A Defense of Human Value

Comparing Arguments from a Secular and Christian Perspective

(Adapted from my philosophy honors thesis "A Defense of Human Value: Contributions of Kant, Korsgaard, and Christianity," advised by Prof. Kyla Ebels-Duggan)

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Catholic doctrine teaches that all human beings possess an intrinsic value, called dignity, because God made us in His image.[1] Growing up Catholic, I heard repeatedly that every person has dignity, that all human life is sacred, that human dignity lies at the heart of Catholic social teaching, and that we must treat each other with respect and love because our Creator endowed us with a special worth. Surrounded by fellow Catholics in my bubble, I never thought beyond the Catholic argument defending human value. For me, it sufficed. God created us all in His image and likeness, and because God designed us this way, we are valuable beyond measure.

However, in college my network widely expanded. For the first time in my life I debated seriously with people who held no theological beliefs. In sophomore year, while discussing with my sister a paper I had written on a mathematical depiction of human value, a thought that I could not shake struck me. Could people who do not believe in God still think human value exists? If they do, on what basis?

Our affirmation of human value bears incredible importance. It affects how we think about each other and treat each other, on the political level and on the personal level. If we reject the belief that all people have incomparable value, we can justify negative, disparaging attitudes and mistreatment towards those who fall on the lower end of whatever scale we set. For everyone to flourish, we must understand why we need to acknowledge all people's dignity and to treat them in accordance with it.

Deeply troubled by my initial knee-jerk response that people could *not*, in fact, have good reason to believe in human value without theological basis, I searched deliberately for examples of recognition of human value in our world. Generally, people celebrate the birth of a child as exciting and good. Around the world, we grieve when others die, an indication that we view

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[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997), 1700-1715, http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/ccc_toc.htm.

death as a loss of something good. There is general consensus that rape and arbitrary murder are morally reprehensible. While perhaps we could justify these responses without referring to human value, per se, these responses do suggest that people believe in, and recognize, human value, even if the grounds for that belief are not immediately clear.

I set myself a twofold task for this paper. Firstly, I provide and analyze an argument—without reliance on religious premises (such as the existence or nature of God)—for the claim that human beings have value, in order to show that regardless of religious affiliation, we have an obligation to treat each other in ways consistent with our value.[2] Secondly, I consider the Christian argument for human value and reflect on whether it surpasses the secular one.

Before delving into the secular argument for human value, I will lay the groundwork for a discussion of human value by introducing some terminology and noting distinctions in literature about value. Next I will present the non-religious argument that philosopher Christine Korsgaard, a present-day Kantian scholar and professor at Harvard, gives for the value of humanity.[3] Then I will examine both the merits and shortcomings of Korsgaard's secular picture of human value. Finally, I will explore whether a Christian account can offer a more complete picture of human value by incorporating religious premises. I conclude that the Christian connection of human value to the image of God (in Latin, "imago Dei") solves the problem I identify in Korsgaard's secular argument.

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[2] In this paper I refer to such an argument as a secular argument. I do not mean to imply that a secular argument is incompatible with religious beliefs, only that it does not require religious premises.

[3] In Section 2 I address why I chose to focus on Korsgaard's formulation of Kant's argument for human value.

Section 1: Human Value: Important Distinctions

The first relevant distinction to highlight is the difference between constructivist and realist pictures of value.[4] For constructivists, value comes from the standpoint of valuing creatures; it does not exist as an attribute on its own. The act of valuing gives rise to value. Constructivist philosopher Christine Korsgaard explains, "[V]alues exist in the perspective of a certain kind of creature, a creature who values things, in the sense of having evaluative or valenced attitudes towards things."[5] Specifically, Korsgaard argues, rational nature allows for the possibility of value: "Value is grounded in rational nature—in particular in the structure of reflective consciousness—and it is projected on to the world."[6] Therefore value, under a constructivist picture, is a notion tethered to the perspectives of valuing creatures, creatures with the rational capacity of reflective consciousness, without whom value cannot exist. Something has value only if someone can rationally value it. In the case of human value, Korsgaard argues that human beings confer value on themselves, and therefore have value. I will reconstruct her argument for human value in more detail in Section 2, but put simply, human beings are rationally committed to the idea that they are valuable, and thus, Korsgaard concludes, they are valuable.

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[4] In this paper, the way I explain value constructivism aligns with the general, starting definition of constructivism from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: "Some existing entities are constructed by us in that they depend substantively on us." See Dana Goswich, "Constructivism in Metaphysics." Applying this definition of constructivism to value, value is constructed by us, in that it depends substantively on us and does not exist on its own without us, which is how Korsgaard explains value.

[5] Christine M. Korsgaard, 2018, *Fellow Creatures*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 27. See also 74 and 148.

[6] Christine M. Korsgaard, 1996, *The Sources of Normativity*, edited by Onora O'Neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 116.

