

How Valuable Could a Person Be?*

Andrew M. Bailey¹ | Joshua Rasmussen²

¹Yale-NUS College, Singapore

²Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, United States

Correspondence

Andrew M. Bailey, Yale-NUS College
Email: andrew.bailey@yale-nus.edu.sg

Abstract

We investigate the value of persons. Our primary goal is to chart a path from *equal* and *extreme* value to *infinite* value. We advance two arguments. Each argument offers a reason to think that equal and extreme value are best accounted for if we are infinitely valuable. We then raise some difficult but fruitful questions about the possible grounds or sources of our infinite value, if we indeed have such value.

1 | VALUE

Our topic is the value of human persons. While we do not have a reductive definition or analysis of the concepts involved, we lay out a few clarifying assumptions.

First, we are thinking of value as the most general positive status. Thus, any thing that is good in any sense at all falls under this capacious umbrella. Value at this most abstract level includes, we might say, the good, the true, and the beautiful. It is common to and unites all and only things that are morally positive, epistemically positive, or aesthetically positive.

Second, value comes in degrees; some things are more valuable than others. Some things, furthermore, suffer from negative degrees of value or disvalue; it is better for them not to be. A helpful connection may be this: Anselmian perfection or supreme value is the upper limit case of value in the target sense. To be perfect in St. Anselm's sense is for it to be good to the highest (conceivable) degree that one exist.

Third, all kinds of things can be valuable: displays of courage, sublime waterfalls, true beliefs, properly-functioning dehumidifiers, delicious durians, elegant theories, and so on. And all sorts of things can be disvaluable: pain, unrequited love, murder, damage to soft myofascial tissue, and so on. It does not follow, of course, that all of these things have the same kind of value. Despite all being good in some respect or other, some might be categorically different from others in the value they possess.

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Some maintain that only a restricted class of things – experiences, facts, or states of affairs, for example – can be valuable in the strict sense, while other things are valuable only in a loose sense. Our assumption that all sorts of things can be valuable in some respect or other is compatible with such views, since it does not imply that all sorts of things can be valuable *in that strict sense*.¹

Fourth, value comes in at least two flavors: *final* and *instrumental*. The final value of an item is what makes it properly valued for its own sake – as an end. The instrumental value of an item derives from its capacity or tendency to produce value. Both final and instrumental value come in positive and negative degrees, and mixing and matching is possible. A thing could have any mixture of final or instrumental value or disvalue (a bad feeling that is nonetheless useful for survival, for example, might suffer from a small degree of final disvalue and a high degree of instrumental value; a beautiful but useless work of art may be very finally valuable but without much instrumental value at all, or even some instrumental disvalue, as when it prompts jealousy or political strife).²

2 | HUMAN VALUE: EXTREME AND EQUAL

Human persons are those things to which we ordinarily refer with personal pronouns. Among human persons are those things we sometimes call ‘non-cognitivists’, ‘teenagers’, ‘politicians’, ‘foreigners’, ‘heterosexuals’, and more. You are a human person. The authors of this article are people too.

So how much value does a human person have? At least some. We take it to be self-evident that you are valuable. You matter. It is good that you exist.

Your value seems to surpass the value of many other things, including pugs, sunsets, twitterpation, “Black Star”, valid arguments, delicious dinners, The Keeper of the Plains, and more. It is good that those items exist; the world is better for their being. Yet, there are important senses in which your value surpasses the value of beasts, landscapes, pleasant feelings, classic Yngwie J. Malmsteen tunes, proofs, meals, or majestic steel sculptures. Your value is more extreme.³

You are no exception or outlier. The authors also enjoy this remarkable status. *We all* do. Value is our common human birthright.

We can be more specific about the value we have in common. Though we may differ with respect to instrumental value, we do not differ with respect to what we call “final” value. In this sense we are all *equals*. You may well be more effective than someone else when it comes to producing lucrative dance beats, for example, and thus more valuable in that instrumental sense. Or you might have powers of persuasion that make you a potent ally in campus politics. But when it comes to final value, you don’t have more of that than anyone else. You are properly valued for your own sake to exactly the same degree as is anyone else. It is proper that someone treat you as an end in yourself, and the same

¹For helpful discussion of issues in this neighborhood, see Bradley (2006: 115-119), Kagan (1998: 293-294), and Zimmerman (2001: 33-39). To the objection that the only bearers of *intrinsic* value are, say, experiences (and not the people that bear them) we say: perhaps so. But that thesis is not at war with the claim we make below that people bear *final* value. For the proper contrast of *intrinsic* is *extrinsic*, not *instrumental* or *non-final*. See the next footnote.

