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**Abstract**

It is widely affirmed that human beings have irreplaceable valuable, and that we owe it to them to treat them accordingly. Many theorists have been drawn to Kantianism because they think that it alone can capture this intuition. One aim of this paper is to show that this is a mistake, and that Kantianism cannot provide an independent rational vindication, nor even a fully illuminating articulation, of irreplaceability. A further aim is to outline a broadly Aristotelian view that provides a more fitting theoretical framework for this appealing conception of human value. This critique of Kantianism extends to contemporary theorists with a broadly Kantian orientation, including Christine Korsgaard, Stephen Darwall and John Rawls. The problem with these views, at heart, is that they attempt to ground morality in respect alone. Yet it is love, not respect, that brings irreplaceability into view. The paper closes with a sketch of a virtue-theoretic theory that follows Aquinas in taking love to be a master virtue that refines the other virtues so as to ensure a continuous and practically efficacious sensitivity to the irreplaceable value of fellow human beings.

**Keywords:** Acknowledging, irreplaceable value, Kantianism.

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## Introduction

I take it as a starting point that human beings have a distinctive kind of value, not just much greater than but also formally different from the value of, say, a pleasurable sensation or a pocket full of money. It can make perfect sense to invest one hundred dollars in order to secure two hundred, or to forgo one welcome sensation in order to experience another, more pleasurable one. When we make such trade-offs, we don't ordinarily lament the particular dollars or pleasures we have forgone, because the loss has been compensated in kind. The loss of a human being is not similarly compensable by the creation or preservation of another human life. This is not to say that it could never make sense to choose a course of action that will foreseeably lead to the death of one person because it will spare the lives of many others. It is only to deny that in the wake of such a choice, it would make sense to regard the lost life as compensated for by the lives that have been spared. What rules out such compensation is that each human being has *irreplaceable* value. Any viable account of the value of human beings, and in turn any viable ethical theory, must affirm their irreplaceability in this special sense.

Any such account must also make sense of the standing of human beings as beings who can properly claim certain forms of regard and treatment as their due. It must make sense, that is, of the essentially interpersonal structure of certain ethical demands. For it is true of human beings not only that they ought to be treated as bearers of irreplaceable value, but that they are *due* such treatment. If we did not so treat them, we would not merely do the wrong thing; we would wrong *them*.

It is often alleged that a broadly Aristotelian approach to ethics cannot properly accommodate either of these features of the value of human beings. Some think it has special difficulty acknowledging the value of those whose natural attributes, upbringing, or afflictions put virtuous character beyond their reach. Others think the eudaimonistic structure of Aristotelianism presents a more general impediment to the acknowledgment of others as self-standing sources of reasons. The thought is that if all practical reasons are grounded ultimately in the reasoner's own flourishing, then it can never be a fundamental reason for any action that we owe it to another to do it. Those who raise such concerns often suggest that a broadly Kantian approach to ethics can provide a more illuminating account of the

obligation to treat each human being as irreplaceably valuable, and of the standing of each human being to demand such treatment as her due.

I will suggest that these charges should be reversed. In saying this, I don't mean to deny that a commitment to irreplaceability is woven into the substantive ethical commitments associated with Kantianism. It obviously is. Indeed, Kantianism owes much of its intuitive appeal to its affirmation of the irreplaceable value of human beings. I believe, however, that Kantianism cannot succeed in its ambition to provide an independent rational vindication, or even a fully illuminating articulation, of this picture of human value. My aim is to explain what has led me to this conclusion, and to offer some speculations on how a revisionist Aristotelian approach might provide a more fitting theoretical framework for (though not an independent derivation of) this appealing conception of human value.

### **I. Kantianism and Irreplaceable Value**

Kant distinguishes between two kinds of value-bearers: those with a mere price and those with a dignity. "Whatever has a price," he explains, "can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity" (Kant, 1997, 4: 434). It is central to Kant's substantive ethical view that every human being has a dignity, hence cannot "be replaced by something else as its equivalent."

This substantive ethical conviction can be found in a wide array of contemporary views that are often categorized as Kantian. Indeed, Kantianism's ringing affirmation of this view goes a long way towards explaining the turn to Kant ethics among late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century ethical theorists, many of whom were appalled by utilitarianism's readiness to aggregate costs and benefits across persons, even at the cost of life, liberty and limb. One particularly influential version of this affirmation is due to John Rawls, who states at the outset of *A Theory of Justice* that, "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others" (Rawls, 1971, pp. 3-4). Rawls goes on to claim that utilitarianism's failure to affirm this intuitive truth shows that it "does not take seriously the distinction between persons" (Rawls, 1971, p. 27).

Now, this passage from Rawls puts forward the irreplaceable value of human beings in an attempt to “express our intuitive conviction in the primacy of justice” (Rawls, 1971, p. 4). Kant himself is widely thought to have put the view forward not merely as an evaluative intuition but as an implicit presupposition of any exercise of rational agency. One of Kant’s key arguments for this view, at least on Christine Korsgaard’s influential reading, is found in *Groundwork* II, just before the introduction of the version of the Categorical Imperative known as the Formula of Humanity. Korsgaard sees in this stretch of text an argument that can be summarized as follows: We cannot act except under the supposition that our chosen ends are good, and we can sustain this supposition on full reflection only if we regard our own will as an unconditioned source of value, capable of conferring conditional value on the (permissible) ends that it adopts for itself. Yet our will can be an unconditional source of value only if it is itself unconditionally valuable. So we must attribute unconditional value to our own capacity for rational choice, and must in all consistency attribute the same value to that same capacity wherever we find it. We must, then, regard rational nature wherever it occurs as unconditionally valuable, which is to say, as an end in itself (Korsgaard, 1996, pp. 119-123).

