THE QUEST FOR REALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE

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The Limits of our Worth, Power, Freedom and Destiny

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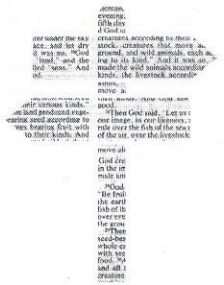
BOOK 1

BEING TRULY HUMAN

THE LIMITS OF OUR WORTH, POWER, FREEDOM AND DESTINY



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the nature and basis of morality and how other moralities compare with one another. For any discussion of the freedom humans have to choose raises the question of the power we wield over other humans and also over nature, sometimes with disastrous consequences. What should guide our use of power? What, if anything, should limit our choices, and to what extent can our choices keep us from fulfilling our full potential and destiny?

THE BASIC VALUE OF A HUMAN BEING

If we say that human life is valuable, surely we must mean more than that parents who welcome and love a newborn baby should not destroy it, but parents for whom a newborn child is neither wanted nor loved should be free to destroy it. That would reduce the value of life to a mere matter of arbitrary, personal taste.

THE VALUE OF LIFE

Without first attempting to define human life—for that could be a long, if not impossible, task—let's begin by asking: what value do we put on human life? After all, we are all human beings, we are all alive, and what is more, we all have direct personal experience of being alive. We ought, therefore, to be able to decide what value we place on human life; our own of course to start with, yet not merely our own, but other people's as well.

And let's be clear what exactly we mean by 'placing value on human life'. We are not asking: how much have we enjoyed living in the past? Or: are we having any rewarding experiences of life in the present? We are asking: what value do we put on human life in and of itself? Is human life, our own or any other person's, so valuable that it would be wrong to mistreat it or to diminish it in any way or to destroy it? The answer to this question is fundamental to our attitude to other people, and likewise to ourselves.

So let's start with a real-life, practical situation that will bring us at once to the heart of the matter.

THE QUESTION OF INFANTICIDE

All of us were newborn babies once, and presumably we are grateful that no one practised infanticide on us. But is there anything wrong with infanticide? And if so, what and why?

In ancient Greece the father (or both parents) of an unwanted child was allowed to take the baby, place it in an open box or jar, and set it on the mountainside to be devoured by wild beasts (they thus tried to salve their conscience by pretending that it was not they who killed the child, but wild beasts). The historians Professor M. Cary and Professor T. J. Haarhoff comment that after 200 BC this way of disposing of unwanted children 'seems to have become frequent

enough to keep the Greek population at a stationary level, and even to induce a sharp regression in some cities'.[1] Intentionally or not, infanticide seems not only to have been a means by which a family limited the demands on its budget, but to have become also a way of population control.

The question immediately arises: is such infanticide morally right? The question concerns us, because it is not just an ancient problem. We too were once babies. If for any reason our parents had not wanted us, would it have been morally permissible for them to eliminate us? During the last several decades, hundreds of millions of foetuses, whose brains and nervous systems were already formed, have been aborted because their mothers, or mothers and fathers, did not want them.[2] Were they not also human? And if they were (though many people would deny it), we could ask the same about them: was it morally right to destroy them?

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But to get back to newborn babies, for nobody would deny that they are human beings. Is their life so absolutely valuable that it would be wrong to kill them, even if their parents could not afford to keep them, or if for any reason they did not want them, or if the State wanted to curb excessive population growth?

At the beginning of the last century many people kept a cat to suppress the mice that otherwise would infest the house. Some people still do. If, however, the cat produced a litter of four or five kittens, and the householder did not want them, and nobody else was willing to take them, the householder would put the kittens in a tank of water and drown them. Nobody thought it was morally wrong.

Now many people urge us to believe that human beings are simply animals that by accidental mutation of the genes and subsequent natural selection have by chance evolved further than the other primates. If that is so, on what ground could we say that killing a

[1] *Life and Thought in the Greek and Roman World*, 143.

[2] This figure is not an exaggeration, as figures from the Guttmacher Institute show. See, for instance, the 2016 article by Dr Gilda Sedgh et al. in *The Lancet*.

newborn kitten would not be morally wrong but killing a newborn human would be? What is so special about a human being?