²Final value is, we’ll suppose, distinct from what’s sometimes called ‘intrinsic’ value: value that is internally derived if derived at all. For helpful explanation of distinctions in this neighborhood and cases showing that final value and internally-derived value are not equivalent, see Korsgaard (1983), Kagan (1998), and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (1999). Since our argument concerns final and not intrinsic value, even philosophers who are skeptical that human persons have intrinsic value at all – like (Murphy 2017: 75-83) – might nonetheless find it convincing.

³This comparative judgement does not require, of course, that all of the valuable items we’ve listed are valuable in the same respects, nor does it require exactly one dimension of evaluation on which all can be ordered. We are agnostic on both points.

goes for everyone else in exactly the same sense and to exactly the same degree. In matters of final value, we are all the same.⁴

So, we each enjoy final value that is extreme and equal. Were final value a kind of wealth, the tribe of humanity would be supreme in its affluence, while also blessed with a Gini coefficient of 0.

3 | THE PUZZLE OF EXTREMITY AND EQUALITY

Suppose that our value is indeed extreme and equal. This idea, as it turns out, is puzzling. To see why, consider a parable:

You are in a museum; paintings adorn the walls. Some appear lovely indeed, and you can tell why they're on display in such a fancy locale. Others are plain. Some depict desert landscapes. Yet others seem jarring or even ugly; you're not quite sure what to think about those. A curator approaches.

“Did you know that every one of these paintings is a treasure, an artifact of deep value?”

- “No, I didn't. But that doesn't surprise me. This is a fancy museum, after all.”

“It's true. And did you know that every one of these paintings enjoys exactly the same value as any other?”

- “Wait. Really? How? Oh, I see what you must mean. They each have the same price. You'd charge the same amount to part ways with any of them.”

“Not quite. Art traders – their aim is lucre alone – talk about price. And the price they speak of concerns the conditions for voluntary exchange. But I'm talking about value. Each of these paintings has precisely the same value as any other – no more, no less!”

- “Perhaps I understand. Are you saying that, though these paintings differ in style and color and medium and era, each has the same power to generate good in the world, perhaps by arousing various kinds of reactions in viewers?”

“That's not what I'm saying at all. Some of these paintings will produce all sorts of good in the hearts and minds of those who behold them. But others will leave their audiences empty. So I'm not talking about the equally valuable *effects* of these paintings.

⁴That our value in the target sense is equal does not imply that we are *fungible*. Two paintings could be equally beautiful (and thus possessed to the same degree of a certain kind of final value) but not such that one could be swapped for the other without loss.

I'm saying that each of these paintings is equally valuable as an *end in itself*, regardless of its effects!"

The curator's claims are puzzling. The paintings differ wildly in their ability to generate positive affect (a kind of instrumental value). They differ wildly in many other respects, too. So how could it be that they are each finally valuable to the same degree? Some explanation is in order.

In the same way, some explanation is in order if all human beings are *extremely* and *equally* valuable. Like the paintings, we differ wildly in color and size and shape. We differ in all matter of non-moral properties. We differ in all matter of moral properties too: some of us are well-behaved and disposed towards kindness or courage, others significantly less so. Like the paintings, we also differ wildly in our capacity to *produce* other kinds of goods – money, food, pleasure, awe, and so on. We differ in instrumental value in that sense. And yet, somehow we are indeed each *extremely* and *equally* valuable. How? Why? Our extreme and equal value cries out for explanation.

In what follows we shall pursue a deeper explanation of our extreme and equal value. We aim to see how final value could be the same across such divergent beings.

4 | FROM EXTREMITY AND EQUALITY TO INFINITY

In the following sections, we will present and defend two arguments for the thesis that if we have extreme and equal value, then we have *infinite* (or non-limited) value. Each of these arguments is a specification or regimentation of the following intuitive idea: the best way to account for both the extremity and equality of human value is to suppose that we are infinitely valuable.

To further set the stage, here's a coda to our parable:

As you prepare to take your leave from this strange place, the curator adds:

"You seem to be skeptical about the deep and equal value of my paintings. So let me be more precise about how things stand. As it turns out, there's a large-ish unit of value – the axin (for reference, the median delicious meal clocks in at about 0.0004 axins). Every painting has precisely 61.2 axins of value. You can verify this claim by consulting an axinometer. I happen to have one right here if you'd like to use it!"

