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Children: an inheritance from the Lord.  
Infanticide and the value of life

DPhil

Hilary Term 2021

‘Hereditas Domini filii’ (Psalm 127:3)

*Motto of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health*

*Acknowledgements and thanks:*

To Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Christchurch, Oxford, who patiently supervised me over the apparently endless aeons it turns out a part-time DPhil can take, and to Ashley Moyse, McDonald Postdoctoral Fellow in Christian Ethics and Public Life, who helped.

To Professor Mike McNamee, philosopher at Swansea University, who encouraged me to undertake research in ethics in the first place, and to Professor John Wyatt, paediatrician and Christian ethicist, who showed it could be done.

To Professor Peter Singer, who engaged graciously with me even though he knew we profoundly disagree.

To my grown-up children, Rebecca, Katherine and Mike, who teased me about disappearing into my office each Saturday morning to do theology, but did it kindly.

Most of all, to my wife Leonie, whose never-failing love, affirmation, support and capacity for celebration have made this yet another project we have had fun doing together as a team. ‘He who finds a wife finds what is good’ (Prov 18:22a, New International Version).



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## Short abstract

Arguing from preference utilitarianism, contemporary moral philosopher Peter Singer considers infanticide permissible because infants lack the cognitive capacity to prefer life over death. Christian theologians object that Singer's general theory offers too thin a conception of 'the good', fails to recognise the dependence of value on purpose and abstracts moral value from common humanity. Few confront him directly on infanticide.

Singer's empirical claims are unconvincing, but scientific evidence alone cannot refute his judgement that the properties which normatively distinguish infants from adults ('childness') offer no inherent value. I argue that a Christian moral anthropology, too, privileges adulthood over childness if it holds imagehood to represent properties such as rationality that adults have in common with God, but not with infants.

I set out an alternative anthropology that draws on scripture, Christian eudaimonism, neuropsychological research, and the theology and philosophy of childhood. I suggest the value of present moral action in respect of any human is the extent to which it facilitates her vocation. I describe modes in which childness enables humans to flourish at any age, thus extending the range of cognitive properties that can confer personal value on the eudaimonist account beyond rationality to include many that infants possess.

I conclude that, even while infants, humans have a vocation and are equipped both to flourish and contribute to the flourishing of others. Killing humans during infancy imperils human flourishing as decisively as during adulthood and is usually wrong, irrespective of individual capacity to prefer to live.

## Long abstract

Many ancient societies considered infanticide an important component of a householder's financial planning. Christianity's objection—that every member of the species *Homo sapiens* is made in the image of God—created a culture in which killing infants became morally unacceptable.

In my introductory chapter I suggest Christianity should prepare to fight that battle again. In an era of scientific empiricism and constrained healthcare resources, utilitarian moral theories that evaluate humans according to possession of certain properties, such as rationality, promise that some human lives are valueless in themselves and can be taken to benefit others. Doctors, I suggest, are potentially drawn to ethical accounts that make medical decisions morally unambiguous. It is cheaper to kill an unwanted infant than to care for her; the clinician who considers infanticide immoral is uncomfortably torn between what is ethically right and what might appear to some to be practically desirable. A moral theory that claims infants are not harmed by infanticide resolves that discomfort. Most contemporary doctors do not yet embrace infanticide, but I suggest it is reasonable to suppose that is the direction of travel.

While acknowledging the risks of apologetics, I defend a strategy that seeks to express some Christian values in terms that might persuade rational people who are not Christians. I propose that one defensible approach is a teleological argument, along broadly Thomist-Aristotelian lines, that claims the object of moral action is human flourishing and ultimately eudaimonia. I argue that, to explain the value of an infant's life, Christian eudaimonism must appeal to a distinctively Christian anthropology of the child. To that end, I introduce the term 'childness' to denote qualities that distinguish the normal infant from the normal adult. I differentiate childness from the period called 'childhood' and from adjectives such as 'childish' and 'child-like' and clarify that humans outside infancy can demonstrate childness as well as 'adulthood'.

In the next chapter I set out how utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer's general theory leads him to defend infanticide at parents' request.

In *Practical Ethics*, Singer chooses to evaluate the 'good' according to the extent to which moral action maximises global preference satisfaction on the grounds that it represents an outcome everyone agrees is desirable. In the first section, I set out three ways in which Christian theologians have objected. Firstly, they show that Singer's account of the good is too thin. A more defensible alternative is eudaimonia, which represents the perfection of an individual's existence. The goal of individual moral action is to promote an individual's 'flourishing', which refers to all ways in which she might be helped to achieve eudaimonia.

Secondly, Singer abstracts the idea of personal value from human purpose. Value must logically depend on purpose and theologians argue that God has created the universe to some purpose that is reflected in the way it is ordered. The nature of human beings expresses their role in an ordered universe which, for each individual, represents her vocation. Vocation describes the purpose God gives each member of *Homo sapiens*, and a human flourishes to the extent that she is fulfilling that purpose.

Finally, the logic of Singer's moral theory is directed towards maximising an abstraction rather than towards the compassion people should have for one another. There is no mechanism for explaining why the agent should be concerned for others, or for ensuring that she does not commit herself to an ideal that benefits no-one. Theologians argue on eudaimonistic grounds that ethics is inherently intersubjective. The moral agent's vocation is to help others flourish, so that correct moral action promotes the desirable outcome in both moral agent and patient, avoiding the perils of abstraction in Singer's theory.

In the next section I show how Singer's general theory leads him to conclude that the category of valueless lives includes those of infants who are unwanted by their parents. In Singer's ethical project, the infant exemplifies humans without preferences. A being's right to live, he suggests, expresses a preference to continue to exist, and he believes human cognition is insufficiently developed during infancy to hold such a preference. To those who argue that the infant's inherent value is in her potential to become an adult, Singer makes the consequentialist reply that the moral agent must consider what she is like now rather what she might or might not become if she reaches adulthood.

In the final section of this chapter, I suggest that theological objections to his general theory offer the foundations of a response to infanticide but that, as they stand, they are incomplete. Revealing his empirical claims about the infant to be inaccurate is the first necessary task. But it is insufficient because it leaves unchallenged his claim that childness cannot confer value on a human life. A second task is to show that Singer's moral anthropology of the child is wrong; that the properties a normal infant *does* possess (i.e. childness) are properties that enable persons to flourish.

I approach the first task in chapter three. I set out a critique of Singer's interpretation of research evidence in respect of childness, drawing on representative studies from the field of developmental neuropsychology. I show that Singer has often been selective in his appeal to scientific evidence, that he has interpreted it in the light of presuppositions he already holds about the infant's value, and that his theory has not been adequately informed by a body of research that has expanded significantly since the ideas on which his presuppositions are based were first promulgated. I draw a parallel between Singer's belief that the normal infant lacks self-awareness, and a conviction, held in the early twentieth century but subsequently discredited on empirical grounds, that the normal infant is unable to experience pain.

In chapter four I approach the second of the two tasks. I show how each of the objections to Singer's general theory offers a foundation stone for a Christian anthropology of the child, and relate each to what science, especially developmental neuropsychology, has demonstrated about childness.

The first is the idea that the notion of human goods that eudaimonia represents is so broad that it enables even infants to participate. I argue that infants are able to participate in many, though not all, of the same basic human goods as adults. I then show that eudaimonia represents a relationship, meaning there are goods in which childness equips humans for participation particularly well.

The second is that, on the Christian eudaimonist view I am defending, the moral value of an individual's properties cannot be assessed except by reference to her telos or vocation. I suggest that 'maturation' is an inherently

evaluative term and argue for a clear distinction between telos (progression towards what is ideal) and transition (a change over time that is of no evaluative relevance). While acknowledging that part of the telos of an infant is to become an adult, I show that the capacity of childness to pave the way for adulthood does not exhaust its value. I propose that there are modes in which an infant can flourish now by virtue of being an infant and defend the position, taken by some philosophers and other theologians, that there is no reason to ascribe any change in personal value to the exchange of childness for adulthood that occurs gradually between infancy and adulthood.

The third foundation is that ethics is ineluctably intersubjective. I suggest that childness equips humans to live in community and that humans flourish best in communities in which some members possess childness. In an ordered universe the infant has a part to play in human flourishing and need not wait to acquire the characteristics of an adult in order to flourish.

The end of chapter four marks the end of the first part of my argument, in which I have defended the position that adulthood is not inherently more valuable than childness. Neither the presence of childness nor the absence of adulthood in infants justifies the profoundly different evaluations that Singer claims between the lives of humans during infancy and in adulthood.

In chapter five, I acknowledge that in abandoning as principal criteria for moral value the properties that adulthood represents, especially a capacity for rational autonomy, I have also blurred one distinction between human and non-human animals. I suggest that Christianity's account of the sanctity of human life is based on the theological idea of *imago Dei*. I contrast two principal conceptions. Substantialist conceptions indicate that the extent to which an individual is in God's image depends ultimately on certain properties that they possess. I show that most privilege a capacity for formal reasoning and should cause Christians concern because they potentially fail to value or to protect vulnerable human beings who lack that capacity.

I suggest that theologians working in healthcare often prefer a relational interpretation of *imago Dei* because it offers greater protection to vulnerable humans. According to relational interpretations, the special value of humans

expresses the relation to God in which each individual human stands. An individual's vocation reflects her specific and given role in an ordered and created universe. Whereas, on the substantialist view, moral reasoning should start with an assessment of an individual's moral properties, on the relational view the moral agent's responsibility is to engage in a relationship with the individual as though the question of her humanity were already resolved.

I acknowledge a concern that that might lead doctors to imagine they must prolong every patient's life for as long as is technically possible but argue that a compassionate doctor will always withhold an intervention that would, on balance, harm a patient's flourishing more than it would promote it. Withholding an intervention under those circumstances results from according her full value; it is not a judgement that she is no longer a person, even if it results in her death. Substantialist and relational interpretations of *imago Dei* are at odds, but I note that the risk of misclassifying an individual as a 'non-person' on substantialist grounds reduces as the criteria for personhood are broadened. If they are sufficiently broad, a substantialist interpretation collapses into relational ones for practical purposes.

In closing this chapter, I remind the reader that I have not set out to refute Peter Singer on the issue of speciesism but to challenge a defence of infanticide that relies on his profoundly different evaluations of childness and adulthood in humans.

In the penultimate chapter, I suggest that the modes in which humans are enabled to flourish by childness are not limited to infancy or childhood, but that childness can also facilitate the flourishing of adults. I show that the Jesus of the Gospels suggests childness represents some qualities that adults should aspire to possess, and that this indicates childness is evaluable on its own terms rather than by reference to adulthood. Jesus, I suggest, commands adults to aspire to retain two properties which childness represents; faith (which I characterise as a willingness to appreciate situations without pre-judgement) and humility (which I characterise as a willingness to depend on others). I show how those are facilitated by particular forms of human cognition that are at their most highly developed in infancy, but of which most humans continue to be

capable as adults. I cite several artistic and literary references to the sorts of insight that childness can offer to adults, acknowledging that most refer to childness as it is manifest alongside adulthood in older children rather than in infants.

I argue that valuing a capacity for faith and humility is counterintuitive to most doctors in the twenty-first century. I suggest that the privilege that medicine gives to rational autonomy, while necessary to protect patients from exploitation, has endorsed a restricted interpretation of human reasoning as a capacity for logic. I suggest that such a restricted understanding has made it difficult for moral philosophers and theologians to account for value in the infant. Where they have sought to ascribe such value, they have usually done so by drawing on the infant's nature as a human destined to become an adult, or on notions of obligation among adults, rather than affirming the value of childness in the infant, thus perpetuating (*contra* Jesus) the idea that childness cannot be evaluated except by privative contrast with adulthood. In the face of objections from utilitarian moral philosophers, I defend the argument from potential and acknowledge its power to accord some value to the life of an infant. I suggest, however, that it does not explain why the lives of infant and adult are of *equal* value.

I close this chapter by suggesting that the argument I have made in normal infants also accords inherent value to older children and adults who are dependent for other reasons. Even where such patients are unaware that they are being cared for, in their dependent relationships they can promote the flourishing of others and in so doing flourish themselves.

In my concluding chapter, I address some objections that colleagues from theology and from medicine have raised with me during my research. I then defend the position that my argument succeeds in refuting Singer's defence of infanticide. I have shown that Singer's interpretation of empirical evidence is inadequate and should be largely set aside. His claim that infant cognition is valueless cannot be refuted empirically, and I have argued that neither substantialist interpretations of *imago Dei* nor arguments for potential fully defeat that epistemological claim because both share Singer's willingness to assume adulthood is inherently more valuable than childness. To ensure that

infants are accorded their full value, I have suggested it is necessary to evaluate childness independently of adulthood. On the basis of a Thomist conception of human goods, and Jesus' exhortation to childness, I claim to have done so by showing that childness and adulthood both enable their possessor to flourish as a human individual.

On Singer's interpretation of preference utilitarianism, the infant's life can be taken because she lacks the single ability to prefer to continue to live. An account based on this Christian anthropology of the child shows that infants are inherently valuable, not only because their nature is to become reasoning adults later, but because they are equipped by childness to flourish, and to facilitate others' flourishing, at the moment of moral action. I conclude that to kill an infant would imperil that flourishing, irrespective of whether or not she rationally understands the idea of her continuing existence, and so is wrong on grounds that are both consequential and consistent with Christian theological ethics.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Anwen died just after her second birthday. She had been my patient ever since it had become clear, shortly after her birth, that she would survive only a short time.

At her funeral in the local Children's Hospice, Anwen's parents had chosen a theme of butterflies. Filigree pink paper silhouettes, ranging in size from fingernail to falabella, had been scattered with primary school profligacy over walls, chairs and even the Order of Service. It was a large room, but as I arrived it was already difficult to find an unoccupied seat. To a soft and sugar-sweet soundtrack we took our places while a series of photographs was projected onto a screen at the front. Anwen as a baby in her cot. Anwen in her pushchair. Anwen meeting Disney's Pluto, meeting Leigh Halfpenny, meeting Father Christmas and the Prince of Wales. Anwen in traditional Welsh costume for St David's day. Dressed as a pink princess, a sparkling silver-white fairy. A Christmas elf. A princess again, a fairy again. An endless succession of poses with her parents.

At first, the pictures were engaging and deeply moving. But as they continued, I found myself becoming increasingly uncomfortable. In whatever clothes she had been dressed, and whomever it was she was 'meeting', in all the pictures Anwen's face was exactly the same. She was entirely expressionless. Eyes half-closed, apparently focused on something a few inches away that was invisible to the camera. Mouth a loose line, drooping at the edges. Not a petulant look or an unhappy one; just unaware. It was the sort

of look a doll might wear at a tea-party. And the unwelcome thought came to me that these were, in fact, pictures of a doll. A doll who happened to be alive, and to need care every moment of her life, but nevertheless a doll who, however she was dressed and decorated, remained quite unaware of the part she played in the universe or in the lives of others.

Knowing her medical history, Anwen's lack of engagement did not surprise me. The brain injury she had experienced at birth was an exceptionally severe one. There had been catastrophic loss of blood from the placenta during her last few hours in the womb, depriving her brain of oxygen and leaving it capable only of the functions necessary to sustain life in its most mechanistic sense. Unusually among children with cerebral palsy, the damage was so great that she was never able to learn to smile, or to vocalise, or to move her limbs. Anwen was one of the very few children I have cared for who appeared to me not to be aware of her surroundings at all.

Considered as a measure of what she might contribute to society, it would be hard to ascribe inherent value to Anwen's life. It seems likely that Anwen herself never became aware that she existed and so did not value her own life. There is no doubt that it would have been easier for everyone, as well as considerably cheaper, if Anwen had been extinguished in the first few hours of her life when the full extent of the damage to her brain first became clear. And yet, as I looked around, the room was still filling with people to whom Anwen had meant a great deal. Nurses and other carers from the hospice were sobbing quietly. Her teenage stepsister blinked back the tears. Her mother, dressed in black with a silk scarf that was defiantly pink, was holding herself together as she welcomed the guests, but her face was flushed with the effort

not to cry. There was no doubt that the mourners at her funeral felt that they had lost something valuable.

### **1.1 Before Christianity: infanticide in the ancient world**

Two thousand years ago, a child as damaged as Anwen would probably have been killed shortly after her birth. It would not have been thought murder, because many societies then considered infanticide rather as they consider abortion now; the extinction of a potential life rather than an actual one. According to Christian historian of law Richard Harrow Feen, the right of a parent to choose whether or not to keep their child after birth was largely unquestioned:

... it is generally agreed upon that at its birth the Greek child was so completely in its father's power that it rested with him whether or not the child should be admitted into the family. He openly signified his intention to do so during a ceremony, the *amphidromia*, which took place usually during the first week after the child's birth, at which point the child was named before the assembled members of the family and proclaimed to be a legitimate offspring. However the father had no duty to take this step.<sup>1</sup>

Regions where infanticide was illegal, Feen goes on, were 'exceptional even for the day'. The context, of course, was an era in which poverty was common, and the means of contraception primitive and unreliable. According to anthropologist Laila Williamson, most parents faced with an unwanted child would have taken the option of infanticide for granted.<sup>2</sup>

Irrespective of its practical importance, infanticide would not have been an acceptable solution if there had not also been a culture in which the value of

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Harrow Feen, 'Abortion and Exposure in Ancient Greece', in William B. Bondeson et al. (eds.), *Abortion and the status of the fetus* (Updated reprint with corrections. edn.; Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1983), 287.

<sup>2</sup>Laila Williamson, 'Infanticide: an anthropological analysis', in Marvin Kohl (ed.), *Infanticide and the Value of Life* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1978), 61–75.

an infant's life was seen to be contingent on characteristics of the infant herself, such as physical or cognitive impairment, or on extraneous factors such as whether or not a family's financial situation could stand the burden of another mouth to feed.<sup>3,4</sup> Aristotle argues that there are circumstances under which disposing of an infant is not only permissible but morally mandatory:

As to exposing or rearing the children born, let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared; but on the ground of number of children, if the regular customs hinder any of those born being exposed, there must be a limit fixed to the procreation of offspring, and if any people have a child as a result of intercourse in contravention of these regulations, abortion must be practised on it before it has developed sensation and life; for the line between lawful and unlawful abortion will be marked by the fact of having sensation and being alive.<sup>5</sup>

The radical claim that an infant's life is not contingent, but has inherent value, dates from the emerging dominance of Judaeo-Christian moral theology in the fourth century, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The *Didache*, an early Christian pastoral document dating from the first century, is unequivocal: 'Thou shalt not slay a child by abortion, nor what is begotten shalt thou destroy.'<sup>6</sup> The seismic changes that Christianity's progress through Europe wrought on a world that had been shaped by Greek and Roman moral philosophy brought an end to the acceptability of infanticide in most cultures. It was increasingly discouraged as Christianity became the dominant

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<sup>3</sup>Seneca considers that disposing of imperfect infants should be a matter of reason: 'Unnatural progeny we destroy, we drown even children who at birth are weakly and abnormal. Yet it is not anger, but reason that separates the harmful from the sound.' L. Annaeus Seneca, *De Ira Liber 1. Ch. 15, sect 2*. (English translation quoted in John Wyatt, *Matters of life & death: human dilemmas in the light of Christian faith* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 137.)

<sup>4</sup>Particularly if the new child was a girl. A private letter from the first century from Hilarion in Alexandria to his wife Alis is blunt on this point: 'Above all, if you bear a child and it is male, let it be; if it is female, expose it.' Hilarion, *Oxyrhincus Papyrus 4.744*.

<sup>5</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb classical library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 623–24.

<sup>6</sup>The earliest English translation is Francis Brown, Roswell D. Hitchcock, and Philotheos Bryennios, *Didache...Teaching of the twelve apostles* (New York: Scribner, 1884), 7. In a footnote, the translators note that 'this noun [abortion] does not occur in Classic Greek, nor in the New Testament, but is found, together with the entire sentence in which it here stands, in the Epistle of Barnabas Chap xix.'

religion during the reign of Emperor Constantine and became illegal in the Roman Empire in 374.<sup>7</sup>

That is not, however, the end of the story. Ethnographic research shows that there are communities in which infanticide remains common practice in the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> Even in the resource-rich West, opposition to infanticide is by no means universal. In 1956, British academic lawyer Glanville Llewelyn Williams gave a series of lectures at Columbia Law School, later published in book form under the title *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law*.<sup>9</sup> According to Christian ethicists John Keown and David Albert Jones, Williams' aim was to distance jurisprudence in the UK and US from a distinctively Christian approach to the value of life:

Williams observed that [infanticide] was condoned by both the Greeks and the Romans and that its condemnation was 'very largely, if not entirely, the work of the church'... if it were not for the need for baptism in order to gain salvation, 'infanticide might have been regarded as a positive benefit'! Williams argued that such theological notions were 'no longer regarded with the assurance that makes them an acceptable support for a rule of the criminal law' adding: 'Criminal prohibitions cannot, at the present day, be founded upon supernaturalism of any kind'.<sup>10</sup>

Williams' rejection of the idea of the sanctity of life has been influential in shaping legislation around medicine, particularly in relation to abortion, both in the UK and the US. But even before *The Sanctity of Life* was published, UK law had for some decades considered infanticide to be less culpable than the

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<sup>7</sup>Though there is evidence that for centuries after that date laws preventing infanticide were not always rigorously enforced (Samuel X. Radbill, 'A history of child abuse and infanticide', in S.K. Steinmetz and M.A. Straus (eds.), *Violence in the family* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 173–79).

<sup>8</sup>J. Aengst, 'Silences and moral narratives: infanticide as reproductive disruption', *Med Anthropol*, 33/5 (2014), 411–27.

<sup>9</sup>Glanville Llewelyn Williams, *The sanctity of life and the criminal law* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958).

<sup>10</sup>J. Keown and D. Jones, 'Surveying the foundations of medical law: a reassessment of Glanville Williams's the sanctity of life and the criminal law', *Med Law Rev*, 16/1 (Spring 2008), 85–126. Quotations are from Williams, *The sanctity of life and the criminal law*, 27, 29.

deliberate killing of adults. It was in 1922 that infanticide by a mother was first introduced into UK law as a form of homicide separable from murder. The Infanticide Act (1938) states that:

Where a woman by any wilful act or omission causes the death of her child being a child under the age of twelve months, but at the time of the act or omission the balance of her mind was disturbed by reason of her not having fully recovered from the effect of giving birth to the child or by reason of the effect of lactation consequent upon the birth of the child, then, if the circumstances were such that but for this Act the offence would have amounted to murder or manslaughter, she shall be guilty of felony, to wit of infanticide, and may for such offence be dealt with and punished as if she had been guilty of the offence of manslaughter of the child.<sup>11</sup>

Although its primary purpose was to protect vulnerable women, academic lawyer Helen Howard points out that underlying the Act is a clear assumption that the life of an infant is less valuable than that of an adult: '... in allowing a mother who kills her infant to be charged with the offence of infanticide, a lower value is placed incontrovertibly on the life of an infant under 12 months.'<sup>12</sup> Howard argues that distinguishing the offence of infanticide from other forms of homicide diminishes the moral status of infants and, in the twenty-first century, no longer has a place in a 'society proclaiming to protect the defenceless and innocent'. At the time of writing in 2020, however, the Act remains on the statute books.

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<sup>11</sup>Infanticide Act 1938, Section 1(1), available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/1-2/36/section/1>

<sup>12</sup>Helen Howard, 'The offence/defence of infanticide: A view from two perspectives', *The Journal of Criminal Law*, 82/6 (2018), 470-81. In any case, Howard points out, the Act is unnecessary, since impaired judgement as a result of psychosis occurs in men as well as women and is already a defence in law. Other experts in medical law share Howard's scepticism about the Act's utility, although more often their concern for the injustice it inflicts on the adult perpetrator rather than on the child victim (see, for example, S. H. Friedman, J. Cavney, and P. J. Resnick, 'Mothers who kill: evolutionary underpinnings and infanticide law', *Behav Sci Law*, 30/5 (Sep-Oct 2012), 585-97.: '... infanticide legislation is at best unnecessary and at worst misapplied, in that it exculpates criminal intent and fails to serve those for whom an infanticide defense might otherwise have been intended.')

## **1.2 Why Christian ethics should worry now**

The Christian objection that was so effective in changing the culture of the ancient world two thousand years ago is embedded in a theistic view that society no longer systematically accepts. In recent decades there have been signs that infanticide is making a return, not only into ethical discourse, but even into clinical practice.

In 1980, paediatrician Dr Leonard Arthur was charged with the murder of a new-born baby with Down's syndrome. The baby's parents had expressed that they did not want the child because of his disability. Barrister Diana Brahams, writing in *Journal of Medical Ethics* soon after the trial, notes that Dr Arthur's medical record at the time shows he considered their preferences to be sufficient for deciding whether or not to intervene medically so that the child should live:

Dr. Arthur made a note: "Parents do not wish it to survive. Nursing care only". He made out a prescription for DF118, a morphine-type drug, comprising dihydrocodeine. The drug was to be given orally, not more than four-hourly, in 5 milligram doses, to alleviate the baby's distress as and when it arose.<sup>13</sup>

The child was consequently given no fluids or nutrition and died three days later.

Dr Arthur was not alone, Brahams goes on, in considering that whether a child should live or die should depend on the willingness of parents to care for her. He was articulating a view that many doctors of the day shared: 'A large number of eminent and respected doctors and specialists went into the witness box to testify on Dr Arthur's behalf; he himself offered no evidence. From these

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<sup>13</sup>Diana Brahams and Malcolm Brahams, 'The Arthur Case: A Proposal for Legislation', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 9/1 (1983), 12–15.

many testimonies, it seemed clear that Dr Arthur's treatment had fallen within the current accepted norms of medical practice.<sup>14</sup>

Dr Arthur could have explained his actions on the grounds of compassion for the child.<sup>15</sup> Instead, he chose to appeal to parents' preferences in the matter, appearing to believe as the ancient Romans and Greeks did that, even after a child has been born, parents can decide whether or not to take on the task of caring for her.

In 2008, the prestigious and influential *New England Journal of Medicine* published the 'Groningen' protocol, a set of guidelines which set out circumstances under which it might be permissible for paediatricians to euthanise severely disabled and suffering new-born babies in Holland. It was clear at the time that many paediatricians in the Netherlands already considered infanticide to be acceptable practice:

Twenty-two cases of euthanasia in newborns have been reported to district attorneys' offices in the Netherlands during the past seven years. Recently, we were allowed to review these cases. They all involved infants with very severe forms of spina bifida. In most cases (17 of the 22), a multidisciplinary spina bifida team was consulted. In the remaining five cases, at least two other independent medical experts were consulted. The physicians based their decisions on the presence of severe suffering without hope of improvement (see Table 1). The decisions were always made in collaboration with, and were fully approved by, both parents.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid. Sir Douglas Black, then president of the Royal College of Physicians, was one: 'I say that it is ethical, in the case of a child suffering from Down, and with a parental wish that it should not survive, to terminate life providing other considerations are taken into account such as the status and ability of the parents to cope ...' Black's use of the impersonal pronoun 'it' in referring to the baby suggests a view that the moral status of the child herself was negligible when compared with the interests of her parents. Dr Arthur was ultimately acquitted following evidence that the child died as a result of complications of Down's Syndrome rather than from opioid poisoning or dehydration.

<sup>15</sup>His actions would, in my view, have been defensible on those grounds. This particular child with Down's syndrome was severely affected and already suffering from a significant chest infection at the time the order was made. It is unlikely he could have survived more than a few days whatever interventions had been introduced. In that context, giving fluids to the child, which would have worsened many of his symptoms and demanded frequent needles, risked imposing a burden on the child that would have been hard for a compassionate doctor to justify.

<sup>16</sup>Eduard Verhagen and Pieter Sauer, 'The Groningen protocol—euthanasia in severely ill newborns', *The New England journal of medicine*, 352/10 (Mar 10 2005), 959–62.

The protocol's author, paediatrician Eduard Verhagen, gave as one of his reasons for developing it his belief that unregulated infanticide was already practised by some paediatricians on the continent of Europe.<sup>17</sup> There is indirect evidence that his belief was correct; the years that followed introduction of the protocol saw a significant fall in the number of children given medication with the explicit intention of hastening death.<sup>18</sup>

Many utilitarian moral philosophers are anxious to redeem infanticide from any taint of iniquity that doctors who choose to work with children might be intuitively inclined to perceive in it. Jeff McMahan maintains that an objection to infanticide is difficult to sustain rationally, even on the basis of the few moral beliefs that most people share:

The belief that infanticide is always wrong is doubtfully compatible with a range of widely shared moral beliefs that underlie various commonly accepted practices. Any set of beliefs about the morality of abortion, infanticide and the killing of animals that is internally consistent and even minimally credible will therefore unavoidably contain some beliefs that are counterintuitive.<sup>19</sup>

If abortion, he goes on to argue, then infanticide. In 2013, *Journal of Medical Ethics* published an article entitled *After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?*<sup>20</sup> Its authors explicitly call for a return to the ancient practice of allowing parents to decide whether or not their new-born baby should be killed. Since the newly-born infant is not different in any morally relevant way from the fetus

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<sup>17</sup>Eduard Verhagen, personal communication, 2015.

<sup>18</sup>K. Ten Cate et al., 'End-of-life decisions for children under 1 year of age in the Netherlands: decreased frequency of administration of drugs to deliberately hasten death', *J Med Ethics*, 41/10 (Oct 2015), 795–8. It is not clear what part (if any) introduction of the protocol played in the change, since it coincided with the introduction of routine pre-natal ultrasound scans. Such scans permit early detection of anomalies in children who previously might have survived to become infants that the protocol allowed to be killed. In other words, the reduction in infanticide might have been the result of an increase in abortion.

<sup>19</sup>J. McMahan, 'Infanticide and moral consistency', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 273–80.

<sup>20</sup>A. Giubilini and F. Minerva, 'After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 261–3. *ibid.*

immediately before birth, they argue, society's acceptance of abortion should logically extend to allowing infanticide:

Abortion is largely accepted even for reasons that do not have anything to do with the fetus' health. By showing that (1) both fetuses and newborns do not have the same moral status as actual persons, (2) the fact that both are potential persons is morally irrelevant and (3) adoption is not always in the best interest of actual people, the authors argue that what we call 'after-birth abortion' (killing a new-born) should be permissible in all the cases where abortion is, including cases where the new-born is not disabled.<sup>21</sup>

Giubilini and colleagues argue that it is irrational to attribute inherent value to the life of a being who is unaware of her own future. They believe the infant is such a being:

If ... an individual is capable of making any aims (like actual human and non-human persons), she is harmed if she is prevented from accomplishing her aims by being killed. Now, hardly can a new-born be said to have aims, as the future we imagine for it is merely a projection of our minds on its potential lives. It might start having expectations and develop a minimum level of self-awareness at a very early stage, but not in the first days or few weeks after birth.<sup>22</sup>

Julian Savulescu, a utilitarian moral philosopher whose first degree was in medicine, adds that, in most countries, parents are already given *de facto* authority over whether their child should live or die, albeit only if the child is dependent on medical interventions:

I am not here intending to suggest that withdrawal of life-sustaining medical treatment is unethical or should be illegal. What I am pointing out is that actions to end the life of newborns are widely practised and legally sanctioned—although not called infanticide. Also, there is some reason to think that these decisions are made on a different basis from those made for older children, and that parents are given a broader discretion in such decisions. If that is the case, it appears that the societal antipathy to infanticide is not as strong as it might seem at first glance.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Julian Savulescu, 'Abortion, infanticide and allowing babies to die, 40 years on', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 39/5 (2013), 257–59.