If, as many hold, there is nothing but matter in the universe, and human beings have no soul or spirit, but just like animals are simply a highly evolved form of matter, then why should newborn humans not be done away with as well as the young of animals? What's the difference?

Someone may suggest at this point: 'The difference is that humans are more valuable than animals, and that's why it would be wrong to kill human babies, or any human beings at all at any time for that matter.'

True: to sense that human life is somehow specially valuable is a good beginning. But the terms 'value' and 'valuable' are commonly used in several different senses. We need, therefore, to examine in what sense human beings may be said to be first valuable, and then more valuable than animals.

THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE CANNOT DEPEND ON PEOPLE'S SUBJECTIVE JUDGMENT

Some things have no value in themselves; in regard to value, they are, we say, neutral. They become valuable only when people happen to like them. Take cigarettes, for example. Some people like them; and to these people a packet of cigarettes would be valuable. Other people don't like them; in fact they think they are only worth putting on the fire. To them they have no value at all.

Can that be what is meant, then, when we say that human life is valuable: if people like a certain human being, that human being is valuable to them and they should not destroy him or her; but if people don't like a certain human being, that human being is not valuable to them, and they may eliminate her or him?

That sounds, and is, horrific; but that is how some nations sometimes behave. Many Chinese parents apparently prefer sons to daughters for various reasons. In 1979 the Chinese government, alarmed at the exponential growth of the birth rate, passed a law forbidding parents to have more than one child. There is strong anecdotal evidence that in some remoter parts, if the firstborn child turned out to be a

girl, the parents quietly killed her, in the hope that their next child would be a boy. And in ancient times one of the Egyptian pharaohs, wishing to subjugate his serfs, laid it down as government policy that daughters born to the serfs could be saved alive; sons were to be killed at birth by the midwives or drowned in the river.

So if we say that human life is valuable, surely we must mean more than that parents who welcome and love a newborn baby should not destroy it, but parents for whom a newborn child is neither wanted nor loved should be free to destroy it. That would reduce the value of life to a mere matter of arbitrary, personal taste. If human life is valuable at all, one would have thought that it must always and everywhere be equally valuable, no matter whether people like its possessor or not.

But perhaps someone will object: 'Newborn babies and adult human beings are not equally valuable. A fully developed human being is surely more valuable than a newborn, undeveloped baby; and an adult who has, say, brilliant artistic scientific or engineering gifts is more valuable than an adult who has none of these gifts, or may even have a learning disability. Doesn't the general public value a famous footballer or film star more than it does a factory worker, or a disabled child?

Well, we certainly do, and should, value growth in a child, and grieve if a child fails to develop normally; and of course we do, and should, value the skills of a good cook, or trained doctor, and the special gifts of a brilliant teacher, novelist or musician.

But when we acknowledge that we all admire and value gifted people for their gifts, what exactly are we implying? We don't mean, do we, that to qualify for being classed as human, you have to be gifted? Or that the elderly grandmother is less human than a film star? Take the least gifted and least sophisticated person imaginable. Does not that person have human life? And is not that life to be valued and regarded as sacrosanct and inviolable simply because it is human life?

Are we saying that there are different grades of human life, such that the higher grades should be preserved and nurtured, but the lesser grades are scarcely worth preserving and may rightly be neglected or even destroyed?

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THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE CANNOT BE MADE TO DEPEND ON WHAT GIFTS A HUMAN BEING POSSESSES

This, again, is not a merely academic question; for the view that the value of human life varies according to the extent of its evolution has been more than once adopted in the last century on a grand scale with far-reaching results. Let's take some examples.