For realists, on the other hand, value exists prior to, and independent of, valuing. It is rational to value something only if that thing has value. Value is a sort of property certain objects have.[7] To say that human beings have value is to say that they possess this property. The appropriate response to an object of value is to value that object. In the case of human value, a realist asserts that human beings have value, and therefore we should value them. Thus a realist maintains that we should value people because they have value, whereas a constructivist believes that people have value because we rationally must value them.

The second distinction I want to mention separates the idea of valuable *period* from the idea of valuable *for*. If something is valuable *period, point blank,* it is objectively valuable, valuable without condition. If something is valuable *for* someone, it is good *for* that person; its goodness connects directly to its relationship with the agent.[8] The differentiation between valuable *period* and valuable *for*, albeit perhaps connected to the constructivist versus realist distinction, is not identical to it. At first glance, we might feel inclined to assign to the realist, who thinks value precedes valuing, the belief in value *period*, in objective and unconditional value. We likewise might feel inclined to assign to the constructivist, who thinks valuing precedes value, the belief in value *for* and a complete rejection of absolute value.

However, does the realist view that value precedes valuing *necessarily* commit the realist to a belief in absolute value, and does the constructivist view that valuing precedes value *necessarily* commit the constructivist to a belief in purely relative value, and a rejection of

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[7] As Elizabeth Anderson writes, "According to [realist] G. E. Moore, 'good' refers to a simple, undefinable, nonnatural property." Anderson, 1993, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 119. For Moore's text, see G.E. Moore, 1993, *Principia Ethica*, Revised ed., edited by Thomas Baldwin, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[8] For more about goodness *period* versus goodness *for*, refer to Richard Kraut, 2011, *Against Absolute Goodness*, New York: Oxford University Press.

absolute value? I think not. A realist could subscribe to the view that value is a relational property that does not and cannot stand on its own, and therefore reject absolute value. For example, realists who fall into this camp could claim that broccoli is good *for* human beings, a true fact independent of whether anyone values it. They would not say that broccoli is good, *period, point blank*, because broccoli's goodness refers specifically to its relation to people—being nutritionally good *for* people. Therefore, broccoli has relational value not derived from people rationally valuing it, which makes the view realist instead of constructivist. On the other hand, a constructivist can accept the view that what is rationally valuable for every valuer is then absolutely valuable, even though it derives its "valuable" status from its being valuable *for* entities—a relational property.[9] This is, in fact, a position Korsgaard takes in her argument for the value of humanity. Instead of using absolutely good to mean totally and completely good, good independent of relation, Korsgaard uses the phrase "good absolutely" to mean "good-for everyone for whom things can be good, in the final sense of good, or good from everyone's point of view."[10] We will see this version of the phrase appear in Korsgaard's argument, to which I now turn.

Section 2: Korsgaard's (Kantian?) Argument for the Value of Humanity

Christine Korsgaard's argument for the value of humanity relies heavily on Kantian ideas, but I use her version for a few reasons. First, she is a renowned Kantian scholar. Second, she has written at length on the topic of human value. Third, she dissects Kant's argument (as she

[9] Christine Korsgaard makes this move in *Fellow Creatures*, 10.

[10] Ibid.

understands it) in a clear and concise way. The timeline of this paper, and my hope not only to explore a secular argument for human value but also to compare it to a Christian one, unfortunately did not allow the time to delve deeply into Kant's multiple works. I do recognize that philosophers can disagree with Korsgaard's interpretation of Kant's argument, but to delve into that disagreement is out of the scope of this paper, so for my purposes I will refer to this argument as Korsgaard's argument, because it is her interpretation of Kant.

Korsgaard establishes that every individual human being must rationally think of himself or herself, as well as all other human beings, as valuable. Her overarching argument for this claim is actually fairly short. The brunt of the philosophical work occurs in the subproof of one of her premises. At the heart of her argument is the proposition that each individual must presuppose that human beings are ends in themselves (as opposed to means to an end) "in order to engage in practically rational activity at all."[11] Put broadly, without subarguments, Korsgaard's argument flows as follows:

Premise 1: Rational action exists, and therefore is possible.

Premise 2: If rational action is possible, human beings must be committed to the idea that they and other human beings are valuable for their own sakes.

Premise 3: We are human beings.

Conclusion 1: Thus we are rationally committed to the idea that we and other human beings are valuable for our own sakes, as ends in ourselves.

Conclusion 1': Therefore, we *are* valuable.[12]

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[11] Christine Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, 134.

[12] I have adapted this argument from Korsgaard's *Sources of Normativity*, 122-124.

We begin by examining Premise 1. According to Korsgaard, by our nature as rational beings, we reflect upon our motives, decide whether our reasons for action are good ones, and act according to the conclusions of our reflection.[13] In her book *Fellow Creatures,* Korsgaard says, "Rationality is the capacity to ask whether the potential reasons for our beliefs and actions are good ones, and to adjust our beliefs and actions according to the answers that we get."[14] She moreover says, "[A] rational being is one who is conscious [...] of the motives on which she is tempted to act."[15] Identifying and evaluating reasons for action and acting in accordance with those reasons is rational action as Korsgaard defines it, and rational beings act in accordance with this process every day. So rational action is indeed possible.[16]

Premise 2 requires rigorous justification because Korsgaard's broader argument depends heavily on its truth. Premise 2 reads, "If rational action is possible, human beings must be committed to the idea that they and other human beings are valuable for their own sakes." Suppose rational action is possible. We must prove that human beings (read: rational agents) must rationally value themselves for their own sakes, as ends in themselves—not merely on the individual level, but on a level that incorporates all of humanity. I will first lay out Korsgaard's entire subargument and then add insight into each of the premises.