Would this additional detail make more explicable the thesis that each painting is extremely and equally valuable?

It would not. It is all the more puzzling how these divergent paintings could have that same degree of final value. Indeed, for any finite amount of value (neither the unit nor the quantity seems to matter), it would be strange indeed if each painting had precisely that degree of value and not another.

So also with people. It would be strange indeed if human persons all had great final value to precisely the same finite degree. How could that be? What could explain or account for this apparent coincidence?

In what follows, our core claim is that the best way to explain or account for the extreme and equal value of human persons is in terms of infinite value. We offer next two arguments for this claim. We are not maximally convinced that both arguments are sound. But we find their disjunction plausible and worth serious consideration.

5 | CONFIRMATION

The first argument uses a Bayesian confirmation framework. Let Equal Human Value be this datum: we all enjoy equal and extreme final value. Finite Value Hypothesis is the theory that we are each equally and extremely finally valuable to some finite degree. Infinite Value Hypothesis is the theory that we are each infinitely finally valuable.

Consider now two conditional epistemic probabilities. These report, roughly, the degree to which one should expect a particular item of evidence, given a hypothesis:

$P(\text{Equal Human Value}/\text{Infinite Value Hypothesis})$

$P(\text{Equal Human Value}/\text{Finite Value Hypothesis})$

These probabilities are not the same. And indeed, the first is significantly higher than the second. We shall argue for this claim from both directions.

Given Infinite Value Hypothesis, we may expect that people have equal value. It would not be surprising, given Infinite Value Hypothesis, that we are all deeply and equally value. It seems to be precisely what one would expect, in fact. Infinite Value Hypothesis, furthermore, offers a simple and compelling explanation of Equal Human Value. Infinity is a big number, so to speak. So no wonder we are *extremely* valuable.

Given Finite Value Hypothesis, by contrast, Equal Human Value is unexpected. It would be quite surprising, given Finite Value Hypothesis, that we are all deeply and equally value. For equal value would require that there be some particular finite degree of value – 61.2 axins, for example – such that we are each valuable to exactly that degree. Given our variation along other dimensions, this particular equality would be a surprising result indeed. It is *possible*, yes – just as it is *possible* that all the paintings in our parable have the same degree of value. But equal finite value across wide diversity is surprising and unexpected. On Finite Value Hypothesis, there is no simple and compelling explanation of our extreme and equal value. So we judge the probability of Equal Human Value on that hypothesis to be rather low.

One might, of course, supplement Finite Value Hypothesis with various auxiliary hypotheses. One could add that selective evolutionary pressures or mysterious and powerful aliens only allow the birth and continued existence of human beings that have exactly 61.2 axins of value. And the probability of Equal Human Value on this more complicated view might well be high, even 1. But this maneuver comes at familiar theoretical price. Adding extra conjuncts to a hypothesis can always expand the evidence that hypothesis can accommodate; but it drives down the *prior* probability (or, simplicity, if you prefer) of that hypothesis. Proponents of Infinite Value Hypothesis need not add such auxiliary hypotheses to their theory to explain or accommodate the evidence that is Equal Human Value.

We have all the ingredients we need, then, for a novel argument. It unfolds as follows:

C1. Equal Human Value

C2. $P(\text{Equal Human Value}/\text{Infinite Value Hypothesis}) [=1] \gg P(\text{Equal Human Value}/\text{Finite Value Hypothesis}) [=low]$

C3. If so, then Equal Human Value is strong evidence for Infinite Value Hypothesis

C4. Therefore, Equal Human Value is strong evidence for Infinite Value Hypothesis (from C1-C3)

The argument is valid. We have already indicated support for the key premises – C1 and C2. Premise C3 encodes a standard view about confirmation and evidence: if a datum is more probable on one hypothesis than another, then it is *evidence for* that hypothesis.

Interesting results follow. First, Equal Human Value *confirms* or is *evidence for* Infinite Value Hypothesis. Second, on learning about Equal Human Value, one is in position to *increase confidence* that Infinite Value Hypothesis is true (and, accordingly, decrease confidence in Finite Value Hypothesis). Just how much should your confidence increase? That is a matter of the ratio of P(Equal Human Value/Infinite Value Hypothesis) to P(Equal Human Value/Finite Value Hypothesis). The higher this ratio (sometimes called the ‘Bayes factor’) is, the more support Equal Human Value provides to Infinite Value Hypothesis over Finite Value Hypothesis.