Hitler's anti-Semitism

Prof. Z. Sternhill has pointed out what value-judgments lay behind and led up to Hitler's extermination of at least six million Jews and several million others. Based on an extreme and perverted view of Social Darwinism (which modern Social Darwinists would decry) people like G. Vacher de Lapouge of France[3] and Otto Ammon in Germany:[4]

> not only asserted the absolute physical, moral and social superiority of the Aryan (which they based on measurements of the skull as well as on other social, anthropological and economic criteria) but also put forward a new concept of human nature and a new idea of the relationships between men. . . . Social Darwinism allied to racism had the immediate effect of desacralizing the human being and assimilating social with physical existence. For such racists, society was an organism regulated by the same laws as living organisms, the human species was subject to the same law as the other animal species, and human life was nothing but an incessant struggle for existence. The world, they believed, belonged to the strongest who was accordingly the best, and there came into being a new morality (which Vacher de Lapouge called 'selectionist') to replace the traditional Christian morality. The idea of the ethnic inequal-

[3] *Les Sélections Sociales.*

[4] *Die Gesellschaftsordnung und ihre natürlichen Grundlagen.* See also Biddiss, *Father of Racist Ideology.*

ity of the different peoples had become prevalent by the turn of the century.[5]

Mixed with Aryan anti-Semitism, it eventually, through a flood of publications in Germany and France, entered Hitler's political thinking, with what results we know only too well.

The massacres in Cambodia

Pol Pot also held the view that some human beings are more valuable, others less. But for him it was the non-intellectuals that were superior and worth preserving. The intellectuals, he considered, were decidedly inferior; and on those grounds he executed about two million of them.

Street children around the world

These are children that are either orphans, or abandoned as youngsters by their parents. They live on the streets, grow up without supervision, make a living by doing simple jobs or stealing, and make a general nuisance of themselves. They are undeniably human. But nobody values or wants them. From time to time the police in some countries drive round the streets and shoot them down like vermin. They are treated as low-grade, and therefore undesirable, human beings.

The physically weak

But we should not confine our attention to these extreme examples. If the value of human life depends on the gifts and abilities of its possessor, or on his or her usefulness to society, and not simply on the sheer fact that it is human life and as such is inviolable, what shall we say about granddad or grandma? They were in earlier life fit and useful members of society. But now their gifts have waned, their health is poor, they can contribute little or nothing to society, they are in fact a burden to their family. In some countries nowadays there is a strong and vociferous lobby that calls on the government to pass legislation to the effect that in these circumstances granddad's or grandma's relatives or doctors or friends are to be permitted to 'help' him or

[5] Miller et al., *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, 414–16.

her to die. Assisted suicide, it is called. Would that be morally right?

And what about disabled children, or adults with learning disabilities? Does the fact that, though damaged, they are human beings possessed of human life, impose on us, or on the State, a duty to care for them to the best of our ability and resources? Or are we justified in leaving them to rot like animals in squalor?

So far, then, we have raised more questions than we have answered. But already it has emerged:

1. that the value of human life cannot satisfactorily be made to depend on this or that person's, or nation's, subjective judgment. It cannot be left as a matter of someone's arbitrary, personal taste or preference.
2. that it is highly dangerous to make the value of human life depend on the extent of its development or on its 'usefulness' to society.

That being so, let us examine another possibility, namely that the value of human life inheres in life itself and so has objective value.

THE INHERENT VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE AND ITS OBJECTIVE VALUE

If one evening the setting sun paints an unusually magnificent display of colour across the western sky, we might well exclaim, almost involuntarily, 'That is majestic!' What is more we should expect everyone else who saw it to respond to it in the same way. If anyone didn't, we should think that there was something wrong with him or her, colour-blindness, perhaps, or sheer insensitivity. We react in this way because we really do believe that the sunset has intrinsic beauty. It was not our feeling that the sunset was beautiful which bestowed beauty on it. Indeed most of us would maintain that the sunset was beautiful whether we saw it or not.

Moreover we did not come to see it was beautiful by some long, drawn-out process of logical analysis. The sunset by its sheer intrinsic beauty compelled our admiration and acknowledgement of its beauty. Nor did the sunset have to get the consensus-verdict of the majority of our fellow-citizens to the effect that the sunset was

majestic, before it could convince us it was majestically beautiful. It convinced us by the unaided power of its inherent beauty.

There are of course many things in nature like that. Some scientists tell us that when they come to perceive how some part of the physical universe works, the sheer sophistication and yet basic simplicity of the laws and processes that govern it fills them with a sense of awe. Their industry, experimentation and logical analysis brought them to the position where they could understand these laws and perceive their elegance. But it was not their industry, experimentation and logical analysis that created these elegant laws. Their beauty was an objective, intrinsic beauty; and it was that beauty that compelled the scientists' awe and wonder. So surely it is with human life: it is life's own objective, intrinsic essence and nature that compels our recognition of its value.