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[13] Christine Korgaard, *Fellow Creatures,* 43.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid, 137.

[16] I should note, thanks to Prof. Ardis Collins, that this is perhaps a "thin" definition of rational action, and one that might actually diverge from Kant's own definition.

Assumption 2.0: Rational action is possible.

Premise 2.1: Value is "tethered" to human desires and interests.[17]

Premise 2.2: "[B]ecause we are rational, we cannot decide to pursue an end unless we take it to be absolutely good."[18]

Premise 2.2': We do decide to pursue ends.

Conclusion 2.2': Therefore we take our ends to be absolutely good.

Premise 2.3: We can rationally take our ends to be absolutely good only if we value ourselves.

Premise 2.4: We can rationally take ourselves to be valuable only if we value every other rational agent.

Conclusion 2.5: We must value ourselves and each other for our own sakes, as ends in ourselves.

Premise 2.1 follows from Korsgaard's constructivist picture of value. When we say something is good, we do not mean it is good from an impersonal point of view. Instead we mean it is important *to* someone, or good *for* someone. Korsgaard argues that "nothing can be important without being important-to someone, and nothing can be good without being good-for someone."[19] Thus "good" and "important," indicators of value, are notions tethered to the

[17] I borrow the language of "tethered" directly from Korsgaard's *Fellow Creatures*: "[A]ll importance is tethered. In particular, it is tethered to the creature to whom the thing in question is important, and it cannot be cut loose from that creature without ceasing to be important at all" (10).

[18] Ibid, 137.

[19] Ibid, 135.

valuer's interests or desires. One might then be inclined to say that absolute value cannot exist, because all value is relative to the valuer. As I mentioned in Section 1, Korsgaard disagrees.

While absolute value cannot refer to a kind of "free-floating goodness" on the constructivist account, something that is good absolutely (or valuable absolutely) can exist as something that "is good-for everyone for whom things can be good, in the final sense of good, or good from everyone's point of view."[20] In summary, "to say that something is good absolutely is just to say that it is good-for us all—that is, good (or at least not bad) from every point of view, part of a universally shared or common good."[21] Therefore, the constructivist account describes what is good from the point of view of every valuer—what everyone must rationally value—as absolutely good.

Premise 2.1 is largely Korsgaard's contribution to Kantian ideas. Premise 2.2 picks up with Kant's own thought. Korsgaard writes that from Kant's perspective, Premise 2.2 "is essentially built in to the nature of the kind of self-consciousness that grounds rational choice."[22] By our nature as rational beings, we reflect upon our motives, decide whether our reasons for action are good ones, and act according to the conclusions of our reflection.[23] Ultimately acting upon our reasons for action, then, is an endorsement of our motives "as adequate to justify what we propose to do."[24] To pursue an end is to regard this pursuit as justified. When we view our pursuit of an end as justified, we are, equivalently, viewing that end as good. In viewing the ends

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid, 135-36.

[22] Ibid, 137.

[23] Ibid, 43.

[24] Ibid, 137-38.

of our actions as good, we view them as valuable. Thus as rational beings, whenever we act, we take our ends to be valuable.

Moreover, our choices "*create* reasons for everyone."[25] When we act, we set a law for ourselves that must also hold as a universal law, a law that governs all rational agents. Kant says in his *Critique of Practical Reason,* "What we are to call good must be an object of the faculty of desire in the judgment of every reasonable human being"[26], which, Korsgaard says, means not that everyone needs to care about the same things I do, but that if I rationally take myself to have reasons to pursue an end, everyone else must also take themselves to have reasons not to interfere with my achieving my end, and even to support me in my pursuit of my end.[27] Korsgaard explains that when we act, "we expect others not to interfere [...] without some important reason for doing so, and even to help us to pursue them [our ends] should the need arise."[28] Therefore, "we think that our achieving our ends is good from the point of view of others and not merely good-for us," meaning that we think our achieving our ends is absolutely good.[29] Hence we view our ends not only as valuable for us, but valuable absolutely. In summary, rational action necessarily implies that the agent views his or her ends as absolutely good. We are agents who decide to pursue ends. Thus we must take our ends to be absolutely good.

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[25] Ibid, 138.

[26] Immanuel Kant, 1997, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Translated by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5:61.

[27] Christine Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, 138.

[28] Ibid, 139.

[29] Ibid.