If this is Kant’s argument, I don’t think it succeeds. In the first instance, I do not think that the goodness of our ends can be grounded in the very fact that we have willed them. If any permissible life plan could be given all of the value that a merely permissible life plan can have simply by choosing to pursue it, this would call into question the widespread conviction that it matters greatly whether we get such choices right, and that we can go badly wrong in ways that are morally blameless. Further, it would threaten the very idea of a genuine reason to pursue one (permissible but not required) life plan rather than another. If such plans owed their value entirely to our choice, their value would not differ from other possible plans before the choice that confers value upon them. This means that no genuine value could guide such choices, hence that there could be no good reason to make one choice rather than another. But if we were fully aware of this, we could not succeed in making such a choice in the first place, since (at least by Kantian lights) the will is nothing but practical reason, and cannot operate without implicitly taking something to be a reason. So we seem to need will-independent non-moral value as a condition for the possibility of clear-headed choice among merely permissible ends.

Even if we could resolve this thorny problem (e.g. by invoking as a viable reason for choice our need for some life plan or another, precisely in order to have reasons<sup>2</sup>), the doctrine under discussion would call into question the urgency of our objection to those infringements of freedom that close off our actual life pursuits, provided that these restrictions leave us with some viable alternative life plan, since we could confer upon the remaining alternative all the (non-moral) value that a life plan can have simply by choosing to pursue it. The objection to infringements of liberty would seem rather trivial if the harm imposed by the infringement could really be eliminated at will. So there is a conceptual tension between the stringent affirmation of individual freedom associated with Kantianism and the thesis that all value is conferred by the will.

Suppose that these worries could somehow be overcome, and that it were established that the goodness of our ends is conferred upon them by the fact that we've chosen them. Would this show the rational will itself to have irreplaceable value? I believe not. It might perhaps show that a rational agent's value cannot coherently be transgressed in the name of some end whose value has been conferred by the choice of a rational agent. (I say only that it *might*, as this inference would depend upon a contestable conception of the dynamics of value-conferral.) But it would not, in addition, settle the question how rational agents stand with respect to each other, and for instance whether the value of the continued life of one can be overridden in the name of the continued lives of two others. That is, it would not show rational nature to have what Kant calls a dignity rather than a somewhat complicated price. It would not show this because a value that has no conditions might still be outweighed, for purposes of practical deliberation, by more instances of the same sort of value. We see this, for instance, in familiar hedonistic versions of utilitarianism. Such theories assign value to each and every pleasure. They assert that there is no condition that must be met in order for a pleasure to have value. And yet no one thinks that these theories land in straightforward self-contradiction when they go on to deny the irreplaceable value of these pleasures (and, more pointedly, of the human beings in whom these pleasures occur). What the Kantian gets right is the substantive insistence that this

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<sup>2</sup>. Korsgaard has put forward this option in her own attempts to articulate a broadly Kantian ethical theory (See Korsgaard, 1996b, Lecture 3).

sort of moral arithmetic is out of place when it comes to the value of human life and liberty. But such arithmetic appears to be entirely consistent with the recognition of unconditional value. What it cannot compass is irreplaceable value.

Could we work up a variation of the above-sketched argument that would provide a transcendental ground for irreplaceable rather than merely unconditional value? One option would go by way of our encounter, in practical thought, with our own projects and commitments. We seem to need some project or commitment in order to bring practical deliberation to a successful conclusion, and any such project or commitment will involve a concern not just for future events but for our own future actions. After all, no one else can jump in for us and perform *our* future actions, completing *our* projects and commitments. Thus our projects and commitments might be thought to provide a transcendental practical ground for assigning irreplaceable importance to ourselves. And since each of us can see that all other rational agents have equally compelling grounds for assigning such value to themselves, we might argue along familiar Kantian lines that each of us must assign irreplaceable value to every rational agent.

I don't think this line of reasoning gets us to the intended quarry. The problem is not limited to the last step, where we are asked to leap from a claim about how all rational agents must see themselves to a conclusion about how each of us must see all of them. There are already difficulties in the prior, purely first-personal stretch of the argument. I accept the claim that I am indispensable to the completion of my projects, as you are to yours, and that projects must extend into the future if they are to be sources of practical direction. But, as Williams points out in his reflections on the opera *The Makropulos Case*, the mere possession of a project need not involve acknowledgment of any reason at all to stay around to complete it (Williams, 1973, pp. 82-100). I can coherently prefer to do A rather than B tomorrow if I happen to be around to do something, while being indifferent between doing A tomorrow and not being around to do anything at all. As far as I can see, there is no practical incoherence in having only projects that fall into this purely conditional category. It would be tragic to lack any project that animates the continuation of existence with purpose and meaning. But I do not think that having projects of this worthy sort is a necessary condition for bringing episodes of practical deliberation to a determinate conclusion.

The term in Kant's lexicon that comes closest in meaning to my term 'irreplaceability' is 'dignity'. As we've seen, Kant introduces the notion by distinguishing that which has a dignity from that which has a mere price and hence can be "replaced by something else as its equivalent" (Kant, 1997, 4: 434). Interestingly, he seems to tie the dignity of the human being not to our will considered in its generic end-setting capacity but rather to our will in its capacity as the source of the moral law, hence in its capacity for autonomy. As he explains:

Man in the system of nature (*homo phaenomenon, animal rationale*) is a being of little significance and, along with other animals, considered as products of the earth, has an ordinary value (*pretium vulgare*). Even the fact that he excels these in understanding and can set up ends for himself still gives him only an external value for his usefulness (*praetium usus*), namely, the value of a man in preference to another animal. This is to say that he has a price as a commodity in the exchange of these animals as things. . . . But man as a person, i.e. as the subject of a morally-practical reason, is exalted above all price. For as such a one (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of other people, or even to his own ends, but is to be prized as an end in himself. This is to say, he possesses a dignity... (Kant, 2017, 6: 434-5).