There is evidence that in the UK some practising clinicians too find the idea of infanticide acceptable and are willing to express their support for it. At a national conference for paediatricians, one paediatrician specialising in intensive care suggested to a large audience of paediatric delegates that children whose lives cannot be shown to have value according to a utilitarian conception should properly be considered no more a person than some non-human primates, and that expensive intensive care facilities should not be provided for them for that reason.<sup>24</sup> It is not surprising that one practising paediatrician might hold such views, but it is perhaps significant that he expected them to be acceptable enough to colleagues to allow him to air them confidently at a large meeting.

On that occasion the speaker misjudged his audience, which mainly comprised specialists in palliative care and in long-term disability. Most were horrified. It seems likely, however, that relatively few would be able to explain clearly what it was about the idea of infanticide that had shocked them. While many clinicians continue personally to hold the belief that human life is in some sense 'sacred', most would struggle to explain that belief in terms that could be defended against the onslaught of a determinedly secular rational argument.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Dr Andrew Petros, Consultant in Paediatric Intensive Care at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, addressing a joint session of the Community Paediatric, Intensive Care Medicine and Palliative Medicine special interest groups, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Annual Conference, University of York, April 2006.

<sup>25</sup>Catholic moral philosopher Christopher Kaczor attempts an objection to Giubilini that is not argued from a specifically Christian premise but is consistent with it. In *The ethics of abortion: women's rights, human life, and the question of justice* he affirms a synthetic concept of personal identity as opposed to the analytical concept favoured by utilitarians, in which the essence of a person is considered to be no more than the sum of what they are able to do. (Christopher Robert Kaczor, *The ethics of abortion: women's rights, human life, and the question of justice* (Second edn., Routledge annals of bioethics; New York: Routledge, 2015). Kaczor's explicitly pro-life ideas were explored in the mainstream medical ethics literature (see J. Rasanen, 'Pro-Life Arguments Against Infanticide and Why they are Not Convincing', *Bioethics*, 30/9 (Nov 2016), 656–62, Christopher Robert Kaczor, 'A dubious defense of 'after-birth abortion': A reply to Rasanen', *Bioethics*, 32/2 (Feb 2018), 132–37, D. Rodger, B. P. Blackshaw, and C. Wilcox, 'Why arguments against infanticide remain convincing: A reply to Rasanen', *Bioethics*, 32/3 (Mar 2018), 215–19, J. Rasanen, 'Why pro-life arguments still are not convincing: A reply to my critics', *Bioethics*, 32/9 (Nov 2018), 628–33.).

For clinicians who believe it, the special value of a human life is axiomatic, without any empirical evidence or any line of reasoning to support it.<sup>26</sup>

In modern medicine, such intuitive convictions are vulnerable in the face of utilitarian moral theories. In the hands of doctors, bioethics is a practical tool to help them make clinical decisions about actual patients, whose lives and deaths will be profoundly affected by the decisions they take. In the day-to-day care of sick patients, applying the principles of moral philosophy to medical practice seems an obvious parallel to the application of pure scientific principles. Clinical care puts medical science to use in the pursuit of measurable improvements in patients' existence. Utilitarian theories promise that medical ethics can do the same. They simplify moral decisions by setting aside metaphysics and putting medical ethics on the same quasi-scientific footing as the practice of medicine itself by expressing moral value in terms that can hypothetically be observed empirically, so that the effectiveness of moral decision making can theoretically be evaluated in the same way as that of

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<sup>26</sup>Giubilini's paper was contentious and sparked a debate among medical ethicists—and, to a lesser extent, clinicians—that continues several years later. Interestingly, battle lines were not drawn primarily between differing metaphysical positions. Few of those who objected to Giubilini and Minerva did so explicitly on the grounds that human life is 'sacred'. The dialectic was largely between different utilitarian perspectives. Savulescu, while defending the right of Giubilini and colleagues to advocate 'infanticide on demand', objects to their conclusion on the utilitarian grounds that: 'One obvious difference between early abortion and infanticide is that infanticide involves killing a human being who could be adopted or cared for by people other than the mother.' Giubilini's central hypothesis was first articulated in detail by utilitarian philosopher Michael Tooley in 1972 (Michael Tooley, 'Abortion and Infanticide', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 2/1 (1972), 37–65.) and some utilitarian critics point out that it should be reinterpreted in the light of societal changes that have taken place in the intervening years, because those changes impact on consequences that Tooley considers to be important: 'There have been immense changes in the intervening 40 years: in the ability to diagnose conditions early in pregnancy, in genetics and in the availability of in vitro fertilization; in understanding of the capabilities of persons with disabilities; in law; in economic support and access to healthcare for pregnant women and their children; in social customs and arrangements; and even in philosophy, with developments in feminist thought, bioethics and cognitive science. ... If context is relevant to the applicability of moral reasons—as for theorists of justice in the non-idealised world it surely should be—it is questionable whether a view of the birth-line that ignores contextualising change can be adequate.' (L. Francis and A. Silvers, 'Infanticide, moral status and moral reasons: the importance of context', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 289–92.).

therapeutic decisions about drug prescription or surgical intervention. If all human value can be expressed as the outcome of moral action, then whether a medical decision is morally right or wrong can potentially be demonstrated with the same confidence as a dose-response relationship in pharmacology.

The peculiarly seductive claim of utilitarian ethics is that what it reveals to be morally right in principle often coincides with what is convenient in practice.<sup>27</sup> Doctors are continually faced with judgements about the value of human beings whose capacity for formal reasoning is damaged. The care of such patients is often expensive, goes on for many decades, and can feel ultimately pointless since there is usually no prospect of recovery to normal. A commitment to the belief that human life is 'sacred' is often an uncomfortable one because it is in tension with other expectations that society lays on doctors, especially the perennial duty to conserve health care resources. Killing infants who are unwanted would certainly be more economical than caring for them alive, especially if the reason they are unwanted is that they are damaged. Permitting infanticide would also resolve some apparent inconsistencies, bringing the authority of parents over their children after birth into line with what society currently considers their reproductive rights beforehand, and eliminating the inequity between the authority doctors give to the parents of sick children (who, in practice, can often choose to bring the life of their child to an end), and those of healthy children (who cannot). A belief that infanticide is morally wrong can be in tension with the fact that, in practice, it sometimes appears to be the more compassionate, more convenient and more consistent course of action.

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<sup>27</sup>In 2005, Time Magazine listed Singer among the world's most influential people (A. Caplan, 'Scientists and Thinkers: Peter Singer', <[http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656\\_1972712\\_1974257,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656_1972712_1974257,00.html)>, accessed January 2020.)

Many doctors would be drawn to an ethical analysis that resolves such tensions, and the theories of a philosopher who promulgates the idea that physicians need not be morally troubled by shortening the life of damaged patients might be well received. If the preference utilitarian defence of infanticide is right, then no moral unease need attach to a decision that results in the death of any human patient, providing she is incapable of preferring to remain alive.

So, while it would not be true to suggest that clinicians are already clamouring for a change in the law that would allow them to dispose of infants at the request of parents, there are powerful reasons to think that is the direction of travel. The slope towards infanticide on demand is undoubtedly slippery. That on its own does not make it inevitable that clinicians will embrace the idea, but the slope is becoming ever steeper as clinicians come under pressure to conserve increasingly scarce healthcare resources.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, traditional moral claims about the inherent value of all human life, that for many centuries have provided some form of resistance against the gravitational pull of such resource pressures, are losing their traction.

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<sup>28</sup>Christian commentators recognise the moral relevance of resource implications in making decisions at the end of life. British Christian ethicist and paediatrician John Wyatt, for example, summarises an argument for valuing new-born babies thus: 'Medical care should be based upon respect for the value of the individual, protection of the defenceless from abuse or exploitation, and wise stewardship of limited health-care resources.' American Catholic theologian Charles Camosy comments that: '... one can see quite clearly how the sinful social structure of the improperly regulated market works in the culture of treatment in the NICU: the profitability of such treatments drives resources towards imperiled newborns—and away from other needy patients—in a way that is disproportionate with the common good.' Charles Camosy, *Too Expensive to Treat?: Finitude, Tragedy, and the Neonatal ICU* (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 165.

### **1.3 How should Christian ethics respond?**

Christian ethics faces a particular challenge when it comes to influencing the behaviour of doctors. In their clinical practice, doctors encounter two rather different ways of conceiving the idea of moral value. As individuals charged with caring for people, they are expected to hold themselves accountable to a set of moral values that orbit around the human nature of their patients. The Hippocratic Oath, for example, does not confine itself to expressing an expectation that doctors will equip themselves with the necessary technical skills and knowledge to practise medicine but sets out with the same degree of earnestness the sort of person a doctor should aspire to be. The Oath enjoins doctors to attend to their own personal integrity, and to concern themselves with respecting the dignity of patients and colleagues through relationships that are characterised by honesty and trust:

And I will use regimens for the benefit of the ill in accordance with my ability in my judgement but from (what is) to their harm or in justice I will keep (them) ... And in a pure and holy way I will guard my life and my technique. I will not cut, and certainly not those suffering from stone, but will cede this to men (who are) practitioners in this activity. Into as many houses as I may enter, I will work for the benefit of the ill, while being far from all voluntary and destructive injustice, especially from sexual acts both on women's bodies and upon men's, both of the free and of the slaves. And about whatever I may see or hear in the treatment or even without treatment in the life of human beings—things that should not ever be blurted out outside—I will remain silent, holding such things to be unutterable (sacred, not to be divulged).<sup>29</sup>

Doctors in most countries no longer swear the Hippocratic Oath when they graduate from medical school, but the principles it represents remain the yardstick by which acceptable medical practice is measured. In the UK, the expectation that a doctor should be wise, honest, discreet, humble, and well-

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<sup>29</sup>Steven H. Miles, *The Hippocratic Oath and the ethics of medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ii.

disposed has legal force. The General Medical Council (GMC), which has statutory responsibility for deciding how doctors should behave, sets out obligations of a doctor in four domains that clearly have their roots in the Hippocratic ideal of the 'good doctor':

1. Knowledge, skills and performance: Make the care of your patient your first concern. Provide a good standard of practice and care (keep your professional knowledge and skills up to date, recognise and work within the limits of your competence).
2. Safety and quality: Take prompt action if you think that patient safety, dignity or comfort is being compromised. Protect and promote the health of patients and the public.
3. Communication, partnership and teamwork: Treat patients as individuals and respect their dignity (treat patients politely and considerately, respect patients' right to confidentiality). Work in partnership with patients (listen to, and respond to, their concerns and preferences. Give patients the information they want or need in a way they can understand. Respect patients' right to reach decisions with you about their treatment and care. Support patients in caring for themselves to improve and maintain their health. Work with colleagues in the ways that best serve patients' interests).
4. Maintaining trust: Be honest and open and act with integrity. Never discriminate unfairly against patients or colleagues. Never abuse your patients' trust in you or the public's trust in the profession.<sup>30</sup>

The expectation on doctors is not only that they will respond obediently to the properties a patient possesses, but that as human beings they will ascribe value to other human beings.

But if humanism is one of medicine's parents, the other is science. In judging what actions will help their patients, doctors are schooled from early in their training to turn exclusively to the evidence of scientific research. Medicine is lineally descended from science and, as a profession, doctors share the scepticism of many modern scientists about the persuasive power of proofs that cannot be supported by empirical observation.

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<sup>30</sup>General Medical Council, *Good Medical Practice* (London: General Medical Council, 2006).

As a result, medicine takes an essentially non-cognitivist position with respect to values that are held by patients. The doctor is expected to recognise that a patient has values, and that the fact that a patient holds those values impacts on the way the doctor should treat him. The doctor is not, however, expected to concern herself on the whole with whether such values are right or wrong. That patients hold values and preferences is a matter of observable fact, and that the doctor should often allow her decisions to be influenced by her patient's values and preferences is a matter of professional obligation. But the evaluations and preferences themselves are not susceptible of empirical proof and so, on the medical scientific view, do not belong in the category of truths at all. The importance of values lies in the fact that the patient holds them, not in any quality of rightness or wrongness in the values themselves.

To most doctors, the values of Christian ethics represent such personal values. When they are held by patients, Christian values are often represented in medical ethics as frustrating barriers to rational treatment.<sup>31</sup> Many contemporary medical ethicists identify themselves explicitly as 'post-Christian'. What they mean is that they define their moral position precisely by a presumption that theological ethics cannot be the basis for moral reasoning because faith is fundamentally irrational.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>This non-cognitivist view of values is less clear in paediatrics. Paediatricians are happy to judge a parent's moral values to be wrong if they would result in harm to the child, and will override them if necessary in the name of what will help the child. Some paediatricians have suggested that parental values arising from a religious worldview are particularly egregious: 'In these cases in which cures are expected on the basis of religious belief, perhaps it is time that a firm legal response to all religions is established.' J. Brierley, J. Linthicum, and A. Petros, 'Should religious beliefs be allowed to stonewall a secular approach to withdrawing and withholding treatment in children?', *J Med Ethics*, 39/9 (Sep 2013), 573–7.

<sup>32</sup>The distinction between 'irrational' and 'non-rational' is important, though often overlooked. Philosopher Barry Hoffman points out that it is fallacious to conflate the two. To do so implies both that logic is the only way to reach a true conclusion, and that a conclusion is always true providing it is reached by means of logic, neither of which is correct: 'The irrationalist fallacy of

The distinction that doctors are expected to make between ‘scientific’ truth and other sorts of truth presents a challenge to ethicists who believe that patients will be better served if they are treated as Christ would want to treat them. If the observable truths of science are of an entirely different sort from the truths that Jesus spoke, then the values that Christians hold do not express anything universal about how an individual can most effectively care for others and most doctors are right not to allow them to influence medical practice.

Anglican moral theologian Nigel Biggar, however, points out that what Christians confess is a claim of universal truth, and that the responsibility of Christians to try to influence society is not restricted to improving the lives of other Christians:

The church's vocation holds, notwithstanding the fact that some who do not explicitly affirm God-in-Christ also grasp what is good and right, and even do so in a way that gestures at a given moral order, at hope for the lasting significance of human endeavor beyond the mortality of all things, and at the intelligibility of ultimate self-sacrifice for the sake of love and justice. After all, Christians believe that what they confess is true – and true not just for Christians.<sup>33</sup>

In that case, Christian ethics needs to equip itself for meaningful dialogue with secular society; that is, secular in the modern sense of a society in which religious views are given no particular prominence in the public square. There are some truths that Christian ethics needs to affirm in the name of accuracy, because those who reject the Christian view often misunderstand the claims

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formal reason frames both Richardson’s dichotomous construction of the problem—deductive application or irrational—and Haslett’s dichotomous criticism of his solution—definitive answer or irrational. The only real solution is the Aristotelian one Richardson disclaims. Judgment is beyond the purview of formal reason, yet judgment is essential and ineliminable.’ Barry Hoffmaster, ‘The Rationality and Morality of Dying Children’, *The Hastings Center Report*, 41/6 (2011), 30–42, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in public: how to do Christian ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Cambridge, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 107.

that orthodox Christianity actually makes. Theologian David Albert Jones points out that even highly educated religious sceptics can profoundly misrepresent the basis of Christian objections to infanticide if they have no access to clear expositions of the Christian position:

[Failure to articulate a specifically Christian account can] ... mean that when non-believers attribute specifically theological reasons to believers they get it deeply wrong. A good example of this is Glanville Williams's allegation that the reason that early Christians condemned infanticide (a practice generally tolerated by pagans) was because of the fear that unbaptized infants who died in this way would be consigned to the fires of hell. This claim is utterly implausible.<sup>34</sup>

It is important that Christians correct such misperceptions, both because they are false and because reiterating the Christian gospel offers an opportunity for evangelism.

In dialogue with medical ethics, another potentially constructive line that Christian ethics can take is apologetic. Arguments that are expressed in theological language alone are unlikely to persuade clinicians. Where the same arguments can be expressed in the language of critical realism, however, it is possible that they might be able to effect change in medical practice. The vocabulary and grammar of critical realism acknowledge that, while what is observable must be real, it does not follow that what is real must always be observable. It is a language that Christian ethics and medicine have in common. The experience of pain, for example, is subjective and cannot usually be shown

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<sup>34</sup>David Albert Jones, *Approaching the end: a theological exploration of death and dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20. Jones explains that it is implausible for four reasons: firstly, because Christian opposition to infanticide pre-dated the widespread practice of infant baptism; secondly, because the idea that the unbaptised infant was condemned to hell emerged later still in the 5<sup>th</sup> century; thirdly, because Christian attitudes to infanticide at the time mirrored Jewish attitudes, which do not include condemning uncircumcised infants to hell; and finally, because if Glanville Williams' explanation were correct then Christians would not object to infanticide once baptism had happened, which was, and remains, patently untrue.

by medical investigation; yet no-one is in doubt that pain exists and is real.<sup>35</sup> As well as showing the way in which Christ has instructed humans to behave, Christian theology can often offer a rational explanation as to why behaving in that way is universally important, and how it will serve the needs of others in practice. If the explanation provided by Christian ethics appeals to what all humans have in common, then doctors will have no reason to think its truth is restricted to Christians.

There are certainly risks in an approach to ethics which seems to represent Christian values simply as rational values alternatively expressed. On the Christian view, humans are fallen, and human reasoning is, at best, flawed because it is the reasoning of sinful creatures. There are truths that human reason distorts and are only uncovered by God's revelation. Protestant systematic theologian Karl Barth, while espousing a broadly realist framework for establishing truth, insists on Christological grounds that human reasoning is not of the same type as God's reasoning. As Westerholm explains: 'On the basis of an understanding of the relation between God and creatures, [Barth] recasts the question of reason as a moral inquiry into the proper ordering of the activities of the mind.'<sup>36</sup> To treat human reason as though it were an alternative to faith in theology, he goes on, is to imply that even God himself can be inferred

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<sup>35</sup> The wholly existential nature of pain is affirmed in the definition by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP): 'An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage ... Pain is always a personal experience that is influenced to varying degrees by biological, psychological, and social factors ... Pain and nociception are different phenomena. Pain cannot be inferred solely from activity in sensory neurons' (International Association for the Study of Pain, 'IASP Announces Revised Definition of Pain', <<https://www.iasp-pain.org/PublicationsNews/NewsDetail.aspx?ItemNumber=10475>>, accessed 29 October 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Martin Westerholm, *The Ordering of the Christian Mind: Karl Barth and Theological Rationality* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 41–42.

rationally, which reduces him to a part of the reality that he has created: 'On the basis of an understanding of the difference between God and creatures, he recasts the question of truth as a problem of acknowledging the divine without reducing it to the creaturely.' Because humans can reason well, there is a danger of thinking we know what God is like because we can imagine a being who, except that he does it perfectly, reasons just like us.

The centrality of Christ's resurrection to theology, and the paradoxes on which it appears to rely, led Barth to argue, *contra* Aquinas, that even the logic of non-contradiction is not axiomatic in theological thinking:

There is thus no point in drawing attention to [scientific logic's] internal difficulties or the ways in which it is perhaps always broken when applied, even in the natural sciences. It is still the proper concept of science for our own time. And theology can only say point-blank that this concept is unacceptable to it. Even the minimum postulate of freedom from contradiction is acceptable to theology only when it is given a particular interpretation which the scientific theorist can hardly tolerate, namely, that theology does not affirm in principle that the "contradictions" which it makes cannot be resolved. But the statements in which it maintains their resolution will be statements concerning the free activity of God and not therefore statements which "dismiss contradictions from the world". ... Not an iota can be yielded here without betraying theology, for any concession at this point involves surrendering the theme of theology.<sup>37</sup>

It is in that eschatological perspective that Westerholm locates Barth's commitment to distancing the logic of theological thinking from that of scientific thinking:

For Barth, the logic of this reckoning is grasped only from the standpoint of the resurrection, and occupants of this standpoint cannot 'gulp down'

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<sup>37</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I, 1 §1* (Online version edn.; Alexandria, district of Columbia: Alexander Street Press, 2007), 9. The conclusion that Barth reaches in respect of logic stands in contrast to that of Aquinas, who insists that even God cannot transgress the logic of non-contradiction: '... that which implies being and non-being at the same time is repugnant to the idea of an absolutely possible thing, within the scope of the divine omnipotence. For such cannot come under the divine omnipotence, not because of any defect in the power of God, but because it has not the nature of a feasible or possible thing. Therefore, everything that does not imply a contradiction in terms, is numbered amongst those possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent: whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility.' (S. Th. I q25 a3).

the logical norms that govern human thought generally, or they affirm states of affairs marked by a logical tension that is addressed only by describing the free activity of God. The standpoint of the eschatological subject thus stands at one remove from the governing principles of 'scientific' human thought.<sup>38</sup>

Modern US culture, according to contemporary Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas, offers an illustration of the danger of failing to recognise the distinctive nature of Christian reasoning in dialogue with secular society. Hauerwas' concerns centre around the extent to which Christian values have been annexed by political parties in the US for their own ends and are largely purged of any association with Christ himself. In *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas' main theological target is Reinhold Niebuhr, who, Hauerwas says:

... saw that our politics determines our theology. He was right that Christians cannot reject "culture." But his call to Christians to accept "culture" (where is this monolithic "culture" Niebuhr describes?) and politics in the name of the unity of God's creating and redeeming activity had the effect of endorsing a Constantinian social strategy. "Culture" became a blanket term to underwrite Christian involvement with the world without providing any discriminating modes for discerning how Christians should see the good or the bad in "culture."<sup>39</sup>

Hauerwas blames that kind of accommodationism for the fact that, in the United States, society has come to identify certain moral positions that it considers 'Christian' with specific political parties rather than with Jesus: 'Both [Falwell's Moral Majority and any mainline Protestant Church that opposes him] begin with the Constantinian assumption that there is no way for the gospel to be present in our world without asking the world to support our convictions through its own social and political socialization.'<sup>40</sup> The primary purpose of the church, Hauerwas suggests, is to demonstrate the nature of God; it is not to try to influence through ratiocination the culture of the *polis* in which the Christian 'colony' finds itself. Hauerwas points out that much of what Christ teaches runs counter to what the prevailing culture—then, as now—would consider rational: 'Jesus was not crucified for saying or doing what made sense to everyone. People are crucified for following a way that runs counter to the prevailing

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<sup>38</sup>Westerholm, *The Ordering of the Christian Mind: Karl Barth and Theological Rationality*, 123.

<sup>39</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident aliens: life in the Christian colony*, eds William H. Willimon and Will Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 40.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

direction of the culture.’<sup>41</sup> Members of a society that is persuaded to take on a superficially Christian way of behaving for rational reasons alone, he goes on, might even find themselves ‘inoculated’ against a real relationship with Christ: ‘The aim of such inoculation is security—not security in Christ, but security from Christ and from having to rely on him and the shape of his Kingdom to give meaning and significance to our lives’.<sup>42</sup> Attempts to influence society by expressing Christian ethics in rational terms are, he suggests, unsatisfactory:

An ethic claiming to be “rational” and universally valid for all thinking people everywhere is incipiently demonic because it has no means of explaining why there are still people who disagree with its prescriptions of behavior, except that these people must be “irrational” and, therefore (since “rationality” is said to be our most important human characteristic), subhuman.<sup>43</sup>

On that basis, Hauerwas is sceptical of an exposition of Christian ethics that does not rely wholly on a Christian worldview:

Christian ethics, like any ethics, are ‘tradition dependent.’ That is, they make sense, not because the principles they espouse make sense in the abstract, as perfectly rational behavior, which ought to sound reasonable to any intelligent person. Christian ethics only make sense from the point of view of what we believe has happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>44</sup>

In *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas appears to be arguing that the reasoning of humans is not merely flawed, but so utterly corrupt that reaching a moral conclusion by means of such reasoning is in itself enough to ensure that the conclusion is wrong.

Hauerwas must be right to insist that Christian values spring from the nature of God himself, revealed in Christ, and that obeying Christian moral rules, even where those can be clearly known, cannot be enough for an

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 71.

individual to reach the fulness of her existence. Christian reasoning is informed by revelation as well as by ratiocination. Human reasoning alone can, even at its best, infer only part of the truth of what Christians confess. But it does not inevitably follow that revelation must always be at odds with ratiocination's conclusions. Human reasoning in the absence of revelation, though flawed and limited in what it can infer, is a subset of all the reasoning to which a Christian human has access, rather than an alternative to it.

Hauerwas is also clearly right that Christian values are not always explainable in terms that a contemporary human culture would consider rational, and often run frankly counter to such reasoning. Christian values are revealed, rather than derived from first principles, and cannot reliably be inferred by human reasoning alone. Again, however, it does not follow that Christian values can never be defended in rational terms. Biggar points out that: '... the fact that religion involves faith (in the sense of belief that outruns proof) does not mean that it is bereft of reason'.<sup>45</sup> Nor does it mean we should never attempt to defend Christian values in terms that are consistent with secular reason. While Barth, like Hauerwas, rejects the idea that human reasoning is analogous to divine reasoning, he recognises that it can be used to uncover useful knowledge:

Theology does not in fact possess special keys to special doors. Nor does it control a basis of knowledge which might not find actualisation in other sciences. Nor does it know an object of enquiry necessarily concealed from other sciences. Only by failing to recognise the actualisation of revelation, the possibility of grace and therefore its own nature, could it possibly make any such claim. Similarly, we cannot possibly prove that there is any necessity in principle for a theology of

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<sup>45</sup>Nigel Biggar, 'Why religion deserves a place in secular medicine', *J Med Ethics*, 41/3 (Mar 2015), 229–33, 229. See also Nigel Biggar, 'Religion's place at the table of 'secular' medical ethics: a response to the commentaries', *J Med Ethics*, 41/11 (Nov 2015), 873–4. and Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan, *Religious voices in public places* (Oxford scholarship online; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the service of God. ... Philosophy and secular science generally do not have to be secular or pagan. There might be such a thing as *philosophia Christiana*.<sup>46</sup>

The idea that obeying Christ *often* means acting in a way that does not seem rational to others should not lead to the idea that in order to obey Christ we must *always* act in a way that seems irrational. Sometimes what Christ commands makes sense even to fallen man. The Christ of Mathew's gospel describes the sometimes irrational ethical 'counter-culture' that the Kingdom of God represents, but he also commands Christians to concern themselves with improving the lives of others through rational attention to their bodily needs:

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'  
"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'<sup>47</sup>

Giving food will not, of itself, bring hungry people into relationship with God or offer them the ultimate fulness of existence that such a relationship brings. Christians should nevertheless feed the hungry because the lives of hungry people will be made better by receiving food in the present moment. Any rational person can understand that someone who is hungry and cold will benefit from being offered food and clothes. As part of their service to Christ, Christians are expected to exercise moral reasoning on the basis of common humanity, and to direct it to the goal of improving others' existence.

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<sup>46</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics I*, 1 §1, 6.

<sup>47</sup>Matt. 24:35–40 (New International Version)

Christians also have a responsibility to influence the wider culture in which they live. The command in this passage to improve the lives of others is not restricted to those within the Christian 'colony', since there is nothing in it to suggest the King discounts service to those who are not his subjects. Hauerwas notes that Barth himself was an active socialist:

A theologian may at first appear "radical," or at least new, because he or she has identified with the latest leftist political developments ... Of course Barth was no less a socialist than Tillich. Yet Barth saw how our Christian belief makes a difference for how we are political. That which makes the church "radical" and forever "new" is not that the church tends to lean toward the left on most social issues, but rather that the church knows Jesus whereas the world does not.<sup>48</sup>

Barth was socialist because he saw in socialism a means of influencing society in order to serve others as Christ had commanded.<sup>49</sup> Hauerwas himself resorts to ratiocination in order to influence the culture in which he lives. In his contribution to a 1977 report to the US government, he approaches the issue of research involving children by defending a traditional Christian view of family. But he expresses that defence in terms of reason; there is no direct appeal to Christian revelation.<sup>50</sup>

In effect, despite their wariness of the reasoning of fallen humans, both Barth and Hauerwas are telling the societies in which they live as Christians

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<sup>48</sup>Hauerwas, *Resident aliens: life in the Christian colony*, 27–28.

<sup>49</sup>See Paul Brazier, 'Barth and Rome—Socialism, the Church and a Theocratic Illusion?', *The Downside Review*, 124/434 (2006), 61–78.

<sup>50</sup> 'In summary I have tried to suggest that modern ethical theory has tried to deal with the issues of the status of children as research subjects in the language of rights because such language best suits its methodological commitments. For the language of rights appears to provide a way of giving children a moral status without presupposing any arbitrary and particular concept of parental responsibility. However, I have tried to suggest that even though such a strategy may have some plausibility in a society where parental responsibility is unclear and ambiguous, the strategy in fact embodies assumptions that contributes to the distortion of the family as a moral entity.' Stanley Hauerwas, 'Rights, Duties, and Experimentation on Children: A Critical Response to Worsfold and Bartholome', in *The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research* (ed.), *Research Involving Children* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402: DHEW Publication Number (OS) 77-0005, 1977), 5.8.

that 'Christianity has got this right. If society wants the best for its members, it should take note and follow suit'. There are ways in which a society that behaved as though it were Christian would treat its members better than one that did not. In such a society, the hungry would be fed, the thirsty would be given drink, the naked would be clothed, and the lonely and outcasts would be comforted. It is not necessary for an individual Christian to capitulate to Constantinian accommodationism in order to feel it is part of her service to others to point out some of those ways using the language of reason that, while it is consistent with Christ's teaching, is not dependent on it. The benefit to others in behaving towards them as Christ commands is often—though, of course, as Hauerwas points out, not always—explainable in rational terms. Providing it does not insist that behaviour is right merely *because* it is rational, or imply through false promises that rationally correct behaviour can substitute for a relationship with Christ in achieving the fulness of an individual's existence, apologetics is a legitimate approach to take in ethics because it is ratiocination used in God's service. If Christian theology is to have currency in modern medical ethics (that is, if it is to persuade others that the benefits of acting in accordance with theology's moral insights are not reserved exclusively for Christians), it sometimes *does* need to be able to express itself in terms 'which ought to sound reasonable to any intelligent person'.<sup>51</sup>

I have argued that infanticide is an issue on which Christian ethics needs to speak out because the pressures on doctors to consider it convenient and morally acceptable are increasing. I have also suggested that it is legitimate for

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<sup>51</sup>Hauerwas, *Resident aliens: life in the Christian colony*, 71.