For concreteness, let us plug in a few numbers. Suppose that the conditional probability of Equal Human Value on Infinite Human Value is indeed high, as we’ve argued above – 1 or close to it. And let us suppose that the conditional probability of Equal Human Value on Finite Human Value is indeed quite low, as we’ve argued above – perhaps as low as .05. The relevant Bayes factor would then be 20 or close to it – suggesting that Equal Human Value is not just *evidence* for our hypothesis, but *strong* evidence. Caveat: the exercise of this paragraph is heuristic. Since we don’t have an argument for a precise value of P(Equal Human Value/Finite Value Hypothesis), we don’t have an argument for this *precise* Bayes factor. What matters here is that it is certainly high, and that the higher it is, the stronger the Confirmation Argument turns out to be.

Our presentation of the Confirmation Argument sets the stage for an argument similar in spirit. We present this informal version of the argument for philosophers who (quite reasonably) have doubts about using Bayes factors or a confirmation framework to derive philosophical views. Even if these formal tools are best left to the empirical sciences, we think, there is still a kernel of insight within the Confirmation Argument. That kernel, when suitably nourished, can expand into a fruitful and promising argument for a similar conclusion. That argument is as follows:

W1. There is a kind and degree of value that we all share.

W2. If so, then: if that kind and degree of value is finite, then it is a wild coincidence that we all share it.

W3. It is not a wild coincidence that we all share it

W4. Therefore, that kind and degree of value we all share is not finite (from W1-W3)

W1 is a consequence of the now-familiar thesis explored in this paper, viz., that we all have an extreme and equal degree of final value. It might well be that we all enjoy this status equally, and that the degree in question is finite. That is an open possibility. But it carries with it a further consequence: coincidence. For any finite degree of value at all, it would be extremely puzzling and strange to suppose that each of us has *that* degree and none other. Thus W2. W3 adds this plausible thought to the mix: the wild coincidence in view is not convincing. Indeed, it seems wrong. One route to W3 is abstract. We could reason that theories that multiply or posit wild coincidences are, all other things being equal, not as good as those that do not. Another route to W3 is more concrete. Just consider the view that it is indeed a wild coincidence that we all share a certain kind and degree of value. This view is implausible, we think, and reflection on the museum parable we’ve given above supports that judgement. It is more plausible, then, that if we share equal value, then we all have a kind and degree of value that is not finite, which is to say that it is infinite.

The informal remarks above do not necessarily give *independent* support to the central idea behind the Confirmation Argument. They may well stand or fall with that more formal presentation. But they may well prove to be more widely accessible and acceptable.⁵

5.1 | Instrumental Difference

Our second argument unfolds as follows:

- I1. We are all equally overall valuable
- I2. We differ with respect to instrumental value
- I3. If so, then either we differ with respect to final value, or we are all overall infinitely valuable
- I4. Therefore, either we differ with respect to final value, or we are all overall infinitely valuable (from I1-I3)
- I5. We do not differ with respect to final value
- I6. Therefore, we are all overall infinitely valuable (from I4-I5)

We already have the resources to motivate the premises. I1 begins with a similar datum as our other argument. The datum I1 trades on, however, concerns *overall* value. The overall value of an item, let us say, is the sum of its final value and its instrumental value.⁶ However else we may differ, we do not differ in *this* respect. No person is, overall, more valuable than any other. Note that the thesis expressed by I1 is logically stronger than that presupposed our previous two arguments. The Instrumental Difference Argument requires as a starting point that we are all equal with respect to *overall* value, rather than that we are all equal with respect to final value.

And yet we do differ. We even differ with respect to one kind or dimension of value. So I2 adds an obvious truth. Some of us are better at producing certain goods than others. You probably know someone who is better at making groovy music than you are, for example. Or money. These cases exemplify differences in instrumental value.

If the overall finite value of one item is equal to the overall finite value of another, but they differ in one factor contributing to their overall values, then surely they differ in some *other* factors contributing to their overall values. Difference in one kind of summand requires difference in another. This second kind of difference is the only way to ensure, as it were, that the sums remain equal. So if you and I have the same degree of finite value, but differ with respect to instrumental value, then we must therefore differ with respect to final value. The other option, of course, is that the degree of overall value we enjoy is not finite at all. This is our case for I3.

⁵Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on the relationship between this more informal argument and the Confirmation Argument.

⁶This definition is inspired by Feldman (1998): 345.