Here Kant tells us rather directly that we ought not to look for his vindication of our status as irreplaceably valuable in his discussion of the will considered simply as a capacity to set and pursue ends. His view seems to be that we have a dignity, and are to be treated as ends in ourselves, only because we are each "the subject of a possible absolutely good will" (G 4: 437) – that is, only because we are capable of acting from recognition of the authority of the moral law arising from the structure of our own will. Yet here too it is not clear why exactly this capacity for moral goodness implies that we possess irreplaceable value. This status seems to enter the picture as part of the substantive content of the moral law, and it is not clear how the status could possibly be grounded in the very idea of a self-legislative capacity. I will argue in Section II that it cannot be.

Of course, the Kantian could simply stipulate that *achtung* involves an intuitive apprehension of the irreplaceable value associated with the capacity for freedom understood as self-legislation, and that *achtung* so understood, along with the irreplaceability that it brings into view, serve as fixed limitations on the task of

formulating acceptable moral principles. This would, I think, be a step in the right direction, since I think this conception of human value is extremely appealing, and I do not think we can provide a constructivist grounding for it. Yet a further problem would remain. The problem is that the phrases ‘rational nature’ and ‘practical reasoner’ seem ill-suited to the task of bringing irreplaceability into view, and ‘respect’ seems an inapt name for the subjective acknowledgment of this irreplaceability. While I lack an ear for German, I think the same worry extends to the term ‘*achtung*,’ given that in many contexts it can be translated with the English term ‘warning,’ and this connotation seems discordant with our clearest apprehensions of the irreplaceable value of, say, a human infant or a badly wounded and therefore physically vulnerable adult. It seems to me, then, that Kantianism has trouble making full sense of the irreplaceable value of human beings not just because of the difficulties in providing a rational grounding of the value but also because the theory is cast in the wrong conceptual key to give apt expression to the value. I’ll say more about this difficulty in Section III below.

## **II. Neo-Kantianism and Irreplaceable Value**

I’ve suggested that Kant’s theory does not make full sense of the picture of human value that accounts in large part for the appeal of the theory’s substantive moral principles. Yet it is one thing to speak of the limitations of Kant’s view, and quite another to speak of the limitations of Kantianism taken in the wide sense, as a family of views. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider every view that might be grouped within this family, but I do want to consider one common neo-Kantian approach to ethics. I have in mind the contractualist strategy, which is to say, the strategy that focuses not on the task of the isolated practical reasoner who must make sense of his own exercises of practical deliberation, but on the task of multiple reasoners concerned to justify their actions to one another in terms that each can accept (or can reasonably accept, or cannot reasonably reject, etc.). I do not think that we can provide an informative derivation of irreplaceability from the idea of each human as an equal moral legislator, or (to say the same thing in other words) an equal provider and demander of reasons. Any such argument would seem to require a substantive account of what is and is not an acceptable reason – an account, in particular, that would itself underwrite our status as

irreplaceable. The notions of reciprocal justificatory exchange, or equal legislative authority, would merely postpone rather than resolve the question of irreplaceability.

This point can be sharpened by looking at Stephen Darwall's case against utilitarianism. Darwall acknowledges that the utilitarian might accept what he, Darwall, says about the second-personal nature of moral reasons, then proceed to offer up utilitarianism as a substantive answer to the question what we can reasonably demand of each other (Darwall, 2009, p. 130). This is not a mere hypothetical possibility; it comes very close to describing the view of Derek Parfit, who argues that "Kantian Contractualism implies Rule Consequentialism" (Parfit, 2011, p. 417). Supposing that this is a coherent form of argument, then one cannot settle the substantive confrontation between utilitarian and deontological moral theories merely by regarding morality as the reasonable outcome of the task of group self-legislation. One must adopt a particular understanding of the kind of value that human beings have – an understanding that goes beyond the mere insistence that we relate to each other as equal and unconditional sources of authoritative demands, and that settles such questions as whether human lives can legitimately be traded against one another in pursuit of utility-maximization. It is only after we settle a range of questions about the kind of value we have, including the question whether we have irreplaceable value, that we will be able to determine what we can legitimately demand of each other.

A similar point can, I think, be made about Rawls' argument for the inviolability of individual citizens. This result is not guaranteed by Rawls' adoption of the original position as a device for constructing acceptable principles of justice. The parties to the original position consider utilitarian principles of justice. As Rawls sees it, they reject such principles because they favor the highly risk-averse decision procedure that he calls "maximin" – that is, the principle of maximizing the value of the worst possible outcome. Yet maximin is certainly no less controversial, and probably more controversial, than Rawls' above-quoted intuitive affirmation of (what I am calling) the irreplaceable value of persons, and his associated denunciation of utilitarianism for riding roughshod over this irreplaceability. Indeed, the route to reflective equilibrium arguably runs from our confidence in the irreplaceable value (or inviolability) of human beings to whatever fine-tuning of the

original position will yield principles that express a commitment to it, not the other way round.