Christian ethics to speak in terms that might persuade those who do not share the Christian faith. That does not entail conceding the consequentialist position that the moral value of an action is wholly in its outcome. One of the truths that Christian ethics must express is to re-affirm on its own terms the special value of human life. There is a profound and important difference between utilitarian conceptions of personal value as an expression of an individual's capacity to benefit from correct moral action, and the idea from Christian theories of *imago Dei* that correct moral action is a response to personal value that an individual already inherently possesses.<sup>52</sup> It is important that Christian theological ethics continue to affirm that moral value is not dependent on consequences alone.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, if it is to establish credibility among doctors then at the same time Christian ethics must acknowledge that consequences are not wholly *irrelevant*, either. Most doctors have been taught from early in their training to judge the rightness of a decision by its effects, and on the whole to dismiss personal values as distractions. Christian theology needs to mount an argument that, while not consequentialist in that it does not judge moral value

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<sup>52</sup>To be consistent, a consequentialist must be able to express all moral value in terms of a desirable outcome. To a libertarian consequentialist, for example, a decision is morally correct to the extent that it increases the universe's store of liberty. To a hedonistic utilitarian, it is morally correct to the extent that it contributes to the universe's stocks of happiness. When it comes to assessing personal value on those terms, it follows that the moral agent need not concern herself with characteristics that are irrelevant to that desirable outcome. Faced with a man who was incapable of happiness, for example, a consistent hedonistic utilitarian would have to conclude that it did not matter how she treated him because nothing she could do to him would affect the sum total of human happiness. Consequentialist theories, consistently applied, restrict the characteristics that confer personal value exclusively to those that are relevant to the specific outcome which the particular brand of consequentialism identifies as desirable. One way of looking at Christian eudaimonism is that it is the only form of consequentialism that has as its goal a desirable outcome defined broadly enough to constitute a plausible account of what can improve the quality of human existence. That desirable outcome is flourishing.

<sup>53</sup>For example, '... we can recognize someone as a person only from a stance of prior moral commitment to treat him or her as a person'. Oliver O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a person?', in J. H. Channer et al. (eds.), *Abortion and the sanctity of human life* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985), 125–37, 126.

solely according to outcome, is persuasively consequential. That does not require Christian ethics to be disingenuous. While ethics on most Christian views is not consequentialist, it is a teleological endeavour because its object is the well-being of people. The outcome of moral action—providing it is properly defined—should be relevant to the concerns of Christian ethicists as well as to utilitarians.

Peter Singer is one of many utilitarian moral philosophers who imagine that the doctrine of the sanctity of life is Christianity's only way of explaining an infant's inherent value. He considers it a doctrine that allows human infants, on a technicality, personal worth to which they are not entitled. He seems to believe that, in order to establish the credentials of his account as a rational explanation of infant value he must start by entirely rejecting a Christian moral framework. A Christian eudaimonist theological critique, however, reveals rational concerns about Singer's utilitarianism that do not depend on the doctrine of the sanctity of life. Christianity's conclusions might be correct even if the theistic premiss on which Christians reached them were not.

#### **1.4 Refuting Singer: evidence and epistemology**

On the Christian view that prevailed in the fourth century, infanticide is wrong because the infant is human. All humans are in the image of God, which means that all human lives, including those of infants, have inherent value. The argument I will make, which is a broadly Thomist one consistent with the Reformed theological tradition, is that the wrongness of infanticide can also be expressed in the teleological consequential terms of Christian eudaimonism. I will argue, however, that such an argument depends on a correct theological

anthropology of the child.

Following Aquinas, my argument draws heavily on Aristotelian teleology. Aristotle's account starts with considering the object to which moral action should logically be directed, to which he gives the name *eudaimonia*. Some ambiguity is built into the concept itself. Catholic moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that, in giving it a name, Aristotle deliberately avoids trying to define exactly what *eudaimonia* contains:

What then does the good for man turn out to be? Aristotle has cogent arguments against identifying that good with money, with honor or with pleasure. He gives to it the name of *eudaimonia*—as so often there is a difficulty in translation: blessedness, happiness, prosperity. It is the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man's being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine. But when Aristotle first gives this name to the good for man, he leaves the question of the content of *eudaimonia* largely open.<sup>54</sup>

That uncertainty is compounded, as MacIntyre indicates, by the fact that much of the meaning of the term itself is easily lost in translation to contemporary English. The Greek word literally means 'the state of having a good indwelling spirit' but in the twenty-first century it is typically used synonymously with happiness or well-being in the present moment, or with 'quality of life'. Those are more restricted (and, as we shall see later, potentially misleading) translations; it is clear that Aristotle meant something much more:

... let us say what we claim to be the aim of political science: that is, of all the good things to be done, what is the highest. Most people, I should think, agree about what it is called, since both the masses and sophisticated people call it happiness, understanding being happy as equivalent to living well and acting well.<sup>55</sup>

*Eudaimonia* (translated here as 'happiness') is the ultimate goal of ethical

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<sup>54</sup>Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory* (3 edn.; London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 148.

<sup>55</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy; Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4–5 (1095a).

behaviour because it is a way of existing; a state of 'living well and acting well'. It is a way of living rather than a set of morally correct achievements. According to Aristotle, indeed, eudaimonia is ultimately represented by a state of contemplation rather than by actions: 'Happiness, then, extends as far as contemplation, and the more contemplation there is in one's life, the happier one is, not incidentally, but in virtue of the contemplation, since this is honourable in itself. Happiness, therefore, will be some form of contemplation.'<sup>56</sup>

In *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas considers that the account of morality which 'The Philosopher' Aristotle has set out is, in its essence, fundamentally correct and consistent with Christianity:

Now the first principle in practical matters, which are the object of the practical reason, is the last end: and the last end of human life is bliss or happiness, as stated above (Q. 2, A. 7; Q. 3, A. 1). Consequently the law must needs regard principally the relationship to happiness. Moreover, since every part is ordained to the whole, as imperfect to perfect; and since one man is a part of the perfect community, the law must needs regard properly the relationship to universal happiness. Wherefore the Philosopher, in the above definition of legal matters mentions both happiness and the body politic: for he says (Ethic. v, 1) that we call those legal matters "just, which are adapted to produce and preserve happiness and its parts for the body politic": since the state is a perfect community, as he says in Polit. i, 1<sup>57</sup>

'To make this clear', he goes on. 'two points must be observed. First, that man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object.'<sup>58</sup>

Since eudaimonia (again, here rendered as 'happiness') represents the highest quality of an individual's existence, one way of expressing the project

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 197 (X. 1178b).

<sup>57</sup>S. Th. I-II q90 a2

<sup>58</sup>S. Th. I-II. Q3 a8

of ethics in teleological terms is that its object is to facilitate eudaimonia.<sup>59</sup> The aspirational sense of eudaimonia as perfection, rather than present pleasure or absence of suffering, introduces complications into its utility as a way to evaluate moral action in practice. At the time the agent needs to make a moral decision, she cannot know exactly what eudaimonia will look like. All she can do is to use reason to consider whether or not the effect of the action she takes is likely to help another person towards it. Moral philosophers and theologians who use the term 'flourishing' refer to the progress towards eudaimonia that results from a morally correct decision.

In the next two chapters I will first set out Singer's utilitarian defence of infanticide alongside theology's objections to it, and then present a critique of Singer's use of empirical evidence to support his arguments for infanticide. I will show that Singer is unjustified in many of his beliefs about the limitations of human cognition during infancy. Neuropsychological research shows an infant perceives and processes the world in a way that, even on Singer's own terms, are relevant to self-awareness.

In the chapter that follows, however, I will suggest that revealing Singer's empirical claims about the infant to be unreliable does not on its own defeat his argument for infanticide. Although scientific studies show what cognitive properties the normal infant possesses, they cannot challenge the value judgement that Singer makes about those properties relative to the cognitive properties possessed by a normal adult.

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<sup>59</sup>Virtues are qualities, or habits, of an individual whose presence inclines them to eudaimonia and whose absence jeopardises it. One of the most important aspects of Aristotelian ethics is that it is right for a moral agent to exercise the virtues, both because it will help others achieve their eudaimonia, and because exercising the virtues helps optimise the agent's own eudaimonia. A morally right action simultaneously promotes a desirable outcome in moral agent and moral 'patient'.

Singer's profoundly different evaluations of the infant and adult result, I will argue, from his having defined the value of properties that characterise a normal human during childhood (represented at its most extreme by the infant) solely by privative contrast with those she possesses during adulthood. I suggest that a Christian moral anthropology offers the potential for a convincing theological objection to Singer on infanticide and that the objections theologians have already made to Singer's general theory provide the basis for such an anthropology although, as they stand, they do not offer it.

On the broadly Thomist argument I will set out, an individual's vocation—her role in God's plan for humanity—determines the mode in which she flourishes, whether she is an infant or an adult. A key element of my argument will be the concept of 'childness', which I take to be the properties (and especially the cognitive capabilities) that characterise the normal human while she is an infant. To that end, I will differentiate childness from the period called 'childhood', from adjectives such as 'childish' and 'child-like', and from actual infants or children. I will summarise what is currently known about childness on the basis of empirical science and then set out how two interpretations of *imago Dei* explain the general relationship between the properties a being possesses and her individual vocation. I will show that, according to relational interpretations, personal value derives from individual vocation, affirming the distinctiveness of humans without making humanness contingent on specific properties. I will suggest that the cognitive characteristics that constitute childness represent capabilities which predispose those who possess them to trust, and to depend on, others. I will argue that trust and dependence underpin faith and humility, which in turn equip a human of any age to flourish according

to her individual vocation. On that basis, I will argue, there is no rational foundation for an anthropology such as Singer has proposed that accords greater value to adulthood than to childhood. A normal human infant is able to flourish in modes that are different from those of a normal human adult, but it does not logically follow that it would be of less moral consequence to deprive an infant of flourishing through infanticide than it would to deprive an adult of flourishing through murder.

I am addressing the argument to moral theologians who feel, as I do, that Christian ethics offers an important perspective on the nature of humans, and on how medicine should be practised if it is to care effectively and compassionately for humans. Such moral theologians will, I suggest, need to find ways to express some theological concepts in terms that non-Christians will understand and find acceptable and perhaps persuasive. Sometimes that is not possible (it is hard, for example, to imagine a way in which the concept of *imago Dei* can be expressed without reference to God). More often, I will suggest, there are secular terms available in which to express theological ideas, albeit in a way that is typically incomplete or insipid by comparison with those ideas. So, for example, only Christians could understand the richness of 'vocation' as individual purpose that springs from a relationship with a living and creator God. There are, however, many non-Christian medical ethicists who would understand the word 'telos' as purpose and appreciate its logical importance in establishing value. The two terms are not by any means synonymous, but most of what is morally relevant about the restricted term 'telos' is subsumed in the meaning of the much more capacious 'vocation'. While there is theological reasoning that is broad and revelatory and can only

be described using theological language, when it comes to ratiocination alone such intersection and overlap between meanings offers theology something of a common vocabulary in dialogue with medical ethics in the twenty-first century.

## Chapter 2: Singer's argument, and theology's response

### 2.1 Singer's general argument

#### 2.1.i His ideology: rejecting speciesism

The author of *Practical Ethics* emerges as a man of some integrity and moral courage; one who feels driven to defend the vulnerable against exploitation in the face of society's scepticism and even anger. Where Singer challenges conventional moral assumptions it is because he is compelled to do so by a passionate commitment to his ideals. His is a *curriculum vitae* that, *mutatis mutandis*, could legitimately introduce many who have been admired for the moral stand they have taken in the name of Christianity. Like William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King, Singer feels called to protest against injustice.

Singer's objective is to present a global moral theory that is rational, coherent and comprehensive and, as far as possible, avoids making any metaphysical claims: 'This book can be read as an attempt to indicate how a consistent preference utilitarian would deal with a number of controversial problems ... preference utilitarianism is a straightforward ethical theory that requires minimal metaphysical presuppositions.'<sup>60</sup> He is particularly anxious to distance himself from any way of considering ethics that relies on a theistic worldview:

[Ethics is not] something intelligible only in the context of religion. I shall treat ethics as entirely independent of religion. Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of 'good' is nothing other than 'what God approves'. Plato refuted a similar claim

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<sup>60</sup>Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14.

more than two thousand years ago by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods' approval that makes them good.<sup>61</sup>

Despite that determination to keep the feet of his theory firmly on the ground of reason, it is a passionate conviction that provides the starting point for Singer's argument. His main aim in *Practical Ethics* is ideological; to show that it is fundamentally unjust to accord greater value to the life of a human than to that of a non-human animal, solely on the basis that the former is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*:

It could be said that if there is any single aspect of this book that distinguishes it from other approaches to such issues as human equality, abortion, euthanasia and the environment, it is the fact that these topics are approached with a conscious disavowal of any assumption that all members of our own species have, merely because they are members of our species, any distinctive worth or inherent value that puts them above members of other species.<sup>62</sup>

It would be hard for Christians to deny that human beings generally use non-humans as though they were possessions, and moreover often as possessions for which we have little concern. That is, as Singer sees it, no less cruel or fundamentally unjust than slavery or racial prejudice. He labels the injustice 'speciesism'. The purpose of *Practical Ethics* is to convince readers that there are non-human animals whom humans, in a just universe, should treat according to the same ethical principles that guide their treatment of other humans. Singer is writing as a passionate persuader, not as a disinterested exponent of fact, and the purpose of *Practical Ethics* is explicitly proselytic; to

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 3. The Dilemma of Euthyphro appears in one of Plato's Dialogues, in which Socrates and Euthyphro discuss the nature of piety. Both agree that good behaviour is something of which the gods approve, but Socrates argues that divine approval does not define, describe or determine what behaviour is 'good'. There is a quality that is characteristic both of gods and of the behaviour of which gods approve but does not depend on either. It is that common quality that Plato invites us to recognise as 'good'.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., ix.

make humankind understand and repent of appalling cruelty to non-human persons.

As a result, although Singer often appeals to rationality, he is inconsistent in his representation of what rationality is. When it comes to the way a moral agent should think, he certainly understands it in the sense of a specific logical faculty. The task of ethics is to consider how a process of logical reasoning can illuminate actual moral quandaries, and a capacity for logic is the *terra firma* on which he considers a systematic consideration of ethics must rest:

... the question “Why should I be rational?” questions something that we normally presuppose. But to question rationality—not the use of reason in any specific context, but in general—really is logically improper because in answering it we can only give reasons for being rational. Thus the person asking the question must be seeking reasons and, hence, is herself presupposing rationality. The resulting justification of rationality would have to be circular—which shows, not that rationality lacks a necessary justification, but that it needs no justification, because it cannot intelligibly be questioned unless it is already presupposed.<sup>63</sup>

When considering the moral status of the infant, it is in the name of reason that he enjoins readers to ignore their intuitions and dismisses as irrelevant any moral appeals that might be made to, or under the influence of, any emotional response: ‘In attempting to reach a considered ethical judgement about this matter, we should put aside feelings based on the small, helpless and—sometimes—cute appearance of human infants.’<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 534. Singer indicates here that the need for a moral agent to be rational is not susceptible of further analysis. His reasoning is not clear (at least, not to me). It is true that the agent who asks ‘Why should I be rational?’ is demonstrating that she is already rational, but that neither answers the question she is asking nor does it explain why the question needs no answer (except in the most basic sense that no moral action depends on the answer). It is possible that this is example of Singer struggling in 2011 to follow the demands of subjectivism. The subjectivist Singer can avoid explaining the objective importance of agent rationality to his argument by dismissing the question as logically improper.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 152.

Elsewhere in his writing, however, Singer seeks to evoke the same sorts of emotional response in support of his own argument, inviting the reader movingly to consider the suffering of non-humans that humans inflict by:

... capturing [them] (often after shooting their mothers) and imprisoning them in small cages for humans to stare at; tormenting animals to make them learn tricks for circuses and tormenting them to make them entertain the audiences at rodeos; slaughtering whales with explosive harpoons, under the guise of scientific research; drowning over 100,000 dolphins annually in nets set by tuna fishing boats; shooting three million kangaroos every year in the Australian outback to turn them into skins and pet food; and generally ignoring the interests of wild animals as we extend our empire of concrete and pollution over the surface of the globe.<sup>65</sup>

Singer is appealing to the instinctive concern members of the species *Homo sapiens* have for beings who are vulnerable to exploitation by those who are more powerful. It is a battle-cry; a way of calling his readers to join him in his crusade. That interweaving of rhetoric and ratiocination is the tactic of someone determined to convince his audience of something about which he feels passionately.<sup>66</sup>

In the context of that wider project, passion and purpose, infanticide can be seen to represent a 'mirror image' of speciesism. Speciesism not only allows humans to justify killing non-human beings whom Singer considers to be persons, but it allows us to justify preserving the life of human beings who are not. The infant is a normal human whose life has no inherent preference utilitarian value because she lacks the properties that make killing her morally

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<sup>65</sup>Peter Singer, *Animal liberation* (2 edn.; London: Pimlico, 1995), 22.

<sup>66</sup>Catholic theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill points out that in his use of reason and logic as tools to persuade people of passionately held beliefs Singer is following a long utilitarian tradition: 'Classical utilitarianism, like Singer, appealed to reason in order to demolish common moral assumptions and attitudes. More deeply, and again like Singer, it was inspired by a passion for political and social reform.' Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Moral reason, community belonging, and global justice', in John Perry (ed.), *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 72.

wrong. Singer holds up infanticide in order to reflect humankind's casual cruelty to non-humans who *do* possess those characteristics, such as some Bonobo apes. The infant provides Singer with the rhetorical device he needs; a human who is less a person than some of the non-human animals whose cruel treatment he deplores. Arguing that infants can be killed is an effective shock-tactic which illustrates in a challenging and memorable manner Singer's vision of an approach to bioethics in which no special moral status need be conferred by membership of the species *Homo sapiens*. Singer leaves the reader of *Practical Ethics* in no doubt that he hates what he thinks the infant represents; the arbitrary moral privilege that members of the species *Homo sapiens* give to one another.

### **2.1.ii Singer's objections to Christianity**

Singer indicates that he considers theology to be essentially unconnected to the task of moral philosophy: 'The third thing ethics is not is something intelligible only in the context of religion ... I shall treat ethics as entirely independent of religion'.<sup>67</sup> His readers might infer that Singer is uninterested in religion and religious values. That would not be true; the argument that unfolds is often dominated by a specific rejection of Christian values. The origin of Singer's hostility, he explains in *God, the Good and Utilitarianism*, is partly in his observation that some Christians are hypocrites:

I read the passage in which Jesus tells the rich man to give all he has to the poor, and adds that it is as hard for a rich man to go to heaven as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. I wondered how that squared

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<sup>67</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3.

with the fact that the most expensive car in the school parking area was the chaplain's shiny black Mercedes.<sup>68</sup>

It is also an expression of his impatience with Christ's treatment of the natural world:

Then there is the passage in which Jesus causes the devils from the man called Legion to go into a large herd of pigs—according to Mark, there were about two thousand of them (Mark 5:9–13; Luke 8:30–33; Matthew 8:28–32). The pigs then rush down the hill and drown themselves in the Sea of Galilee. Even apart from any concern about the deaths of the pigs, this seems to completely disregard the interests of the owners of the pigs. No wonder that, in Matthew's version, the whole town comes out to meet Jesus and pleads with him to leave the region!<sup>69</sup>

Singer's antipathy to Christian moral theology, however, is not merely a response to his personal reservations about Christ or his followers. A particular challenge Singer's work presents to theologians is that, to this well-intentioned philosopher, Christian moral thinking not only fails to offer a persuasive alternative to that injustice but is largely responsible for it. Singer believes that Christian religious ideas are the principal *cause* of the unjust evil of speciesism. Christianity accords, without any justification, intrinsic value to every human life. Furthermore, the Christian account denigrates those who are *not* human on grounds that he considers equally hard to justify:

A second Christian doctrine that led to the same conclusion was the belief that because we are created by God we are his property, and to kill a human being is to usurp God's right to decide when we shall live and when we shall die. As Thomas Aquinas put it, taking a human life is a sin against God in the same way that killing a slave would be a sin against the master to whom the slave belonged. Nonhuman animals, on the other hand, were believed to have been placed by God under man's dominion, as recorded in the Bible (Genesis 1:29 and 9:1–3). Hence, humans could kill nonhuman animals as they pleased, so long as they were not the property of another ... During the centuries of Christian domination of European thought, the ethical attitudes based on these

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<sup>68</sup>Peter Singer, 'Engaging with Christianity', in John Perry (ed.), *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

doctrines became part of the unquestioned moral orthodoxy of European civilization.<sup>70</sup>

In respect of bioethics, Singer believes Christianity has, over a long period, actively undermined the cause of justice by asserting axiomatically and in a way that is contrary to all reason that the life of a human animal is intrinsically more valuable than that of a non-human animal:

Our present attitudes date from the coming of Christianity. There was a specific theological motivation for the Christian insistence on the importance of species membership: the belief that all born of human parents are immortal and destined for an eternity of bliss or for everlasting torment. With this belief, the killing of *Homo sapiens* took on a fearful significance, because it consigned a being to his or her eternal fate.<sup>71</sup>

As a result, Singer's general moral theory is largely shaped by a determination to distance the project of bioethics from a historical landscape of moral philosophy that, in his view, has been dominated by Christianity's ultimately indefensible special valuation of humans.

### **2.1.iii Singer's preference utilitarianism**

Singer argues that most important characteristic of an ethical theory is that it should be universally acceptable:

Ethics takes a universal point of view. This does not mean that a particular ethical judgment must be universally applicable. Circumstances alter cases, as we have seen. What it does mean is that in making ethical judgments, we go beyond our own likes and dislikes. From an ethical perspective, it is irrelevant that it is I who benefit from cheating you and you who lose by it. Ethics goes beyond 'I' and 'you' to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 76.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid. This passage illustrates Singer's inconsistent understanding of the fundamentals of orthodox Christian theology.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 11.

Because people do not agree on a metaphysical position, Singer argues that a theory that takes such a universal standpoint must require the smallest possible commitment to metaphysics. Preferences, he suggests, represent something everyone can agree on; while other outcomes may be contentious, there is no doubt that beings who are capable of expressing a preference believe they are made happier by having it met: 'We all know what preferences are, whereas claims that something is intrinsically morally wrong, or violates a natural right, or is contrary to human dignity invoke less tangible concepts that make their truth more difficult to assess.'<sup>73</sup>

The desirable outcome in the utilitarian calculus should, he concludes, therefore be the degree to which an agent's action will maximise preference satisfaction globally:

In accepting that ethical judgements must be made from a universal point of view, I am accepting that my own needs, wants and desires cannot, simply because they are my preferences, count more than the wants, needs and desires of anyone else. Thus, my very natural concern that my own wants, needs and desires—henceforth I shall refer to them as 'preferences'—be looked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the preferences of others ... Unless there are some other ethically relevant considerations [accepting that ethical judgements must be made from a universal point of view] will lead me to weigh all these preferences and adopt the course of action most likely to maximise the preferences of those affected. Thus, at least at some level in my moral reasoning, ethics points towards the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected.<sup>74</sup>

On Singer's interpretation of preference utilitarianism, moral value—the 'rightness' of an action—is the extent to which it maximises global preference satisfaction. The capacity to benefit from actions that satisfy such preferences,

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 12.

and to be harmed by those that do not, is a measure of individual worth that Singer considers to be universal.

Singer expresses the value of any individual's life in terms of global preferences that she should continue to exist, including the preferences of the individual herself (though the latter are given no special privilege over the preferences of others). He accordingly rejects any concept of the 'sanctity of life', particularly insofar as it gives special status to *Homo sapiens*, because it represents a claim of value that derives from humans' view of humanity, rather than from that universal standpoint: 'We may take the doctrine of the sanctity of human life', he says, 'as simply a way of saying that human life has some very special value, a value quite distinct from the value of the lives of other living things.'<sup>75</sup> Singer does not deny that humans generally are of more value than other animals generally. He draws a distinction between *sentience* and *self-awareness*. A sentient being can suffer or experience pleasure, but only a being who is self-aware can hold a preference to continue to live. That means there is a sense in which the life of a being who is merely sentient can be said to be of less inherent value than that of a being who is self-aware:

The claim that self-aware beings are entitled to more consideration than other beings is compatible with the principle of equal consideration of interests if it amounts to no more than the claim that something that happens to self-aware beings can be contrary to their interests, whereas similar occurrences would not be contrary to the interests of beings who were not self-aware ... It would be a different matter if it were claimed that, even when a self-aware being did not suffer more than a being that was merely sentient, the suffering of the self-aware being is more important because these are inherently more valuable beings. This introduces non-utilitarian claims of value—claims that do not derive simply from taking a universal standpoint ...<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 65.

It is reasonable to observe on those grounds that the lives of humans in general are more valuable than those of non-human animals in general but, according to Singer, that generalisation is of no relevance in considering the value of an individual human's life. It makes no sense, he goes on, to '... treat individuals, not in accordance with their actual qualities, but in accordance with the qualities normal for their species.' The extent of any life's value is in the extent to which preserving it will contribute to global preference satisfaction and even the value of a being's own life must be evaluated according to how her preference to go on living weighs against the preferences of others that she should die. The full value of a being's life is expressed by her own preference to continue to live on the one hand and, on the other, the extent of others' preference that she should die. Singer has achieved his aim of describing moral value in terms that depend on the individual's own particular abilities, rather than on the general characteristics of her species.

The originator of preference utilitarianism in its modern form is Christian philosopher Richard Hare. Like Singer, Hare recognised the danger that unless inherent value is anchored in something that is universalisable, it is open to each moral agent to decide for herself what it is about persons that 'inherent value' expresses:

Suppose that a Nazi argues that he has a right to persecute members of non-Germanic races because there is something in the hereditary make-up (in the 'blood', he might say) of the Germanic races which gives them a natural superiority over other races and a right to make them their subjects. This looks at first sight very like some perfectly good factual arguments that we mentioned earlier; we have the statement that the facts are such that a certain moral principle applies. But ... no determinate criterion is given for discovering whether this factor is present in the heredity or blood of any particular person. No empirical tests are offered for determining the truth of the assertion that members

of Germanic races actually have this mark of natural superiority to members of other races. So the argument rests on statements of 'fact' whose truth is in principle not ascertainable; and therefore we can never know whether the premisses of the argument, or its conclusion, are true.<sup>77</sup>

Hare is looking for an explanation of inherent value that is anchored in some rationally defensible way to a property common to all humans who can reasonably be called normal. His solution is preference utilitarianism.

Hare argues that the full extent of absolute meaning in a moral term derives from its semantic properties. A moral term possesses two such logical properties. It says something about what action should ensue (that is, the term is 'prescriptive'), and it claims that such an action instantiates a principle that extends beyond that specific agent's specific situation at the time (that is, the term is 'universalisable'). In *The Language of Morals* Hare shows why semantic logic must result in a concept of prescriptivity, and in *Freedom and Reason*, he explains why a principle of universalisability must also follow.<sup>78</sup> It is the nature of words to convey descriptive meaning, but that function is lost if description does not apply equally truthfully to anything that is, as a matter of fact, the same. So, for example, the term 'red' can have no meaning at all if it does not apply in the same way to everything, in all circumstances, that is the same in the aspect that 'red' describes. Hare believes he has already shown that the descriptive component of moral judgement is inseparable from the prescriptive. It follows, Hare argues, that the attribute of universalisability must be inherent in prescriptive judgements as well as descriptions. Starting with internal

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<sup>77</sup>R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 5–6.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 15–16.

semantic logic, Hare therefore arrives at the meta-ethical principle he calls 'universal prescriptivism'.

Hare's next logical step, set out in *Moral Thinking*, demonstrates that preference utilitarianism is the result of correct moral reasoning from universal prescriptivism.<sup>79</sup> A 'correct' judgement must be one that takes into account all relevant facts (whether they are, or can be, actually known or not). It is therefore important to moral reasoning to know what it would be like to be anyone affected by that moral decision. To know that requires an act of conditional reflection in which the moral agent considers the impact on others, not in terms of what she herself actually wants, but what she would want if she had the same tastes, tendencies and were in the same circumstances as those others. A commitment to correct moral action requires her to consider what it would be like to be each of the people who might be affected by her decision. Everyone, Hare concludes, is free to think morally as they choose, but if they were able to apply logic perfectly, and had all the facts at their disposal including a knowledge of what others want for themselves, all rational agents would inevitably reach the same moral conclusions, irrespective of the form of their ethical reasoning.<sup>80</sup>

That universalising sense of what others would want for themselves defines 'preference' in the context of Hare's preference utilitarianism. Hare argues that the response of a moral agent to the inherent value of a moral patient should be to recognise that the subjective preferences of others are as important as her own. He uses as an illustration the moral choice facing a jazz

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<sup>79</sup>R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>80</sup>R. M. Hare, 'Another's Sorrow', in Press Oxford University (ed.), *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 112.

trumpeter who wishes to play during the night while considering the preferences of his neighbours who find jazz unbearable:

Suppose that, to take a somewhat trivial example (though one which might lead to blows in real life), A likes to listen to classical chamber music on his gramophone, and B, who lives in the next room, is considering whether to practise playing jazz on the trumpet. Now it is obviously of no use for B to ask himself whether he is prepared to prescribe universally that people should play trumpets when they live next door to other people who are listening to classical records. For if B himself were listening to classical records (which bore him beyond endurance) he would be only too pleased if somebody next door started up on the trumpet.<sup>81</sup>

The fact that he, as a jazz musician, would positively enjoy listening to loud music being played late into the night is not the moral point. It is rather whether he would wish that *if he had the same preferences as those of his actual neighbours*.

Singer and Hare share a commitment to identifying a property that is inherent in all those to whom the agent owes a moral obligation. There is a sense, however, in which, despite its name, Hare's preference utilitarianism is not truly a utilitarian or even a consequentialist theory. Hare acknowledges that the subjective preferences of others are important, but he does not suggest that they are the only absolute source of moral value.<sup>82</sup> He suggests moral terms *need* not appeal to external standards in order to be moral terms, but he does not insist that they must *never* make such an appeal. Rather, he shows that rational thinking will always lead to the same moral conclusions as a certain form of consequentialism, because it flows inescapably from the internal

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<sup>81</sup>Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, 112–13.

<sup>82</sup>Although in arguing in favour of abortion Hare does imply that the fetus lacks inherent value because the 'golden rule' need not apply (George Sher, 'Hare, Abortion, and the Golden Rule', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 6/2 (1977), 185–90).

semantic logic of moral terms themselves.<sup>83</sup> On that basis Hare does not deny the possibility that there is an absolute sense in which subjective values are morally important.

Nevertheless, the theory of preference utilitarianism can easily lead to the sort of highly subjectivist account that Singer's interpretation represents. On consequentialist terms, the value of moral action expresses the impact of moral action. An individual's capacity to benefit from an agent's action fully explains both the moral correctness of the action, and the value of the individual. If global satisfaction of preferences is taken to be the only desirable outcome that should count in that utilitarian calculus, then an individual's inherent value is extremely limited. Beyond her own capacity to have preferences, any personal value an individual might have is a result of the preferences of others.

