



Applied Ethics  
(other than Bioethics)

## The Importance of Being Human

*Dan Egonsson*  
*Lund University*  
[Dan.Egonsson@fil.lu.se](mailto:Dan.Egonsson@fil.lu.se)

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I will defend a kind of human-centered perspective regarding ethical questions wherein the interests of humans and nonhumans alike are involved. Compared to other species, however, the idea that there is something special about being human is commonly vague. For example, it is unclear whether the thought is (1) being a human being is important in itself, or (2) it is important to be *like* a human being — that is, to have the capacities which a normal adult human being enjoys. I build my defense of human dignity on the claim that we regard a biological human being as a being of *intrinsic* importance, which is what (1) is about. However, I also consider the ethical implications of (2), which concerns the moral significance of personhood. I argue that the idea of a special intrinsic value of being a human is applicable only to cases where we deal with nonpersons. I claim that in spite of this qualification, we might defend a substantial principle of human dignity founded upon this generalization.

Traditionally in the West we regard the property of being a human as something morally significant. In what does this significance consist? Is membership in our species important in itself, or does the importance lie in having the properties that a normal grown-up human being has? I believe that this distinction is commonly neglected in discussions about a special human value or a human dignity. It is a distinction between the direct and indirect importance of a property. What I want to claim is that there is a way of arguing for the existence of a value which proceeds from the assumption that most of us believe that being human is something important per se. The advantage of founding the idea of a human dignity on this kind of reasoning is of course that it allows all human beings to have a share in this value.

In the traditional view, however, it is not only important to regard all human beings as having a share in a special human value, it is normally important as well to regard all human beings as having this share to the same extent. Not only is it the case that human beings are more valuable than non-humans, all human beings are equally valuable. This second aspect of the importance of being human will be given no treatment here.

I am strongly inclined to believe that whatever attitude we have towards intuitions, that is, whether we want to take them seriously in our moral reasoning or not, most of us share the intuition which I henceforth will call the Standard Attitude (SA) and which tells us that human beings have a special moral standing just in virtue of being human. This is an

intuition which in one way or another is important to most of us as a putative source of moral knowledge or as something we believe we have to fight against. One important axiological problem concerns whether something can be valuable only in relation to a valuing subject or if something can be valuable given that there exists something valuable independently of whether or not a subject has any attitude towards it, whether it be a cognitive or conative attitude. This is classical problem of subjectivism versus objectivism.

If you believe that being human is intrinsically important you can, if you are a subjectivist, by this mean that the property is intrinsically important for humans, i.e. human beings place a special value on being human in itself, a value which is not dependent upon what is associated with belonging to that species, and that is what makes being human morally important. Or, you may, if you are an objectivist, intend to say that being human has an intrinsic value which is independent of the fact that this is valued by us humans.

I will here concentrate on the subjectivistic defence of human dignity. One of the reasons, besides the fact that I personally find this position more attractive than objectivism, is that it is interesting to defend the idea of human dignity from a subjectivistic position when such an idea normally is rejected by the subjectivists. Now, one of the assumptions that I have made is that there is according to the Standard Attitude an intrinsic value in being human. This assumption must now be questioned. Michael Tooley gives in *Abortion and Infanticide* three counter-examples to show that membership of the human species has no intrinsic importance. His third argument is a thought experiment which is constructed as follows:

There might exist on some other planet, such as Mars, non-human animals that speak languages, have highly developed cultures, that have advanced further scientifically, technologically, and aesthetically than humans have, and that both enjoy sensations, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires, and attribute such mental states both to us and to themselves. Would it not be wrong to kill such Martians? And wrong for precisely the same reason that it is wrong to kill normal adult human beings? (1983: 67)

First, Tooley wants us to decide not only whether or not it would be wrong to kill these Martians, but also whether or not it would be wrong to kill them for the same reason that it would be wrong to kill normal adult human beings. I believe that this is a bit tricky, since suppose you decide to say that it would be wrong to kill these Martians. Does that mean that you know also why it would be wrong? Of course not. One of the main tasks of these thought experiments is to detect what kind of reason one has for ones moral judgements. The supposition is therefore that this is something one might be mistaken about. Therefore, I suggest that we start by asking the simple question about what ones spontaneous reactions on the wrongness of this kind of killing would be.