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But now we ought to listen to the reductionist explanations of those who would convince us that human life does not actually possess this intrinsic value that we imagine it has.

REDUCTIONIST EXPLANATIONS

Let's go back to the sunset for a moment. The reductionists would tell us that what we took to be its majestic beauty was merely our subjective reaction to material phenomena. They maintain that science can explain how these material phenomena are produced: by solar rays, photons and nerve impulses in the brain; and that science can give a complete explanation of everything about these photons and forces without dragging in ideas of meaning and value and majesty and beauty. And since such things cannot be measured by science, then they have no objective reality. They are merely illusions which we weave around sunsets in our imagination because that helps to soften the impact that the sheer raw, impersonal facts of nature, as revealed by science, would otherwise make upon us.

Reductionists say the same about human life. Human life for them is nothing but animated matter. By its inherent qualities matter spontaneously (though quite unintentionally) produced proteins,

cells, genes, chromosomes, that eventually by chance hit upon an arrangement that (without any purpose) produced some lowly form of life, which in turn gradually evolved into human life.

Now this matter and these forces did what they did without any conscious purpose or sense of value. The matter of which genes are composed still has no deliberate aim in mind. Genes have no mind. It is simply that the matter of which they consist has this quality: given a chance, it will blindly take the route of maximising the replication of itself in successive generations.[6]

How then could human life, produced in this way, have any intrinsic value? What is more, if human beings come to feel that human life has some inherent value, they are then told by the reductionists that it is the neurons in their brains that control their emotional reactions and whatever sense of values they have. Sensations of value produced in the human brain by such mindless, impersonal, electrochemical processes—what inherent, objective value could they possibly have?

Not all scientists, of course, are extreme reductionists of this kind.[7] And, in any case, as we approach the central mystery of the human being, that is, how the brain works, how memory functions, the chemical basis of the emotions, and the supreme question of the relation of the brain to the mind, we are grateful for the work of all scientists, whatever their worldview, reductionists included!

On the other hand, when it comes to the understanding of the essential nature and value of human life, we are not dependent solely on science and its empirical methods: we have another, more direct, route to knowledge open to us. We can listen to the voice of intuition.

OUR DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF HUMAN LIFE

An ounce of experience, they say, is worth a ton of theory; and this is especially so when we come to the question of what life is.

[6] To describe genes as selfish, as Richard Dawkins does in his famous book *The Selfish Gene*, is highly misleading. In normal language the term 'selfish' implies a self-conscious personality that knowingly asserts itself. Yet this is precisely the quality that Dawkins denies to the matter of which genes are composed.

[7] See the Appendix to this book: 'The Scientific Endeavour', p. 253.

We human beings know by experience what it is to be alive. We do not have to ask the scientist whether we are alive or not, nor what being alive is like. We have direct experience of it. At this level, therefore, philosophical reflection on that experience is more likely to help us grasp its significance than is empirical science. The scientist with his empirical methods endeavours to find out what life is; we live it!

In virtue, then, of this direct experience each one of us knows with utter certainty two things at least. Each can say of himself or herself:

1. 'I am alive', and
2. 'I am conscious that it is I that experience this being alive. I, as the philosophers would say, am the subject of this life; that is, I do the living.'

The same thing is true with thinking. I may feed my brain with information, set it working on a problem, and even when I am asleep it will continue to process this information through its computer-like neurons. But I have to do the thinking and interpret its findings. I cannot leave that to the electrochemical neural processes in my brain. For such reductionism is ultimately suicidal as it destroys rationality, as Professor John Polkinghorne has pointed out. Consider his description of the implications of reductionism:

> Thought is replaced by electro-chemical neural events. Two such events cannot confront each other in rational discourse. They are neither right nor wrong. They simply happen. If our mental life is nothing but the humming activity of an immensely complexly-connected computer-like brain, who is to say whether the programme running on the intricate machine is correct or not? Conceivably that programme is conveyed from generation to generation via encoding in DNA, but that might still be merely the propagation of error. If we are caught in the reductionist trap we have no means of judging intellectual truth. The very assertions of the reductionist himself are nothing but blips in the neural network of his brain. The world of rational discourse dissolves into the absurd chatter of firing synapses. Quite frankly, that cannot be right and none of us believes it to be so.[8]

[8] *One World*, 92–3.