Darwall's theory can be seen as an effort to circumvent a basic problem, often called "Prichard's dilemma", that faces any theoretical attempt to shed light on the authority of morality.<sup>3</sup> Such attempts cannot succeed by showing that there are non-moral reasons to be moral, since dutiful actions are not morally exemplary if they are chosen for non-moral (e.g. prudential) reasons. So it seems that the only choice is to show that there are moral reasons to be moral. Yet if the authority of moral reasons is in doubt, this would of course be viciously circular. The trick to circumventing Prichard's dilemma is to locate moral demands in a broader circle of human concerns that are "far enough" from morality that they can genuinely illuminate its authority, even if that authority is in some doubt, yet "close enough" that their invocation does not improperly ground moral concern in some other, quite alien kind of reason. This is precisely what Darwall is trying to do by placing moral obligations in a circle of related concepts that illuminate the normative structure of second-personal relations. Yet Darwall operates with an extremely restrictive conception of the "right kind of reason" to be moral.<sup>4</sup> As a result, he places moral duties in a circle of related concerns with too tight a circumference to cast fresh light either on their content or their importance. This is why his position seems at times to boil down to the unhelpful insistence that moral obligations are required because people can legitimately require that one perform them, and that one must act morally because other people can legitimately demand that one do so.

We do of course have intuitions about what people can legitimately demand of us, and we of them. But we have these views because our entire lives have unfolded in human relations that go well beyond those of mutual responsibility and respect. It is from this wider context that we gain our sense of the value of human beings and human lives. If we could somehow think away this wider context, we would be left with a barren and wholly asocial landscape against which a voiced demand would

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<sup>3</sup>. This dilemma was put forward by H. A. Prichard in "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" in *Mind* 21 (1912), 21-37.

<sup>4</sup>. This, I think, is what induces Darwall to criticize Scanlon for seeking to illuminate the authority of moral reasons by invoking the intrinsic value of human relationships conditioned by mutual recognition or respect. Darwall regards this move as providing the wrong kind of reasons to be moral. I think it can persuasively be seen, instead, as a viable way to amplify our sense of the value of moral decency. (See Darwall, 2009, 36, 316-18.)

protrude as something absurd rather than as an urgent Darwallian summons.

Suppose someone to be bitten by remorse for murdering a fellow human being. Does this consist only in a full reckoning with the fact that the victim had the authority to demand not to be killed, and that others have the authority to blame one for having done so? This is, roughly speaking, where the Darwallian circle of interrelated second-personal concepts runs out. But it seems radically inadequate to the reckoning at hand. After all, others have similar authority to demand that we not turn our backs to them when we've just been introduced, yet there is a world of difference between rudeness and murder. Full remorse for murder is not simply a matter of seeing that the victim had the authority to demand not to be killed. It is a matter of seeing whatever it is about the victim that makes this particular requirement a solemn one. This is what I am gesturing towards with the term 'irreplaceability'.

We can approach the same point by imagining someone who makes clear that he does not demand observance of even the most minimal moral limitations on our treatment of him. He will lodge no objection, make no contrary demand, if we speak to him in a humiliating way, subject him to pain, even torture him. Surely the obligation not to humiliate or torture this person would remain constant whether or not he is prepared to demand its observance. The obligation seems then to be grounded in his value, to which he is currently blind, and not in his authority to make demands. It is highly implausible to suppose that we would be respecting him as a demand-maker by insisting, for his sake, upon a demand that he himself declines to make.

Here we come face to face with two points that we've seen before. First the Kantian approach seems capable of affirming irreplaceable value at the level of substantive ethical claims only by importing this same irreplaceability as an independent ethical intuition. Second, the approach seems to provide an ill-fitting theoretical setting for this independent evaluative insight, for we do not doubt the irreplaceability of those human beings who are not themselves moved to demand its recognition, or who lack the capacity to make the demand. On the contrary, we often have particularly powerful apprehensions of irreplaceability when we come face to face with newborns or with adults whose illness or suffering has placed them beyond the reach of reasoned dialogue.

### III. Irreplaceable Value, Respect and Love

Now, the Kantian takes all moral demands to be expressions of mutual respect. Perhaps the root of the problems we've been considering is that recognition of the irreplaceable value of our fellow human beings lies beyond the scope of mere respect. That would certainly explain why Kantianism must import the affirmation of irreplaceability as an independent ethical intuition, and why it seems to offer an ill-fitting articulation of this imported intuition.

In attempting to examine this suggestion, however, we run into a serious methodological difficulty. For we cannot explore the topic at hand unless we have a firm grip on what we are talking about when we say such things as that the loss of human life cannot be compensated without remainder. Yet while there are moments in almost any life that bring home the full resonance of such affirmations of irreplaceability, these moments are rare and often very painful, and the understanding achieved in them cannot dependably be reproduced in full whenever philosophical reflection happens to demand it. Nor can we bring our quarry into view by fixing upon a generic idea of irreplaceability, suitable for application not only to humans but also to pets or inanimate objects. For it seems possible to have a workable understanding of the irreplaceability of, say, an artifact or historic relic, yet still not grasp what people mean when they speak of the irreplaceable value of human beings. The term 'irreplaceable' seems to function like an attributive adjective, at least in the sense that its meaning depends partly on the kind to which it is applied.