## **2.2 Christianity's objections**

Rationalist philosopher Gottfried Leibniz summarises the Dilemma of Euthyphro thus: 'It is generally agreed that whatever God wills is good and just. But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just; in other words, whether

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<sup>83</sup>In other writing on preference utilitarianism, Singer acknowledges this: 'Once most people understand that our ordinary moral concepts lead to preference utilitarianism, and understand what preference utilitarianism is, they will be quite clear that they are more committed to preserving their rejection of preference utilitarianism than to preserving the moral concepts they have been using. They will therefore adopt different moral concepts, adequate to expressing the diversity of normative views which people have expressed since ancient times, and not requiring that we be preference utilitarians.' Peter Singer, 'Reasoning towards Utilitarianism', in Hare and critics: essays on Moral thinking (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 154.

justice and goodness are arbitrary or whether they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things.<sup>84</sup>

If, as Leibniz suggests, justice and goodness are 'necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things' rather than emanating from God himself, then Singer is right that ethics does not necessarily need to concern itself with studying God in order to discover them. But the fact that the project of rational ethics does not *have to* start with a theistic account does not mean that it *may not* start with such an account. Moral theology is legitimately concerned with necessary and eternal truths. Since ethics argued from a theistic first premiss does not always represent a form of divine command theory (contrary to what Singer appears at times to believe), there is no reason why it should not make a meaningful contribution to any ethical debate that is rationally conducted.

The converse is also true. Andrew Sloane, a moral theologian with a first degree in medicine, starts his critique of Singer's theory with an acknowledgement of ways in which it can constructively challenge Christian thinking:

First, it is a (relatively) consistent theory, which articulates well the philosophical viewpoint with which he operates. Second, he effectively exposes some of the intellectual and practical flaws in (rigidly) absolutist versions of sanctity of life ethics, and some of the inconsistent manoeuvres proponents of such views must make to deal with difficult and conflicted situations. Third, he reminds us that we need to consider the consequences of our actions and policies if we are to do justice to the realities of personal existence.<sup>85</sup>

In avoiding the repugnant consequentialist idea that 'the end justifies the means', there is a risk that theories which appeal only to the sanctity of life

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<sup>84</sup>G.W. Leibniz and L.E. Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Literary Licensing, LLC, 2011).

<sup>85</sup>A. Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', *Stud Christ Ethics*, 12/2 (1999), 47–73, 62.

might accord no relevance at all to the practical outcome of moral decisions. That would be too extreme an alternative. Whatever its flaws, Sloane points out, Singer's theory recognises that the consequences of an agent's action are important and morally relevant.

Christian theological critique nevertheless uncovers three major specific weaknesses in Singer's theory on its own consequential terms. Firstly, Christian ethics reveals the maximisation of global preference satisfaction to be a poor measure of moral outcome. It represents too meagre a conception of what human well-being is that even Singer himself finds difficult to sustain consistently. Secondly, Singer rejects the idea of human nature and purpose entirely on the basis that he finds one particular account of it (an evolutionary account) implausible. Finally, Singer's account takes no account of the relationship between individuals, and so fails to explain both why humans should concern themselves with the good of others in the first place, or why an action that fails to benefit anyone might be wrong if it satisfies a strongly-held preference.

### **2.2.i Subjective preferences: an inadequate account of 'the good'**

One of the most important critiques that Christian theology offers Singer's interpretation of preference utilitarianism is that global preference satisfaction is too meagre a way to represent human well-being. At the outset of his argument in *Practical Ethics*, Singer suggests that an exclusively subjective account of value is inevitable once we dismiss the idea of a personal God:

If the universe has not been constructed in accordance with any plan, it has no meaning to be discovered. There is no value inherent in it,

independently of the existence of sentient beings who prefer some states of affairs to others. Ethics is no part of the structure of the universe, in the way that atoms are.<sup>86</sup>

It is not clear, however, that adopting an atheistic moral paradigm closes the question of objective value as a general principle. Catholic philosopher Susan Krantz points out that theistic moral theories are not the only ones to deny that all value is subjective. Along with the bathwater of theism, Singer has thrown out the substantial baby of moral realism:

... there is a sense in which Singer's whole ethical outlook is premised on the falsehood of traditional religion. In fact, however, there is no need for ethics to have a religious basis in order for it to include belief in objective moral value. In ancient times, Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics all regarded moral value as having a basis in human nature, and they regarded human nature as an objective reality.<sup>87</sup>

In rejecting objective value, Singer has moved from a logically defensible claim that without sentient beings there can be no value to the conclusion that there is no objective sense in which a particular moral valuation by sentient beings can be wrong. The existential nature of preferences means that preferences must be held by beings capable of holding them; but Krantz points out that it certainly does not preclude the possibility that some preferences might be for actions that are right or wrong in some objective sense:

What is subjectively known may be true objectively, just as what is subjectively believed may be false objectively. Subjective preference, as distinct from belief, is also capable of being correct or incorrect. Again, the fact that something is subjectively discerned says nothing about whether it is objectively respectable; that is a separate consideration.<sup>88</sup>

If, applied to the idea of value, 'existential' and 'subjective' described the same characteristic, then in order for a preference to be right it would only be

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<sup>86</sup>Peter Singer, *How are we to live?: Ethics in an age of self-interest* (OPUS book (Oxford University Press); Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 188.

<sup>87</sup>Susan F. Krantz, *Refuting Peter Singer's ethical theory: the importance of human dignity* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 35.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

necessary that it were held. But the idea of wrongness is an objective moral principle, at least in the sense that everyone agrees it. While people might not agree with each other on what we individually prefer, or even which specific actions are wrong, we do agree on the fact that 'wrong' is something an action can be.

Sloane suggests that it is to philosopher J. L. Mackie that Singer owes the idea that rejecting a theist metaphysical premiss must necessarily entail rejecting moral realism altogether:

Mackie proceeds to argue that no coherent account of such entities, or the moral faculties required to get in touch with such entities so as to derive moral knowledge from them, has been, or can be, presented. There is something 'odd' or 'queer' about such claims, and this queerness shows that such claims are false.<sup>89</sup>

It is obviously fallacious to conclude that a claim is false simply because there is no coherent account of it. Sloane points out that Singer himself avoids that error: 'It must be noted that Singer follows Hare rather than Mackie in concluding that such accounts are *incoherent* rather than *false*'.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, like Mackie, Singer has failed to consider whether the explanation of value that Christianity can offer is plausible in itself, without reference to God:

Nor do his arguments against objectivism (or descriptivism) deal directly with Christian ethics, or any other theistic ethical system, for he first rather casually dismisses theistic belief systems, and then directs his critique against non-theistic objective accounts of morality. Indeed, Christian ethics provides coherent accounts of the existence and nature of an objective moral order that correspond to the available data at least as well as, and I believe better than, its rivals. Thus theistic ethical systems are much more robust than Singer claims and survive his attempts to undermine them. This, in turn, means that those who hold to theistic ethical theories are entitled to do so.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 58.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 64.

Singer himself struggles to maintain his commitment to subjectivity and repeatedly returns to ideas of how people 'should' reason morally that are not easily explained without an appeal to objective values. In a debate published by current affairs magazine *Standpoint*, Biggar points out to Singer that his moral theory provides no objective explanation why a Nazi with a preference for killing Jews should have to consider a Jew's preference to live.<sup>92</sup> Singer's response is:

I'm not sure why I haven't succeeded in doing that. I agree it could be done in the way that you are suggesting if you were to have this independent standard of objective values, which you then need to ground in some way. What I'm suggesting is that it's enough to try to put yourself in the position of both the Jewish person who's going to be killed, and then to put yourself in the position of the Nazi and see whether they are comparable desires.<sup>93</sup>

Singer wishes to allow the moral question to collapse into a logical weighing of the relative strength of the Nazi preference for killing Jews on the one hand, and the Jewish preference for not dying on the other: '... we are talking here about a factual question,' he says. 'It's not a question of the value of life, it's a question about the strength of the preference for going on living.' But having first described what Nazis *do* want (they want to kill Jews) he has gone on to define what they *ought* to want (they ought to want to put themselves in a Jew's position and recognise that his preference to live is stronger than theirs is to kill). Biggar points out that Singer's response here is an 'inadvertent affirmation of some kind of objective morality.'<sup>94</sup>

In the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*, Singer hints that he is planning to

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<sup>92</sup>Daniel Johnson, 'Putting A Value On Human And Animal Life', <<http://standpointmag.co.uk/dialogue-julyaugust11-putting-a-value-on-human-life-peter-singer-nigel-biggar-euthanasia-genocide-infanticide-animal-rights-huma#comment-25682>>, accessed 2nd November 2015.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

abandon the extreme subjectivist position of his interpretation of preference utilitarianism. He admits that he is persuaded that a preference might be wrong in some objective sense and concedes a new willingness to ‘... entertain—although not yet [to] embrace—the idea that there are objective ethical truths that are independent of what anyone desires.’<sup>95</sup> Catholic theologian Charles Camosy considers that this is a significant change that must make Singer reconsider some of the fundamentals of his theory. He suggests that Singer has already moved to a position that embraces, at least to an extent, the idea of objective value:

For most of his career, Singer has accepted David Hume’s view that reason, because it applies to means and not ends, cannot move us to moral action. What we happen to desire is neither rational nor irrational, it just is. Indeed, Hume famously said that it was not irrational even to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of one’s finger. But at the Oxford conference [*Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer: Christians and Utilitarians in Dialogue*, McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life, Oxford University, May 2011], Singer revealed that Parfit’s ongoing work has convinced him that this view is mistaken, and that, despite many decades of defending it, he no longer holds Hume’s view of practical reason.<sup>96</sup>

When pressed by Biggar, Singer defends the cautiousness of his new objectivist position, suggesting that the objective basis to ethics is limited to a certain logical relationship, analogous perhaps to the truth that  $2 + 2 = 4$ :

[I] am now prepared to say that some moral claims are objective truths in the same way that we think of mathematical truths as being so. [For example] that agony is bad. That, other things being equal, it’s bad for a being to be in agony ... at least taken on its own the state of being in agony is something to be avoided.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, xiii.

<sup>96</sup>Charles Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian ethics: beyond polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 477.

<sup>97</sup>Johnson, 'Putting A Value On Human And Animal Life', <<http://standpointmag.co.uk/dialogue-julyaugust11-putting-a-value-on-human-life-peter-singer-nigel-biggar-euthanasia-genocide-infanticide-animal-rights-huma#comment-25682>>, accessed 2nd November 2015.

Camosy believes, however, that once any kind of objectivity is given a place in ethical theory it becomes logically difficult to set any limits on what that place should be. If Singer now accepts, however reluctantly, that there exist values which are good in some objective sense, Camosy considers that Singer must concede that defining those objective goods is the only rational basis for an ethical theory:

Such conceptions of a good life (and a good world), at least as they are articulated here, go well beyond what preference utilitarianism can give us. And accepting objective value in these ways might just be the beginning. Singer, I believe, needs to invoke specific and normative metaphysical claims about the flourishing and happiness of human beings in order to rank various preferences, decide which future preferences to permit or create, and in trying to discover what will promote the well-being of distant future people.<sup>98</sup>

Singer retorts that the existence of one objective good does not have to imply the existence of all of them. Perhaps, he suggests, ‘... there is only one objective value: preference maximization from the point of view of the universe’.<sup>99</sup> But Camosy is right that this represents an important inconsistency because Singer’s preference utilitarianism in *Practical Ethics* provides no explanation for that one objective value. The universe is not a meaning-making being and, except metaphorically, has no point of view. It is hard to reconcile the idea that a universe might have some morally compelling ‘preference’ for preference maximisation with a view of preferences that considers them to emerge existentially from the narratives of meaning-making beings.

A focus on subjective preferences might actually undermine the project of ethics itself, because it sets the bar for what ethics should achieve far too low. Cahill shows that the term ‘wrong’, if it is to have any meaning at all, must

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<sup>98</sup>Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian ethics*, 587.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 477.

articulate a concept that is clearly separable from the idea of 'not preferred':

The fact is, what is right is often precisely what we do *not* prefer, hence the pain of moral choice. Sometimes what is right coincides with what we prefer, sometimes it does not, and the task is to figure out in each case how the two are related and how to proceed from there.<sup>100</sup>

If the object of moral action is to satisfy preferences, then the moral agent can achieve it without calling into question whether there is something better that the moral patient *should* prefer, and moral agency becomes an act of blind obedience rather than of moral reasoning. The purpose of ethics, says Cahill, is to consider how relationships between individuals should work in order to enable all individuals to flourish. Human beings should do much more for one another than merely to satisfy one another's preferences: 'What is central to the Christian theological tradition on personhood is not the minimum but the maximum of what persons are and are called to be.'<sup>101</sup>

Sloane points out that there is a sense in which any consequentialist theory is inconsistent with Christian theology, because it accords moral value only to the outcome of moral action. A consequentialist theory whose desirable outcome is global maximisation of preferences, must reject *ex hypothesi* some of the sources for moral value that Christianity would seek to retain, such as duty, intuitions, moral character, and the way in which individuals relate to one another:

[Singer's preference utilitarianism] is an impoverished, reductionistic theory. ... Singer claims that ethics can be reduced to consequentialist analysis. ... there is nothing about an action that is inherently right or wrong, even when our moral intuitions say there is: there is no true *deontological* component to ethics. Nor does the character of the one performing the action have any ethical status, except in that it may influence this action, or future actions: there is no true *aretaic* component

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<sup>100</sup>Krantz, *Refuting Peter Singer's ethical theory*, 40.

<sup>101</sup>Cahill, 'Moral reason, community belonging, and global justice', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 76.

to ethics... his theory fails to consider the essentially relational character of human, indeed all personal, life.<sup>102</sup>

Theologian John Perry, however, suggests that, since preference utilitarianism and Christian teleology are both ultimately directed at improving the lives of persons, there are important points of contact. 'God', he says, 'is a kind of consequentialist'.<sup>103</sup> Far from being antithetical to theological accounts of ethics, consequentialism originated as an articulation of the Christian focus on improving people's well-being:

Utilitarianism was originally a Christian endeavour, and its earliest systematic defences were works of moral theology. William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* remained standard fare on university reading lists for many years, while Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published the same decade, was virtually unknown. In less than a century, however, theological utilitarianism had been entirely eclipsed. John Stuart Mill, who took his cue from Bentham rather than Paley, offered a version of the theory associated with deep scepticism towards religion, and whose practical conclusions were regarded as anti-Christian.<sup>104</sup>

Perry accordingly locates Singer's utilitarian theory in a group of teleological consequentialist theories: 'In technical terms, this means Singer and I both endorse teleological theories of ethics, which might (in the widest possible sense) both be labelled consequentialist.'<sup>105</sup>

If ends are to be a source for moral value in correct moral action, they need to be carefully and correctly defined. Any theory directed at improving the lives of persons needs to start with a plausible concept of what constitutes that improvement. On Perry's view, the principal difference between Singer and Christian theology is the way in which they conceive an improvement in the

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<sup>102</sup>Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 68.

<sup>103</sup>John Perry, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?', in John Perry (ed.), *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 72.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

quality of an individual's existence. Singer's error, according to Perry, is that in preference satisfaction his teleological endeavour is directed towards a representation of human well-being that is too restricted.

Part of the aim of classical utilitarianism was to find a way of expressing the benefit of correct moral action in terms that were equally relevant to everyone for whom the moral agent should be concerned. In classical utilitarianism, the only intrinsic 'good' for human (and animals) is deemed to be pleasure. Pleasure and suffering are seen to be antithetical to one another so that they can, in effect, cancel each other out in an arithmetical calculation of happiness sometimes called the utilitarian, or felicific, calculus. Happiness is considered to be identical with pleasure or the absence of suffering.

The architects of classical utilitarian consequentialism are British philosophers Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick. They agree that the object of moral action should be to maximise the amount of happiness by maximising pleasure and/or by minimising suffering. Bentham considers that all suffering and all pleasures are of equal value, irrespective of the nature of the experiences themselves or of the beings who have them. The most important virtue of an ethical theory, he argued, is that it is universal. A theory whose objective is to avoid suffering must apply in the same way to every being who is capable of suffering, irrespective even of species:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognised that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond

comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? Nor Can they talk ? but, Can they suffer ? <sup>106</sup>

The pleasure or suffering of each individual person, including the agent herself, is as important as that of every other person: ‘Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one’.<sup>107</sup> Bentham recognises that enjoying poetry might be seen by society as a nobler way of attaining pleasure than enjoyment of board games but insists that the distinction is of no moral relevance.

Mill, on the other hand, distinguishes between ‘high’ and ‘low’ pleasures. It is, says Mill, the nature of some beings to understand higher pleasures than others. That difference is morally relevant because an understanding of higher pleasures enriches lives even when the pleasures themselves are not satisfied:

It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly-endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But ... It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.<sup>108</sup>

Where Bentham is constitutionally suspicious of the motives of individuals, Mill believes that some people are capable of deriving pleasure from the pleasure of others and rejects Bentham’s stern attempt to eradicate self-interest from his moral theory.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Jeremy Bentham, *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 311.

<sup>107</sup>Marco E.L. Guidi, “‘Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one’”.The Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests from Bentham to Pigou’, *Revue d’études benthamiennes* 14 (2008), 40–69.

<sup>108</sup>John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1879), 25–30.

<sup>109</sup>While applauding the principles underlying Bentham’s moral theory, Mill had little liking for Bentham himself, believing the latter lacked compassion. Furthermore, according to Mill, Bentham neither had insight into the fact that he lacked compassion nor recognised that others possessed it, failing to recognise the ‘... incompleteness of his own mind as a representative

The claim that pleasure can improve the quality of an individual's existence, or that suffering can detract from it, is uncontentious. What is radical about the utilitarian claim is that the two exist only as the antithesis of one another, and that ultimately there is no need to look beyond pleasure or suffering to describe the quality of an individual's existence, because that quality can always be expressed in terms of the presence of pleasure or its corollary the absence of suffering.

It is, however, to Henry Sidgwick that Singer appeals when he sets out what he understands to be the objective of ethics in 2011.<sup>110</sup> Sidgwick, like Mill,

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of universal human nature. In many of the most natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and the faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination.' (Mill, J.S. (1859), *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical and Historical*, 2 vols. (1; London: John W. Parker and Son), 353). That deficiency led Bentham, in Mill's view, to be too cynical in his stark representation of individual motivation as irredeemably selfish. It is highly likely that Bentham suffered from a disorder on the autistic spectrum which was unrecognised at the time but would later be called Asperger's Syndrome (Lucas, P. and Sheeran, A. (2006), 'Asperger's Syndrome and the Eccentricity and Genius of Jeremy Bentham', *Journal of Bentham Studies*, 8, 1-37.) Individuals with Asperger's have a normal or sometimes unusually acute faculty for logic. They find it difficult, however, to comprehend anything that is not observable in itself or else can be directly deduced from what is observed. Individuals with Asperger's understand the meaning of the words contained in a phrase that is said to them, for example, but cannot infer anything from the tone in which it is said or the facial expression which accompanies it. A philosophy such as Bentham's extreme form of utilitarianism, that isolates happiness as an abstraction from the existence of actual people, is exactly what one would expect from someone with Asperger's who wanted good things for people but found people themselves an impenetrable mystery.

<sup>110</sup>'...looking at things ethically is a way of transcending our inward-looking concerns and identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view possible—with, as Sidgwick put it, 'the point of view of the universe.' Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 293. It is also partly to Sidgwick that Singer latterly ascribes his move from preference to hedonistic utilitarianism (Massimo Pigliucci, 'RS97 – Peter Singer on Being a Utilitarian in the Real World', <<http://rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs97-peter-singer-on-being-a-utilitarian-in-the-real-world.html>>, accessed 21 January 2019. The changes occurred while he was collaborating with Polish utilitarian philosopher Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek in a 2014 book examining the impact of Henry Sidgwick on modern ethics (Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford Scholarship Online; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014b). Even in the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*, however, Singer is already having second thoughts about whether preference utilitarianism can offer a complete account of value: 'The sections of the [2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*] that have left me in the greatest philosophical uncertainty are those parts of Chapters 4 and 5 that discuss whether there is some sense in which bringing into existence a new being—whether a human being or a nonhuman animal—can compensate for the death of a similar being who has been killed. ... In revising these sections for this edition, I have found myself unable to maintain with

believes that individuals can take pleasure from the pleasure of others.<sup>111</sup> In *Methods of Ethics*, he posits a hypothetical impartial observer who can consider humankind from outside but, anxious to avoid confusion with the concept of a personal God, he refers carefully to 'the point of view of the Universe'.<sup>112</sup> Sidgwick distances himself from Bentham's premiss that pleasure itself is the only intrinsic good. Rather, he says, it is the '... *desirable consciousness* which we must regard as ultimate good'.<sup>113</sup> In introducing the importance of awareness, Sidgwick's universalistic hedonism affirms the importance to ethical deliberation of actual beings who are aware of what they would lose as a result of wrong moral action.

The classical utilitarian identification of happiness with pleasure and/or the absence of suffering stands in marked contrast with 'happiness' when it is used to represent an approximate translation of what Aristotle means by eudaimonia:

... the masses and sophisticated people call it happiness, understanding being happy as equivalent to living well and acting well [but] they disagree about substantive conceptions of happiness, the masses giving an account which differs from that of the philosophers. For the masses

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any confidence that the position I took in the previous edition—based solely on preference utilitarianism—offers a satisfactory answer to these quandaries. That reconsideration of my earlier position is the most significant philosophical change to this edition.' (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. x.). Over the years that followed, Singer continued to re-evaluate his position and now aligns himself with Sidgwick's universalistic hedonism.

<sup>111</sup>... a Universalistic Hedonist may reasonably hold that his own happiness is that portion of the universal happiness which it is most in his power to promote, and which therefore is most especially entrusted to his charge. And the practical blending of the two systems [Self-interest and Utilitarianism] is sure to go beyond their theoretical coincidence ... Few men are so completely selfish, whatever their theory of morals may be, as not occasionally to promote the happiness of others from natural sympathetic impulse unsupported by Epicurean calculation.' Henry Sidgwick, *The complete works and select correspondence of Henry Sidgwick* (Sidgwick, complete works and select correspondence; Charlottesville, Va.: InteLex Corporation, 1996), 84.

<sup>112</sup>Henry Sidgwick, *The methods of ethics* (7th edn.; London: Macmillan, 1907), 382. Elsewhere, Sidgwick comments: 'If there exist a personal Creator of the universe who is infinitely intelligent and powerful, he cannot be infinitely good: if, on the other hand, he be infinite in goodness, then he must be lamentably finite in power or in intelligence. By this two-edged difficulty, Theology has ever been foiled.' Sidgwick, *The complete works and select correspondence of Henry Sidgwick*, 405.

<sup>113</sup>Sidgwick, *The complete works and select correspondence of Henry Sidgwick*, 397. My italics.

think it is something straightforward and obvious, like pleasure, wealth, or honour, some thinking it to be one thing, others another.<sup>114</sup>

Singer's interpretation of preference utilitarianism, as we have seen, is predicated on the idea that, while pleasure or the absence of suffering are the only intrinsic goods for a being who is merely sentient, it is having her preferences satisfied that augments the quality of a self-aware being's existence. While the outcome that he chooses is different from those of the classical utilitarians, Singer's claim, like theirs, is that the quality of any being's existence can ultimately be expressed in a single 'lowest common denominator'.

Perry argues that such a conception of human goods is too meagre, and that an exclusive appeal to preference satisfaction in the calculus perpetuates two fundamental errors of classical utilitarianism:

First, it is committed to a particular vision of rationality as the only possible mode by which ethics can proceed: the deductive certainty of mathematics or geometry, in which all questions have a unique, necessary, demonstrable answer. Second, the classical utilitarians are interested in only one way of evaluating the good: that is, by rendering all expressions of the moral good commensurable and measurable on a single scale.<sup>115</sup>

Humans are complex and it seems unlikely that improvements in the quality of human existence can be reduced to a single term in the way that utilitarians wish to do. Singer himself admits that having preferences satisfied is not the only way in which the quality of humans' life can be improved: 'People have very strong preferences for winning lotteries, although researchers have shown that those who win major lotteries are not, once the initial elation has passed,

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<sup>114</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, 4–5 (1095a).

<sup>115</sup>Perry, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 3.

significantly happier than they were before.’<sup>116</sup> A Thomist-Aristotelian objection to Singer proposes that eudaimonia is a more realistic representation of the quality of human existence: ‘[Unlike Singer’s], my ‘consequentialism’,’ Perry goes on, ‘is eudaimonist not utilitarian.’<sup>117</sup>

Because it is complex and aspirational, eudaimonia is an inconvenient outcome which is hard to measure. But the fact that it can be difficult to know what will actually help someone to flourish does not logically lead to the conclusion that it is better to measure something else that might or might not do so. Nor does the fact that an outcome is easily knowable imply that it is an important or relevant outcome. Height is easier to measure than kindness, but obviously that does not make height more morally relevant than kindness. There is a risk that, because it is easily established, preference satisfaction assumes monist importance as the only relevant indication of well-being, and so distracts attention from other ways in which a person’s existence might be made better. Perry uses the illustration of an aesthetic deliberation of the comparative merit of several paintings. They cannot be meaningfully evaluated on monist grounds:

How much simpler it would be to assert a single value, like age or price, to make all aesthetic values commensurable! But aesthetic judgement is not the sort of deliberation for which mathematical precision is appropriate. Singer is unwilling to pursue this option because he is so committed to a single, monist first base for ethics. But *that* preference is presumed rather than argued for.<sup>118</sup>

Perry illustrates the point using a thought experiment by Jonathan Haidt. In the

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<sup>116</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 14. There are even some preferences whose satisfaction would usually result in a net increase in an individual’s suffering, such as the preference of the addict for more heroin.

<sup>117</sup>Perry, ‘Where did utilitarianism come from?’, in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 12.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 32. Author’s original italics.

experiment, a biologist discovers that of the four flavour receptors on the tongue, it is sweetness that causes the strongest pleasure response in the brain. He therefore imagines that opening a restaurant called 'The True Taste', which serves only sweet things, must be the best way to improve the quality of humans' existence:

This is not a real restaurant, of course. It is a metaphor for how ethics has gone badly wrong in the dominant moral theories of the past two centuries. Bentham runs The Utilitarian Grill, which serves only sweets, and Kant has The Deontological Diner, where everything is salty; at each, there is only one flavour on the menu.<sup>119</sup>

The metaphor illustrates powerfully an important central fallacy in Singer's preference utilitarianism. The fact that someone enjoys sweetness more than any other single flavour does not at all imply that, in order to maximise her enjoyment, one should prepare a meal that consists only of sweetness. For an individual to enjoy a meal she will want more than one flavour. She might, paradoxically, derive smaller enjoyment from a meal that consisted only in her favourite flavour than she would from one that included other flavours that she did not like as much.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, although it is true that well-being is often improved by having one's preferences satisfied, it does not at all follow that satisfying more and more preferences will eventually be enough to achieve

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 27. Quoting from Jonathan Haidt, *The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion* (London: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>120</sup>Theologian Derek Jeffreys goes further and suggests that suffering itself can be a good thing because of its 'redemptive possibilities' and its impact on the 'deepest elements of human dignity' (D. S. Jeffreys, 'Euthanasia and John Paul II's "silent language of profound sharing of affection:" why Christians should care about Peter Singer', *Christ Bioeth*, 7/3 (Dec 2001), 359–78, 360.) Jeffreys cites as his authority John Paul II in his 1984 meditation *Salvifici Doloris* John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II', <[http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1984/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_11021984\\_salvifici-doloris.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html)>, accessed 14 February 2011. Jeffreys is right that Christian eudaimonism can accord meaning, and even value, to suffering that utilitarian theories cannot explain. The risk of such an argument is that it appears to suggest that suffering can be a desirable outcome in itself. In the context of medical ethics that would be a perverse and potentially dangerous conclusion.

maximal well-being. In order to act in a way that will, as a matter of fact, improve the quality of another's existence, it is necessary to attend to much more than just satisfying her preferences. Perry suggests that, however difficult it might be to know or to measure, it is eudaimonia that accurately represents the many dimensions of an extant being and the quality of her existence. Perry has reason on his side. Eudaimonia, by definition, represents perfection of an individual's existence, and so it must represent the only ultimate object of moral behaviour that can be defended logically.

## **2.2.ii Human nature: not only evolution**

In eradicating from moral philosophy any reliance on a religious narrative, Singer finds himself also rejecting the idea that there are certain actions that will benefit human beings solely because they are human. The idea of human nature articulates a distinction between humans and animals that Singer believes has no objective justification:

Adult chimpanzees, dogs, pigs, and members of many other species far surpass the brain-damaged infant in their ability to relate to others, act independently, be self-aware, and any other capacity that could reasonably be said to give value to life. With the most intensive care possible, some severely retarded infants can never achieve the intelligence level of a dog ... The only thing that distinguishes the infant from the animal, in the eyes of those who claim it has a 'right to life,' is that it is, biologically, a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, whereas chimpanzees, dogs, and pigs are not.<sup>121</sup>

There is a sense in which Singer seems to be obviously wrong. A cognitively impaired human infant will not become a chimpanzee, dog or pig just because her IQ is the same. Singer's point, however, is precisely that such a

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<sup>121</sup>Singer, *Animal liberation*, 18. Singer has already indicated that even a normal infant is 'merely conscious' (and therefore mentally equivalent to an animal).

categorisation of humans as a different 'kind of thing' from non-human animals is arbitrary when it comes to moral evaluation. On his consequentialist terms, all the things '... that could reasonably be said to give quality to life' lie on a spectrum. They are not separable into categories by break-points that can be justified objectively. The break-point between human and animal is, according to Singer, a subjective judgement.<sup>122</sup> Singer maintains that damage to the human brain impacts on everything that can reasonably be said to give value to life, so that the difference between a human with severe brain damage and a normal animal with the same capabilities does not explain a difference in their moral status.

Singer further objects that, by linking what is observed about the way in which humans do behave to the way humans *ought* to behave, the concept of human nature risks attributing moral desirability to characteristics that, in reality, merely ensure species survival. Sloane appears to believe that Singer supports an evolutionary explanation for altruism:

Singer is heavily dependent on subjunctives ... in outlining the evolutionary development of altruism (and hence the starting point for ethical systems). However he then treats such suppositions as a sufficient factual basis for his further theorising, thus hiding the essentially hypothetical nature of his case.<sup>123</sup>

Sloane's assumption that Singer supports an evolutionary account is understandable, because the way in which Singer first sets out the grounds for preference utilitarianism in *Practical Ethics* suggests he is locating its origins in

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<sup>122</sup>As is the difference between child and adult human (see Ronald M. Green, 'Stem Cell Research: A Target Article Collection Part III - Determining Moral Status', *American journal of bioethics*, 2/1 (2002), 20.: '... biology usually offers not decisive events but only continuous processes of development ... in making status determinations we do not so much identify a point on a developmental continuum where moral respect should be accorded as choose that point.'

<sup>123</sup>Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 62 (footnote).

prehistory:

Now, imagine that I am one of a group of people who live by gathering food from the forest in which we live. When I am alone, I find a particularly good fruit tree and face the choice of whether to eat all the fruit myself or to share it with others. Imagine, too, that I am deciding in a complete ethical vacuum and that I know nothing of any ethical considerations—I am, we might say, in a pre-ethical stage of thinking. How would I make up my mind?<sup>124</sup>

But Singer is only using prehistory as a thought experiment with which to demonstrate his theory. He is not claiming that it is evolution which gives that theory its authority. That would be inconsistent; the main achievement of the theory of evolution is that it explains the differences between species and, given that Singer's main purpose is to suggest that those differences are not of themselves morally relevant, he cannot explain correct moral behaviour in terms of what will confer survival advantage on one species at the expense of others.