Premise 2.3 links the value we confer on our ends to the value we necessarily confer on ourselves. According to Korsgaard, "Kant saw that we take things to be important because they are important to us—and he concluded that we must therefore take ourselves to be important."[30] On what grounds could we think that our ends have absolute value? It appears we regard ourselves as having the authority to assign such value to them, as having a value in ourselves, by virtue of our rational agency. If we take seriously the goodness of our reasons for action and of those ends we pursue, we rationally must regard ourselves also as good because we are the source of these reasons.[31] We can trace the goodness of our ends back to ourselves, where the regress ends, because we are the source of value. The point where the regress stops must also have value if any of the other "valuable" things are valuable. In Korsgaard's words, "We 'represent' ourselves as ends in ourselves by taking what is good for us to be good absolutely, by choosing our own good, that is, what is good-for us, as an end of action."[32] In taking our ends to be absolutely important, we likewise must take ourselves to be important, not as some instrumental good, but as a final good, a good in ourselves.[33]

Premise 2.4 extends the value of humanity beyond the individual agent. Not only must *I* by rational necessity regard *myself* as valuable, but also, for consistency's sake, I must regard others as valuable. Rational beings in general must regard *each other* as valuable. When I act, I think of myself as having the authority to assign absolute value to my ends, by virtue of my

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[30] Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 122.

[31] In *Sources of Normativity,* Christine Korsgaard writes, "If you had no normative conception of your identity, you could have no reasons for action, and because your consciousness is reflective, you could not then act at all. Since you cannot act without reasons and your humanity is the source of your reasons, you must value your own humanity if you are to act at all" (123).

[32] Christine Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, 139.

[33] Ibid.

rational agency. But then I must recognize that all other agents, by virtue of *their* rational agency, must also think of themselves as having the authority to assign absolute value to *their* ends. They too are the sources of reasons; they too create universal laws to which I am bound. Korsgaard says, "You make yourself an end for others; you make yourself a law to them. But if you are a law to others in so far as you are just human, just *someone,* then the humanity of others is also a law to you."[34] I am committed to valuing myself just by virtue of the fact that I am a rational being. Hence I must also be committed to valuing other people just by virtue of the fact that they too are rational beings. Thus one agent's rational choice incorporates not only their view of themselves as ends, but also their regard for others as ends.[35]

In this subargument of Premise 2, we have reasoned from our assumption that rational action is possible to our conclusion that we must, out of rational necessity, value ourselves and each other for our own sakes, as ends in ourselves, which allows us to draw Conclusion 1: We by rational necessity must regard ourselves and others as valuable as ends in ourselves. To understand why Korsgaard then equates Conclusion 1 and Conclusion 1', recall our earlier discussion of constructivism. Constructivists claim that for something to be valuable is for it to be rationally regarded as valuable. Taking oneself to have reasons to regard something as valuable just is to say that the something *is* valuable. Things are valuable if rationally valued and if it would be irrational *not* to value them. Humanity falls into this latter camp, as the only thing we are rationally committed to valuing. Thus as a constructivist, Korsgaard moves from Conclusion 1 to Conclusion 1'. Saying that we rationally have to regard ourselves and others as

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[34] Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 143.

[35] Korsgaard defends this move against objections in *Sources of Normativity*, 132-145.

valuable equates to saying that we and others *are* valuable. Now, if we accept that human beings are valuable, how, then, should we respond to them?

Korsgaard suggests that the status of human beings as ends in themselves entails a moral obligation to act in a way that respects this status.[36] Moreover, she only goes as far as saying that marking people as ends in themselves (the kind of value Kant and Korsgaard claim we as human beings have) commits us to acting in particular ways towards people, i.e. "respecting [their] rights, taking [their] interests into account in our deliberations, promoting [their] good when we have the chance", and not using them as a mere means to our ends.[37] Further, "[r]espect for a human being as an end in himself or herself, Kant argues, demands that we avoid all use of force, coercion, and deception, that is, all devices that are intended to override or redirect the free and autonomous choices of other people."[38] Thus, we must treat other people in ways that align with their status as ends in themselves, and this, she insinuates, is all the moral law requires of us in response to the value of human beings. To take oneself to have normative reasons to treat human beings in certain ways, and then to treat them accordingly, is all there is to valuing them.

I began this project seeking a non-religious defense of human value, one that could convince everyone that we have not only reasons, but further the obligation, to treat people in ways consistent with their value. Korsgaard's constructivist argument satisfies this part of my quest! Without any appeal to theological premises, Korsgaard shows that we must regard people as valuable. The presupposition that human beings have value as ends in themselves is

[36] See Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 142-43.

[37] Christine Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, 64. ("This is the kind of value each of us is supposed to have as what Kant called an 'end in itself.' When we accord a creature this kind of value, we commit ourselves to respecting her rights, taking her interests into account in our deliberations, promoting her good when we have the chance, and things like that. We also commit ourselves to the idea that this creature should not be used as a mere means to the ends of others.")