In wrestling with this methodological problem, we are hampered by the professional philosophical commitment to bloodlessly abstract jargon. This commitment often serves the laudable purpose of heading off sentimentality and its attendant illusions, but here it threatens to distance us from lucid apprehension of a genuine value in whose reality we have great confidence. It threatens to take what we know in the moment of birth as a near-miraculous advent, and in the moment of death as a yawning abyss of absence, and to shrink it to the unimposing dimensions of an anomaly in decision theory. I do not know of any string of words that can reliably induce appreciation of the irreplaceability of our fellow human beings. But if I had to suggest something, I might quote the last stanza of Auden's "Funeral Blues":

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.<sup>5</sup>

This is an expression of grief, not last respects. Respect – at least in the ordinary, non-technical sense – is entirely consistent with a lack of grief at the passing of the person who is its object. There is no tension in saying: I respected him, but I can't say I'm sorry to see him go. Respect is properly called forth by awareness of the existence of another human being. It is one aspect of full acknowledgement of another. Kantians may be right that respect involves the recognition of powerful reasons to do what one can to prolong and enhance the lives of other human beings. But respect alone does not ground gladness for the existence of others, or grief at their loss. This suggests that it does not itself include an appreciation of the irreplaceable value of others.

Here we can see a telling contrast between respect and love. Now love can take many forms, including at least the three forms distinguished with the Greek terms *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. The lines between these kinds of love are fluid. A single relationship can involve all three. But we catch sight of one thing that unifies them as a coherent category when we consider that they all have an internal connection with grief. To the question “Why are you grieving,” a suitable answer is “I loved him” and the answer does not await clarification concerning what kind of love one had – whether erotic, intimately friendly, or neighborly. There is no grief without at least a modicum of love, and no love without a propensity for grief. Indeed, I believe that grief is the form taken by love when its object is (thought to be) extinguished. But if grief is a particularly vivid appreciation of the irreplaceable value of a human being, and if grief is just love in the context of loss, then presumably love consists at least in part in appreciation of irreplaceable value.

I think this is basically right, but I have a terminological concern about this way of putting the matter. For if we take the term at face value, ‘irreplaceability’ is a relational property – the property, namely, of having no suitable replacement. The evaluative property that love brings into view, and that accounts for our grief at the

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<sup>5</sup> W. H. Auden, “Funeral Blues,” <https://allpoetry.com/Funeral-Blues>.

death of loved ones, does not seem to be similarly relational. It seems to be an intrinsic evaluative property that implies, but is not exhausted by, the absence of any adequate replacement. It would be nice to have another term for this more fundamental intrinsic property. Yet I'm not entirely happy with any of the terms that suggest themselves. Kant's 'dignity' does not seem apt, partly because it has a well-established philosophical use under which its full appreciation is respect, not love. The term 'sacredness' is unsuited for fully secular deployment, while 'preciousness' sounds affectedly delicate – in a word, precious. In the end, then, I think it best to leave the intrinsic property unnamed, and to speak of it through the lens of the relational property implied by it, since this keeps its ethical import in clear view.

It might be thought that if love and grief really are apprehensions of the property under discussion, then that property must be relational in a different sense. For what surfaces in moments of grief might be thought to be irreplaceability *to the person doing the grieving*. Yet I do not think that the irreplaceability brought into view by grief is fundamentally person-relative. The irreparable gap in the life of the grieving person is a consequence of the irreplaceability of the person whose life once unfolded where that hole has suddenly appeared. The hole cannot possibly be filled *because* its former occupant admits of no substitute. I think we must take this view of the experience of irreplaceable loss on pain of assigning to grief a perversely self-directed content, making it ultimately about the griever rather than the deceased.

This is no doubt a contestable point, so perhaps we should explore it a bit further. Suppose I am pondering the news that 30 are dead in an airport bombing in Brussels, or that a drone has sent a Hellfire missile into an Afghan wedding party. If am not fully awake to the significance of such news, as usually I am not, I cannot simply attain full appreciation at will. But there are ways to jog the mind. It does not help to remind myself that the victims were practical reasoners. For me, at least, that language does not open the way to a deeper and more illuminating appreciation of the wrongdoing and its stakes. But I can sometimes bring myself to lucidity by recalling that the victims were each somebody's child and perhaps also somebody's sibling, somebody's lover, somebody's spouse. The point is not to remind myself that in addition to the badness of the killing, there is also the anguish of the loved ones who are left behind. The point is to attain an especially lucid

apprehension of the utter irreplaceability of the freshly dead, because this is essential to comprehending the wrong that has been done to them. But if the grieving lover's standpoint really can help us to appreciate the irreplaceable value of the dead, this value must not after all be indexed to the griever. It must be irreplaceability *tout court*.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we *must actually love everyone* in order to sustain the idea of ourselves as having weighty duties to all human beings. Rather, I am suggesting that love reveals to us a dimension of the value of human beings that would be unknown to us without it and that is most clearly seen in its light, and further, that we could not understand of the urgency of our duties if this dimension of value were unknown to us.

#### **IV. Aristotelianism, Directed Duties, and Irreplaceability**

As noted at the outset, the return to Kantian ethics among late 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers was partly motivated by recoil from the moral mathematics of utilitarianism, and its readiness to picture losses of life and liberty as compensated without remainder by benefits to others. Interestingly, the essay widely credited with initiating the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century revival of Aristotelian ethics, Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," gives voice to just the same sort of complaint against utilitarianism. Anscombe goes so far as to say that philosophers show "a corrupt mind" insofar as they affirm the abstract utilitarian thesis that in certain kinds of cases it would be permissible, or perhaps even required, to treat innocent people unjustly in order to secure compensating benefits for others (Anscombe, 1958, 1-19, quotation, p. 17).