Singer is in fact deeply sceptical of any attempt to base moral theory on an evolutionary account of human nature.<sup>125</sup> Evolution, he points out, merely describes the reasons species survive. It has no moral authority:

I reject the view that some ... Christians take, that we can learn what is right or wrong from observing our human nature, or acting in accordance with the 'purpose' for which some parts of our body were 'given' to us. Evolution has no purpose and cannot tell us what is right or wrong.<sup>126</sup>

Singer conflates the Christian concept of human nature with that evolutionary account, and so sees in it a form of naturalistic moral realism which he

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<sup>124</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 45 et seq.

<sup>125</sup>In a 2013 podcast, Singer reiterates his impatience with evolutionary accounts of ethics. Pigliucci, 'RS97 - Peter Singer on Being a Utilitarian in the Real World', <<http://rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs97-peter-singer-on-being-a-utilitarian-in-the-real-world.html>>, accessed 21 January 2019.

<sup>126</sup>Singer, 'Engaging with Christianity', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 174. Singer's apostrophising here underlines once again his indignation with Christian teleology.

rejects.<sup>127</sup>

He is right to reject it. The result of evolution is certainly that some human characteristics persist while others are lost, but the genetically determined component of that persisting nature is limited to what will enable genes to pass to the next generation. In *The Selfish Gene*, biologist Richard Dawkins explains that, as far as evolution is concerned, it is only necessary that the body should be kept alive long enough to procreate:

Sexual reproduction has the effect of mixing and shuffling genes. This means that any one individual body is just a temporary vehicle for a short-lived combination of genes. The combination of genes that is any one individual may be short-lived, but the genes themselves are potentially very long-lived. Their paths constantly cross and re-cross down the generations. One gene may be regarded as a unit that survives through a large number of successive individual bodies.<sup>128</sup>

Evolution uncovers *causes* for some of what can be observed about humans, but it cannot provide *reasons* because in itself evolution has no teleological direction. The fact that certain of her genes have persisted might indeed promote the flourishing of an individual human, but that promotion would be incidental to enabling her to survive long enough to pass the genes down to the next generation. Biology observes that certain characteristics have persisted because they confer a survival advantage on the human race, but evolution does not care about the quality of the existence the members of that race might enjoy, and so can select for characteristics that Singer rightly considers morally

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<sup>127</sup> Although Parfit has persuaded Singer of the truth of moral realism, like Singer he does not believe that the nature of humans is its basis. He goes on to reject the naturalistic claim that it is possible to work out how humans ought to behave on the basis of the way in which they actually do behave: 'According to some empiricists, this fact is some natural fact, such as the fact that, when people multiply 7 by 8, the result of their calculation is nearly always 56. This view misunderstands arithmetic, and the way in which mathematical claims can be true. Nor could logical truths be natural facts about the ways in which people think. In the same way, I believe, normative and natural facts differ too deeply for any form of Normative Naturalism to succeed.' (Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2011), 2060).

<sup>128</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 108.

problematic.

Singer goes further, however, and concludes that, because an evolutionary account of human nature is an untrustworthy starting point for moral reasoning, the Christian idea of human nature must be morally irrelevant.

Perry objects to that conclusion because it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what Christians claim is the relationship between evolution and human goods:

That is too quick. Surely the correct response is not to reject all recourse to human nature. We can certainly accept that humans might have, for evolutionary reasons, inclinations to violence, but we can also see that humans flourish best in the absence of violence. That is, humans are happier when they can live with their families, with sufficient food and without threat of violence from others, with time for productive labour and play and artistic endeavour, able to see their children grow, and to develop friendships—these are all morally relevant features of human nature by which we can see that any evolutionary inclinations to violence are typically obstacles to human well-being.<sup>129</sup>

Singer is wrong to think that, in considering how humans should behave, Christian theology equates human nature with evolution. Despite what Singer indicates, most Christian ethicists do not claim that for a moral agent to know how a human being should be treated it is enough to understand the evolutionary forces that shaped her. Theologian and molecular biologist Neil Messer agrees with Singer that evolution cannot offer a basis for defining human goods:

...all that modern biology can say is that 'what all [living] things seek after' is survival and reproductive success. Biology *qua* biology gives no grounds for equating these ends with the good, in any morally informative sense, or for concluding that they are proper ends. They may be, but biology cannot tell us that they are.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup>Perry, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 25–26.

<sup>130</sup>Neil Messer, *Respecting life: theology and bioethics* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 173–74.

Biggar points out that it flies in the face of the evidence to reduce family affection, for example, to a question of genes alone:

... an adopted son, faced with the choice of saving either his biological father or his socially functional father, is most likely to choose the latter. Genes may be monomaniacal, and some beings may be in their thrall; human beings are, generally, not. So we need to avoid the genetic fallacy in a double sense; in general, things do not reduce to their genesis—they are more than the sum of their original parts; and in particular, human motivation does not reduce to the blind reproductive drive of genes.<sup>131</sup>

Evolution is a tool that God can use in his purpose for Creation, but it does not follow that everything which can be explained by evolution is also justified by it. Theology goes on to offer a more comprehensive explanation. While Singer is right to claim that evolution can blindly favour genes for morally desirable traits such as altruism once they exist, for example, he has no explanation as to why such genes should appear in the first place. Moral order, Sloane suggests, offers such an explanation:

While he demonstrates its survival value once established in a particular biological community, he cannot explain how it could gain the necessary foothold in the face of the short-term value of selfish behaviour. It seems to me that the existence of an objective moral order, with which such behaviour coheres, provides the required explanation. Moral order is comprised of [sic] generic and teleologically ordered relationships between entities. These objective patterns of relationships determine the moral status of an agent's character, actions and consequences. If there is such a moral order the development of altruistic behaviour and its generic correlatives can be seen as an expression of objective moral

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<sup>131</sup>Nigel Biggar, 'Evolutionary Biology, 'Enlightened' Anthropological Narratives, and Social Morality: A View from Christian Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 26/2 (2013), 152–57, 154. In *The Selfish Gene*, biologist Richard Dawkins argues that because altruism is necessary for gene survival, altruism itself must be genetically determined. He goes further and suggests that the extent of altruism in a relationship can be calculated on the basis of how likely it is to preserve the gene for itself: 'It is easy to show that close relatives—kin—have a greater than average chance of sharing genes. It has long been clear that this must be why altruism by parents towards their young is so common. What R. A. Fisher, J. B. S. Haldane, and especially W. D. Hamilton realized, was that the same applies to other close relations—brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, close cousins. If an individual dies in order to save ten close relatives, one copy of the kin-altruism gene may be lost, but a larger number of copies of the same gene is saved.' Richard Dawkins, 'Genesmanship', *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006b) 90–91. It is not clear whether Dawkins is proposing that all altruism is entirely genetically determined, or whether he is arguing that it *should* be; that the objective of bioethics should be to align moral reasoning with natural selection. Neither seems likely.

order, and as corresponding to that order. This then accounts for the emergence of moral behaviour such as altruism, for it corresponds to this moral order, enables the organism to interact meaningfully with it, and contributes to its flourishing.<sup>132</sup>

Human nature is part of that moral order. The Christian claim is that the objective nature of humans is the only logical starting point for a teleological moral theory because it represents the connexion between an individual's characteristics and the sort of actions a moral agent should take because they will improve the quality of her existence. 'By human nature I here mean, what are the features of humans as a species that characteristically contribute to happiness or well-being?' says Perry, going on to remark drily, 'This seems like one of the first questions to tackle if you want to build an ethics on human happiness.'<sup>133</sup>

In Christian theology the term 'human nature' expresses personal value in terms that are broadly consequential, because it is ultimately that nature which determines the actions an agent should take in order to improve the quality of human existence:

Most people want to have sex ... Does this feature of human nature matter morally? One way that it might is that conceptions of human happiness or well-being that involve strict restrictions on sex might be unlikely to succeed. ... Yet we can go beyond even this. Human children, compared to the offspring of other species, require a great deal of socialization, education, and individual attention if they are to flourish. This means that, if their happiness is our goal, the contexts in which they will best be raised will be narrower than if that were not the case. For example, they will need parents with the time, resources, and commitment to provide that attention. As it happens, it is by weighing precisely these considerations

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<sup>132</sup>Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 63. Sloane is in danger of falling into the naturalistic fallacy here. Although he is right that the appearance of 'virtuous' genes in the gene pool *de novo* is consistent with the idea of a universe that is morally ordered, he would be wrong to suggest that it provides evidence of such order. New genes arise by mutation and 'virtuous' mutations would occur, even in a godless universe, as the result of chance. Before it has happened the likelihood of a specific desirable mutation occurring by chance is, of course, extremely low. Once it has happened, however, it is a matter of fact and that prior improbability does not help clarify whether it arose as the result of moral order or merely through chance.

<sup>133</sup>Perry, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 25.

that Thomas Aquinas concludes that sex should be confined to marriage, that monogamy is ideal, and that polygamy is a plausible but lesser alternative (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III:122–4). We might not agree with the details of Aquinas’s conclusion, and I would not expect Singer to share all of them, but surely this *sort* of reasoning is essential if our ethics is intended to promote human happiness.<sup>134</sup>

Perry’s point is about the nature of moral reasoning. He uses the human desire for sex to illustrate that a rational approach to moral reasoning about humans cannot ignore the importance of objective truths about what humans have in common with each other. What we have in common is complex. Moral reasoning about sex cannot stop at the fact that most humans prefer to have it; it must consider that preference for sex in the wider context of everything else that is ‘good for’ humans. That wider context is what Christian ethicists mean by ‘human nature’.

Despite his rejection of the idea, there are several points in Singer’s ethical theory at which he too gives *de facto* prominence to a form of objective human goods that references human nature. In *Practical Ethics* he poses the rhetorical question, ‘Why act morally at all?’ and chooses to answer it by reporting the response of his friend Spira who, as he approached death, explained what had driven him to spend his life working for others:

I guess basically one wants to feel that one’s life has amounted to more than just consuming products and generating garbage. I think that one likes to look back and say that one’s done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look at it from this point of view: what greater motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering?<sup>135</sup>

Spira’s account of the quality of human existence is much more than can be explained by the satisfaction of preferences alone, and it is clear from the

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<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

<sup>135</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 294.

exposition that follows that Singer considers the appeal to broader human goods in Spira's answer to illustrate a fundamental moral principle:

That answer will not provide everyone with overwhelming reasons for acting morally. It cannot be proven that we are all rationally required to reduce pain and suffering and make the world a better place for others. ... those reflective enough to ask why they should act ethically are also those most likely to appreciate the reasons Spira offered for taking the ethical point of view.<sup>136</sup>

Singer also recognises that an account of value that depends wholly on preferences cannot explain why the moral agent should concern herself with the needs of people who do not yet exist:

... to take into account the interests of merely possible future beings—as we can scarcely avoid doing in some scenarios—goes beyond the original minimalist idea of preference utilitarianism based on universalizing our own preferences. It may be based on a judgment that there is value in certain kinds of lives. We could try to distinguish two kinds of value: preference-dependent value, which depends on the existence of beings with preferences and is tied to the preferences of those specific beings, and value that is independent of preferences.<sup>137</sup>

Unfortunately, neither preference-dependent nor preference-independent values can explain why a universe with people in it is better than one without.

Singer recognises that both the sorts of value he has identified leave open the possibility that it would be better if the universe contained no human beings at all:

There is, however, one serious objection to this account of preferences: if the creation of each preference is a debit that is cancelled only when the desire is satisfied, it would follow that it is wrong, other things being equal, to bring into existence a child who will on the whole be very happy and will be able to satisfy nearly all, but not quite all, of her preferences. Because everyone has some unsatisfied desires, even the best life anyone can realistically hope to lead is going to leave a small debit in the ledger. The conclusion to be drawn is that it would have been better if none of us had

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<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 295.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 116. Anticipating, perhaps, his subsequent move away from preference utilitarianism, Singer goes on to set out the hedonistic utilitarian position that pain and pleasure represent such preference-independent values: 'Henry Sidgwick, the nineteenth-century utilitarian, said that if we reflect carefully, we will see that the only thing that is intrinsically or ultimately good—good for its own sake—is a form of consciousness, or state of mind, that we regard as desirable.'

been born !<sup>138</sup>

Singer intuitively feels this is wrong, but Camosy suggests Singer can find no mechanism in his ethical theory to account for that wrongness:

[Singer] points out that we don't consider it a good thing to deliberately make ourselves thirsty simply because we know that there is sufficient water to satisfy our preference to no longer be thirsty [sic], and that this implies the creation and satisfaction of preferences is neither good nor bad. And in response to those who claim that, from a preference utilitarian perspective, the world would be better off if no future people existed at all, Singer says that it 'seems obvious' that a peopled universe is better than one without people.<sup>139</sup>

Singer appeals to something objective and fundamental that he finds difficult to explain in terms other than intuition: '... at this point we are dealing with such basic values that it is difficult to find an argument that would persuade someone who denies this'.<sup>140</sup> He supports his intuition with a fundamental account of what human well-being might look like that Aquinas would recognise and endorse as eudaimonic:

They lead rich and full lives, experiencing the joys of love and friendship, of fulfilling and meaningful work, and of bringing up children. They seek knowledge, successfully adding to their understanding of themselves and the universe they inhabit. They respond to the beauties of nature, cherish the forests and animals that pre-date their own existence, and create literature and music that is on a par with the works of Shakespeare and Mozart. They manage to prevent or relieve many forms of suffering, but they are mortal and are not able to satisfy all their desires.<sup>141</sup>

Singer has set out an account here of the outcome towards which moral action should be directed and it is clearly much more than the mere satisfaction of preferences. He even seems to accommodate the idea that the experience of desires that cannot be satisfied can be part of a 'rich, full life'. As Camosy points

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 114.

<sup>139</sup>Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian ethics*.

<sup>140</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 117.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 116.

out: ‘If one didn’t know from which book they were reading, one could be excused if they confused this passage for a list of ‘basic goods’ written by a Christian natural-law ethicist ...’<sup>142</sup>

Despite Singer’s apparent commitment to preference utilitarianism in the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*, his own account represents the nature of what it is to be human in a much broader way than the sum total of preferences that can be satisfied.

### **2.2.iii Transcendence: too little and too much**

Like Bentham, Singer sees the primary task of ethics to be universalising. He affirms the concept of agent neutrality, calling it the principle of impartiality, or ‘equal consideration of interests’.<sup>143</sup> The moral values that preference satisfaction expresses, however, are not disciplined by reference to any external yardstick such as logic, concern for others or even self-interest. One consequence is that it becomes difficult to explain why a moral agent should choose to concern herself with the preferences of others in the first place. Singer recognises that there is no obvious logical reason why an agent should look beyond her own well-being: ‘I agreed with Sidgwick and Parfit that there is

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<sup>142</sup>Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian ethics*, 620. Cahill points out that elsewhere in his writing, too, Singer repeatedly returns to much larger themes of human flourishing than are technically encompassed in his moral theory: ‘Another rich example of a worthy human life is found in Singer’s biography of his grandfather, David Oppenheim, a victim of the Holocaust. Oppenheim endorsed ten criteria of a worthwhile life taken from Solon, “the lawgiver of Athens”. They centred on goods contingent on material conditions, luck, and social status, such as one’s country’s peaceful prosperity, a comfortable income, well-behaved children, a quick death before extreme old age, funeral honours, and commemoration by fellow citizens. But Singer revealingly adds two more to commemorate the life of his grandfather: close and loving personal relationships and “understanding, defending, and passing on to others the highest and most humane ideas of wisdom, goodness, and beauty that can be gathered from thousands of years of human literature, philosophy, and art”’ Cahill, ‘Moral reason, community belonging, and global justice’, in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 295–96.

<sup>143</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 22.

nothing irrational about being concerned with the quality of one's own existence in a way that one is not concerned with the quality of existence of other individuals.<sup>144</sup>

For utilitarian consequentialism to work at all as a universalising moral theory, however, something must root the pleasure of each individual agent in the task of seeking the pleasure of other persons. If any form of utilitarianism is to provide a coherent account of ethics, it must have a mechanism for explaining the pleasure an individual person should take in the pleasure (or avoidance of suffering) of others.

Sloane suggests that Singer cannot simultaneously argue both that moral reasoning is individual and that it can be universalised. To do so, he argues, would abstract moral reasoning from the existence of actual beings living in relation to one another, which is inconsistent with Singer's view that all reason is a human construct:

Third, while [Singer] uses a notion of reason and its deliverances that is clearly community transcendent, even hypostasised, he asserts that reason is a human product, developed in, by and for communities. How, then, can it transcend space and time in the way he describes?<sup>145</sup>

Sloane answers that theism anchors the nature of moral reasoning in the objective nature of a specific reasoning being:

One way it could do so would be if there were a being who transcends space and time in the requisite manner and who engages in such a practice. For if, as Singer correctly acknowledges, reason is essentially a practice in which persons engage, then it can only transcend the particularities of persons and their communities in the way Singer's argument requires if it is 'transcendentally' practiced. There is, then, no transcendent entity Reason, but only persons who engage in the practice (or practices) of reasoning.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 293.

<sup>145</sup>Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 64.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid.

Theologian John Hare argues that a moral requirement to transcend one's own interests is hard to explain without some appeal to a 'tradition of moral faith'.<sup>147</sup> He suggests a faith narrative is important to the project of ethics. Without it, says Hare, 'I may magnify the intensity of my own preferences, so that they outweigh the preferences of others in the moral calculus; or I may cloak self-interest in the disguise of normative principles with the appearance of objectivity.'<sup>148</sup> Hare contrasts Singer's emphatic rejection of Christian values with the views of earlier utilitarian consequentialists, who accorded an important role for theism in their theories in ensuring that an agent's duties and happiness are served in the same action:

Sidgwick ... concedes that "the inseparable connection between Utilitarian duty and the greatest happiness of the individual who conforms to it cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated on empirical grounds". He ends by going back to the history of utilitarianism before Bentham to the theistic positions of William Paley and others who thought that God acts for the universal good, commands us to do the same, and brings about the consistency of our happiness with our duty. This hypothesis produces a reconciliation of duty and self-interest and thus avoids "a fundamental contradiction in one chief department of our thought".<sup>149</sup>

Mill, too, recognises the reliance of utilitarian consequentialism on some narrative that links the quality of an individual moral agent's existence with that of others. Despite his own religious scepticism, Mill considered that narrative to be Christianity's contribution to moral reasoning: 'The place of religion', he says, 'is to reassure that my interests are aligned with others'.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup>John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 246.

<sup>148</sup>John E. Hare, *The moral gap: Kantian ethics, human limits, and God's assistance* (Oxford studies in theological ethics; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 50.

<sup>149</sup>Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, 245–46. Quotations are from Henry Sidgwick, *The methods of ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1874).

<sup>150</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 5:36.

Singer's alternative to the narrative of transcendence offered by faith traditions is the 'escalator of reason'. He argues that at the outset of moral reasoning there are two choices a moral agent can make; stay off the 'escalator of reason' and remain self-interested, or else choose to get on and be taken to a place where logic alone tells us how far our concern for others should extend. According to Singer, an agent might rationally choose not to step onto the escalator towards transcendence at all but, if she decides to do so, logic bears her relentlessly to the top, and she cannot choose to disembark half-way up.

Reason, he goes on, then requires that we consider the preferences of all beings capable of having them. The reasoning that explains self-interest must logically extend to include considering the preferences of others to the extent that they are capable of holding such preferences:

Reason's capacity to take us where we did not expect to go could also lead to a curious diversion from what one might expect to be the straight line of evolution. We have evolved a capacity to reason because it helps us to survive and reproduce. But if reason is an escalator, then although the first part of the journey may help us to survive and reproduce, we may go further than we needed to go for this purpose alone. We may even end up somewhere that creates tension with other aspects of our nature.<sup>151</sup>

Singer's target here, again, is the belief that humans are entitled to special treatment simply because they are human. When humans have transcended self-interest at all, they have attended only to the pleasure of other humans. The escalator of reason explains the importance of considering the well-being of members of other species. It widens the circle of an agent's concern so that it becomes clear that a rational moral agent should attend to the well-being of all beings capable of experiencing it, irrespective of species: 'What the principle

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<sup>151</sup>Singer, *How are we to live?: Ethics in an age of self-interest*, 226.

[of equal consideration of interests] really amounts to is: an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be'.<sup>152</sup> The result of the escalator of reason is a 'boundary shift' so that the community of those whose preferences should count includes some animals on the grounds that they can hold interests, and, incidentally, excludes some humans on the grounds that they cannot.

The escalator of reason provides a rationale for considering the quality of others' existence that makes no appeal to non-utilitarian values. According to Hare, however, the device introduces an inconsistency into Singer's theory, because the only limit it places on preferences is what sort of being holds them. It takes no account of the nature of the preferences themselves. Singer's preference utilitarianism cannot accommodate, for example, the possibility that someone's preferences might be shaped by something that conflicts with reason, such as a fanatical commitment to a certain set of ideals. John Hare suggests that in that respect Singer importantly misrepresents the basis of Richard Hare's original articulation of preference utilitarianism:

Singer takes [Richard] Hare to be committed to the claim that rival ideals are simply preferences to be weighed against the preferences of others in order to determine what maximises preference satisfaction ... Hare thinks of ideals as preferences, but he thinks of them as a particular kind of preference, and this distinction between kinds of preferences is one that Singer ignores. What Hare says is that he would like to have a comprehensive theory of preferences that could accommodate ideals, but *he does not yet have one* ... Hare's utilitarianism is thus incomplete. By his own acknowledgement, it is not a theory covering the whole of moral thinking. Singer's utilitarianism, on the other hand, is advertised as complete.<sup>153</sup>

Singer has shown that it can be irrational for an individual to weigh his own interests more than those of others. Unlike Singer, John Hare suggests,

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<sup>152</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 20.

<sup>153</sup>Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, 244. Author's original italics.

Richard Hare recognised that the opposite extreme is also logically possible. An individual might feel such commitment to an ideal that in developing his preference he fails to consider his own well-being at all.<sup>154</sup> Richard Hare uses as an example the Nazi soldier who, discovering himself to be half Jewish, turns himself in to the Nazi authorities, knowing he will be killed.<sup>155</sup> The soldier's preference is satisfied, but only at the cost of his own extinction in the name of an ideal. No actual person does, or could, benefit from his choice. In that case, the utilitarian chain of logic breaks down. Such fanaticism is, in effect, an 'overdose' of transcendence.

Christian moral theories rooted in human goods exclude such pointless subordination of one's own interests from the category of right moral action, because they are actions that fail to promote flourishing. Eudaimonistic teleology provides a much stronger account of altruism and transcendence and avoids the weakness that the Hares, *père et fils*, identified in preference utilitarianism considered as a comprehensive moral theory. On the Christian eudaimonistic view I am defending, transcendence looks to the flourishing of actual persons, and so is disciplined by the created nature of persons.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, eudaimonistic teleology anchors the flourishing of the moral agent in the flourishing of those she cares for, and so links the well-being of moral agent to the well-being of others. Christian theological ethics therefore locates individual flourishing in ideas of community flourishing:

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<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 225–26.

<sup>155</sup>Hare, *Freedom and Reason*.

<sup>156</sup>Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann puts it this way: 'Nature sets no obligatory limits ... But the limits religion sets are what would be natural limits if there were natural limits for persons. Nature has no numinous influence on men and women as nature, only as God's creation.' Robert Spaemann, *Persons: the Difference Between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford studies in theological ethics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98.

Singer and Catholics disagree about how to define justice, quality, and personhood not only because they find different arguments intellectually cogent and persuasive, but because they are situated in different communities and traditions of thought and practice. I propose further that the main ethical contribution of Christianity derives from the fact that it is not only a set of beliefs or teachings but more fundamentally a way of life in relation to God and neighbours. Its distinctive moral power is to disclose, emphasize, and sensitize human beings to the worth, suffering, and happiness of all people; and, in Christ and the Spirit, to manifest, inspire, enable, and support compassionate action that begins in the Church and expands beyond.<sup>157</sup>

In his famous watch metaphor, Christian proto-utilitarian William Paley makes clear that correct functioning of each individual component of the watch cannot be isolated from the way in which the watch as a whole is intended to function by its maker:

We ... observe a flexible chain (artificially wrought for the sake of flexure) communicating the action of the spring from the box to the fusee. We then find a series of wheels, the teeth of which catch in, and apply to, each other, conducting the motion from the fusee to the balance, and from the balance to the pointer, and, at the same time, by the size and shape of those wheels, so regulating that motion as to terminate in causing an index, by an equable and measured progression, to pass over a given space in a given time. ... the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.<sup>158</sup>

Paley's analogy illustrates Christian eudaimonistic teleology. How well each component can be said to be working depends absolutely on its function in the whole mechanism. That function expresses the purpose for which a component was made.

According to Paley, the only rational objective yardstick for an individual's moral action is the extent to which it will make Creation work well. Creation includes not only the person at whom moral action is directed, but

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<sup>157</sup>Cahill, 'Moral reason, community belonging, and global justice', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 71.

<sup>158</sup>William Paley et al., *Paley's Natural theology* (London: Charles Knight, 1836), 3–4.

everyone and everything else in Creation, including the agent herself. The flourishing of each individual can be promoted in some objective sense by the way they live with, and care for, other beings with whom they share Creation.

### **2.3 Singer on infanticide**

A glance at the table of contents in the most recent edition of *Practical Ethics* is enough to indicate the position Peter Singer intends to take on infanticide.<sup>159</sup> The title of Chapter 6 –‘Taking life: the embryo and fetus’–stands in deliberate contrast with that of Chapter 7 (‘Taking life: humans’). Singer makes it clear from the outset that he considers the moral status of infants to be quite different from that of adults:

In the next chapter, however, we shall consider another possibility: that there should be at least some circumstances in which a full legal right to life comes into force, not at birth, but only a short time after birth—perhaps a month. This would provide the ample safety margin mentioned previously.<sup>160</sup>

In society’s objection to infanticide, Singer sees further evidence of Christianity’s incorrigible anthropocentrism:

If these conclusions seem too shocking to take seriously, it may be worth remembering that our present absolute protection of the lives of infants is a distinctively Christian attitude rather than a universal ethical value. Infanticide has been practised in societies ranging geographically from Tahiti to Greenland and varying in culture from nomadic Australian aborigines to the sophisticated urban communities of ancient Greece or mandarin China or Japan before the late nineteenth century. In some of these societies, infanticide was not merely permitted but, in certain circumstances, deemed morally obligatory. Not to kill a deformed or sickly infant was often regarded as wrong, and infanticide was probably the first, and in several societies the only, form of population control.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup>There have been editions of *Practical Ethics* in 1979, 1993 and 2011. Although there are ways in which Singer’s general theory evolves over the course of the three editions, none of them materially affects the logic of his defence of infanticide.

<sup>160</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 153.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid.

Singer suggests that it is we in the modern West who have departed from what could be considered conventional morality here:

... it is not easy to feel confident that we are more civilized than the best Greek and Roman moralists, nor than the highly sophisticated civilizations of China and Japan. In ancient Greece, it was not just the Spartans who exposed their infants on hillsides: both Plato and Aristotle recommended the killing of deformed infants.<sup>162</sup>

The only reason society has traditionally accorded comparable value to the life of the infant and that of the adult, Singer suggests, is that both are human. That, he argues, is both arbitrary and unkind. The idea that human life has a special value masquerades as a doctrine that values members of the species *Homo sapiens*. In reality, the stigmatisation of infanticide is a noxious dogma that deprives our species of a 'natural and humane' solution to the problem of unwanted babies:

Seneca, whose compassionate moral sense strikes the modern reader (or me, anyway) as superior to that of the early and mediaeval Christian writers, also thought infanticide the natural and humane solution to the problem posed by sick and deformed babies. The change in Western attitudes to infanticide since Roman times is, like the doctrine of the sanctity of human life of which it is a part, a product of Christianity. Perhaps it is now possible to think about these issues without assuming the Christian moral framework that has, for so long, prevented any fundamental reassessment.<sup>163</sup>

It is, he suggests, irrational and wrong that infanticide has come to be seen as morally equivalent to murder. Singer recommends a return to a pre-Christian ethical paradigm that allowed parents to extinguish the life of an unwanted infant:

If we go back to the origins of Western civilization, to Greek or Roman times, we find that membership of *Homo sapiens* was not sufficient to guarantee that one's life would be protected ... even among the Greeks and Romans themselves, infants had no automatic right to life. Greeks

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<sup>162</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., 153.

and Romans killed deformed or weak infants by exposing them to the elements on a hilltop. Plato and Aristotle thought that the state should enforce the killing of deformed infants.<sup>164</sup>

The message from Singer is that in this respect the ancient Greeks and Romans had got it right, and that Christianity has perpetrated and continues to seek to perpetuate an injustice by introducing a basis for valuing life that is essentially arbitrary. Singer considers it is time to consider an account of bioethics from which Christianity's influence—pernicious in the unique place that it accords to humans in Creation—has been purged. It might be reasonable for a society to choose to restrain its members from killing babies, Singer acknowledges, but that choice should not be taken to imply anything about the inherent value of the infant herself:

... these restrictions should owe more to the effects of infanticide on others than to the intrinsic wrongness of killing an infant. Obviously, in most cases, to kill an infant is to inflict a terrible loss on those who love and cherish the child.<sup>165</sup>

Any limitation society decides to impose on taking the life of an infant should be justifiable on the grounds of the value others choose to accord the infant, and the impact such a killing would have on them as a result of that evaluation.

Singer bases his preference utilitarian defence of that view on what he understands to be an infant's cognitive abilities, and what that implies about her capacity to have interests or preferences. His premiss is that an infant cannot give value to her own life, because by being an infant she is unable to have any meaningful preference to continue to live. Singer then proposes that certain preferences against infanticide should be set aside and excluded from the utilitarian calculus because, although they are strongly held, they are at odds

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<sup>164</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid., 154.

with reason. Objections to a policy of infanticide should, he says, be set aside on logical grounds. The fact that a person can hold such a preference indicates that she herself is not an infant and so cannot be harmed by the policy. Objections to a specific instance of infanticide, too, are irrational. Either they are based on the agent's spurious sense that the infant is connected to a future adult in a way that is morally meaningful in the present moment (which appeals to values that are non-utilitarian and so are wrong on the first premiss) or they rely on an assumption that being killed contravenes the infant's own preferences (which is wrong on the second premiss).

Singer concludes that the only preferences relevant to whether the infant should live or die are those on which the impact of the infant's survival will be greatest. It is therefore morally permissible to kill an infant at the request of her parents.

### **2.3.i His premiss: the infant is unable to prefer to continue to live**

The first premiss of Singer's defence of infanticide sets out his understanding of the infant. Having asserted that the 'inherent' value of a life is exhausted by its owner's preference that life should continue, the 2011 Singer explains why, in his view, the nature of a preference and the nature of infants mean that the infant can have no such value.

