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# Review of Theunissen, L. Nandi. The Value of Humanity.

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Theunissen, L. Nandi. The Value of Humanity.
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The original question of moral philosophy is why I should care about anyone. A popular answer has it that I owe things to people, both myself and others, because they are valuable. Different kinds of value demand different kinds of response, and there is something about the value of humanity that forbids me from chopping up my neighbors and using their bones to make Halloween decorations. But if we want to say this, we face some obvious questions. *Why* is humanity valuable? And *in what way* is it valuable?

L. Nandi Theunissen's excellent book is concerned with these questions. Her answers are situated in a more general thesis about value. There are lots of things that are good because they are of benefit—because they are *good for* someone or something. They have relational value. But according to some, there is also absolute value. Some things are good *simpliciter*, not because they benefit anything. Theunissen is interested in the hypothesis that all value is relational. This claim is motivated by abundant examples, and it is the standard view of the ancient Greeks. Most of the book is aimed at overcoming two obstacles to the claim. The first obstacle concerns the value of humanity. If the relational view is correct, it can seem like we have to say that human beings are valuable just insofar as they are useful, and this seems like a poor foundation for morality, especially when compared to Kantian pieties about the holiness of human dignity. In response, Theunissen offers a more nuanced and attractive conception of the relational value of humanity. "People are of value because we are constituted in such a way that we are able to be good for ourselves in the sense that we are able to lead flourishing

lives." (2) Thus humanity is, like everything else, relationally valuable, but not in the exploitative way that serfs are good for their lords. Each of us is *good for ourselves* insofar as our capacity to value enables us to lead good lives. The second obstacle is an argument purporting to show that relational value must be conditioned on absolute value lest we fall into a vicious regress. (This argument is associated with Kant, but there's disagreement about whether Kant actually makes it.) Theunissen accepts much of the argument, but she ultimately concludes that this regress can be halted by something other than a foundation of absolute value. It can end in a small circle of reciprocal benefit.

More philosophy books should be like this. It is short and tightly focused on defending a small handful of views. The theses themselves are creative yet well-situated in larger traditions. The argument is detailed and rigorous without becoming tedious. Tangents and detours are kept to a minimum. I learned a healthy amount about an area I thought I knew well. Anyone interested in the topic of the title owes the book careful attention. The remainder of this review will be devoted to engaging with the book's arguments.

I'll first address Theunissen's treatment of the regress argument, which goes like this: (i) Some things are good because they can be good for something of value. (ii) The relation in (i) creates a chain of dependence between valuable things. (iii) Any such chain must terminate on pain of a vicious regress. (iv) In particular, it must terminate with an item *x* such that (a) some things are valuable because they are valuable for *x* and (b) *x*'s value does not depend on being good for something else. (v) Valuers meet the conditions (a) and (b). (vi) Therefore, valuers can

terminate the regress on conditions of value. (This is a compression of the argument on page 61.) Theunissen considers several objections to this argument before coming to her own. She offers a proposal on which the regress described in step (iii) is halted not by the absolute value posited in (iv), but by a pair of mutually dependent goods. The chain of dependence relations of ordinary relational goods (motor oil, aspirin, sprinkler heads) does depend on the value of valuers. But these valuers are not absolutely valuable: they are *good for* something else, namely their own lives, which, in turn, can be valuable for those very same valuers. So the regress terminates in a binary star system: the valuer and their life, each of which is capable of benefitting the other.

Theunissen's proposal has the same geometry as other "virtuous circularity" approaches to stopping regresses—like coherentism about epistemic justification—and I think it invites versions of some standard objections to these views. One question has to do with the individuation of the nodes. If someone proposed a coherentism on which the web of mutually supporting beliefs that halted a regress of justification numbered only two, we would be suspicious. What distinguishes a coherentist about $p$ and $q$ from a foundationalist about the conjunctive proposition $p \wedge q$? I think Theunissen faces an analogous question. She avoids absolutism by saying the valuer and their life are relationally good for each other, but what about things containing the union of these two entities—an entity that is partly constituted by a capacity for valuing and the life that is directed by that capacity? Given the close connection between valuing and the life a human being leads, this isn't an exotic fusion. Indeed, we might think that there is a familiar concept of a person

that includes both of these things. When I talk about Wellington, I am not talking merely about a dead aristocrat's capacity for valuing, but about the individual who triumphed at Waterloo. So what should we say about the value of *this* kind of entity? If Theunissen is right, then it terminates a chain of value dependence without depending on anything else for its value, without necessarily being good *for* anything else. (Is it good for itself? Maybe, but maybe not.) So the possibility I am suggesting is that even if Theunissen is right that all suitably basic entities have only relational value, there might be composite entities that nonetheless achieve absolute value by containing the appropriate dependence relations within themselves.

There is another problem that arises in analogy with coherentism. We can imagine networks of mutually supporting beliefs that despite their internal coherence are, as a whole, completely unjustified because they are not suitably tethered to the world. Think of someone who takes the encyclopedic lore of some fantasy world to be literally true. Such a person's beliefs seem unjustified despite their coherence. The analogous challenge for Theunissen is whether there are networks of items that stand in the value dependence relations she envisions but are worthless because they are "untethered" to genuine value. As an example, imagine a machine with many parts and accessories. The plookplook is good for the bongbong because the plookplook keeps the bongbong from drying out, and the bongbong is good for the doodlidee because the bongbong keeps the doodlidee lubricated, and the doodlidee is good for the dingalingdong because the doodlidee can help the dingalingdong stay in equilibrium. Now the dingalingdong itself is

good for something else, namely the tinktinktink, which, in return, can be good for the dingalingdong. So the tinktinktink and the dingalingdong are mutually beneficial. What I have described here is a structure of value dependence that looks just like the one that Theunissen offers, only mine bottoms out in dingalingdongs and tinktinktinks instead of in valuers and their lives. For all I have said, I don't think we can say anything about whether the items I have listed are valuable or not. They could be a pile of junk. So the question is: what distinguishes these things from the structure that involves valuers and their lives?

