethical system, or one form of moral competence, gives better expression of our inherent value than another.

Third, when it comes to the shaping of our ethics and/or moral competence, agapic love and inherent human value are not alone to play the part of meta-reason. In common morality the idea of equal value among human beings is supplemented with the assumption of a unique, or uniquely high, value of human life. This is a value of life form. It is not unconditional, but displays a comparison between the characteristics of different forms of life, where the human life form would be found superior. What matters in such a fancied comparison is the kind and degree of what I called ‘differential values,’ realized through the various forms of life. Yet, the value of a life form is not necessarily conditional in the sense of being a function of a specific set of final and instrumental values; rather, it is semi-conditional, depending on the existence of a relevant range of such sets. This weaker conditionality makes the value of human life serve as a bridge by which human beings with inherent value come to enter the normative principles that articulate humanistic values and norms. Here, then, is a supplementary pillar of normative ethics.

I know of no other explanation of normative ethics that is better entrenched in culture, religion and everyday moral thought. And I know of no one stronger or more reasonable. It combines the non-natural aspect of idealization with the natural aspect of human psychology. It furthermore combines firmness as to our being worth loving, to our inherent, equal value, with flexibility when it comes to the principles or moral competence of normative ethics, by its openness for various differential values, where our preferences and agreements will have a say. This makes it nicely compatible with major systems of ethics present and past, yet not for that sake without bite.¹⁰

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¹ For an overview of notions of love, see Outka (2001).

² The case of virtue ethics is quite complicated. In classic, Aristotelian theory most of the virtues have a personal and partial character – except for justice, as John Cottingham has argued convincingly (Cottingham 1996). Justice as fairness and equity does not fit the Aristotelian pattern of analysis and it “seems by its very nature impartialistic,” says Cottingham (*ibid.*, p. 68). He argues that with Descartes this part of virtue theory develops into a “universal and egalitarian vision of goodness which promises to rescue value from the dominance of fortune,” and the attractions of this vision have exercised such a strong pull on our moral imagination that traditional virtue theory has progressively lost its power to command our allegiance (*ibid.*, p. 75). I think he is right in this.

³ See Dancy 1993 ch.5:3, and 2004 ch. 8:1. He remarks that “ordinary subjective reasons are likely to be permitted but not validated by the objectification process, for instance those which stem from individual preferences where there is no tendency to claim that we are right to prefer what we do” (1993, p. 154).

⁴ The quote is from an unpublished paper that Jonathan Dancy generously has shared with me in a personal communication. A particularistic assumption of equal value could be explained by the acceptance of absolute value belonging to persons, but also by the positing of meta-reason, where equal

human value would have a role. I guess Dancy would prefer the former alternative (see, e.g., his 1983). In any case, he rejects the idea of meta-reason (2004, p. 160) – contrary to the road I am venturing in this essay.

⁵ A recent, rich collection of essays on partiality and impartiality (Feltham & Cottingham 2010) focuses on such approaches.

⁶ Love's role as directly reason-giving is what, for instance, Bernhard Williams (1981), Harry G. Frankfurt (2004), and Lawrence Blum (1986) discuss.

⁷ Gene Outka speaks about human beings as “irreducibly valuable” in agape (1972, p. 12).

⁸ This can be assumed without speciesism, as I have argued (2002).

⁹ Gregory Vlastos, who indicates a parallel between non-gradable human worth and unconditional love, also appeals to the metaphor of a “loving family” to defend egalitarianism (Vlastos 1984).

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