If we think of Anscombe as an early proponent of what has come to be called virtue ethics, this claim might seem surprising. After all, contemporary Aristotelians who profess to take inspiration from Anscombe have had relatively little to say about the virtue of justice. Moreover, this omission is widely regarded as non-accidental, since many philosophers think that Aristotelianism cannot provide a compelling conception of justice, precisely because it cannot provide a proper conception of the moral importance of individual persons. The basic objection, which has been pressed by theorists as various as Sam Scheffler,

Nicholas Wolterstorff, Eric Mack, Gerald Gaus and Thomas Hurka,<sup>6</sup> is that Aristotle and those inspired by him give the wrong kind of reason for other-regarding moral norms. This, it is said, is because they must ultimately ground the badness of murder, rape, etc. in some associated setback to the well-being of the perpetrator rather than in harm or affront to the victim.

This objection turns, I think, on a straightforwardly mistaken reading of Aristotle. *Eudaimonia* is lifelong activity in accordance with and arising from good reasoning. It is not the ground of the reasons recognized by those who achieve it. It is, I believe and have argued elsewhere, an anachronistic distortion to categorize the reasons we act upon when we live an *eudaimon* life as prudential, or even as self-referential (Brewer, 2009, Chs. 6 and 7). When we display courage on the battlefield, we are acting in order to defend the city, not in order to enhance our well-being. Similarly, when we act in ways that express the virtue of justice, our aim is to give another his due, not to make our own lives go better. It is true that our lives would go badly if we chose not to act courageously or justly, but this is because we would thereby be failing to do what we have reason to do, and our flourishing requires that we manage our lives in light of the verdicts of a well-functioning and therefore truth-tracking faculty of practical reason. Avoiding this setback in *eudaimonia* is not a self-standing reason to do it. Indeed, it would be self-defeating to do it solely for this reason, since the resulting action would not qualify as a constituent of the lifelong activity that Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*. The *phronimos* consistently chooses the *eudaimon* life, but not under that description.

Thus far, courageous and just actions are on the same footing: neither is performed for prudential reasons. Why think, in addition, that Aristotle construes just actions as something we owe it to particular others to do? Aristotle makes clear that an unjust act is always unjust to some particular person, and that no one can be done an injustice except by someone's unjust act. Justice, then, seems to be a sphere where every wrong action wrongs some particular, identifiable person. Further, as Michael Thompson has helpfully pointed out, the Greek virtue of justice takes its name (*dikaiosune*) and much of its character from the legal term '*dike*', most commonly used to denote private suits that could only be raised by the

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<sup>6</sup> For references to the relevant works, see footnote no. 7 of Mark LeBar, "Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints," *Ethics* 119, No. 4 (2009), 642-71.

aggrieved party of his representatives. Such suits were understood by contrast with public suits (*graphe*) which could be brought by any citizen. If we lean some weight on this etymological connection, perhaps we can say that the Aristotelian virtue of *dikaiosune* is the virtue of treating others in just those ways that they can legitimately demand to be treated (See Thompson, 2004, 333-384; especially 345).<sup>7</sup> We can say, in other words, that it is a practically efficacious sensitivity to a certain range of what Darwall would call second-personal reasons.

If this reading of Aristotle is right, and if he is a paradigmatic eudaimonist, then it seems that eudaimonism can after all accommodate the thought that some ethical demands are dyadic or directional, in the sense that failing to heed them is not only wrong but wrongs some particular person. But the question remains whether the Aristotelian is in a position to offer a compelling account of the sort of value that human beings have, such that they should figure in our practical thought in this way.

I've suggested that Kantianism owes its appeal in large part to its substantive recognition of the irreplaceable value of every human being. I've also suggested that view of the value of human beings is internal to love. There is, as it happens, a well-known thinker who incorporates into the virtue of love into an otherwise largely Aristotelian picture of virtuous character. That thinker is, of course, Thomas Aquinas. (It bears mention that Anscombe herself was heavily influenced by Aquinas, though she reportedly made it a practice not to mention that certain of her ideas came from this source because she thought this would discourage other philosophers from taking these ideas seriously.<sup>8</sup>) The virtue of love is the key to Aquinas's doctrine of the unity of the virtues: without it, no virtue can be perfect, and it implies the perfection of all other virtues (Aquinas, 1948, I, II, Q 62, A 4 and II, II, Q 23, A 8). In this respect, love plays the role in Aquinas that practical wisdom plays in Aristotle. Love "quickens" and refines the other virtues, bringing them to their proper perfection. It does this by informing them with vivid awareness of the end that gives them their point (Aquinas, 1948, II, II, Q 23, A 8).

Now, for Aquinas this ultimate end is God, and our happiness consists in contemplative appreciation (which is to say, active love) of this end. But each

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<sup>7</sup> See also [http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article\\_law\\_glossary?page=all](http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_law_glossary?page=all).

<sup>8</sup> Candace Vogler, "Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe and the New Virtue Ethics," at: [https://www.academia.edu/2500806/Aristotle\\_Aquinas\\_Anscombe\\_and\\_the\\_New\\_Virtue\\_Ethics](https://www.academia.edu/2500806/Aristotle_Aquinas_Anscombe_and_the_New_Virtue_Ethics)

human being bears a likeness to this ultimate end, and is therefore also a proper object of love. When the virtues are “quickened” by love, all human beings show forth as bearers of a special sort of value, and objects of a special sort of concern. If I am right about the internal connection between love and irreplaceability, then this must mean, at least, that they show forth as irreplaceable.