If, then, electrochemical neural events, by their very nature, cannot engage in rational discourse, the 'I', which can and does, cannot be simply a collection of electrochemicals nor indeed matter in any shape or form. The 'I' is what Aristotle saw it was long ago, and what the Bible says it is—soul, or spirit. Human life and the 'I' which is the subject of that life is not reducible to matter; and it is the 'I' within each one of us that asks about the life of which it is the subject: What is human life worth? What am I worth?

And then there is another characteristic feature of what it means to be human. The philosophers call it transcendence; and any one of us can test for ourselves whether this feature really exists.

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF HUMAN LIFE

A moment's reflection will be enough to show us that in our mental life we have the ability to go beyond (for that is what transcendence means) our own life. We can, for instance, forget about ourselves and think about distant galaxies, study them, and not impose our human qualities on them, but allow their characteristics, qualities, functions, the laws of their being, to impress themselves on us, until we come to know them as they are in themselves.

Our love, in the deepest sense, for other people, our respect for them, and our moral behaviour towards them likewise depend on this ability of ours to transcend ourselves, and our own interests and feelings. A dog will respond to you with something that looks very like affection, because it has experienced your kindness and the food you have given it. But as human beings we can admire someone whom we have never met, but only heard about, or seen on television, for what they are in themselves, for their qualities and character, even though they have never done anything for us. In the same way we can admire inanimate things like a sunset or a painting for their inherent beauty.

As human beings we can transcend the matter of which the universe is made, and think mathematically about the laws according to which it functions, acts and interacts.

In thought we can transcend our own present existence. We can envisage the time when we did not yet exist. We can also envisage the

time when our life on earth will be over. When we think like that, the question arises: where do we come from? Since our transcendence carries with it an incurable refusal to be content with the brute fact of the present existence of anything, of any activity, or even of ourselves, and irresistibly enquires about the purpose of it, we inevitably find ourselves asking about our own existence, its ultimate purpose, meaning and value. 'Only human beings', say Peter B. Medawar and Jean S. Medawar, 'guide their behaviour by a knowledge of what happened before they were born and a preconception of what may happen after they are dead; thus only human beings find their way by a light that illumines more than the patch of ground they stand on.'[9]

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The fact is that we human beings perceive that we are not just matter, we are persons; not just neurons, not just electrochemical events. We are part matter, but also spirit; and because we are spirit we know ourselves to be superior to matter. Any one of us is, in fact, more significant, more valuable than all the mere matter of the universe put together.

It is, then, this transcendence over the universe coupled at the same time with the undeniable awareness that we did not make ourselves, that leads men and women, or at least some men and women, to seek the source of their being in a Creator God who, as the Bible says, is spirit, and who has made us in his image, creatures who are able in part to understand his character, and to love and worship him in a value-response to his perfect goodness.

If this is the truth of the matter it is easy to understand how Jews, Christians and Muslims would answer the question: what is special about human life that gives it its supreme value? It is that man is made in the image of God, by God and for God; man's life is therefore inviolable (Gen 1:26–27; 9:6; Col 1:16–17), and eternally significant (Matt 22:31–32).

[9] *Life Science*, 171. As quoted by Karl Popper and John C. Eccles in *The Self and Its Brain*, vi.

Christians would add that the value of a human as a creature of God has been immeasurably increased by the fact that Christ at the cost of his own life's blood has opened up a way by which men and women may be rescued from their deep alienation from God caused by mankind's wrongdoing and sinfulness (1 Pet 1:18–19; Rev 5:9–10).

On the other hand, many people do not believe that human life is anywhere near so valuable as this. Many atheists, in fact, react vigorously against this version of human value. They consider that introducing the concept of a Creator God degrades humans and robs them of their freedom and essential dignity. To that topic, therefore, we must turn in our next chapter.