We do *not* differ with respect to final value, says I5. We are instead equal in this respect. So we must be, therefore, infinitely overall valuable.

We've given specifications of the core idea of this article. They are somewhat independent, and this is an advantage. Where one fails another may succeed. Together they support the idea that the best way to explain or account for the extreme and equal value of human persons is in terms of infinite value. Together they chart a path from extremity and equality to infinity.

6 | OBJECTIONS

We turn to objections. First, one might wonder whether infinite value could secure equal value. After all, Cantor taught us that there are more infinite cardinals than you can shake a stick at, each bigger than the last. So how does the hypothesis that we are all infinitely valuable account for our equal value? Infinity is compatible with inequality. By analogy: you learn that two sets both have an infinite cardinality. Learning this would give you *no reason at all* to think that they have the same cardinality. This Cantorian insight undermines the Confirmation Argument given above; it suggests that P(Equal Human Value/Infinite Value Hypothesis) is not high; and so the case for C2 fails.⁷

We reply: the objection raises fruitful questions. It is not clear, for one, whether thoughts about our infinite value can be accurately expressed in a set-theoretic framework. We will set aside worries along those lines for now, though, and offer two other considerations in reply to the objection.

First reply: the argument can be repaired, even within a familiar set-theoretic framework. The idea is this: specify a *particular* Cantorian infinity when stating the Infinite Value Hypothesis. Where an axin is some finite unit of value, the Infinite Value Hypothesis could be specified as the thesis that each of us has a value equal to the sum of $\aleph_1 \aleph_0$ axins, for example.⁸ It is highly likely on *this* refined hypothesis that we enjoy equal and extreme value (indeed, that conditional probability would be 1), and so the refined hypothesis explains the datum well. It remains an open question, of course, whether \aleph_0 is the correct order of infinity to select here instead of, say, 2^{\aleph_0} . We have not settled this intramural debate between those who already endorse our infinite value, and our confirmation framework is not suited to answering that question. But our argument might still show that we have infinite value, a thesis that is, on its own, intriguing enough.

Second reply: perhaps we do not need to specify the precise kind of infinity at play. The puzzle that leads us to infinite value is about how beings that diverge in manifestly *finite* ways could have the same value. No finite increase in strength or knowledge makes one human more finally valuable than any other. To solve this puzzle, it suffices to suppose that humans have a value that doesn't turn on finite differences. Any infinite cardinality will do. It may be objected here that, though we each enjoy infinite value, the value of one corresponds to a higher cardinality than the value of another. This would be a case where all enjoy extreme and infinite value, but nonetheless are not equally valuable. An intriguing thought – but we're skeptical. For it's hard to see what could *account* for such differences. Differences in knowledge, power, virtue, nose shape, eye color, and so on all seem *finite* and thus unfit for that job. They could, at most, account for *finite* differences in value (rendering one person worth

⁷A variation on this objection, care of an anonymous referee, has it that different infinite values are *incommensurable* rather than *unequal*. Note, though, that incommensurability may well fill the key roles played by equality. If two people have incommensurable value, for example, it would not be apt to sacrifice one for the sake of the other on the basis of value so preserved or snuffed out. The Cantorian formulation of the objection also seems to us to have extra intellectual and dialectical force: it deploys a known result from mathematics, after all.

⁸ \aleph_0 is the cardinality of the natural numbers. 2^{\aleph_0} is the cardinality of the reals.

71 axins on account of her height, for example, and another only 70, on account of his equal height but slightly worse moral habits). Anyone who thinks that there must be an explanation for differences in value will be hard pressed to say what that could be in a case where some enjoy value corresponding to \aleph_0 and others to, say, 2^{\aleph_0}

A third reply goes like this: perhaps when evaluating the intrinsic plausibility of hypotheses involving infinities, the associated infinite cardinalities are not on a par. Perhaps \aleph_0 enjoys a kind of natural leg up.⁹ So if you're told that there are, the idea goes, *infinitely many books*, you should assign a higher probability to the hypothesis that there are \aleph_0 books than to the hypothesis that there are 2^{\aleph_0} books. Or perhaps you should presume that the infinity in question corresponds to \aleph_0 unless given a good reason to think otherwise. We are not wholly convinced by this idea, but we recognize its attraction. If it is right, it suggests another reply to the objection under consideration. Though it may be *possible* that some people have value corresponding to \aleph_0 while others have value corresponding to 2^{\aleph_0} , we should antecedently rate that hypothesis of inequality as very unlikely – or *presume* it false until given reason to think otherwise. On the assumption that infinities are at play at all, our expectation – absent countervailing reasons – should be, rather, that they all correspond to \aleph_0 .¹⁰ But then, the premise in question – C2, that is – turns out to be resilient. That premise supposes that $P(\text{Equal Human Value/Infinite Value Hypothesis}) = 1$, and this supposition would enjoy either a very high intrinsic probability or otherwise command assent absent countervailing reasons. The mere possibility of its falsity as envisioned in this objection wouldn't defeat the premise, and so it stands.