I think that there is a kernel of insight in Aquinas’s view of the virtue of love, and that it can be incorporated into a secular virtue ethics. To see this, we might begin by noting that love seems in certain respects to be well suited for the role of perfecting and unifying the (other) virtues. This is so, in the first instance, because it has a perfectionist structure, and that which lights up the evaluative stakes of, and proper practical response to, all possible circumstances does not itself lie in a mean between extremes, but must be a perfection. Second, it is a perfection of the right sort to count as a virtue, since it is a motivating apprehension of value. Third, it has the right reach to perfect all other virtues, since it provides a sweeping and general picture of the values to which we ought to be responsive.

We can see more clearly how love “quickens” the evaluative perception given by other virtues by building on the connection we’ve discerned between love and irreplaceability. It does not take love, or any special evaluative insight associated with love, to grasp the bare fact that another is suffering. However, one cannot fully understand the badness of another’s suffering unless one’s apprehension of that suffering is “quickened” by awareness of that other’s irreplaceable value. After all, suffering borrows its significance in large part from the value of the life it mars, and there is nothing essentially tragic in the marring of a life if that life lacks irreplaceable value. Suffering of this sort can be compensated without remainder by the good fortune or happiness of another. If our apprehension of suffering is conditioned, even implicitly, by the idea of its openness to such trans-personal compensation, we fail to grasp its stakes.

This point generalizes to whatever makes the lives of human beings go well or badly. To take a few examples, one cannot see romantic loves or family bonds as running deep, or as carrying the significance one is likely to attach to one’s own loves and family bonds, unless one credits these romantic loves and family bonds as mutual non-delusory apprehensions of a kind of value whose loss cannot be compensated. Nor can one see another’s experience of oppression or persecution

as a genuine experience of the intolerable thing we know the oppression and persecution of human beings to be, unless one sees in their subjugation and persecution the threat of the tragic withering of something (e.g. a life, or an array of personal projects and relationships) whose loss cannot be made good by gains registered by others. And if one cannot see others' loves and sufferings as deep or potentially tragic, then one cannot hear their words as giving witness to real love or real suffering, nor see in their facial expressions or gestures or art or music the signs of the sort of emotions with which one credits oneself, the sort that run deep.<sup>9</sup>

The virtues all involve sensitivity and responsiveness to those things that make human lives go well or badly, and a proper grasp of the value of any such thing must be limned by awareness of the kind of value possessed by the life it conditions. For this reason love, which brings with it an awareness of the irreplaceable value of human beings and their lives, can enliven and refine the evaluative sensitivity associated with any virtue.

It might be thought that love of the sort I've been discussing cannot give us a grasp of the irreplaceability of each and every human being, since those people who are truly evil are not fitting objects of love. This is a tempting view, but I think it is mistaken. A liminal awareness of irreplaceability is essential even to a full appreciation of evil. Without this background awareness, we cannot appreciate the stakes of serious vice, among which must be counted the irreplaceable loss of the chance to live well. This is what is properly grieved in the case of an evil person, and in extreme cases grief might even be appropriate before death, though perhaps it must always be conditioned by some measure of hope (even if only for a glimmer of remorse).

As has perhaps become clear by now, I favor a McDowellian "no priority" view of the relationship between the attitude of love and the property of irreplaceability.<sup>10</sup> That is, I think that the attitude and the property move together, and neither can be explained without reference to the other. A full explanation of the attitude of love will have to mention that it brings irreplaceability into view, and

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<sup>9</sup>. Here I am borrowing amply from Raimond Gaita's work on the recognition of our common humanity (See for instance Gaita, 2003, pp. 261-77, especially p. 267 and 273; See also Gaita, 1991 and 2004, pp. xiii & xxiii).

<sup>10</sup>. For more on this sort of view, see McDowell, 1998, Chapters 7 & 8.

a full explanation of the relevant notion of irreplaceability will require reference to how things seem when we love. Those who have experienced love can bring the evaluative property to mind by talk of irreplaceability. But absent some experience with love, this word would not be sufficient to convey the property in question, even to someone who had a grasp of the irreplaceable value of something other than a human being.

I've tried to show that viewing another as irreplaceably valuable involves a kind of gestalt shift – that is, a comprehensive yet subtle alteration in the way one hears another's words, interprets her actions and emotions, understands her relationships, and sees her gestures and facial expressions. Here we catch sight of an important feature of moral value, a feature that might be called its unlocalizability. Recognition of this sort of value undergirds our capacity to grieve the loss of our friends, to have the deepest sort of conversation with people in full trust that their words and sentiments run deep, to read literature with the sort of trust in the author's sensibility that permits us to find solace and inspiration in her work, and so forth.

Moral value, then, is not a special and isolated kind of value, relevant only to the formulation and vindication of a range of interpersonal demands or obligations. This suggests that philosophical inquiry into the foundations of morality won't get very far if they are conducted in isolation from broader reflection about the human good. But it simultaneously suggests a different vision of fruitful philosophical reflection on morality. For the irreplaceable value of human beings, which gives weight and urgency to moral duties, might be clarified by fully explicating the value of many of our most important interactions with other people, ranging from our intimate loves and friendships, to our appreciation of the literature and music of others, to our deepest and most valuable conversations. We might sensibly hope to bolster our confidence in the importance of moral duties by exploring these interactions. It would not be morally objectionable to be moved to honor various moral "thou shalt nots" by appreciation of this ubiquitous value, as for instance it would be objectionable to be moved by a sense of self-interest. This provides one way of thinking about the nature and point of (modern) eudaimonism in ethical theory. It is a strategy for navigating Prichard's dilemma, grounded in the thought that one can range very far afield from central cases of moral duty without changing the subject.