Second, if that is what we do, we have to make sure that we concentrate on the comparative wrongness of killing these Martians and killing human beings, since the conclusion Tooley wants us to draw will not follow from the sole fact that it would be wrong to kill these Martians (which is what Tooley says), unless it were wrong to the same extent that it would be wrong to kill a human being (assuming that it makes sense to talk of different degrees of moral wrongness).

Third, there is one strangeness in Tooleys example. The Martians intellectual achievements exceed the human ones their cultures have advanced further than human cultures have. This might be an important difference, since suppose one spontaneously believes that it would be wrong to kill these Martians, equally wrong as killing human beings. This could then be explained in the following way.

There are (at least) two factors which might be relevant when deciding the moral status of the act of killing a certain being. Species membership can be important in itself, which follows directly from what we have said about SA. But the degree of intellectual capacity might also be important. The reason for claiming this might be that one believes that the pleasure in doing certain activities increases as the complexity of the activity increases. (This is sometimes called the Aristotelian Principle.) Given this assumption and given that the Martian culture is more advanced than the human one, it follows fairly naturally that a Martian gets more pleasure out of practising the Martian culture. Of course, one cannot be sure as to whether the Martian one kills really is an active participant in the Martian culture, but I believe that this will not damage the main point, since the idea is just that other things being equal, the probability that a Martian will enjoy a life containing deep cultural pleasure if not killed is higher than the probability that a human being will do so.

The upshot of this is that there might be a difference in the moral status of killing a human being and a Martian which is based on the fact that the human being belongs to a superior species, but which in this case is outweighed by the fact that the Martians cultural capacities exceed the human ones. And given the Aristotelian principle we also see how this can be the case the thought is not that rationality or intelligence has some kind of intrinsic importance, but rather that a high cultural level means richer opportunities to have pleasurable experiences. And there is nothing strange at all in the thought that there might be other factors besides the fact that a being is a human one that are important for the moral status of the act of killing this being.

Suppose that we eliminate this difference, which I believe we would have to do if we want to construct a case in which we test whether or not we are prepared to award intrinsic importance to species membership. Will we then believe that there is a moral difference between the action of killing a Martian and an action of killing a human being, that is to say, given that there does not exist any important intellectual difference between them?

I am not absolutely sure about my own feelings, but I think we have to admit that we seem to have an example which tells against SA: in a case where a non-human Martian person has all the attributes of a normal human person, we tend not to make any moral difference between this Martian person and a human being, which supports the idea that there is no intrinsic difference between a human and a non-human.

However, the problem is that I believe we are able also to construct thought experiments that support SA.

Suppose that one morning you read in the newspaper that outside your local slaughterhouse someone has left three sucking-pigs to die in a skip. The reason seems to be a congenital deformity which has made the pigs useless for the production of meat.

Suppose that the next day you read about a very similar story, but this time someone has found three seriously deformed eight-month-old human foetuses left to die in a skip outside the general hospital in your city. The reason this time, it has been found, is that it was necessary to abort these embryos in order to save the mother from dying. However, although the doctors might have tried to save the foetuses too, they chose not to do so because of the grave deformities.

These two cases are similar enough to be compared. We might suppose that the pigs and the foetuses had a comparable capacity to feel pain and furthermore that because of the deformity and what follows from it the foetus might never develop any psychological capacity that would exceed the mental capacities of the kind of pig that the sucking-pigs might have developed into. We might also suppose that these poor beings were suffering from comparable deformities. Both kinds of beings had a comparable appearance.

Although this is constructed, it is not totally unrealistic; these things could happen some day.

Now suppose one asks oneself honestly which news would provoke the strongest (moral) feelings in oneself. I am pretty sure that very many would react much stronger to the second days news. And the best explanation for this, although I am aware that there could be alternative ones, is in my view that we intuitively sense a moral difference between the cases, a difference which is founded on the fact that in the one case a human being is mistreated whereas in the other a non-human being is. Where will this leave us?