The concept of a preference is central to Singer's interpretation of preference utilitarianism. When he introduces the term at the beginning of *Practical Ethics* it appears that the idea of a preference embraces all the outcomes he considers important to the objectives of moral theory. He chooses not to differentiate the sense of what someone *desires* from the sense of what

they *need*.<sup>166</sup> Singer accordingly rejects any distinction between objective and subjective preferences:

Long ago David Hume argued that reason in action applies only to means, not to ends. The ends must be given by our wants and desires. Hume unflinchingly drew out the implications of this view: "Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter." Extreme as it is, Hume's view of practical reason has stood up to criticism remarkably well.<sup>167</sup>

Rationality as logic can explain to the agent that she should act correctly in respect of the moral patient but on the Humean non-cognitivist view that Singer takes in *Practical Ethics*, it cannot explain what 'correctly' is. The role of reason is to decide how best to achieve what is desired; it is not to evaluate whether or not what *is* desired coincides with what *ought* to be desired.

Singer sets the cognitive bar for preferences quite high, linking them with sophisticated thought processes such as understanding, reflection and deliberation:

... preference utilitarians are likely to grant that people often form preferences on the basis of misinformation about what it would be like to have their preference satisfied. The preferences that should be counted, the preference utilitarians may say, are those that we would have if we were fully informed, in a calm frame of mind and thinking clearly.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup>*Ibid.*, 12. John Locke expresses the same subjectivist conception of what is good: 'Every mind has a different relish, as well as the palate and you will as fruitlessly endeavour to delight all men with riches or glory, as you would to satisfy all men's hunger with cheese or lobsters; which though very agreeable and delicious to some, are to others extremely nauseous and offensive. Hence it was, I think, that the philosophers of old did in vain enquire whether the *summum bonum* consisted in riches, or bodily delights, or virtue, or contemplation. They might have as reasonably disputed whether the best relish were to be found in apples, plums, or nuts, and have divided themselves into sects upon it' John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Book II: Ideas*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (2004), 86. The term 'want' is ambiguous in this respect. Its original meaning conveyed a sense of something necessary but lacking and so was perhaps closer to the idea of 'need'. Over centuries, however (at least in English), it has largely lost that sense and it is now usually used synonymously with 'desire'.

<sup>167</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 281. Singer is quoting David Hume, *A treatise of human nature* (II; London: Thomas and Joseph Allman, 1817), II part 3 sect. 3 para. 6.

<sup>168</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 14.

He distinguishes between 'preferences' and 'interests'. A being who is incapable of holding preferences can nevertheless have interests providing she is, or has been, conscious:

Only a basic moral principle of this kind [equality of interests] can allow us to defend a form of equality that embraces almost all human beings, despite the differences that exist between them. (The exceptions are human beings who are not and have never been conscious and therefore have no interests to be considered—a topic to be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.)<sup>169</sup>

To have interests, on Singer's terms, it is only necessary to possess the capacity to suffer:

It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a child. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because mice will suffer if they are treated in this way.<sup>170</sup>

Interests represent the antithesis of suffering, and so encompass preferences but are not identical with them.

The importance of interests to Singer's argument is that they represent something that is morally relevant in the same degree to all living beings:

The principle of equal consideration of interests prohibits making our readiness to consider the interests of others depend on their abilities or other characteristics, apart from the characteristic of having interests. It is true that we cannot know where equal consideration of interests will lead us until we know what interests people have, and this may vary according to their abilities or other characteristics. ... The basic element, the taking into account of the person's interests, whatever they may be, must apply to everyone, irrespective of race, sex or scores on an intelligence test. ... Intelligence has nothing to do with many important interests that humans have, like the interest in avoiding pain, in satisfying basic needs for food and shelter, to love and care for any children one may have, to enjoy friendly and loving relations with others and to be free to pursue one's projects without unnecessary interference from others.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., 22.

Singer considers that interests can represent a broader and less choate expression of subjective experience than preferences. His use of the term 'needs' here even hints that he believes interests, unlike preferences, can represent something that is necessary in an objective sense.

Doctors distinguish more clearly than Singer does between desires and needs. To clinicians, 'interests' is a generic term for any benefit that a patient will experience as the result of the action that a doctor decides to take. The General Medical Council uses it to express the expectation on doctors that they will care for their patients by making choices that will make patients' lives better: '[You must] work with colleagues in the ways that best serve patients' interests'.<sup>172</sup> A 'need' is usually taken to mean something that is missing from the individual and whose absence imperils her well-being, whether she desires it or not. A desire, on the other hand, depends on what a patient would like or dislike for herself, or on what others might like for her. Different people might value the same thing differently without being wrong in any cosmic absolute sense. 'Desire' is subjective; it articulates something about an individual's own personal experience. In medicine, the term 'preference' attaches to such a subjective evaluation. It expresses what a patient desires, rather than what she needs. It is impossible to know preferences without knowing the individual person.

Individual preferences are nevertheless important. It would be irrational to suggest it is in the interests of a patient who prefers tablets to be made to take medication as syrup on the grounds that that is what most people prefer. So important are subjective preferences to establishing what actions are in an

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<sup>172</sup>General Medical Council, *Good Medical Practice*.

individual's interests that a doctor is expected to consider them even if the patient herself is not able to express them at the time:

(1) In determining for the purposes of this Act what is in a person's best interests, the person making the determination must ... consider, so far as is reasonably ascertainable—(a) the person's past and present wishes and feelings (and, in particular, any relevant written statement made by him when he had capacity), (b) the beliefs and values that would be likely to influence his decision if he had capacity, and (c) the other factors that he would be likely to consider if he were able to do so.<sup>173</sup>

While some interests are subjective, according to doctors there exist other interests that are objective. It would be irrational to deny that oxygen is in the interests of a patient on the grounds that she says she does not like oxygen. Doctors are expected to recognise that there are some actions that will, as a matter of fact, tend towards a patient's good irrespective of his or her views on the matter.<sup>174</sup> Those actions are morally correct and a doctor should refrain from taking them only if the patient refuses to allow it despite the fact that she possesses a rational capacity.<sup>175</sup> Preference utilitarianism fails to account for the idea of a need and can accommodate it only as a strongly held desire.

Although at the beginning of *Practical Ethics* Singer defines preferences in a way that encompasses every form of interest ('wants, needs and desires'), he

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<sup>173</sup>Department of Health, *Mental Capacity Act (2005)* (c.9; London: HMSO, 2008).

<sup>174</sup>It is also true that, sometimes, everyone agrees that a certain course of action is wrong, which might appear to represent a sort of objective value. The fact that everyone agrees on a value does not of itself make it correct, although it should raise the question of what it is about people that draws everyone to that agreement.

<sup>175</sup>The fact that some preferences are irrational does not deny the argument that patients should be allowed to refuse treatments they do not want. The moral wrongness of being forced to do something (such as wear an oxygen mask) is not related to whether the forced action itself is right or wrong. When they are parents, adults often assume that right extends beyond themselves so that it also entitles them to refuse interventions on behalf of their children. That is not the case, although doctors typically give disproportionate weight to the preferences of parents because they recognise that, other than the child herself, it is parents who will bear the greatest weight of whatever decisions are made. R. D. W. Hain, 'Voices of moral authority: parents, doctors and what will actually help', *J Med Ethics*, (May 3 2018).

finds it difficult to sustain that position and later concedes that, to be morally relevant, a preference should be 'fully informed' and made 'in a calm frame of mind and thinking clearly'.<sup>176</sup> The distinction that Singer finds himself forced to draw between rational and irrational preferences means he is no longer indicating how a consistent preference utilitarian would deal with controversial problems. A consistent preference utilitarian is only concerned with the fact of preferences, not with evaluating whether or not they are rational. Singer struggles to give a consistent account of personal value because he bases it on beings' capacity for two different cognitive processes; on the one hand the reflective ability to think logically that underlies preferences, and on the other the reflexive ability to experience suffering.

Nowhere is that struggle for consistency more obvious than in his attempt to explain the moral status of humans in infancy. Singer includes fetuses among those humans to whom the principle of equal consideration of interests does not apply, because a fetus:

... is not conscious and never has been conscious. The fetus itself, if killed before awareness commences, experiences nothing different than it would have experienced if it had not been conceived—for in both cases there are no experiences at all.<sup>177</sup>

Singer must presumably exclude infants on the same basis, since he holds that the infant's consciousness is the same as that of the fetus:

I have argued that ... because no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. Now we have to face the fact that these arguments apply to the new-born baby as much as to the fetus. A week-old baby is not a rational and self-aware being.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 14.

<sup>177</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>178</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

If, as Singer suggests, the cognitive processes of fetus and new-born baby mean that they are not conscious, then they cannot suffer. That seems to put them in the same category as a stone, and Singer would have to conclude that it would be ethically acceptable for a boy to kick a baby down the street, providing its parents did not object. Certainly, on that view, it would be more acceptable to kick a baby than to kick a mouse. There is nothing in Singer's writing to suggest that he believes any such thing, but in order to avoid that conclusion he would have to concede either that the fetus and the baby are both capable of suffering, or else that the cognitive abilities of the infant are relevantly different from those of the fetus. He seems to deny both.

The fact that Singer draws back from suggesting that infants can be kicked along the street like stones indicates that he does not really believe they cannot suffer. Elsewhere he includes infants in the group of 'merely conscious' beings who can experience pleasure or its utilitarian antithesis, suffering:

Many beings are sentient and capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, but they are not rational and self-conscious and, therefore, are not persons. I shall refer to these as 'merely conscious' beings. Many nonhuman animals fall into this category; so must new-born infants and some intellectually disabled humans.<sup>179</sup>

On Singer's view, however, the infant's life is of less value than that of an adult because she is incapable of a specific *preference*; namely, a preference for continued existence over death. That defence of infanticide was first articulated in the 1970s by utilitarian philosopher Michael Tooley. Tooley challenged the idea of a universal human 'right to life', arguing that an individual's right to anything must logically depend first on her desire to have it:

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 85.

The basic intuition is that a right is something that can be violated and that, in general, to violate an individual's right to something is to frustrate the corresponding desire. Suppose, for example, that you own a car. Then I am under a *prima facie* obligation not to take it from you. However, the obligation is not unconditional: it depends in part upon the existence of a corresponding desire in you. If you do not care whether I take your car, then I generally do not violate your right by doing so.<sup>180</sup>

An individual's right to life, according to Tooley, represents no more than an expression of the extent to which she desires to continue to exist:

To sum up, my argument has been that having a right to life presupposes that one is capable of desiring to continue existing as a subject of experiences and other mental states. This in turn presupposes both that one has the concept of such a continuing entity and that one believes that one is oneself such an entity. So an entity that lacks such a consciousness of itself as a continuing subject of mental states does not have a right to life.<sup>181</sup>

Singer's defence of infanticide relies critically on the same belief that the infant is not harmed by being killed because she cannot prefer life over death. He expresses that same idea in four different ways. He suggests firstly that the infant lacks self-awareness, then that an infant inherently lacks autonomy and so can legitimately be used as a means to other's ends, that an infant is not

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<sup>180</sup>Tooley, 'Abortion and Infanticide', 81–83. quoted in *Practical Ethics*, 168. The idea of rights is predicated on the notion that the moral agent should treat an individual in a certain way because that individual belongs to a certain category. The rights of a British citizen to be treated in certain ways depend on her being British, for example, and are not changed by whether or not a specific British citizen can benefit from being treated in those ways. The intention of rights arguments is to simplify moral choices by sidestepping consequential arguments that link action to outcome, focusing instead on an individual's automatic qualifications for certain moral treatment. Utilitarians are, as a rule, sceptical of rights arguments.

<sup>181</sup>Ibid. Tooley's argument here has been refuted in several different ways. John Stevens points out that a patient with a medical condition of which he has no conception might nevertheless have a right to be treated for it (J. C. Stevens, 'Must the bearer of a right have the concept of that to which he has a right?', *Ethics*, 95/1 (Oct 1984), 68–74.). Christina Sommers makes the deontological argument that, in becoming parents, adults take on a moral responsibility to care for a living child (C. H. Sommers, 'Tooley's immodest proposal: Abortion and Infanticide', *Hastings Cent Rep*, 15/3 (Jun 1985), 39–42.). Mark Tushnet and Louis Seidman suggest that, even if the infant herself has no right to live, killing her might transgress the rights of relevant others (M. Tushnet and L. M. Seidman, 'A comment on Tooley's Abortion and Infanticide', *Ethics*, 96/2 (Jan 1986), 350–5.). See also Davis, Nancy. 'Abortion and Infanticide (Book Review).' *The Philosophical Review* 94, no. 3 (1985): 436–441.

biographically alive and finally that infants are replaceable by one another because they are not yet persons.

In order to have a subjective preference to continue to live, Singer argues, a being must first understand the concept of existing over time:

If a being is incapable of conceiving of itself as existing over time, we need not take into account the possibility of it worrying about the prospect of its future existence being cut short. It can't worry about this, for it has no conception of its own future.<sup>182</sup>

He believes that all very young humans entirely lack such a conception:

Self-awareness ... is not to be found in either the fetus or the new-born infant. Neither the fetus nor the new-born infant is an individual capable of regarding itself as a distinct entity with a life of its own to lead...<sup>183</sup>

As a result, Singer does not consider that the infant is capable of having any interest in remaining alive. The only thing death would take from an infant is her future existence, which, if she is not self-aware, the infant cannot understand:

Continued existence cannot be in the interests of a being who *never* has had the concept of a continuing self—that is, never has been able to

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<sup>182</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 78. Critics point out that if the moral status of personhood is restricted to those who are self-aware, then any being will lose that status, not only by being unconscious as a result of illness or injury, but simply by being asleep. In his response to the Giubilini article, Catholic philosopher of law John Finnis argues that it is impossible to resist that 'repugnant or absurd conclusion' if, as Tooley and Singer insist, moral wrongness depends only on the experienced harm an action will inflict (John Finnis, 'Capacity, harm and experience in the life of persons as equals', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 281–3.) Tooley anticipates such a criticism in the original exposition of his theory, though he does not provide a defence: '... an individual's right to X can be violated not only when he desires X, but also when he would desire X were it not for one of the following: (i) he is in an emotionally unbalanced state; (ii) he is temporarily unconscious; (iii) he has been conditioned to desire the absence of X.' (Tooley, 'Abortion and Infanticide', p. 48.) Utilitarian medical ethicist John Harris, however, refutes the criticism on the grounds that someone who is asleep has '... not necessarily lost the capacity to value life. It is a fact about human capacities and powers that it is correct to attribute them to individuals at times when they are not exercising those capacities or powers.' (John Harris, *The value of life* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 25.) In an unexpected congruence with Christian teaching on human nature, Harris' argument here seems to appeal to a 'capacity or power', possession of which is a matter of fact in the present moment, even if the capacity or power is not currently being exercised. Physician Daniel Cox considers Harris' to be an inadequate response, because it relies too heavily on a distinction between an individual's being able to do something and their possessing the capacity (or potential) to be able to do it (D. R. Cox, 'The problems with utilitarian conceptions of personhood in the abortion debate', *J Med Ethics*, 37/5 (May 2011), 318–20.). See also D. B. Hershenov and R. J. Hershenov, 'If Abortion, then Infanticide', *Theor Med Bioeth*, 38/5 (Oct 2017), 387–409. Hershenov argues, contra Singer, Tooley and Giubilini, that morally wrong actions can be done even to beings who are 'mindless'.

<sup>183</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 164–65.

conceive of itself as existing over time. If [a] train ... instantly killed [an] infant, the death would not have been contrary to the interests of the infant, because the infant would never have had the concept of existing over time.<sup>184</sup>

Singer believes it is a matter of empirical truth that the normal infant represents such a being:

It would, of course, be difficult to say at what age children begin to see themselves as distinct entities existing over time. But a difficulty in drawing the line is not a reason for drawing it in a place that is obviously wrong, any more than the notorious difficulty in saying how much hair a man has to have lost before we can call him 'bald' is a reason for saying that someone whose pate is as smooth as a billiard ball is not bald ...<sup>185</sup>

Singer's powerful, if oddly facetious, imagery leaves no doubt about how he imagines the infant. In his view, she is utterly bereft of the properties that might allow her to benefit from continuing to live. Singer seems persuaded that all rational people agree with his claim that an infant lacks any self-awareness at all until some weeks or months after birth. His confidence in such universal agreement flows from his conviction that it has been empirically proven by means of the 'mirror test'. He compares the performance of the human infant

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<sup>184</sup>Ibid., 83. Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus points out that, even for normal adults, a preference to continue to live is always technically irrational because if one is alive, one is not dead, and if one is dead, one can no longer prefer to live: 'Accustom yourself to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil lie in sensation, whereas death is the privation of sensation' (A. A. Long, 'Letter to Menoeceus 124', in D. N. Sedley and David Sedley (eds.), *The Hellenistic philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). On Singer's reasoning it would in fact be morally acceptable to take life from anyone who is unaware that it is going to happen, providing it were done instantaneously and caused no suffering. Catholic philosopher of law John Finnis comments that whether or not someone is aware of the harm she is experiencing is not relevant to whether or not the harm occurs. Infants, he insists: '... can undergo unjustly inflicted harm, which damages them then and there as actual persons, even though their awareness of it as a harm and loss and impairment that they underwent may emerge in their consciousness only months or years later. Seeking ... to prevent this subsequent awareness, by ensuring that the person so treated (I say harmed) is also killed before the awareness arises, no more cancels the harm in such early states or stages of an individual human person's existence than the harm is cancelled or negated or averted when an assassin ensures that his victim has no warning and no awareness of his being murdered.' Finnis, 'Capacity, harm and experience in the life of persons as equals'.

<sup>185</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 153.

in the mirror test unfavourably with that of some animals, noting particularly the remarkable abilities of an African grey parrot named Alex:

All the great apes can pass the mirror test ... Pepperberg's meticulously recorded account of [Alex's] abilities and behaviour leaves little doubt that he too was self-aware to some extent. Human children less than one year old typically fail the mirror test, but by the time they are eighteen months old, most can pass it.<sup>186</sup>

Singer believes that failing the mirror test demonstrates conclusively that self-awareness is absent.

The second idea that Singer uses to explain the difference between the value of an infant's life and the value of an adult's life is the concept of autonomy. Here Singer is directly addressing proponents of principlism, the ethical framework most commonly used by clinicians in medical practice. Principlism was first set out in 1977 by philosopher Thomas Beauchamp and protestant theologian James Childress.<sup>187</sup> Of principlism's three central ethical ideas—interests, respect for autonomy and justice—it is respect for autonomy that is often taken by Western physicians and ethicists to be the most important in resolving the ethical quandaries that arise in practice. Singer dismisses any argument against infanticide that might flow from that principle:

A new-born baby is not an autonomous being, capable of making choices, and so to kill a new-born baby cannot violate the principle of respect for autonomy. In all this, the new-born baby is on the same

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., 102. This seems to be the only empirical evidence Singer adduces in his argument that human infants are not self-aware. The scale of some of the changes in moral behaviour that utilitarians are willing to advise on the basis of abstract theorising causes New Zealand philosopher Nicholas Agar some concern: 'I accuse those who seek to translate these conclusions into moral advice of a dangerous overconfidence.' N. Agar, 'How to insure against utilitarian overconfidence', *Monash Bioeth Rev*, 32/3–4 (Sep-Dec 2014), 162–71, 162.

<sup>187</sup>T. L. Beauchamp, 'Principlism and its alleged competitors', *Kennedy Inst Ethics J*, 5/3 (Sep 1995), 181–98. Principlism is currently the dominant framework for medical ethical analysis in most Western countries, and it is the only system of ethics with which most clinicians are familiar. Principlism rejects infanticide on the grounds that there is consensus among most people that strong people should avoid exploiting vulnerable people and particularly that parents should protect and value their child. The main argument against infanticide that principlism therefore relies on is the moral authority of what is agreed by society. It is a weak defence of the value of an infant's life, because cultural agreements can change and what is unacceptable to society today might seem to be obviously right tomorrow.

footing as the fetus, and hence fewer reasons exist against killing both babies and fetuses than exist against killing those who are capable of seeing themselves as distinct entities, existing over time.<sup>188</sup>

The absence of inherent value in the infant's life is explained by her lack of certain properties that are possessed by normal adults, though not by normal infants.

The third way in which Singer expresses his view that the value of an infant's life can be discounted is through the idea of a 'biographical sense of self' which he attributes to philosopher Gary Varner:

To be a person, in [Varner's] view, one must have a biographical sense of self. Humans, he points out, typically tell stories about their lives, weaving narratives that bring together where they have come from, where they are now and what they hope for in the future. Only beings with a sophisticated language, Varner suggests, have this kind of biographical sense of their lives, which means that only humans will have it—and not all humans, either, because not all humans are capable of language.<sup>189</sup>

Varner's position is that the moral status of humans expresses their possession of a certain sort of awareness that leads to narrative about themselves. It is the ability to construct a biographical sense of self, Varner suggests, that represents a categorical difference between human reasoning and the reasoning of non-human animals.

Singer appropriates the idea of biographical life in order to clarify that he recognises that most humans are different from most non-human animals in a

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<sup>188</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 152.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid., 103. Varner is not, in fact, as committed to the importance of language as Singer seems to suggest: '[Reasons for considering humans to be special] have little to do with the standard candidates for a uniquely human ability: rationality, tool use (or tool making), and language. I think that what makes humans special has something to do with language, but it is not having language per se. Rather ... it is telling stories about our lives and our cultures.' (Gary E. Varner, *Personhood, ethics, and animal cognition: situating animals in Hare's two level utilitarianism* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134.) What distinguishes humans from non-humans is not so much that they possess the capacity for reasoning or language, but that the result of their reasoning and language is the construction of narrative meaning.

way that means the value of human life is usually greater than the value of non-human life:

I agree with Varner and Scruton that the more one thinks of one's life as a story that has chapters still to be written, and the more one hopes for achievements yet to come, the more one has to lose by being killed. For this reason, when there is an irreconcilable conflict between the basic survival needs of animals and of normal humans, it is not speciesist to give priority to the lives of those with a biographical sense of their life and a stronger orientation towards the future.<sup>190</sup>

Singer has already made clear that he considers infants to be unaware of their future, and so believes they are excluded from the category of 'those with a biographical sense of their life and a stronger orientation towards the future'.

The final way in which Singer expresses the infant's lack of inherent value is in his argument regarding replaceability. Singer's use of infanticide as a device for refuting speciesism relies on his equating the moral status of infants and some animals. He describes both as 'merely conscious'.<sup>191</sup> Singer suggests that 'merely conscious' beings are interchangeable with one another, because to kill one and replace it with another will not increase the sum total of suffering:

When we come to animals that, as far as we can tell, lack self-awareness, the best direct reason against killing points to the loss of a pleasant or enjoyable life. Where the life taken would not, on balance, have been pleasant or enjoyable, no direct wrong is done. Even when the animal killed would have lived pleasantly, it is at least arguable that no wrong is done if the animal killed will, as a result of the killing, be replaced by another animal living an equally pleasant life. Taking this view involves holding that a wrong done to an existing being can be made up for by a benefit conferred on an as yet non-existent being. Thus, it is possible to regard merely conscious animals as interchangeable with one another in a way that beings with a sense of their own future are not.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 122.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>192</sup>Singer's argument for replaceability is made primarily in relation to animals. The obvious conclusion is that it is acceptable to kill animals for meat. Singer resists that conclusion, but it is because he believes that in practice animals are not happy rather than because the principle

On Singer's view, it would be acceptable to kill any infant because another infant is sure to be born who will replace it. It is only in the case of infants who are imperfect, however, that Singer makes the replaceability argument explicit:

If we favour the total view rather than the prior existence view, then we have to take account of the probability that when the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore, if killing the haemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him. The total view treats infants as replaceable, in much the same way as it treats animals that are not self-aware as replaceable.<sup>193</sup>

Singer recognises that the life of someone with haemophilia 'can be expected to have a life worth living ... His life can be expected to contain a positive balance of happiness over misery.'<sup>194</sup> The life of someone without haemophilia, Singer believes, will (all things being equal) be happier than that of a haemophiliac, however, meaning that on what Singer calls the 'total view' it would always be morally permissible to replace a 'merely conscious' haemophiliac with a 'merely conscious' normal infant.<sup>195</sup>

The premiss of Singer's defence of infanticide, then, is that the infant is unable to prefer to continue to live. Whether he expresses it as the infant's lack of self-awareness, her lack of autonomy, her inability to construct a biographical life or the fact that she can be replaced with another infant, Singer's fundamental

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of replaceability he has set out here is not sound: 'As a piece of critical moral reasoning, this argument may be sound, but its application is limited. It cannot justify factory farming, where animals do not have pleasant lives. Nor does it normally justify the killing of wild animals'. *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>193</sup>*Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>194</sup>*Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>195</sup>Presumably it would be not only permissible but morally required, since on the utilitarian view a moral decision that fails to maximise the desirable outcome leaves the agent as culpable as one that actively reduces it.

claim in defending infanticide is that the way an infant perceives the world and herself means that her life is of no inherent value.

### **2.3.ii His proposition: objections to infanticide should be set aside because they are irrational**

Singer next proposes that preferences about infanticide should only contribute to the preference utilitarian calculus under one or both of two conditions; they are held by a specific infant's parents, or they do not express any objection to infanticide.

On Singer's preference utilitarian grounds, it is the preferences of those most affected by the infant's continuing survival that confer value on the infant's life. There are many hundreds or even thousands of people who might have a preference about whether an individual infant should live, but most of them are not directly affected by the death. The preferences that matter when it comes to deciding whether a specific infant should continue to live, Singer goes on to say, are those of the child's parents:

My comparison of abortion and infanticide was prompted by the objection that the position I have taken on abortion also justifies infanticide. I have admitted this charge to the extent that the intrinsic wrongness of killing the late fetus and the intrinsic wrongness of killing the new-born infant are not markedly different ... infanticide can only be equated with abortion when those closest to the child do not want it to live.<sup>196</sup>

Singer's explanation is that society already accepts that parents should be able to choose to end the life of their child before the child is born and that, since the moral status of the new-born child is no different from that of the late-term fetus, that privilege should logically extend to the infant as well:

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<sup>196</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 154.

At present, parents can choose whether to keep their disabled offspring only if the disability happens to be detected during pregnancy. There is no logical basis for restricting parents' choice to these particular disabilities. If new-born infants were not regarded as having a right to life until some time after birth, it would allow parents, in consultation with their doctors, to choose on the basis of far greater knowledge of the infant's condition than is possible before birth.<sup>197</sup>

Singer proposes that infanticide be permissible at the request of the child's parent, suggesting that if a child's parents do not want the child to live, then infanticide can be equated with abortion:

Killing an infant whose parents do not want it dead is, of course, an utterly different matter, just as forcing a woman to have an abortion she does not want to have is utterly different from allowing a woman to choose to have an abortion.<sup>198</sup>

Singer represents the infant effectively as an object possessed by its parents.

He decries the fact that people often have strong preferences against the killing of a baby, even where such killing does not impact directly on them:

... some people seem to think that the life of a baby is more precious than that of an adult. Lurid tales of German soldiers bayoneting Belgian babies figured prominently in the wave of anti-German propaganda that accompanied Britain's entry into the First World War, and it seemed to be tacitly assumed that this was a greater atrocity than the murder of adults.<sup>199</sup>

The rational moral agent, he goes on to say, should dismiss preferences against infanticide because they represent an emotional reaction: 'If we can put aside these emotionally moving but strictly irrelevant aspects of the killing of a baby, we can see that the grounds for not killing persons do not apply to new-born infants'.<sup>200</sup> Nor should the moral agent be misled into identifying her present self with the infant or imagining that the infant represents anything more

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<sup>197</sup>Ibid., 166.

<sup>198</sup>Ibid., 154. Also 'Obviously, in most cases, to kill an infant is to inflict a terrible loss on those who love and cherish the child.' Ibid.

<sup>199</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>200</sup>Ibid., 152.

than its present existence. The fact that, left alive, an infant will develop into an adult is irrelevant to her value because in the present moment she has no sense of that potential future:

I am not the infant from whom I developed. The infant could not look forward to developing into the kind of being I am, or even into any intermediate being, between the being I now am and the infant. I cannot even recall being the infant; there are no mental links between us.<sup>201</sup>

In respect of a specific instance of infanticide, Singer therefore concludes that objections should be set aside because they are irrational.

Singer next indicates that any discomfort adults might feel about a *policy* that permits infanticide is similarly irrational, because the fact that adults are able to fear it ensures that they are not, in reality, threatened by it:

... no one capable of understanding what is happening when a new-born baby is killed could feel threatened by a policy that gave less protection to the new-born than to adults. In this respect, Bentham was right to describe infanticide as “of a nature not to give the slightest inquietude to the most timid imagination”. Once we are old enough to comprehend the policy, we are too old to be threatened by it.<sup>202</sup>

Singer concludes that any preference against infanticide is irrational. Those who oppose it are falling into one or both of two errors. Some over-value a specific infant’s life because they wrongly identify the present value of the infant with value of present or future adults. They are wrong, says Singer, because an adult cannot remember being an infant and the infant cannot imagine being an adult, and so in reality there is no connexion between an infant and an adult. Infant and adult should be evaluated independently of one another, according to utilitarian measures of value in the present moment.<sup>203</sup> Others who oppose

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<sup>201</sup>ibid., 82.

<sup>202</sup>ibid., 152.

<sup>203</sup>Singer has no patience for arguments from potential, and rejects as perverse the idea that we should: ‘... treat individuals, not in accordance with their actual qualities, but in accordance with the qualities normal for their species.’ *ibid.*, 68.

a policy of infanticide do so because they over-estimate the danger to themselves. They are wrong because they irrationally fear a policy that cannot, in reality, harm them. Their fear is rooted in a wrong perception that a policy that permits infanticide could cause harm. The only beings who would be removed as a result of such a policy are infants and they, on Singer's view, are not harmed by their removal.

In order to sustain his proposition that objections to infanticide should be set aside on rational grounds, Singer has had to abandon two fundamental principles of his interpretation of preference utilitarianism.

A consistent preference utilitarian must conclude that a rational understanding of ethics requires the agent to give value to what an individual wants to do *because she wants to do it*, rather than because what she wants to do is the logical or morally right thing to do. The moral force of preferences consists, not in whether or not a specific preference is rational, but in the fact that it is held at all.

A consistent preference utilitarian must also give equal weight to the interests of all those affected by her moral action: 'What the principle [of equal consideration of interests] really amounts to is: an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be.'<sup>204</sup> Singer has nevertheless concluded that all preferences against infanticide except those of the infant's parents should be set aside on the grounds that if they do not coincide with the preferences of the infant's parents then they are irrational. Even on his own terms, Singer has found it impossible to remain consistent to an account of value that does not

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<sup>204</sup>Ibid., 20.

accommodate the possibility that some preferences are wrong in an absolute sense.

### **2.3.iii His conclusion, and some things Singer does *not* say**

There are several important things that Singer does *not* say about human infants, and which might cloud the issue if not clarified early on.