If you are not quite convinced by all of that, we offer this thought. The Instrumental Difference argument is not undermined by the objection at hand; and so it may be an attractive alternative that succeeds where the Confirmation Argument does not.

Another objection: the arguments presuppose that human beings are all equally and extremely valuable. This premise, however, is not a datum; rather, it is false. Here are three reasons. First, there is little reason to suppose we are all *equally* finally valuable. This equal-value idea is a fiction; it is perhaps useful for modern liberal democracies – but hardly a sober truth. Human beings differ in all sorts of ways, including their final value. Second, it is unclear what final value could even come to here. It is probably best interpreted as (to borrow Peter Singer's words) "obscurantist mumbo-jumbo." Third, there is no reason to elevate human beings above the rest of nature as done in the arguments at hand. We are not angelic beings distinct from natural reality; we are parts of it, and subject to the same finitudes as the other animals (Singer could probably be recruited in defense of this final reason as well).

We reply: we have no *argument* for the premise in question and we will not attempt to refute these three promising objections. But we do have two comments. First, the equal and extreme value of human beings can do much to explain a wide range of ethical phenomena. That we are *extremely* valuable nicely accounts for the deep wrongness of murder, for example. That we are *equally* valuable nicely accounts for the wrongness of inequitable treatment. For this reason, we think the equal and extreme value of human beings is a hypothesis worth testing and extending, as our article does. Second, our arguments are of some value even for those who reject their starting premise. For our arguments uncover this interesting conditional: *if* we are all equally and extremely valuable, then there is very good reason to think we are infinitely valuable. Some may take this as a *reductio* of the antecedent or as a reason to accept the consequence; such is philosophy. But either way, our arguments shed new light.

⁹We thank an anonymous referee for both pressing this objection and suggesting that we consider a response along these lines.

¹⁰Cantorian set theory, of course, gives us precisely that countervailing reason in the case of the real numbers – a *proof*, in fact, that the cardinality in question cannot be \aleph_0 . There is no such proof in the case of people.

7 | THINKING ABOUT INFINITE VALUE

It is not hard to find affirmations of the infinite value of human beings. Kant apparently thought that people were to be “exalted above any price”.¹¹ Search Google for phrases like “human infinite value” and you’ll find some eighty million results. Pope John Paul II, for example, wrote of the “infinite value of the human person, that is not tied to one’s external features or on the ability to relate to other members of society.”¹² And a White House announcement begins with allegiance to “the emphatic belief that every person has unique and infinite value”.¹³ Statements to this effect are, again, commonplace. The arguments of this article could show that they are on the right track.

Our main aim in this article has not been to definitively establish that people have infinite final value. We have tried, instead, to support a *conditional* thesis from extremity and equality to infinity. But the consequent of that conditional raises important issues, some of which we’ll address now.

One might wonder whether the thesis that people have final infinite value implies that every human *life* is infinitely valuable either itself or on the margins. In fact, neither claim follows. Distinguish:

1. Every human life – an event that lasts just so long as a human being is alive and includes the entire story of her mortal existence – is overall valuable to an infinite degree.
2. For any human being, the *marginal* value of some finite interval of life (that of an *extra* year of living, say) is overall valuable to an infinite degree.¹⁴
3. For any living human being, she – the person herself – is infinitely finally valuable.

We have argued that extreme and equal value supports thesis 3. Not so for theses 1 and 2. And this is good, since they are not plausible.

Against 1: some human lives – particularly those that produce great evil (i.e., that have vast quantities of instrumental disvalue) – may be *overall* disvaluable on that account, even if they contain vast quantities of final value too. It may well be better overall for Pol Pot’s life, given the course it took, to have never been. Some human lives may also brim with suffering and pain (i.e., contain vast quantities of final disvalue) and produce too little instrumental value to enjoy overall positive value. It does not follow from these points that human persons could lack overall value, of course, so these observations are compatible with our arguments. For a human *person* is not identical to her *life*.