[38] Ibid, 78.

necessary to engage in practically rational activity at all.[39] In addition, responding to people's value as ends in themselves consists of treating them in respectful ways. Thus, according to a secular, constructivist argument, we rationally must treat human beings as if they have value, as if they have dignity. To fail to do so would be to hold rationally conflicting attitudes.[40] Yet, although Korsgaard's argument shows that we must treat people in ways that respect their status as rational beings, her argument does not logically entail that we must hold certain attitudes towards people. I posit that the proper response to human value is both treating people in respectful ways *and* adopting positive attitudes towards them. An exhaustive account of valuing needs to include both actions and attitudes.

Section 3: The Merits and Shortcomings of Korsgaard's Constructivist Account

Korsgaard's argument shows that everyone, regardless of religious beliefs, must treat people in accordance with their value as ends in themselves, but she implies that the appropriate and sufficient response to human value is acting towards people in ways that align with their value as ends in themselves. I argue that proper valuing must also include an adoption of certain attitudes.

Valuing people must go further than merely taking oneself to have reasons to act in respectful ways towards them, and then acting in accordance with those reasons. Philosopher

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[39] Ibid, 134.

[40] The rational necessity of accepting that human beings are valuable is like the rational necessity of accepting *q* when you believe "*if p, then q*," and *p* is true. If you deny *q*, you have contradicted yourself. So, in the case of humanity, I regard my ends as valuable. If I regard my ends as valuable, I must regard myself as valuable. Thus I am rationally bound to regard myself as valuable. This does not, of course, mean I always do regard myself as valuable. We are not always rationally consistent. However, to stay rationally consistent, I must regard myself and other human beings as valuable.

T.M. Scanlon tells us that to value something has two parts: Valuing is (1) "to take oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes toward it" and (2) to take oneself to have reasons "for acting in certain ways in regard to it."[41] Korsgaard's account does satisfy part (2) of Scanlon's definition of valuing—that we must take ourselves to have reasons to act in particular ways towards human beings—but Korsgaard's argument does not entail that valuing humanity in ways consistent with their value include (1). I argue that proper valuing is insufficient if it comprises (2) only.

To show this, we first rewrite the equivalency between "valuing a person" and "taking oneself to have reasons to treat that person with respect and acting accordingly" as an 'if and only if' statement: "One values a person if and only if one takes oneself to have reasons to treat that person with respect and acts accordingly." From here, we break the 'if and only if' statement into an 'if' statement and its converse. The equivalence holds when both the 'if' statement and its converse are true. Thus, we deconstruct the equivalency as follows:

> (→) If one values a person, one takes oneself to have reasons to treat that person with respect and acts accordingly.
> (←) If one takes oneself to have reasons to treat a person with respect and acts accordingly, one values that person.

I take no issue with the first claim. I concur that proper valuing must include positive treatment. Positive treatment is a necessary component of proper valuing. Therefore, the first 'if' statement (→) holds. Let us now examine the second claim, that if one takes oneself to have

[41] Thomas Scanlon, 1998, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, MA, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 95.

reasons to treat a person a certain way and acts accordingly, one values that person. I will argue that this 'if' statement (←), the converse of the first, is false.

Consider an example. Martha is running for mayor against a field of fierce competitors. She needs every vote she can possibly muster. Each morning, when she walks to Starbucks for her morning coffee, she encounters a homeless man named Ralph, who stands in the middle of the sidewalk and asks passersby for their loose change. Whenever she sees him, she looks upon him with disgust, but she does not let this disgust manifest on her face. She wishes he would leave and find someplace else to bother people, but she acknowledges that she has limited options to bring about that state of affairs. She cannot push him out of her way, and she cannot vocalize her distaste in case the media catches her. An idea occurs to her. Since she needs voters to view her favorably, she decides to mask her disdain for Ralph and instead to greet him each day, buy him breakfast, and place money in his cup. She does not treat Ralph poorly; in fact, she goes above and beyond to treat him in ways consistent with the value of his humanity, to treat him as an end in himself. She takes herself to have reasons to do so: Voters hold her to this standard, and she wants their vote. So she respects his rights. She takes his interests into account in her deliberations. She promotes his good when she has the chance. She does not use force, coercion, or deception against him. Yet although Martha takes herself to have reasons to act respectfully towards Ralph, and treats him according to these reasons, she does not, I contend, value him for his own sake.

One might object and say that Martha is *not*, in fact, treating Ralph as an end in himself in all the ways Korsgaard outlined. Clearly, she is using him as a mere means to her own ends—to advance in the polls—which violates one of the necessary ways of acting towards people. However, here we need to separate *thinking* of Ralph as an end in himself and *treating*

him as an end in himself. Since "using" is an action, our intuition leads us to think that it pertains to Martha's treatment of Ralph, but instead I posit that it refers to Martha's attitude towards him. Recall that we are trying to refute the thesis that taking oneself to have reasons to treat a person a certain way, and treating that person accordingly, amounts to valuing that person. Martha *does* take herself to have reasons to treat Ralph as an end in himself. And she *does treat* him as such, yet I maintain she still does not value him because her *attitude* does not regard him as an end in himself.