Theunissen does not address this question directly, but she discusses an adjacent one. One kind of objection to circularity relies on a "metaphysical principle": "When an object, activity, or state of affairs, X, is instrumentally, constitutively, or in some other way good for a valuer V, and X is valuable, then the value of X must ultimately derive from the value of V." (68) This principle tells against circularity because it requires that the value of such things be borrowed from a foundational good—an "arch lender". On Theunissen's view, there is no arch lender; there are just two relational goods whose benefit can be mutual. But the metaphysical principle is false, Theunissen says. For something can be good not because it conduces to goodness but because it mitigates badness. For example, aspirin does not produce a good, from which it could borrow value; it is good because it prevents an evil. I have two concerns with this reply. Most immediately, the counterexample to the metaphysical principle seems too narrow to support the weight of Theunissen's ambitions. We can restrict the metaphysical principle in the following way and avoid the counterexample: "When an object, activity, or state of

affairs, X, is instrumentally, constitutively, or in some other way good for a valuer V, and X is valuable *but not because it mitigates badness*, then the value of X must ultimately derive from the value of V." (Theunissen mentions this possibility in note 25 on page 70.) It seems likely to me that we can find Xs that will allow us to restate the anti-circularity argument with this narrower version of the principle. But more importantly, I think metaphysical claim about "borrowing" value is only one way to get at the larger issue I pressed in the previous paragraph. There can be systems of value dependence that look just like Theunissen's but are, in whole and in part, quite worthless. Water does not magically appear when we install the pipes. So what makes the networks of value dependence involving me and you different? One answer to this question—suggested to me by Theunissen in correspondence—would be that there is something special about organisms and the relation of benefitting-an-organism that makes the metaphorical pipes come pre-filled. This is an intriguing possibility, and I wonder whether Theunissen needs something like this thesis to make good on her proposal. (The other obvious answer, of course, is that there is something special about us: our freedom and rationality make us absolutely valuable.)

I started this review by talking about the moral uses of claims about the value of humanity. There is something about the value of humanity that forbids me from using and abusing other people. But can Theunissen say this? If persons are not good absolutely, but only good *for themselves*, then why would the value of my neighbor mean anything to me? Theunissen takes up this challenge in the final chapter. "As a valuer, a human being is a special instantiation of something that is

of value because it can be good for human beings, and what is good for human beings generates reasons for human beings." (127) What's the practical significance of this value? "All valuable things should be responded to—acknowledged, treated, considered—as the valuable things they are. If people are of value because, as valuers, we are able to lead good lives, then we should respond to people as the value-bearers they are. In a word, we should respond to human beings as centers of a life to which they bear a special relation." (128) And when it comes to other people, we "have a reason not to destroy, and more positively, to protect, other people's capacity to value, and therewith, to live well." (129) Theunissen goes on to elaborate how we should do justice to this reason.

Let's unpack this argument by substituting another relational good. A can of motor oil is a special instantiation of something of value, so it generates reasons for human beings. What's that practical significance of this value? All valuable things should be responded to as the valuable things they are, and motor oil is valuable because it lubricates our engines, so we should respond to motor oil as befits an engine lubricant. This gives us a reason not to destroy it, and more positively, to protect motor oil's lubricative capacity. All these claims seem true, but they raise a worry about how much Theunissen has shown. It isn't saying very much to say that I have *a* reason not to spoil the can of motor oil's lubricative capacity. Of course, I do. But sometimes I have reasons to do the opposite. Painting my fence with motor oil would certainly spoil its ability to lubricate my engine, but with the right additives, it isn't a bad primer, so there are times where I have *more reason* to spoil the lubricating potential of the oil by using it to paint my fence.

Here's the problem: I don't think anything Theunissen says forefends an analogous conclusion about the uses of humanity. Sure, I have a reason to protect your capacity to value, and using your bones as Halloween decorations would certainly interfere with that capacity. But I also have excellent reasons that favor doing just that. My house would look super spooky, and the winner of the decorations contest gets a ten-pound tub of candy corn. My concern with Theunissen's attempt to restore the moral significance of personal value is that it shows too little. Reasons are plentiful and easily outweighed by other reasons. Common sense morality depends on showing that these reasons are especially stringent.

Theunissen has a way of doing this. The reasons mentioned above are reasons of non-destruction grounded in facts about what a valuable thing is for. Following Raz, Theunissen thinks that these reasons are non-defeasible and that flouting them is wrong. A chair is good for sitting in, and this gives me reasons not to smash it for my amusement. Not only that, it would be wrong to smash the chair for my amusement. The same goes for people: their purpose is to live a good life, and so destroying them for the sake of Halloween decorations would be wrong. Here my instincts diverge. Smashing a perfectly good chair may be wasteful, but it is only wrong under certain conditions, for instance if someone has a right to it. Likewise, destroying a person to turn them into Halloween decorations is not wrong because it is a misuse of their personhood, but because that person can make valid and binding claims on me (a power they have in virtue of their distinctive role in creating value).

In closing, I will repeat my assessment. I have enjoyed and benefitted from thinking about Theunissen's challenging arguments. I am sure philosophers interested in value will be wrestling with them for years to come.

*Acknowledgment*. I am grateful to Nandi Theunissen for copious comments, which informed my understanding of how she would answer the questions posed here. I am sorry that space did not allow a fuller discussion of those answers.

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