Against 2: whatever we might *say* in our more pious moods, hardly anyone’s *revealed* preferences are consistent with the thesis. Sure, there is some price you’ll pay (something of value you’ll give up) in exchange for an extra year of life. But there are some prices you’ll *not* pay. There’s some amount of

¹¹Kant (G, 6: 435), translation from Gregor (1996: 557). The entire paragraph is worth quoting: “But a human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them.” We note that key ingredients of our argument – the finality, extremity, and equality of human value – appear in the claims Kant here makes.

¹²John Paul II (2001).

¹³White House (2017).

¹⁴A claim Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits seems to affirm (as quoted in Davis 2001): “The value of human life is infinite and beyond measure, so that any part of life—even if only an hour or a second—is of precisely the same worth as seventy years of it, just as any fraction of infinity, being indivisible, remains infinite”. See Davis (2001) for helpful discussion and arguments that finite stretches of human life are not infinitely valuable.

suffering, for example – for you or for your loved ones – you’d rather not exchange for another year of living. What this shows is that even if the marginal *value* of human life is infinite, it is not infinitely *valued* by actual people. Of course, we could all be making a deep mistake here in failing to infinitely treasure that which is infinitely valuable. But the more plausible reaction, we think, is to conclude instead that human life does not possess infinite marginal value.

The kind of final value we’ve had in view would attach to people equally and to an infinite degree. It seems, however, that we can make meaningful and reasonable distinctions regarding at least some kind of final value that people possess. This is puzzling. As Zimmerman puts the point:

Suppose that Mary has none of the virtues of John and Kath and no other redeeming features, either; suppose, indeed, that all her personal qualities are reprehensible. Wouldn’t it be absurd to say that she has a final value as great as John’s or Kath’s?¹⁵

We offer two replies. First, we distinguish the final value had by a person *because she is a person* and that had by a person *because she is virtuous* or has otherwise redeeming features. Zimmerman is certainly correct that we can make meaningful and reasonable distinctions between people when it comes to value of the second sort. Such distinctions are consistent with our arguments. For our arguments concern the former. We’ve argued that if *person-value*, as we might call it, is extreme and equal, then it is infinite. That conditional is consistent with all sorts of comparisons between *other* kinds of value people possess, final or otherwise.¹⁶ A second reply is that the goodness of virtue may perhaps accrue, not to a person, but rather to a virtue state itself. On this model, there could be meaningful comparisons between the value of Mary’s courage and Kath’s, even though Mary and Kath *themselves* have precisely the same degree of value. That said, we think that Zimmerman’s point here is worth further reflection. And together with the arguments we give for our key conditional it puts significant pressure on those who would accept that conditional’s antecedent or consequent.

8 | CONSEQUENCE AND EXTENSION

If people are infinitely valuable, a pious and popular slogan turns out to be true. What follows and why should this be interesting? In this section, we will briefly highlight four possible consequences or extensions.

First, our thesis has practical implications. You may put these to use as soon as you are done reading this article. There are probably people in your life. If we are correct, these people are really quite remarkable – all of them. They are probably the most precious things you’ve ever known. Their worth has no bounds at all. You should therefore look on them with wonder and take great delight in their existence. This duty – we are obligated to value valuable things, it seems – is a joyful one.¹⁷

¹⁵Zimmerman (2001: 45).

¹⁶Similar distinctions address another worry Zimmerman raises in the same passage (2001: 45-46): “...it would seem to follow that all worlds in which a person exists are infinitely good” a point he finds “... simply not credible”. We reply that worlds containing people would thereby contain infinite final value of a certain kind – person-value. But it would not follow that they contain infinite final value of *other* kinds, nor that they all contain an *equal* amount of person-value. Vallentyne and Kagan (1997) argue in detail for the latter claim; they contend that worlds containing infinite value can nonetheless differ in aggregate value; meaningful comparisons across worlds containing infinite value are indeed possible. That said, it is plainly the case that caution is in order when applying inferences that are valid in finite cases to infinite cases. For cautionary notes along these lines especially useful to those who affirm the consequent of our key conditional, see Hamkins and Montero (1999) and Climenhaga (2018); see also Rubio (2020)’s reply to Climenhaga.

¹⁷Valuing people as such is not the same as valuing or promoting their interests, we note. See Card (1984: 42-43).