Let us imagine two different versions of the Martha and Ralph example. In Version 1, the original scenario holds. Martha greets Ralph, buys him breakfast, and gives him money for the sole purpose of looking good to her constituents. In reality, she does not really care what happens to him. She has no compassion for him. In Version 2, Martha is still running for mayor in a competitive race, but she would never exploit Ralph's misfortune for her personal gain. She feels compassion towards him. Martha's empathy for Ralph as a fellow person inspires her to greet him each morning, buy him breakfast, and give him money when she can.

Now, Martha's actions, the ways she treats Ralph, align in both Version 1 and Version 2, yet her internal attitude differs. In Version 1, Martha does not adopt the internal attitudes of respect, love, or compassion. She considers Ralph a pawn in her ploy to win the election. She thinks of him as a mere means to her end. She does not, in fact, value him. In Version 2, Martha adopts an attitude of compassion and empathy towards Ralph. She sees him as worthy of her respect, by virtue of his humanity. She thinks of him not as a mere means, but as an end in himself.

The example with Martha and Ralph illustrates that valuing human beings does not merely reduce to treating them in ways that align with their status as ends in themselves. Taking

oneself to have reasons to treat people respectfully, and actually treating them respectfully, is certainly a necessary component of valuing them, but it excludes an important factor. To value human beings properly, one must also take oneself to have reasons to adopt particular positive attitudes towards them, and adopt those attitudes accordingly. Per the Martha and Ralph example, I have shown that to value human beings involves two components, as Scanlon suggests:

1) One must take oneself to have reasons to adopt positive attitudes like respect towards human beings, and adopt these attitudes accordingly.
2) One must take oneself to have reasons to treat human beings with respect, and act accordingly.

Recall that Korsgaard's argument concludes with the claim that, in order to act, human beings must rationally commit themselves to the view that they and others are valuable. Therefore, Korsgaard declares, human beings *are* valuable, because of this rational commitment to regard them as such. Our rational commitment to the value of humanity obligates us to act in ways that respect people,[42] yet Korsgaard does not say it makes any moral claim on our attitudes, and frankly, I am not convinced she can, at least not without more philosophical work.

In fairness to Korsgaard, I have not shown that a moral requirement to adopt positive attitudes towards human beings is *impossible* in her framework, but it would certainly need a careful, thoughtful defense. Why should we take ourselves to adopt certain attitudes towards human beings? What about people's status as "ends in themselves" imposes a moral obligation on us to adopt particular attitudes towards them? I conclude that it is at best unclear whether, and at worst impossible that, Korsgaard's argument can account for morally required attitudes

[42] See Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 143.

towards people, which are necessary in a picture of human value in the following way: We claim human beings have value. The proper response to something or someone of value is *to value* them. To value something or someone properly is to act in certain ways towards that something or someone, *and* to adopt particular positive attitudes towards that something or someone. While Korsgaard's argument establishes the former, it does not clearly entail the latter.[43] In the next section, I will show how the Christian picture of human value explains why human value must elicit both responses (1) and (2). The Christian argument for human value succeeds where Korsgaard's argument fails.

Section 4: Christian Theology's Contribution

I should first note that, in this section, I do not attempt to convince a skeptic that the Christian God indeed exists. This paper does not provide a defense of the existence or essential properties of the Christian God. Instead, I try to answer what the *assumption* that the Christian God exists can contribute to a discussion about human value.

Christianity teaches that human beings possess inherent value over and above the rational demand to regard them in a certain way. The Christian tradition grounds belief of human dignity on the notion of the image of God, or in Latin, the imago Dei. During the creation of the world, God, a divine entity, created human beings in His image and likeness: "Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. [...] God created mankind in his image; in

[43] It is possible that the issue I identified in Korsgaard's argument stems from an unfaithful interpretation of Kant and her "thin" definition of rational action. Kant himself spends a lot of time reflecting upon and defining rationality. Perhaps Kant provides a strong argument for proving human dignity without relying on religious premises, and perhaps, moreover, his version explains why we must adopt particular attitudes in response to human value. This is a question I could pursue as a follow-up to this paper.

the image of God he created them."[44] There are two main interpretations of the imago Dei: an ontological interpretation and a relational interpretation.

The imago Dei as an ontological claim deals with the nature of being, specifically, that our nature reflects the nature of God. We resemble God spiritually and psychologically.[45] This interpretation of the imago Dei "define[s] the image of God as some essential characteristic or quality at the essence of human existence which reflects the divine nature in some way."[46] Bearing the image of God means we have characteristics, with which God endowed us, that mirror God's own essence: "Thus, humans mirror God's divinity in their ability to actualize the unique qualities with which they have been endowed," qualities that include "rational structure[, ...] creative freedom, a possibility for self-actualization, and the ability for self-transcendence."[47] Joseph Koterski, a Jesuit priest and philosopher, writes, "Among the creatures that are animals, what separates human beings apart from the rest is the possession of the powers of intellect and will, that is, the power of understanding[...], and the power to make free choices and to love."[48] In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae,* Pope John Paul II says,

> The Book of Sirach too recognizes that God, in creating human beings, "endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in his own image" (17:3). The

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[44] Gen 1:26-27 (NABRE). See also Gen 5:1, Gen 9:6, Wis 2:23, Sir 17:3-10.