I claimed above that at least one of Tooleys examples was problematic in that it seemed to support the falsity of SA. My strategy has been to construct examples which support the truth of it. Suppose I have been successful. The initial paradox and problem remains, however, since even if I succeeded in showing that it is easier to find examples which support SA compared with examples which have the opposite effect, that does not eliminate the problem. The problem is that we seem to have intuitive support both for the truth and for the falsity of SA. Let us compare the two kinds of examples which speak for and against the truth of SA respectively and see whether we can find some feature which might explain why we judge them differently. One obvious difference is that in Tooleys example we were dealing with persons, whereas the beings figuring in the other examples where all non-persons. So it seems that we could try the following generalization: SA is applicable only to cases where we deal with non-persons, and that might be the reason why Tooley failed to see that there is some truth in SA after all.

Is it possible to claim that SA can be applied to some cases but not to some others? One fairly uncontroversial demand on those principles which can be extracted from our intuitions is that they at least should not yield inconsistent judgements. The question is whether or not our generalization will have that effect.

To judge from some philosophers that is the case. For instance, writing about the distinction between killing and letting die, James Rachels considers and rejects an idea very similar to my generalization, an idea that is formulated in the following way:

Perhaps the truth is simply that the difference between killing and letting die is sometimes morally important, and sometimes not, depending on the particular case you choose to think about (1986: 123).

This is described by Rachels as the compromise view (and once again it is rejected by Rachels) and it seems to be directly applicable to our discussion of Tooley. What I have suggested, to paraphrase Rachels, is that the difference between being and not being human is sometimes morally important, and sometimes not, depending on the particular case you choose to think about. However, Rachels thinks that this position is inconsistent, since it violates a formal principle of logic that everyone must accept regardless of the content of his or her particular moral code (1986: 125), namely the following one:

Principle I. If the fact that A has P is a morally good reason in support of the judgement that A ought (or ought not) to be done, and B also has P, then that is also a reason, of equal weight, for the judgement that B ought (or ought not) to be done (1986: 125).

However, as a general principle about reasons this principle is false, as it seems, at least if we leave it unqualified. It might full well be the case that the fact that one action has a certain property is a reason for performing it in one kind of context but not in another. For instance, suppose that action A is taking a cake (A has the property, P, of being the eating of something sweet). After having had my dinner I may well say that the fact that A has P is a reason for performing it whereas before having had my dinner I may say that the fact that B has P is a reason for not performing it. Whether or not P is a reason for an action

depends therefore on the situation. It might also depend on the person performing the action. If I am a slim person then the fact that A has P might be a reason for me to perform it after I have had my dinner, whereas if I am a fat person then the fact that B has P is a reason for me not to perform it (neither after nor before the dinner). It might also, of course, depend on our set of values if I like sweets, then the fact that A has P is a reason for performing it whether or not I am fat, whereas if I do not value sweets, then this fact will not be a reason for performing A. So it seems that Principle I is false in a literal interpretation.

Therefore, if we suppose that moral reasons behave like reasons generally in this respect, then Rachels has not succeeded, as it seems, in showing what is wrong with the compromise view and therefore what he says cannot be used against our generalization either. It does not seem inconsistent to claim that the distinction between killing and letting die is important in some cases but not in others and also that the same is true of the distinction between being a human and not being one. It would have been inconsistent if we had claimed that the distinctions both are and are not important in the same type of situation. But that is not what we are doing; that would have been an infringement of the universalizability of moral judgements. On the contrary, the reason why we specify the kind of case where the distinctions do and where they do not make any moral difference is precisely to avoid being inconsistent in our moral judgements.

To conclude: what I have tried to do is argue for the thesis that given subjectivism and the existence of an intuition or preference to the effect that a human being has a special moral standing just in virtue of being human, then we have a foundation of the idea of human dignity. This is true whether or not we may find any further theoretical foundation of SA. So an intuition might be relevant from a subjectivistic perspective whether or not we are able to place it in a larger theoretical context. Quite the contrary, I believe we run into difficulties as soon as we try to give a rational defence of intuitions like SA. In other words, I do not think that it is possible to give a rational defence of speciesism, since all the attempts in that direction that I have seen have failed. But given the fact that the speciesistic attitude exists among us, whether or not we are able to justify it, then I believe it has to be taken into account. And my main efforts here have been to make a case for the claim that we have these kinds of speciesistic inclinations, whether or not we want to have them.

## References

Rachels, James (1986). *The End of Life*, Oxford, New York & Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Tooley, Michael (1983). *Abortion and Infanticide*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.