Singer does not call for infanticide to be made legal. While he clearly considers that there are circumstances under which killing an infant is *morally* correct, he draws back from definitely proposing a change in the law that would permit infanticide. He even hints that there might be a persuasive utilitarian explanation for why the law should seek to prevent infanticide:

There is some plausibility in the view that, for legal purposes, because birth provides the only sharp, clear and easily understood line, the law of homicide should continue to apply from the moment of birth. Because this is an argument at the level of public policy and the law, it is quite compatible with the view that, on purely ethical grounds, the killing of a new-born infant is not comparable with the killing of an older child or adult.<sup>205</sup>

Singer's commitment to defeating 'speciesism' is easily misunderstood as a claim that the lives of humans are no more valuable than the lives of non-humans. That representation of Singer is unfair. He acknowledges that human life has value and agrees with Christians that generally speaking human life has

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<sup>205</sup>Ibid., 153. The distinction Singer draws here between what is unethical and what should be illegal might seem Jesuitical on the face of it, but the point he is making is sound. It echoes the assertion by Beauchamp and Childress that: 'When using moral norms ... we cannot move with certainty from a judgement that an act is morally right (or wrong) to a judgement that a corresponding law or policy is morally right (or wrong).' (Thomas Beauchamp and James Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (6 edn.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.) Christian bioethicist Søren Holm uses infanticide as an example to illustrate the gulf that should exist between abstract philosophical conclusion and policy prescription. S. Holm, 'The grand leap of the whale up the Niagara Falls: converting philosophical conclusions into policy prescriptions', *Camb Q Healthc Ethics*, 24/2 (Apr 2015), 195–203.

more value than the life of non-humans. His argument in *Practical Ethics*, he assures his readers, is not intended to diminish the value of humans:

... the aim of my argument is to elevate the status of animals rather than to lower the status of any humans. I do not wish to suggest that intellectually disabled humans should be force-fed with food colourings until they get ill or die—although this would certainly give us a more accurate indication of whether the substance was safe for humans than doing this to rabbits or dogs.<sup>206</sup>

What he insists is that the difference in their value is only because humans in general are capable of greater suffering as a result of wrong moral choices and greater pleasure as a result of correct ones.

Singer does not claim that the life of the infant is of no value at all. His claim is that it is of no *intrinsic* value; that is to say, it has no value that is independent of the preferences of others. In practice, the lives of most infants are nevertheless valuable because their parents value their continuing existence. 'Obviously', he says, 'in most cases, to kill an infant is to inflict a terrible loss on those who love and cherish the child.'<sup>207</sup>

Singer is not explicitly advocating for selective infanticide. He certainly sees in infanticide a solution to what he considers the problem of caring for a disabled child:

Romans like Seneca, whose compassionate moral sense strikes the modern reader (or me, anyway) as superior to that of the early and mediaeval Christian writers, also thought infanticide the natural and humane solution to the problem posed by sick and deformed babies.<sup>208</sup>

There are also points in *Practical Ethics* at which he appears to be making judgements of the relative values of humans with disability and those without:

Nevertheless, the main point remains clear, even after the various objections and complications have been considered: killing a disabled

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<sup>206</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 67.

<sup>207</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>208</sup>*Ibid.*, 153.

infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all.<sup>209</sup>

More generally, however, he makes clear that disability is not the point. The moral significance of an infant's disability is the impact it has on the preferences of those closest to her:

The difference between killing disabled and normal infants lies, not in any supposed right to life that the latter has and the former lacks, but in other considerations about killing. Most obviously, there is the difference that often exists in the attitudes of the parents.<sup>210</sup>

The unique privilege to choose whether or not to extinguish their child that Singer extends to parents flows from the extent to which they prefer not to care for any specific infant, disabled or otherwise:

... we are in no doubt at all that it is better to be born with limbs than without them. To believe this involves no disrespect at all for those who are lacking limbs; it simply recognizes the reality of the difficulties they face. In any case, the position taken here does not imply that it would be better that no people born with severe disabilities should survive; it implies only that the parents of such infants should be able to make this decision.<sup>211</sup>

Singer's defence of infanticide does not represent a claim that disability itself diminishes the value of life. Infanticide is equally permissible in normal infants. The permissibility of infanticide in Singer's theory does not represent a judgement about the moral significance of disability on the value of life but from the nature of the infant *qua* infant.<sup>212</sup> An infant's disability is only relevant to the extent that it influences the preferences of her parents, and his assumption seems to be that all parents of a normal infant will prefer that infant to live.

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<sup>209</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>210</sup>Ibid., 161.

<sup>211</sup>Ibid., 165.

<sup>212</sup>See *ibid.*, 152. '... we can see that the grounds for not killing persons do not apply to new-born infants'.

The place of a defence of infanticide in Singer's wider ethical project is to emphasise that holding a birth qualification for the species *Homo sapiens* fails to explain a moral obligation to allow an infant to continue to live. To a consistent preference utilitarian, the value of the infant's life is wholly subjective. Singer believes on empirical grounds that the infant does not understand that she exists as an entity over time, and he believes on utilitarian grounds that, as a result, she cannot value her own life because she cannot prefer continued existence over death. It is the infant's parents who will be most affected by a decision not to kill the child, and so it is their preferences that give the infant's life its value. The preferences of other adults are irrelevant because they are based on one or more misunderstandings about the nature of an infant and her connexion with adults.

On the grounds of Singer's preference utilitarianism, the value of the infant's life is an expression of her parents' preference that she should continue to live. His conclusion is therefore that the decision to kill an infant is morally correct to the extent that it maximises those preferences.

## **2.4 Responding to infanticide: Christian theology and medical ethics**

### **2.4.i Objecting to infanticide: medicine vs. metaphysics**

Renewed calls for infanticide began to surface in the medical ethics literature during the early 1970s. The decades that followed saw a growing impatience with the Christian perspective, which was seen by many to be antithetical to reason. In 1988 philosopher Thomas Long expressed the view that religious arguments cannot contribute meaningfully to dialogue about infanticide because they can neither be substantiated nor refuted:

...the dispute between the proponents of infanticide and their religious opponents cannot be resolved because one side's perspective on the infant is shaped by a metaphysics that is emphatically rejected by the other. In such a situation philosophical argument is powerless to bring about a resolution because there can be no refutation of one side by the other.<sup>213</sup>

That relegates Christianity to a whim rather than an account of truth. Long appears to be persuaded that there is no argument against infanticide that is both rationally sound and consistent with Christian metaphysics.

Christian objections in the medical ethics literature have generally appealed to the idea of 'potential'. An argument from potential represents the

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<sup>213</sup>T. A. Long, 'Infanticide for handicapped infants: sometimes it's a metaphysical dispute', *J Med Ethics*, 14/2 (Jun 1988), 79–81. In reply, Peter Singer retorts that the Christian viewpoint can be dismissed because it is inherently inconsistent. Some years before, theologian Paul Ramsey had set out the Christian position that allowing a person to die is not necessarily evidence that her life is not valued. Singer wishes to refute that position on rational grounds: 'While there are aspects of our position that draw upon metaphysical views different from those of Ramsey, we do not need to rely on those views in order to refute Ramsey's position.' (Peter Singer and Helga Kuhse, 'Resolving arguments about the sanctity of life: a response to Long', *J Med Ethics*, 14/4 (Dec 1988), 198–9). Singer's refutation of Ramsey is questionable, but Singer is surely right to insist that where a metaphysical position is inherently contradictory it must be wrong as a matter of fact. It follows that it is reasonable to press those who take a different metaphysical position to defend any rational arguments that the position entails. In the twenty-first century that logical device is more often deployed against Christian positions than against atheist ones, but it is nevertheless equally valid in both directions.

value of an infant as a function (in the mathematical sense) of what the infant has the capacity to become, rather than in anything that is true about the infant in the present moment. It is a response that is not always persuasive to clinicians because the relationship between potential value and moral action in the present is not clear. Singer's argument is simply that killing an infant today would not harm her today. The Christian objection from potential, on the other hand, takes a more convoluted route, arguing firstly that it is wrong to kill persons, then that humans are persons because they are characterised by a distinctive capacity for reasoning which they share with God, and then that, because infants are human, and humans have a rational nature, it is the infant's nature to be rational. Only then does an argument from potential finally arrive at the conclusion that it is wrong to kill infants. The argument is perfectly reasonable, but it is not clear to clinicians. The practical connexion between a being's attributes and how moral action now will improve their well-being, which is so obvious and so direct in Singer's utilitarianism, is something of a 'knight's move' in Christian arguments from potential.

Christian eudaimonism offers a more promising way to articulate a theological response because flourishing is a much more direct way to connect moral action now with augmentation of the quality of a patient's existence. The argument from potential becomes a more straightforward and practical claim that what will enable an infant to flourish—or prevent her from doing so—in the here and now is shaped by her nature. Doctors are expected to consider living to be more than the mere absence of death. They must accord proper value to a living patient, and the quality of the life she is engaged in living at the time. Rather than attaching value to human life as an abstraction, clinicians should

attach it to an actual individual human (they should respect the *patient's* life, rather than the patient's *life*).<sup>214</sup> Eudaimonia, as the ultimate objective of moral action, encompasses that sense of striving to enable a patient's existence to be the best existence possible for that patient.

The concept of eudaimonia is, however, complex, unclear and difficult to measure, and medicine has sought to simplify it. Physician Deborah Swinglehurst is concerned that healthcare sciences are particularly prone to give inappropriate weight to outcomes that are measurable, rather than those that are meaningful:

The papers in this theme focus on the gap between what is easily measurable and what is meaningful in relation to the quality of healthcare, and critique the tendency for dominant approaches to quality evaluation to privilege the former.<sup>215</sup>

The term 'quality of life' is used in medicine to evaluate benefits of interventions, many of them intangible, that are not captured by statistics about survival and, to that extent, it encompasses some of the same concepts as eudaimonia. It is intended to approximate the same broad sense as eudaimonia and flourishing of a patient's well-being and the quality of the existence a patient can expect to experience if her death is postponed. Historically, 'quality of life' is an idea that has helped move medical research away from a dangerous belief that the only goal of medicine is to preserve life, or that doctors must always prolong life as

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<sup>214</sup>The difference can lead to confusion in discussions between doctors and their patients. When clinicians talk about 'prognosis' they often use the same term in two quite distinct senses. One is prognosis as a measure of the probability of dying. The other is prognosis as the extent to which a patient is likely to enjoy her existence if death is delayed. Clinicians' dual understanding of prognosis is an acknowledgement that the value of an actual person, considered in her totality, is not limited to the technical value of the life that she holds, but extends to the value or quality of the sort of living she can do. To complicate things further, 'prognosis' can have a third meaning that is even more difficult to disentangle from the first; namely the probable duration of a patient's life.

<sup>215</sup>D. Swinglehurst et al., 'Confronting the quality paradox: towards new characterisations of 'quality' in contemporary healthcare', *BMC Health Services Research*, 15/1 (2015) 3.

long as possible, no matter what harm to the individual might be entailed.

Its meaning, however, is much more restricted than that of eudaimonia. Measures of the quality of life assess a degree of satisfaction with life in the present moment. Eudaimonia, on the other hand, refers to an entire life well-spent. Episodes of sadness or suffering would always work against quality of life, even if they were to lead to personal emotional growth and so tend towards eudaimonia. Swinglehurst considers that that restricted understanding represents a significant flaw in the way the term 'quality' is used in medicine for evaluative purposes:

... the case for pausing to reconsider and extend our understandings of 'quality' is strong, especially since it is increasingly recognised that the pursuit and measurement of quality in healthcare often fails to deliver anticipated benefits and may have perverse consequences, undermining rather than strengthening the characteristics it seeks to assure.<sup>216</sup>

The quality of life for a patient with chronic pain, for example, will be improved in the present moment if she remains sedentary and is assured by her doctor that, with enough investigations, a cause for her pain can be found and reversed. Since, however, it is highly unlikely in reality that a cause will be found, or that her pain will remit, she is more likely to *flourish* if she is encouraged to exercise and is told the truth so that she can develop some of the psychological and emotional skills she needs to enjoy her life meaningfully despite her pain.

When it comes to medical ethics, restricted quality of life measures (those that represent something less than the perfection of the person which eudaimonia represents; 'eudaimonia lite', as it were) bring with them significant

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<sup>216</sup>Ibid., 1.

risks. They lead utilitarian philosopher Helga Kuhse, for example, to suggest that moral concern for the quality of a patient's existence is inevitably at odds with the idea that a living human is inherently valuable. Kuhse argues that for a patient's life to lack inherent value it is only necessary for her no longer to take pleasure in being alive. Kuhse accordingly rejects the doctrine of the sanctity of life in medicine *in toto*. She starts '... with the assumption that conscious life has value because it enables the existence of pleasurable states of consciousness.'<sup>217</sup> 'What I am suggesting, then,' she goes on, "is that there is a strong connection between the value of life and the interests of the being whose life it is'.<sup>218</sup> That must be true as far it goes, but in fact Kuhse has not stopped at arguing that there is a strong connexion between them. She has asserted that interests are *only* expressible as 'pleasurable states of consciousness'. Kuhse is right that the life of a person who is enjoying her existence has value, and that her enjoyment is part of the explanation for it. But while the value of her life cannot be *less* than what is conferred by her enjoyment of it, there is no logical reason why its value might not be *more* than what can be explained by that alone. Eudaimonia represents an acknowledgement that the quality of an individual's existence is not reducible to that one emotional response. An experience can be painful or upsetting and yet be meaningful and even, in the end, tend towards eudaimonia.

Kuhse is wrong to consider that an individual's life ceases to have value if being alive does not make her happy, but that is not because she is wrong to ascribe importance to the quality of a patient's existence. It is because she first

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<sup>217</sup>Helga Kuhse, *The sanctity-of-life doctrine in medicine: a critique* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 213.

<sup>218</sup>*Ibid.*, 214.

gives the idea monist utilitarian importance, suggesting that the value of life is no more than an expression of its quality, and then defines that quality so narrowly that the value of an individual's life is, in effect, merely an expression of her capacity to have pleasurable experiences. Eudaimonia, on the other hand, represents the perfection of life quality in all the dimensions in which it can hypothetically be made perfect.

In order to maintain the clear distinction between quality of life and eudaimonia, in the rest of this thesis I will avoid the term 'quality of life' unless I mean it in the restricted medical sense. I will use 'well-being' or 'quality of existence' to express an idea of happiness that is broader than the utilitarian sense of 'pleasure' or 'absence of suffering' alone. I will use 'eudaimonia' in the Aristotelian-Thomist sense to refer to the ultimate perfection of well-being or quality of existence, and I will use 'flourishing' to refer to progress towards that ultimate perfection.

#### **2.4.ii The value of living**

Singer suggests that most doctors already accept in practice that the lives of some humans are more valuable than others. It is, he suggests, perverse to claim that all human life is of equal value, when it is quite clear that physicians choose to intervene to prolong life in some individuals while choosing not to do so in others:

The problem is not with the distinction that is being drawn, at least not when it is stated in terms of which means are proportionate, and which are not, to the benefit gained by extending a human life. That we should draw such a distinction is, of course, in accordance with consequentialist thinking. The point is that the way the distinction is applied is inconsistent with the idea that all human life is of equal value. For the distinction is

standardly used to justify withdrawing life support from, for example, a baby with anencephaly, or from an adult with no prospect of recovering consciousness. In many of these cases, intensive medical care can prolong the life of the human organism for years, or even decades. If the patient were conscious, communicative, and capable of enjoying his or her life, we would never consider it legitimate to withdraw life support when the patient might still live for years or decades.<sup>219</sup>

Singer is correct to observe that there are some human patients from whom medical interventions are withheld, even if the interventions might have delayed the patient's death. He is also correct that it is more likely a doctor will decide to withhold life-prolonging interventions from a patient with cognitive impairment than if there were no such impairment.

He is wrong, however, to infer on that basis that doctors value the lives of cognitively impaired patients less highly than those of undamaged patients. There may be individual doctors who take the utilitarian view that less respect is due to someone whose brain is damaged, but that is not the usual reasoning.<sup>220</sup> The harms of interventions are usually greater, and the benefits less likely, in patients who have cognitive impairment, as a result of the physical vulnerabilities that come with it. Doctors are not failing to respect the life of such a patient by withholding the intervention, but rather valuing the quality of her individual existence.

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<sup>219</sup>Singer, 'Engaging with Christianity', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*. Elsewhere, Singer makes the same claim about infants: 'The evidence [that infanticide would not disturb the entire lives of opponents of infanticide] is that infants with severe disabilities are allowed to die.' Johnson, 'Putting A Value On Human And Animal Life', <<http://standpointmag.co.uk/dialogue-julyaugust11-putting-a-value-on-human-life-peter-singer-nigel-biggar-euthanasia-genocide-infanticide-animal-rights-huma#comment-25682>>, accessed 2nd November 2015. It is not clear what Singer means, since the deaths of most infants in hospital could not be avoided and so there is no meaningful sense in which such deaths are chosen or allowed. It is possible that Singer wrongly believes that medical interventions that might prolong life are routinely withheld from disabled infants with the primary purpose of extinguishing them.

<sup>220</sup>Where such a belief is held, it is often because doctors feel they are guardians of a scarce resource with a moral responsibility to give treatment in proportion to the likelihood that the patient will recover and become an effective reciprocator in society. Catholic theologian Charles Camosy offers a constructive theological critique of that concept of healthcare rationing (Camosy, *Too Expensive to Treat?*)

Some years ago, I found myself in the 'quiet room' next to our intensive care unit, where a patient of mine had been on a respirator for several weeks. She had severe cerebral palsy, and over recent years had had a series of chest infections of increasing severity and frequency. Her parents, themselves visually impaired, had been disabilities rights activists for many years before their own disabled daughter was born. The reason I was seeing them now was that the intensive care team had told me that there was no longer any realistic chance that my patient would recover, and they were planning to discontinue the ventilation in expectation that she would die within a few hours.

I spoke to Sally's parents together. Even though I was saying something they had been half expecting to hear, it was immediately clear that the news had devastated them. While Sally's mother became quiet, her father's voice took on an ominous and aggressive tone. 'Are you letting her die because she has cerebral palsy?' he demanded. 'I have to know that you are not treating her differently from any other child just because she's disabled.' I replied, that for any child, we would only do things that would (as far as we could know) offer that child more benefit than harm. 'The fact that Sally has cerebral palsy affects how much good the life-support machine will do, and also how much harm. So it does impact on the decision. But the decision itself—making a judgement about how much good something will do, and how much harm—is exactly the same decision I would make in any child.' Sally's father was quiet for a few moments, then responded sadly, but with no anger: 'Thanks, doctor. That's all I needed to hear.'

Sally's parents were professionally as well as personally sensitive to the possibility that doctors might value their child less because of her disability.

They had no difficulty, however, in recognising that a decision to stop ventilation could be influenced by the nature of her condition and yet be a compassionate expression of Sally's own full value as a person. Under the circumstances, they recognised that deciding not to postpone the end of Sally's life was in no way tantamount to suggesting that the person, Sally, had no value. The result of the doctors' decision was that Sally's life ended; but her parents did not at all feel that her life was not *valued*. While preference utilitarianism cannot easily account for that distinction, eudaimonistic theories explain it on the grounds that the value of a life represents the concern a moral agent should have with the way an individual lives, rather than the mere fact of life or absence of death.

## **2.5 What more is there to say ?**

If the objective of a Christian eudaimonistic challenge to Singer on infanticide is to show why the life of an infant is as valuable as that of an adult, it must explain how killing a human during infancy represents the same threat to human flourishing as killing her during adulthood. That relies on setting out a convincing Christian anthropology of the child.

The response of Christian theologians to Peter Singer has not done that. Most do not address him on the question of infanticide. Sloane considers that, having revealed the flaws in Singer's general argument, a specific challenge to his defence of infanticide is no longer necessary:

The cogency of Singer's stance on infanticide depends on the cogency of preference utilitarianism, for as we have seen each of his arguments against the wrongness of killing an infant and in favour of infanticide depend upon his preference utilitarian position. Since the latter is unsound, then so are the former. He has failed to defeat alternative views, especially those which advocate the existence of an objective

moral order to which we must conform. This is a serious flaw, for it means that a crucial argument in favour of his theory is unsound. Furthermore his own theory, and the justification he presents for it, are not sound. This, in turn, means that his views on infanticide are unjustified; for he has specifically excluded from his discussion any reference to the inherent value of infants, or the inherent moral qualities of the act of infanticide. All that is left are the preference utilitarian arguments he presents in its favour, and if the theory itself is unjustified, then so are the arguments that rely upon it.<sup>221</sup>

If infanticide were considered only as an academic theological concern, then in order to defeat Singer's arguments it might be enough, as Sloane suggests, to set out the reasons that Christian theologians are entitled to reject them.

If, however, a justification of infanticide is considered as a matter of practical medical ethics that might encourage doctors to kill children, that response is not adequate. Singer and his utilitarian colleagues have offered an explanation of the value of the infant's life that holds out to clinicians the promise of aligning moral rightness with practical utility. If it were correct, that explanation would dramatically simplify complex decision making among doctors caring for infants.

From the vantage point of the Christian metaphysical position that they take, theologians have uncovered three important flaws in Singer's theory. Firstly, Singer has rejected moral realism and cannot resolve the inconsistencies that such a rejection introduces into his theory. In the absence of an appeal to objective or created moral order, Singer does not provide any reason why ethics should matter in the first place.

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<sup>221</sup>Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 73. Sloane overstates the force of his own rebuttal. As this dissertation shows, Singer has tried hard to explain the inherent value of infants. He concludes that the inherent value of an infant is exhausted by her capacity to suffer, but that the inherent value of her life is exhausted by her capacity to prefer to live. The position he thus arrives at is arguably incoherent, but it is not unconsidered, and in setting out a different metaphysical position Sloane has not successfully refuted it.

Secondly, Singer has chosen the wrong 'desirable outcome'. While preferences represent a measure that is convenient, that is irrelevant to considering whether or not it is a true measure. The assertion that the quality of a human being's existence can be improved only by satisfying subjective preferences is implausible, since it is neither true that satisfying preferences consistently improves the well-being of individuals, nor that well-being cannot be improved in any other way.

Thirdly, Singer dismisses the moral relevance of human nature altogether on the basis of flaws in a single account of it. He rejects an evolutionary account but does not address the theological concept of human nature as inherent characteristics that should guide moral action.

Christian eudaimonists argue that flourishing, which represents the progress an individual makes towards eudaimonia, is a more realistic yardstick than preference satisfaction for measuring the value of moral action. On the Christian view, the universe is rationally ordered. The teleological object of correct moral action in respect of humans is to promote the individual's flourishing. Flourishing represents an improvement in the quality of an individual's existence such that it tends towards eudaimonia. The way in which an individual will flourish optimally depends on the unique way in which she as an individual participates in human nature. An individual's value, understood as the extent to which a moral agent should act correctly towards her, is expressed by the specific way in which she participates in human nature.

Theologians have not directly responded to Singer on the question of infanticide. Their objections to his general theory are important, but none of them defeats Singer's claim that the life of the infant is of no inherent value. A

moral realist theory does not of itself forbid infanticide and theologians have not shown how what is objectively true about the infant explains why infanticide is wrong. An appeal to an infant's ability to become an adult in the future is unsatisfactory because it expresses an infant's present value wholly in the rather speculative terms of the value of a future adult which she might or might not become. The more sophisticated identification of potential with the infant's nature as a human offers more scope, but as it stands it is an incomplete response. If human nature is, as most theological accounts suggest, distinctively characterised by a form of rationality then, in the present moment, infants do not obviously participate in human nature in the same way that adults do.

While flourishing is a much broader and more plausible measure of human well-being than 'quality of life', happiness or preference satisfaction, it does not entirely obviate the risk of under-valuing the infant. Infants are different from adults in morally relevant ways. If moral status relies on reason, then the infant measures up only poorly against the adult. What constitutes rationality can reasonably be extended to a point where it includes some of the ways of thinking that infants certainly can do, but that on its own does not close the question of the infant's value relative to the adult because the fact remains that adults think in most of those ways very much better than infants do. There is a risk that some of the goods that are basic in adults are, as a result, not basic, and might not even be good, in infants. If the extent of infant flourishing is measured against those adult goods, then Christian eudaimonism will have to conclude with Singer that the infant is of less inherent value than the adult.

Even showing that Singer is wrong in some of what he believes about what the infant can and can't do will not be enough to refute him on the issue of infanticide, because the difference between Christian ethics and Singer's utilitarianism on infanticide does not, in fact, turn primarily on any disagreement about the capabilities of a new-born baby. Christian ethicists largely share with Singer the view that the cognitive abilities of an infant can be equated with those of a fetus, and where infanticide is mentioned at all the moral issues it raises are not often disentangled from those of abortion. Indeed, there is considerable congruence between the way Singer and some Christian theologians consider personal value. Cahill reluctantly concludes that it is not possible on rational grounds to demonstrate personal value in the fetus because the fetus lacks the hallmarks of personhood:

I am not convinced that there is a purely 'rational' argument that can demonstrate or refute the personhood of a fetus. One reason is that, generally speaking, 'person' is understood in terms of what is distinctive of or unique to persons, not in terms of minimum criteria for marginal cases. Human beings, angels, and—analogously—God are persons because they possess reason and free will.<sup>222</sup>

In any moral anthropology that considers moral status to rely on a capacity for reason and free will, the infant as well as the fetus must inevitably fall short when it comes to comparing her value with that of an adult.

Such an anthropology represents a judgement that the state of being an adult is in some way inherently more valuable than the state of being an infant. Contemporary moral philosopher David Archard argues that a clear distinction needs to be made between the state represented by childhood—what it is to exist as a normal human who is not an adult—and the *stage* of childhood—that

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<sup>222</sup>Cahill, 'Moral reason, community belonging, and global justice', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer* 289.

is, the period during which a human has not been alive for very long. The fact that the stage of being an adult follows that of being a child says nothing relevant about the relative values of the two states:

How exactly might conceptions of childhood differ? One fundamental line of division lies between thinking of childhood as a *state* and thinking of it as a *stage*. This is the distinction between viewing children as 'being' and as 'becoming'. On the former conception, childhood is a free-standing, independently defined condition; it is not adulthood but its character is not exhausted by this privative fact. On the latter conception childhood occupies a place, or level, within a broader narrative and derives its significance from that narrative—more especially from what succeeds or supplants childhood in the longer story; childhood is not *yet* adulthood and derives much, if not all, of its character from this fact.<sup>223</sup>

According to present-day systematic theologian Dawn DeVries, eighteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher recognised that if childhood is taken to be a quality of persons, rather than an epoch of time, then it can characterise a person at any stage in her life:

[Schleiermacher] argued that childhood and adulthood were best understood not as successive phases of human development but as distinct spiritual perspectives that could coexist in any human being at the same time. Of course, we would expect that young humans would tend more naturally to the child's perspective and older humans to the adult's. But it is wrong when either side exclusively takes over in any stage of human life. Growing up, then, should not mean leaving childhood behind. The insights of childhood are not illusions that must be replaced with the cold hard facts of adult reality.<sup>224</sup>

The confusion that Archard identifies is perhaps not entirely resolved by his distinction between state and stage of childhood, because it is conceptually hard to separate the state of being a child on the one hand from existing in the stage of childhood on the other. The difference between them is easier to

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<sup>223</sup>David Archard, 'The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics', in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 92.

<sup>224</sup>Dawn DeVries, 'Toward a Theology of Childhood', *Interpretation*, 55/2 (2001/04/01 2001), 161–73, 165.

conceptualise as a quality we can call 'childness'.<sup>225</sup> In the context of neurodevelopment and ethics, I take childness to express, for example, certain forms of awareness and reasoning. 'Childness' is obviously distinct from 'childhood' and 'infancy' which simply refer to epochs within a human lifetime. It is also different from 'childishness' (which describes behaviour resembling that of a child and usually carries with it some pejorative sense), and the cognate adjective 'child-like' (which refers to analogy with the child, this time often signifying approval).

Conceptually separating the quality of childness from the epoch of childhood clarifies Schleiermacher's assertion that at any age an individual person might simultaneously possess both childness and its corollary adulthood. 'Childness' connotes a quality that children, and particularly infants, exemplify but it does not of itself express anything about the age of the person who possesses it. A normal human is born with only childness but, over the course of the following years, childness slowly gives way to adulthood as the infant exchanges some moral properties for others and she gradually changes into an adult. As an older child, she possesses both qualities of childness and of adulthood, in proportions that change as childhood unfolds. The infant represents the human in whom childness is most clearly and completely manifest, but childness also characterises other humans, especially older children. The impact of Singer's profoundly different evaluations of childness

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<sup>225</sup>There is an analogy is with colour, that Aquinas uses to explain the concept of hypostasis. A specific object is a substance (Greek *ousia*) that exists independently of other objects. The whiteness of the object is a quality of it. There is a sense in which whiteness is individual (Greek *hypostasis*) because it characterises a specific object (S. Th. I q93 a9). But it is also universal because it denotes something that everything described as 'white' has in common, even if the degree varies: 'In another way, we speak of things as alike which communicate in form according to the same formality, though not according to the same measure, but according to more or less, as something less white is said to be like another thing more white; and this is imperfect likeness'. (S. Th. I q4 a3)

and adulthood is not, therefore, limited to assessing the value of infants.<sup>226</sup> If Singer is right that the characteristics he associates with adulthood (for example, self-awareness) are inherently more valuable than those of childhood (for example, being dependent on others) then it must be true that the life of a three-year-old is less valuable than the life of a ten-year-old because three-year-olds are less self-aware and more dependent than ten-year-olds.

Singer builds his defence of infanticide on an epistemological claim as well as an empirical one. It is epistemological, not only in the sense that it expresses the way Singer understands the world, but also in the sense that it is a claim about the relative value of two different ways that normal humans have of knowing about the universe. What Singer has urged is that the difference between childhood and adulthood is so great that the preferences of a being exhibiting the first are more important than the life of a being who exhibits only the other.<sup>227</sup> While Christian objections to Singer's general theory have paved the way for a response by re-focusing the object of moral action on broad ideas of human nature and flourishing rather than on narrow ideas of rational autonomy and preferences, they have not challenged that belief that the quality of childhood itself, exemplified in its most extreme form by the normal infant, is of less value than the quality of adulthood.

Showing that Singer is wrong in some of his empirical claims is an important assertion of truth, but on its own it does not extract all the teeth from Singer's argument that the infant's life is of no value. It remains to show that

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<sup>226</sup>Nor, as we shall see later in contrast, is Jesus' approval of some aspects of childhood limited to its value in infants or children.

<sup>227</sup>In the sense that the moral 'rightness' of preserving the infant's life is explained only by the suffering her death would cause to other people, while the moral 'rightness' of preserving the adult's life is explained by her own desire to live.

what the infant can do is morally relevant. With respect to their cognition, individual human infants have more in common with each other than they do with their future selves or with other adults in the present moment. Singer claims that there is something about 'what matters morally' that means the way an infant perceives, and understands what she perceives, cannot lead to valuation of her own life. The only way in which cognitive ability can confer personal value, Singer insists, is if it can enable positive conscious experiences. Since it is hard to see how empirical evidence could prove that infant awareness allows the infant to have a positive conscious experience as a result of continuing to live, that leaves open the possibility that the infant's cognitive abilities are not relevant to the value of the infant's life. Singer's argument for infanticide might still stand, at least on its own terms. Demonstrating that the infant can do more than Singer believes she can is not enough; for the purposes of the teleological argument I am setting out for an audience of clinicians, it is necessary to show that what the infant is, in fact, able to do explains why the clinician should not kill her.