[45] InspiringPhilosophy, "What Does it Mean to be the Image of God?," YouTube Video, 14:10, December 1, 2017, https://youtu.be/Q49G4tihX3Y.

[46]Lemke, Steve W., 2008, "The Intelligent Design of Humans: The Meaning of the *Imago Dei* for Theological Anthropology," Paper presented at *The Southwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *Houston, TX,* 5.

[47] "Imago Dei ("image of God")," Faith and Reason, PBS, Accessed March 18, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/theogloss/imago-body.html.

[48] Koterski, Joseph. 2012. "Human Nature from a Catholic Perspective." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71 (4), 811.

> biblical author sees as part of this image not only man's dominion over the world but also those spiritual faculties which are distinctively human, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will: "He filled them with knowledge and understanding, and showed them good and evil" (Sir 17:7). The ability to attain truth and freedom are human prerogatives inasmuch as man is created in the image of his Creator, God who is true and just (cf. Dt 32:4). Man alone, among all visible creatures, is "capable of knowing and loving his Creator."[49]

Hence by an ontological interpretation, to be in God's image and likeness means to possess special capacities—capacities beyond those of other animals—that make us god-like, that allow us to know God and to act consciously in accordance with what is right and good. As His image and likeness, we mirror God's own nature. We are reflections of God Himself.

Notice that an ontological interpretation of human value is a realist one: Our value is a real and innate part of us. This picture of human dignity is appealing because it hints at value itself being a true property we have by virtue of our other qualities. Recall I have argued that adopting positive attitudes towards human beings is a necessary component of valuing them. Well, adopting positive attitudes of love and respect towards people suggests that there is something about them that makes them worthy of such attitudes. We respond to human value when we adopt these positive attitudes towards people. In regarding people as valuable, we are attributing value to them—value worthy of particular attitudes—and such value is a *further thing*, a notion that does exist in a realist picture of human value.

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[49] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, March 25, 1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html, sec. 34.

While many in the Christian community accept the ontological interpretation of the imago Dei, I worry that it excludes some human beings. Not every human being, born or unborn, can exercise the capacities of reason, moral concern, or love. For example, people with anencephaly lack the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain responsible for higher order functions like movement, thought, and speech.[50] We might solve this problem by saying that although the unborn cannot exercise such faculties now, they have the *potential* to exercise such faculties because they are human beings, and it is in the nature of human beings to have such faculties, unlike other plants and animals who lack even the potential. In the case of anencephaly, the defect does not develop until the third or fourth week of pregnancy,[51] so perhaps amending the ontological claim to read, "Human beings have dignity because of their *potential* to exercise particular capacities like reason, moral concern, and love" could solve our exclusion concern. But I do not think this amended claim captures what we mean when we talk about the imago Dei as ontological. We do not refer to potential qualities; rather, we refer to actual qualities. Although the ontological picture of the imago Dei can leave out people who do not possess the capacities we attribute to God's own nature, we as Christians still believe that such individuals have inherent dignity and that God knows them as persons, loves them, and values them. We need an explanation of the imago Dei that does not allude merely to the possession of certain characteristics, or else risk excluding people who lack them.

Alternatively, then, we can think of the imago Dei not as an ontological claim, but as a relational claim, denoting a special relationship between God and human beings. Pope John Paul

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[50] "Anencephaly," Fetal Health Foundation, Accessed March 18, 2021, https://www.fetalhealthfoundation.org/fetal-syndromes/anencephaly/.

[51] "Anencephaly," *Genetic and Rare Diseases Information Center*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 31 Aug. 2015, rarediseases.info.nih.gov/diseases/5808/anencephaly/cases/27367.

II writes, "Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator."[52] God gave us our humanity, and all of its characteristics, out of love. God *loves* human beings. The very act of creation demonstrates God's love for us. But God created other creatures as well. Surely He loves them too. What separates human beings as different, as *especially* valuable, as bearers of dignity?

God chose us for an intimate relationship with Him. In that relationship rests our dignity: "The dignity of the human person resides in the person's intimate relationship with God."[53] God designed every person with the ultimate purpose of living in communion with Him. Out of all creation, God calls humankind into a relationship with Him to fulfill their ultimate purpose of knowing Him. God even became man Himself in the person of Jesus Christ and died so that we might, despite our sins, reunite with Him. Under this interpretation, the imago Dei is *relationship*—a relationship of love, a partnership with God—and a calling.[54]

It has recently occurred to me that describing people's value as stemming from a mutual relationship with God could allow us to see their value through a realist lens. They possess the property of being valuable by virtue of living in communion with God. However, not everyone chooses to accept God's invitation to love Him and live in communion with Him, but we as Catholics do not believe that only those who accept God's calling have value as human beings. Instead, we typically think everyone has value because God has called them and because God loves them and values them in a special way, whether or not they choose to reciprocate. This picture then becomes constructivist: God is a valuer, He values us, and hence we have value and

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[52] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, sec. 34.