Second, we have exposed a possible answer to the question of what makes people special. There are, as we have observed, all manner of valuable things. But people seem to be different in kind from the rest. Topiaries and songs and delicious meals are good, alright, but people are better. The thesis advanced in this article suggests one account of why that is. People are different, not just in degree but in kind because, unlike most other merely finitely valuable things, people have value without limit.¹⁸

Third, here is an application from the philosophy of religion. Some theists claim that a perfectly good God has arranged an eternal and glorious afterlife for some and annihilation for others. If our thesis is correct, there is some reason to doubt that second claim. To allow or arrange for an infinitely valuable thing to pass out of existence altogether, to be annihilated, is to allow or arrange for a very bad state of affairs. The loss of even one person to the abyss of annihilation would accrue infinite disvalue. This is some reason to deny that a perfectly good God would allow or arrange for such a loss.¹⁹

Finally, we point out a connection between the argument of this article and the question of what we are. Accounting for our infinite value on the hypothesis that we are wholly material beings (animals, brains, cerebral hemispheres, or what have you) is no easy task.²⁰ It would seem to be much easier if we were, instead, creatures of a different kind altogether from finite material goods found in nature – immaterial souls, say.²¹ The thesis that we are indeed infinitely valuable could, then, support a novel argument against materialism about human persons. The key conditional in question here – *if* we are infinitely valuable, then we are not wholly material – also suggests a new objection to our infinite value. If there are good arguments for materialism and that key conditional is true, then those arguments for materialism are also objections to the thesis that we are infinitely valuable.

These are, as we say, possible consequences. We do not raise them to suggest they are certainly the case. But they deserve further inquiry and together show that our thesis could command wide interest.

9 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have answered an important question. We have said how valuable a person could be. People could be very valuable, even *infinitely* valuable. This is, we've shown, a consequence of the plausible and widely accepted view that people are extremely and equally valuable.

Troubling questions remain. For example: how could it be that people are infinitely valuable? It's easy enough to see why we'd have some degree of value. Most things do. But why infinite? And why are all of us like that? What could possibly ground or account for such infinite value?

These are, again, troubling questions. They admit of no clear answer. Many obvious answers face problems.

It is unlikely that your final value is simply the sum of the individual values of your parts, for example. An *addition* view would have a hard time accounting for both the equality and extremity of our value. Equality: people are wildly diverse in their size and shape and in the various configurations of

¹⁸For speculative approaches to human nature that suggest rather different hypotheses about what makes us special see Bailey (forthcoming b), Bailey and Rasmussen (forthcoming), and Rasmussen and Bailey (forthcoming).

¹⁹For argument to this effect, which argument would find support from the arguments of this article, see Lewis (2007: 232) and Spiegel (2015).

²⁰For arguments in support of this key conditional, see Bailey and Rasmussen (2016: §4) and Harrison (2016). On what it is to be wholly material in the first place, see Bailey (forthcoming a)

²¹For recent argument to this effect within a liberal and egalitarian framework, see Friberg-Fenos (2020).

their parts. Why should their parts happen to sum to the same value? Extremity: your parts don't seem to have enough value individually to add up to the value you have. Though your top and bottom halves might be quite special, you are more special than their combined value.

It is unlikely, too, that our final value could be *socially constructed*; this view faces the same problems as above. For people need not be, and are not in fact, equally valued. And the social construction theory fails to make much sense of the greatness, much less the infinitude, of your value. Suppose Sue moderately likes himself, and no one else knows Sue. Then Sue's value would be moderate. But no person has merely moderate value. There is an additional, perhaps more basic problem with the social construction theory. This theory gets the order of value backwards. People do not have final value because they are valued. Rather, they are properly valued because they are valuable.

We predict, then, that accounts of the grounds of our infinite value will face serious difficulty. We close by suggesting three paths forward. First: develop better theories of value that can accommodate and explain something's having value without bounds. This is no easy task. Second: give up on the thesis that our infinite value has any explanation at all. Perhaps our infinite value is an unexplained explainer. This comes at a price and will no doubt annoy fans of various principles of sufficient reason. Third: revisit the opening premise of this article and deny that we are after all equally and extremely valuable.²² Whatever path is to be taken, we have learned something valuable about the value of persons.

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²²In this connection, see Stith (2004), who argues that *respect* is a more apt category than *value* when explicating the ways in which people are special. Being an apt candidate for respect, we note, appears to come in degrees. If we each have that feature to some great and equal degree, then our argument could be recast in terms of respect without loss.

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