## V. Love and Its Place in Ethics

It might be objected that I've mistakenly attempted to inform an ethical universalism with a kind of love that cannot by its nature be universal in reach. Put another way, I've focused on a picture of value internal to *philia* or *eros*, but not to *agape*, yet only this last sort of love can serve as the basis for a properly inclusive and impartial ethical theory. Further, it might be charged, an ethics based on *agape* would be utilitarian, not Kantian or Aristotelian, for *agape* involves a motivation to further the well-being of all human beings, and this is just what utilitarianism requires.

If universal benevolence understood along utilitarian lines really were a form of love, the charge at hand would be a powerful one. But I do not think this is a plausible view, for it can make no sense of our reluctance to regard unbridled egoism as a variant of the same relation we have to others when we love them. It is, after all, deeply implausible to suppose that a purely egoistic person already has first-hand acquaintance with love, and can grasp the nature of the love relationships that non-egoists regard as more valuable by simple substitution of variables.

As I see it, talk of self-love is misleading in something like the way that talk of asking oneself something, or informing oneself, is misleading. We do of course use these forms of speech, but the meaning of the relevant verbs shifts subtly in the reflexive case. As Matthias Haase has persuasively argued, to ask oneself something is not to seek to be informed of the answer but to wonder what the answer might be, and to inform oneself of something is not to impart knowledge to oneself but to take steps to acquire it. To quote Haase, "If I do not know, then I am not the one to ask. And if I do, there is no point in telling me" (Haase, 2014, p. 5). The verb 'love' also subtly shifts its meaning in the intrapersonal case, and for the same reason: strictly speaking there is no second person to encounter here. Self-love is not genuine love because genuine love is an encounter with a separate person who leads a separate life and can offer a distinct vantage point on the world – someone who can disagree with us and hence can meaningfully agree with us, someone whose considered views can take us wholly by surprise. Only someone with this sort of separateness can provide the kind of accompaniment that we know and value under the term 'love'.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates elaborates a view of love that he credits to the

mystic Diotima, according to which interpersonal love (*eros*) consists in a longing to beget what is good in the medium of another's soul (Plato, 1994, 206C-209E). Aristotle takes a somewhat similar view in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he claims that love (*philia*) "to the full extent" (Aristotle, 1985, 1157a32) occurs when two people are drawn together by appreciation of the good in each, and who are in a position to contribute to, and enhance, each other's goodness (Aristotle, 1985, 1155a12-16; 1170a11-12; 1172a10-14). These sources provide a picture of interpersonal love as an active appreciation of, and commitment to, the emerging potentiality for goodness in the life of another human being. Yet Diotima and Aristotle differ in their conception of the detachability of this appreciation of goodness from the human beings who occasion it. For Diotima, appreciation of the good present in particular humans can eventually give way to a more direct appreciation of the good, detached from its worldly instantiations (Plato, 1994, 210A-212B), while for Aristotle our most revealing apprehensions of the human good are immanent, and take the form of an appreciation of the particular path of emergence towards the good that organizes and lends intelligibility to this or that human life. It is this latter, Aristotelian sort of love that, in my view, provides us with whatever grip we have on the irreplaceable value of human beings. And while it is of course true that this love cannot be universalized, since we cannot know everyone well, it is suited to enrich our understanding of what is at stake in each human life, and why the lives of our kind have a value that does not admit of substitution.

Love dissolves into egoistic aloneness if others are not apprehended as equally real and equally valuable, but it dissolves into what might be called "utilitarian aloneness" if what is recognized as equally real and equally valuable is not, at the end of the day, truly other. It is only in this latter case that it will seem tempting to accept the implicit utilitarian view that the difference between persons is no more significant, for purposes of practical deliberation, than the difference between time-slices of a single life. Between the aloneness of egoism and the aloneness of overzealous utilitarian inclusiveness is the Aristotelian conception of *philia* as encounter with "another oneself" – an awkward phrase, no doubt, but one that marks rather than evades the inner tensions and potential pitfalls of interpersonal love. Both words need to be emphasized to hear what this phrase says. Another

*oneself*, like to this one, but not this one, rather, *another* oneself.

What keeps us from fully apprehending the reality of others is not ignorance. There is no proposition that we do not know, such that we could clear things up by providing a convincing argument for its truth. Even in the most favored cases – say, of long-time lovers, lying next to each other in bed – the sudden full acknowledgment of the presence of a fellow traveler from cradle to grave, right there on the next pillow, can sometimes arise with percussive force. If love quickens and completes the virtues, we should not expect the completion and quickening of the virtues to be more than an intermittent and imperfect achievement. We are often consigned to plodding along in the darkness, guided by dim memory of how the value of our fellow beings seems when our vision is sharper, and holding ourselves mechanically to a few urgent “thou shalt nots.” Yet if I’m right, the most convincing of our substantive ethical theories are animated by a conception of value that we attain to only in these intermittent and imperfect moments of clarity, and the clearest of these moments are moments of love.

### **Conclusion**

I have tried to show that Kantianism cannot provide an independent rational vindication, or even a fully illuminating articulation, of the irreplaceable value of our fellow human beings, and have sketched a virtue-theoretic ethical theory that can do better in this regard. The theory in question borrows from Aquinas the thought that love is the keystone of the virtues, unifying and perfecting the other virtues, and attempts to show that love essentially involves a vivid apprehension of irreplaceable value. The hope is to have outlined a strategy for overcoming two widespread and fundamental criticisms of virtue-theoretic approaches to ethical theory: (1) that such approaches cannot make good sense of the value of other human beings; and (2) that such approaches cannot make good sense of duties whose fulfillment is owed to, and hence can be demanded by, other human beings.

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