[53] Richard P. McBrien, 1981, *Catholicism*, Study ed, Minneapolis: Winston Press, 135.

[54] InspiringPhilosophy, "What Does it Mean to be the Image of God?"

are valuable. Will this picture of Christian constructivism encounter the same problem I identified in Korsgaard's argument? To answer this question, we need to examine the following. First, what makes God as a valuer different from human beings as valuers? Second, how can this constructivist version of human value require us to adopt positive attitudes towards people because of their dignity in a way that Korsgaard's version did not?

In response to the first question, we as valuers differ from God as a valuer in a few ways. Most importantly, God can value perfectly. I observed above, when explaining Korsgaard's argument, that although the rules of logic require us to regard all human beings as valuable, we are not always rationally consistent. We do not always, in practice, value ourselves and other people. Yet God in His perfection never fails to value properly. Why? Here we face a version of the Euthyphro Dilemma, a dilemma discussed in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*.[55]

Does God value something because it is good? Or is it good because God values it? If we answer the former question affirmatively, we allude to a standard of goodness independent of God. Perhaps God can perfectly identify the good in all scenarios because He is all-knowing, but He appeals to something outside of Himself to do so, in which case there is something greater than God, something beyond Him, something more ultimate, that is the standard of good. On the other hand, if we answer the latter question affirmatively, we suggest morality is arbitrary. What is good is good because that is just what God happened to pick. What if instead He chose to value rape and murder? Then rape and murder would be good, which we obviously find problematic.

William Lane Craig, a philosopher and Christian theologian, calls the Euthyphro Dilemma a false dilemma, because, he asserts, there is actually a third alternative distinct from

[55] In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro,* Socrates asks Euthyphro, "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" (10a).

these two options: God values something because *He* is good.[56] Craig explains, "God's nature *is* the good, and [...] this simply determines what goodness is."[57] You cannot separate God from the standard of goodness because God *is* the standard of goodness as a perfect being. His very nature defines what is good, but not in a way that is arbitrary. It would be arbitrary if God could have had a different nature, which is impossible.

Suppose God had a different nature, a nature that inclined Him towards rape and murder. Call this other version of God "God 2.0." Either God or God 2.0 lacks something the other has; otherwise the two would share all their attributes and thus be identical. God cannot lack something God 2.0 has because God is perfect. So God 2.0 lacks something God has. They differ only in the moral standard they set, so God 2.0 has moral deficiencies. By definition, God is the most perfect being. God 2.0 lacks something God has, and therefore, compared to God, is the lesser being, the imperfect being. So God 2.0 cannot be the most perfect possible being across time and space. Hence God's nature could not be otherwise, so it is impossible that a version of God would value rape and murder. Since God's very nature *is* the good, He values perfectly. He is the perfectly rationally consistent valuer.

Consider now the second question: Can a Christian constructivist version of human value require us to adopt positive attitudes towards people because of their dignity? Yes. God gave us commandments in accordance with His nature, and these commandments mandate not only moral actions but also moral attitudes. Craig states, "[God's] commandments to us are expressions of His nature. In short, our moral duties are determined by the commands of a just

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[56] drcraigvideos, "The Euthyphro Dilemma (William Lane Craig)," YouTube Video, 1:30-1:36, September 22, 2011, https://youtu.be/wBvi_auKkaI.

[57] Ibid, 10:49-10:56.

and loving God."[58] Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, gives us the commandment to love one another as He loves us, marking it as a moral duty: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another."[59] Thus it is our moral duty to love one another as God has loved us, and love is expressed both in action and attitude. God showed us the greatest act of love by dying for our sins; so too we must love each other through action.[60] But we also must adopt the moral attitude of love. In Mark 12:30, Jesus gives us another commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."[61] We can think of loving the Lord with all our strength as loving the Lord through our actions, yet loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind implies we also must adopt an attitude of love towards God. Love, in a Christian context, combines action and attitudes.

Let us return to our example of Martha and Ralph. Suppose Martha, still running for mayor, once again bumps into Ralph on her morning trip to Starbucks. If Martha understands that Ralph bears the imago Dei, she can no longer justify thinking of him as merely a tool in her scheme to rally votes for herself. No longer can she entertain attitudes of disgust and disdain towards him. Rather, the image of God in Ralph calls Martha to love him both in attitude and action. God loves Ralph. God, the perfectly rationally consistent valuer, sees Ralph as someone worthy of valuing, which means Ralph has value. God's valuing Ralph constitutes Ralph's being

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[58] Ibid, 1:42-1:56.

[59] John 13:34 (NABRE).

[60] Jesus' death on the cross is the ultimate act of love: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13, NABRE).

[61] Mark 12:30 (NABRE).

valuable. Martha has the moral duty, by Jesus' commandment, to love Ralph as God loves him. She must see him through God's eyes, and this lens will reveal his dignity to her.

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