The second part of a convincing Christian response to Singer, then, will be to challenge his claim about the nature of personal value by setting out an alternative explanation that makes clear how childness is relevant to it. Having agreed with Singer that ethics is a teleological endeavour, but having rejected preferences in favour of flourishing as the object of ethical behaviour, Christian ethics needs to explain on the basis of flourishing why it might be wrong to kill even a being who is unaware of her future. In order to explain the value of the infant's life on the Christian eudaimonist view, the infant's distinctive way of

thinking must be reflected in the distinctive way in which the infant's existence promotes her own flourishing and the flourishing of others.

Theologians have shown that Singer's general theory is misdirected because human flourishing is a more defensible object of moral action than mere preference satisfaction. The key to a convincing theological objection on the specific question of infanticide is in a theological anthropology which shows that human flourishing will be jeopardised by killing the normal infant, just as it would be by killing the normal adult.

### Chapter 3. How infants think: the evidence

The original meaning of the word 'infant' is simply 'one who is not yet able to speak'.<sup>228</sup> In common usage, it means 'a young child' (or even, as in the romance languages, 'a child') and there is a technical medical sense in which it refers specifically to a child whose age is between birth and twelve months of age. The sense in which Singer uses the term is none of those but derives rather from the internal logic of his own argument for infanticide. In *Practical Ethics*, the term 'infant' simply means a human who is indifferent to its continuing existence because it is too young to have acquired the cognitive skills that would enable it to prefer to continue to live. Singer does not, for example, commit himself to how long infancy might persist.<sup>229</sup>

Defining the term in that way already excludes the possibility that on Singer's terms an infant might have full moral value as a person. His authority is John Locke, who defines a person as 'a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places'.<sup>230</sup> Singer suggests that, when it comes to holding a relevant preference to continue to live, that sense of continuity must extend into an individual's future as well as reaching back into her past. Importantly, his point is not about an actual future but about the idea of a future that an individual might have in the here and now. An individual is entitled to have that

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<sup>228</sup>From its Latin root *in-* ('not') and *-fant* from *fari* ('speaking').

<sup>229</sup>Although he suggests that restricting infanticide to children below a month of age would provide an 'ample safety margin' suggesting he expects infancy based on his definition to persist for more than four weeks after birth (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 153.),

<sup>230</sup>Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Book II: Ideas*, 115.

idea, and on Singer's own terms it would usually be morally wrong to take it from her by killing her. Singer is not seeking to make personal value reliant on shamanic powers of prevision but on a present capacity which, he believes, infants entirely lack.<sup>231</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not always easy to obtain a clear or consistent understanding of the moral status Singer wishes to accord to those he describes as infants. The fetus, he believes, experiences nothing at all: 'The fetus itself, if killed before awareness commences, experiences nothing different than it would have experienced if it had not been conceived—for in both cases there are no experiences at all'.<sup>232</sup> He goes on to suggest the experience of the fetus and that of the infant are the same: 'Now we have to face the fact that these arguments apply to the new-born baby as much as to the fetus.'<sup>233</sup>

On that basis, it seems Singer should conclude that the infant too can have no experiences. Elsewhere, however, he concedes that the infant is capable of experiencing pleasure and suffering and on that basis accords her the inherent value of a 'merely conscious' being.<sup>234</sup> The fact that she cannot prefer to continue to live, however, means that in deciding whether the infant live or die the agent need only concern herself with the preferences of others.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup>A similar idea emerges in James Rachels' term 'realisable goals'. The goals themselves relate to events in the future, but the utilitarian value they confer on an individual's current existence is in the fact that they are held in the present moment (James Rachels, *The end of life: euthanasia and morality* (Studies in bioethics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 64–65.)

<sup>232</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 142.

<sup>233</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>234</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>235</sup>Christian theologian and medical ethicist Andrew Sloane summarises Singer's position thus: 'he claims [that] human infants, while clearly sentient, in that they can experience pleasure and pain, are not persons, for they are not rational, are unable to communicate, and have no sense of themselves as existing over time. Thus, while it is wrong, on preference utilitarian grounds, to cause an infant to suffer, it is not wrong to kill an infant. Indeed, in light of the preferences of the infant's parents not to rear, say, a disabled child, it may be permissible, even right, to kill the infant.' (Sloane, 'Singer, preference utilitarianism and infanticide', 57.) Sloane's summary is

Singer seems to be claiming that a living infant has some inherent value, while at the same time insisting that the *life* of an infant has none.<sup>236</sup>

One reason for the confusion is that, without showing his working, Singer consistently conflates the moral status of several different sorts of being. He presumes that the normal infant brain functions the same in all relevant ways as that of an adult whose brain is damaged, so that the moral status of the two 'merely conscious' beings is equivalent to one another, as well as to other merely conscious beings such as non-human animals:

[This] gives us a reason for preferring to use human infants—orphans perhaps—or severely retarded human beings for experiments, rather than adults, since infants and retarded humans would also have no idea of what was going to happen to them. So far as this argument is concerned nonhuman animals and infants and retarded humans are in the same category ...<sup>237</sup>

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concise and correct, but in introducing the concept of personhood and the criteria of rationality, ability to communicate and a sense of self over time, Sloane slightly over-simplifies Singer's position. Singer considers rationality, ability to communicate and sense of continuing existence as spectral characteristics rather than as pass/fail criteria for personhood. The infant probably does have a sense of herself over time, since she is abundantly able to learn and so must have a capacity for memory. Whether or not the infant is rational, however, depends on what is meant by 'rational'. An infant certainly perceives, thinks and learns. In consequentialist theories, what is morally relevant about a being's cognition is determined by the specific theory under consideration. In preference utilitarianism, what is morally relevant about 'rationality' is defined *ex hypothesi* as a capacity to hold preferences. An infant can prefer some things (for example, she can prefer her mother's voice over a stranger's) and so, on that reasoning, there is a defensible sense in which the infant is rational even if rationality is considered as a capacity to hold preferences. What is beyond dispute, however, is that, given current technology, the infant is unable to communicate. On the basis of current scientific knowledge, it is quite plausible that what passes for an inability on the infant's part to reason or understand herself over time is no more than an inability to communicate. In conflating in the single term 'person' the three characteristics of rationality, ability to communicate, and sense of self existing over time Sloane risks obscuring an important weakness in Singer's argument; namely his lack of knowledge about the cognitive processes of the infant.

<sup>236</sup>The implication here that the value of a person is not exhausted by an agent's obligation to prolong her life is inconsistent with Singer's later assertion that a patient's value is wholly expressed by the doctor's willingness to prolong her life: '[intervening to prolong life in some individuals while choosing not to do so in others] is inconsistent with the idea that all human life is of equal value. For the distinction is standardly used to justify withdrawing life support from, for example, a baby with anencephaly, or from an adult with no prospect of recovering consciousness.' Singer, 'Engaging with Christianity', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 40.

<sup>237</sup>Singer, *Animal liberation*, 16. Singer's rhetoric here should not distract from the main point, which is that Singer equates the cognitive abilities of normal infants with those of adults with brain damage. In interpreting Singer's comments, it is important to note that the term 'retarded', which is offensive in the extreme in the UK, was at the time more acceptable in the US where

Singer does not cite a source for his conviction that infants (as well as damaged adults) think in the same way as sentient animals. It may have been Bentham's own assertion that: '... a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old.'<sup>238</sup> The implication is that humans pass through a stage in their early development during which their cognitive abilities are those of an animal, and that brain injury can cause them to regress to that stage. It echoes an Aristotelian ontogeny in which, as American philosopher Mathew Lu summarises:

Aristotle holds that no individual animal begins its existence as a full member of its species. Rather, the ontologically distinct animal embryo begins essentially as a plant-like creature (possessed of a nutritive soul) before later manifesting a sensitive soul (and thus becoming animal-like). For human beings there is yet a third stage of development in which the powers of the rational soul are acquired, and it is only at that point that it can properly be called a human being.<sup>239</sup>

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Singer is based. Furthermore, Singer is not actually suggesting that humans be used for experiments. His argument is that if the reason we use animals for experiments is that animals suffer less than humans, then it would be just as reasonable to use certain sorts of human instead. He goes on to point out (correctly) that such studies would be more reliable when it comes to extrapolating the results to human patients.

<sup>238</sup>Bentham, *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*, 311.

<sup>239</sup>M. Lu, 'Aristotle on abortion and infanticide', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 53/1 (2013), 47–62, 50. Aristotle does not commit himself as to at what point the human acquires a rational soul, and his positions on abortion and infanticide seem, on the face of it, to indicate contradictory ideas. He asserts uncompromisingly that there are some circumstances under which infanticide should certainly be carried out, but also expresses a view that the fetus represents an individual human life from forty days after conception. Lu observes that Aristotle's comments restrict abortion only in places where there is already a societal rule prohibiting infanticide and represent a precautionary principle. The society in which Aristotle lived did not have our benefit of empirical knowledge regarding infant awareness, and he may have believed that even the infant lacked sensation and life. Aristotle recommends a forty-day limit, not because he is sure that reason has entered the fetus at that time but because, on the basis of what was known at the time, he believes himself on safe ground in assuming that before that point it has not done so. Rather than callously permitting society to deny the status of person to some humans, Aristotle might instead be compassionately arguing that there are circumstances under which society should give the status of person even to human infants, whom he believed at the time to lack the essence of personhood. Aristotle's apparently casual acceptance of infanticide would then be quite consistent with his careful restrictions on abortion.

The idea that the cognition of developing humans is the same as that of non-human animals persisted in various forms until the nineteenth century, most notably in the strong recapitulation theories of biologist philosopher Ernst Haeckel. It has, however, now been obsolete for nearly two hundred years.<sup>240</sup> Animals' brains respond well to the demands of their own existence, but they would not be able to meet the cognitive challenges that face the new-born human infant and for which the latter is well-equipped.

Nor is it true that an adult brain becomes the same as an infant's brain if it is injured. A damaged adult human brain is often impaired in its performance of the tasks of adulthood. The normal infant brain, on the other hand, works extremely well and performs highly effectively the specific cognitive tasks that infancy presents. The truth is that the working of a normal infant brain has very little in common with the working of a damaged adult brain or the brain of most non-human animals, beyond the fact that at the moment we cannot usually know what is going on inside it.

The best way to consider Singer's defence of infanticide is perhaps to set aside his problematic parallels with adults, animals and fetuses and focus instead on the distinction he draws between sentience and self-awareness among humans. Singer considers that the infant is sentient but not self-aware. She can experience suffering but, because she is not self-aware, the knowledge that her existence will be shortened cannot be the cause. It is permissible to take her

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<sup>240</sup>Haeckel summarised his theory in the phrase 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'. He supported it with a series of sketches of embryos. His ideas were largely discredited when it became clear that in them Haeckel had deliberately exaggerated the similarities between species (Nick Hopwood, 'Pictures of Evolution and Charges of Fraud. Ernst Haeckel's Embryological Illustrations', *Isis*, 97/2 (2006), 260–301).

life, not only if the infant herself is suffering, but also if killing the infant will augment the pleasure or reduce the suffering of those who are self-aware.

### **3.1 Singer's appeal to empirical evidence**

Singer believes that his markedly different valuation of some human lives over others is robustly underpinned by empirically demonstrable facts. In his view, that dependence on objective truth sets his own willingness to consider some humans worthless apart from that of less scrupulous authorities. In a rare reference to events in his own life, Singer describes the astonished dismay he felt at the reception given to earlier editions of *Practical Ethics*:

What I did not expect was that some would try to prevent the book's arguments being discussed. Yet in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, opposition to the views on euthanasia contained in this book reached such a peak that conferences or lectures at which I was invited to speak were cancelled, and courses taught by professors at German universities in which the book was to be used were subjected to such repeated disruption that they had to be abandoned.<sup>241</sup>

German neonatologist Michael Obladen observes that infanticide is a particularly sensitive topic to twenty-first century Germans, still living in the shadow of a time in modern history when their government mandated the killing

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<sup>241</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. viii. See also Peter Singer, 'Bioethics and academic freedom', *Bioethics*, 4/1 (Jan 1990), 33–44. The protests were orchestrated, and largely carried out, by people with disabilities who felt his views legitimised and perpetuated societal judgments about the lack of value of their own lives. Singer dismissed those concerns because they: '... failed to point out that my views are no threat to anyone capable of expressing a preference for continued life, and thus obviously no threat to anyone capable of commenting on what I have written or said.' Singer's apparent surprise at his reception is nevertheless difficult to understand. If, in conversation with a short man, Singer had said 'I want to kill all short men other than you. Let me explain to you why I believe that is the right thing to do', he might not be surprised to find his interlocutor reluctant to engage in the discussion. Later in the same article, Singer chooses to blame religious fundamentalism for his reception: 'Bioethics is a discipline that leads to the questioning of values and ethical doctrines that had previously been treated as sacrosanct. Often these doctrines are closely connected with religious beliefs, and we did not need Khomeini to remind us that religious fundamentalism is often intolerant of free speech.' *Ibid.*, 43–44.)

of children for reasons that were, at least at first sight, quite similar to the reasons Singer gives today:

Killing handicapped children was organised in Hitler's Chancellery from 1939, targeting infants with idiocy and mongolism, micro- or hydrocephaly, malformed limbs, head, or spine, and palsies. A system of reporting and rating such infants was established, leading to their admission to one of thirty 'Special Children's Departments'. There, sedatives were applied in a dose depressing respiration which led to a slow death disguised as natural. A hundred physicians were directly involved in killing, and many more including eminent paediatricians in reporting infants.<sup>242</sup>

Singer agrees with the Nazi claim that there are humans who are not persons, and he manifestly embraces the same conclusion that humans who lack certain characteristics can be killed at the behest of others.<sup>243</sup> Despite that superficial similarity, Singer emphatically rejects the parallel with Nazism and is in no doubt that the Nazis acted immorally:

The principle of equal consideration of interests shows straightforwardly why the most blatant forms of racism, like that of the Nazis, are wrong: the Nazis based their policies only on what would be good for the 'Aryan' race, and the sufferings of Jews, Gypsies and Slavs were of no concern to them.<sup>244</sup>

Singer does not, however, consider that the Nazis were wrong because they considered it reasonable to kill some humans. Their actions were wrong, he explains, because the criteria they used to decide what sort of humans it was reasonable to kill were not adequately informed by evidence:

... if one accepts abortion on the grounds provided in the preceding chapter, the case for killing other human beings, in certain circumstances, is strong. As I shall try to show in this chapter, however, this is not something to be regarded with horror, and the use of the Nazi analogy is utterly misleading.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup>M. Obladen, 'Despising the weak: long shadows of infant murder in Nazi Germany', *Arch Dis Child Fetal Neonatal Ed*, 101/3 (May 2016), F190–4.

<sup>243</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 167.

<sup>244</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>245</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.

Richard Hare, Singer's early teacher in moral philosophy and originator of preference utilitarianism, uses Nazism to highlight the danger of accepting arguments that are made on the basis of empirical evidence without critical scrutiny of how that evidence has been interpreted. A hypothesis should rationally explain available evidence.<sup>246</sup> According to Hare, the Nazi claim that non-Germans could legitimately be killed was based on a hypothesis that, although it was rationally defensible in itself, was not referable to evidence of objective truth. As a result the argument ultimately fails:

This looks at first sight very like some perfectly good factual arguments that we mentioned earlier; we have the statement that the facts are such that a certain moral principle applies. But the argument suffers from two fatal weaknesses.<sup>247</sup>

The first 'fatal weakness' Hare identifies is that it is impossible to know empirically whether what has been claimed as objective fact is, in reality, true:

In the first place, no determinate criterion is given for discovering whether this factor is present in the heredity or blood of any particular person. No empirical tests are offered for determining the truth of the assertion that members of Germanic races actually have this mark of natural superiority to members of other races. So the argument rests on statements of 'fact' whose truth is in principle not ascertainable; and therefore we can never know whether the premisses of the argument, or

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<sup>246</sup>In his exposition of falsificationism (the basis of what has come to be called the 'scientific method') philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper points out that the most that empirical evidence can ever achieve is to demonstrate that a hypothesis is wrong. The number of hypotheses that can be constructed to explain what we observe is vast, and what we observe cannot tell us which of those many plausible explanations is the true one. But a hypothesis is certainly wrong if it cannot predict or explain what we observe. The distinctiveness of science, according to Popper, is that, unlike mythology, science makes claims that are vulnerable to that sort of disproof: 'Thus my proposal was, and is, that it is this second boldness, together with the readiness to look for tests and refutations, which distinguished "empirical" science from non-science, and especially from pre-scientific myths and metaphysics.' (Karl R. Popper and Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The philosophy of Karl Popper* (Library of living philosophers; La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974), pp. 980–81.). Popper observes that myths and metaphysics are inherently unprovable, but he rejects the conclusion that they are unimportant or untrue and dismisses the idea that science disproves theism: 'It may be well to mention at once one important difference between the authors: a difference in religious belief. One of us (Eccles) is a believer in God and the supernatural, while the other (Popper) may be described as an agnostic. Each of us not only deeply respects the position of the other, but sympathizes with it. This difference of opinion should be quite immaterial in our discussion of some of the problems, especially of the purely scientific ones.' (Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The self and its brain* (Berlin, London: Springer International, 1977).)

<sup>247</sup>Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, 208.

its conclusion, are true. We do not need to be logical positivists to reject this sort of argument; but if anyone does accept some kind of verification theory of meaning, he will go further, and say that the premisses of such arguments are not merely untestable but meaningless.<sup>248</sup>

There is, Hare goes on, a second fatal weakness. Even if some reliable empirical demonstration were to exist, Nazism would still have to show how the difference between them explains why non-Germans are of less inherent value than Germans:

In the second place, even if the premisses of these arguments were all right, the users of them have not told us *why* the moral conclusions follow from the premisses. In order that the presence of this blood-factor in Germans should justify their domination of other races, it has to be the case that the factor confers a right to dominate; and it is hard to see why this should be so.<sup>249</sup>

The conclusions reached by Singer in relation to infants are parallel to those espoused by the hypothetical Nazi in Hare's illustration. Earlier, we saw that Singer asserts that the infant lacks self-awareness, that she lacks autonomy, that she is not 'biographically alive' and that infants are not persons so that any infant can be replaced by another. He uses those four different ways to express the same belief that human infants are not harmed by being killed. Just as the Nazis claimed it was an inherent characteristic of Germans that their lives were of greater value than those of other races, Singer is claiming that it is an inherent characteristic of adults that their lives are more valuable than those of infants. That hypothesis does not succeed simply by showing empirically that infants are different from adults. In order to defend it, Singer must show that the difference explains why the life of an adult is of more value than that of an infant.

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<sup>248</sup>Ibid., 209.

<sup>249</sup>Ibid.

There are two ways in which, on his own utilitarian terms, Singer might be right in that hypothesis. He might be right if evidence were to show that the infant lacks any capacity for apprehending her existence at all; that she is unaware that she exists and does not care if her existence ceases prematurely. That empirical claim hangs by the thread of scientific data.

Even if he were demonstrably wrong in that first claim, Singer's conclusion in respect of infanticide might still be defensible (again, on his own terms) if he were able to show that the specific mode in which the infant apprehends her existence cannot confer value on her continuing existence; in other words, that such a mode of perceiving and making sense of the universe that does not 'count' when it comes to considering the value of an infant's life.

In this chapter, I will address the first of those claims by setting out some of what we now know to be true about what the infant's cognitive abilities are, and how that might impact on Singer's hypothesis that the infant is not self-aware in the sense of being able to construct a biographical narrative. In the remainder of this dissertation I will address Singer's second claim by considering critically and from a theological perspective the idea that the abilities, perceptions and constructions that humans possess during infancy are inherently less valuable than those they possess as adults.

### **3.2 Infant cognition: no longer a complete mystery**

The understanding of childness that Singer sets out in 2011 essentially recapitulates the earlier views of utilitarian philosopher Michael Tooley who, in 1972, believed he already knew the relevant facts about infant cognition:

[Because] it is virtually certain that an infant at such a stage of its development does not possess the concept of a continuing self, and thus does not possess a serious right to life, there is excellent reason to believe that infanticide is morally permissible in most cases where it is otherwise desirable. ... the practical moral problem can thus be satisfactorily handled by choosing some period of time, such as a week after birth, as the interval during which infanticide will be permitted ... This interval could then be modified once psychologists have established the point at which a human organism comes to believe that it is a continuing subject of experiences and other mental states.<sup>250</sup>

Tooley was correct to anticipate that over time important new empirical evidence would appear. At the time he was writing, theories regarding the cognitive processes in infants were difficult to prove or to refute, but over the last twenty or thirty years techniques have been developed that render it possible to make objective observations about the workings of the infant mind. The advent of functional magnetic resonance imaging in the early 1990s was particularly important, allowing researchers to identify which parts of the brain are functioning during certain actions or thoughts. It is, in effect, becoming possible to 'read the mind' of some individuals who are physically unable to articulate words.<sup>251</sup> The techniques, sophisticated though they are, do not yet allow us to access the specific thoughts of pre-verbal infants. They do, however, provide some evidence in respect of the similarities and differences between infant and adult thinking that does not depend on inferences on the part of investigators.

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<sup>250</sup>Tooley, 'Abortion and Infanticide'.

<sup>251</sup>There are several examples. fMRI has, for example, allowed individuals to spell out words without movement (Bettina Sorger et al., 'A Real-Time fMRI-Based Spelling Device Immediately Enabling Robust Motor-Independent Communication', *Current Biology*, 22/14 (7/24/ 2012), 1333–38.). There are ways of enabling those who have lost the power of speech to control voice-synthesisers using their brain alone, though at present they still require the patient to have previously had the capacity to form words physically (H. Akbari et al., 'Towards reconstructing intelligible speech from the human auditory cortex', *Sci Rep*, 9/1 (Jan 29 2019), 874).

It seems likely from the tone of his writing that Tooley was expecting science to confirm the view he already held, and perhaps to show that relevant awareness appeared even later in infancy than he was suggesting. Sadly for the defence of infanticide that Singer wishes to build on Tooley's foundations more than forty years later, in the event science has largely shown the reverse.<sup>252</sup> A substantial body of relevant research has appeared in respect of self-awareness in the human infant and, while the question is perhaps not yet beyond doubt, the weight of evidence that has accumulated overwhelmingly militates against Tooley's 1972 assertion.

### **3.3 What the evidence actually shows, and what it does not**

As technological advances have allowed evidence of the infant's cognitive abilities to begin to accumulate, it has become apparent that none of the convictions on which Singer's argument relies (that the infant is not self-aware, that she cannot see herself as a distinct entity, or that she has no concept of time passing) is obviously correct. Furthermore, it is also becoming clear that, from the moment she is born, the infant possesses in high degree some cognitive capabilities that are relevant to any reasonable account of personal value.

What follows is not an attempt to review the entire canon of empirical neurodevelopmental psychology, which would be an impossible task in a large and expanding field, but to set out the conclusions drawn by some of its

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<sup>252</sup>For example. fMRI shows that the infant's existential experience of pain is similar to that of the adult (S. Goksan et al., 'fMRI reveals neural activity overlap between adult and infant pain', *Elife*, 4 (2015)).

practitioners that are relevant to Singer's claims, and to supply some illustrative references to the evidence by which they have reached those conclusions.

### **3.3.i It is not clear that infants lack self-awareness**

In the years before the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*, there was already evidence that infants apprehend the universe in ways that are germane to Singer's argument. Singer, however, seems to be unaware of most of that evidence. He appeals almost exclusively to one test:

Self-awareness ... has been tested by putting a coloured dye on a part of the animal where it will be seen in the mirror but cannot be seen otherwise—for example, on an ape, the forehead. (The dye is put on when the animal is asleep so that she does not notice.) Then the animal is given a mirror, with which she has previously become familiar. If she looks in the mirror and then touches the dyed spot, this indicates that she knows that the image in the mirror is herself.<sup>253</sup>

The mirror self-recognition test was the work of biopsychologist Gordon Gallup, who developed it in the late 1960s to assess self-awareness in non-human animals.<sup>254</sup> Gallup's research was important because it revealed a clear distinction between great apes, most of whom who 'pass' the test, and monkeys, who all 'fail' it.

Despite the fact that it was developed to study behaviour in non-humans, Singer adduces the mirror test as empirical proof of his hypothesis that infant humans lack self-awareness: 'All the great apes can pass the mirror test ... Human children less than one year old typically fail the mirror test, but by the time they are eighteen months old, most can pass it.'<sup>255</sup> Drawing attention to

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<sup>253</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 101. Singer's summary here is accurate.

<sup>254</sup>G. G. Gallup, Jr., 'Chimpanzees: self-recognition', *Science*, 167/3914 (Jan 2 1970), 86–7.

<sup>255</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 102. Singer's reluctance to subject his beliefs about the infant to more rigorous empirical scrutiny suggests a readiness to abandon reason for rhetoric. The

the human infant's typical inability to pass the mirror test before the age of eighteen months suits Singer's rhetorical purpose because the test measures something that is plausibly related to personhood, and it is something some humans cannot do while some non-humans can.

When the first edition of *Practical Ethics* was published in 1979, moreover, it was a reasonable interpretation of what was known at the time. A painstaking 1984 review of empirical evidence around self-recognition, carried out by psychologist James Anderson, suggests that it was then generally accepted by authorities in the field that passing the mirror test indicates a form of awareness that humans do not demonstrate until after they have left infancy:

... there is general agreement surrounding certain aspects of the infant's developing ability to recognize itself. For example, mirror-guided responding to otherwise invisible marks, which *must* be based on self-recognition, does not occur before 15 months of age, emerges in some infants shortly thereafter, and is characteristic of most infants by the age of 2 years.<sup>256</sup>

By the time the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics* appeared, however, scientists in the field were no longer sure what the mirror test demonstrates in humans. Philippe Rochat is an experimental psychologist at Emory University in the United States who has a particular research interest in early development and emergence of the concept of self. He trained under Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, whose seminal book *The Child's Conception of the World* is usually regarded as the first serious work of developmental or child psychology.<sup>257</sup>

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general willingness of utilitarian philosophers to recommend significant changes in practical moral behaviour on the basis of abstract lines of reasoning alone causes New Zealand philosopher Nicholas Agar some concern: 'I accuse those who seek to translate these conclusions into moral advice of a dangerous overconfidence.' (Agar, 'How to insure against utilitarian overconfidence', 162).

<sup>256</sup>J. R. Anderson, 'The development of self-recognition: a review', *Dev Psychobiol*, 17/1 (Jan 1984), 35–49, 47. (author's italics)

<sup>257</sup>Jean Piaget, Joan Tomlinson, and Andrew Tomlinson, *The child's conception of the world* (International library of psychology, philosophy, and scientific method; London, New York: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., Ltd. Harcourt, Brace, 1929).

Rochat explains that there are many ways of passing the mirror test, some of which have little to do with self-awareness *per se*: ‘ ... there are different ways of passing the test, including solipsistic, nonsocial ways. Interestingly, multiple studies demonstrate that autistic children passing the mirror mark test do so with flat affect, displaying “completely neutral” expressions, with no signs of either coyness or embarrassment.’<sup>258</sup>

Valéry Legrain is a cognitive neuropsychologist at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium. Summarising the conclusions of a series of his own studies into self-awareness, Legrain comments that a person is aware of herself in a number of different ways simultaneously: ‘Our results support the notion that self-awareness is not a monolithic, all-or-none ability’.<sup>259</sup> A man walking down a street will be aware of the physical boundaries of his own body, and what happens when the wind and rain of the material universe interact with those boundaries. He will be aware of his physical sensations of coldness and wetness, and he will be aware that they concern him in a way that the coldness and wetness of others do not. He might also commence an internal dialogue along the lines of how unlucky he is, imagine how much better his life would have been if there had been no tube strike, and anticipate with pleasure the warm bath he will have when he gets home. The reflections are quite different from one another, but they are all forms of self-awareness.

Singer does not acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of self-awareness, but surely it matters to his argument. There is clearly a morally important distinction to be made, for example, between the mere awareness of

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<sup>258</sup>Philippe Rochat, Tanya Broesch, and Katherine Jayne, 'Social awareness and early self-recognition', *Conscious Cogn*, 21/3 (Sep 2012), 1491–7, 1496.

<sup>259</sup>L. Legrain, A. Cleeremans, and A. Destrebecqz, 'Distinguishing three levels in explicit self-awareness', *Conscious Cogn*, 20/3 (Sep 2011), 578–79.

one's physical position and movements in space (kinaesthetic self-awareness), and the kind of 'existential' self-awareness that allows the individual to be aware of what is going on in her own mind. On the basis of what is known about which sides of the brain are associated with different intramental functions, Canadian experimental psychologist Alain Morin concludes that 'passing' the mirror test demonstrates the kinaesthetic aspect of self-awareness rather than the more morally relevant sense of being conscious of one's existential self through self-description ('How wet and cold I am') or autobiography ('How much better my life would have been if the tube trains were running, and how much better it will be when I get home and have a hot bath'). 'Organisms that display MSR [mirror self-recognition]' says Morin, 'most probably do not possess introspective self-awareness.'<sup>260</sup> If personal value is, as Singer claims, reliant on self-awareness then, according to Morin, it seems difficult to argue that the mirror test demonstrates anything relevant at all.

Moreover, even if it were still agreed that passing the mirror test probably demonstrates the *presence* of relevant awareness, it would be fallacious to conclude on that basis alone that failing the test reliably demonstrates the *absence* of such awareness. Some of the reasons for failing the test result from well-developed characteristics of the human infant that are relevant to moral agency. For example, children are less likely to respond to the spot on their forehead if the investigator himself has a spot too:

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<sup>260</sup>A. Morin, 'Self-recognition, theory-of-mind, and self-awareness: what side are you on?', *Laterality*, 16/3 (May 2011), 367–83. That piece of evidence alone casts serious doubt on Singer's claims about personhood in infants and some of his assumptions about nonhuman persons. Morin's view is supported by the observation that Capuchin monkeys who are not self-aware can be trained to pass the mirror test (see P. G. Roma et al., 'Mark tests for mirror self-recognition in capuchin monkeys (*Cebus apella*) trained to touch marks', *Am J Primatol*, 69/9 (Sep 2007), 989–1000.). Presumably the Capuchin monkeys are learning the movements needed to pass the test, rather than acquiring existential self-awareness.

[When parent and researcher were marked in addition to the child], children displayed significantly more hesitation while removing the mark, often touching it without removing it or, if so, promptly putting the mark back onto their forehead. In the Classic condition, only one child showed such hesitation. These results suggest that from the outset, mirror self-recognition can refer to social awareness. This link is interpreted as the trademark of human self-consciousness, a deeply rooted “looking glass” self-awareness.<sup>261</sup>

The difference between the two groups indicates that the child’s response is conditioned by what she sees in the people around her. The human infant’s capacity for sociality with other humans therefore represents an important potential confounding factor in interpreting the mirror test. Singer acknowledges that, in animals, failing the test does not reliably exclude self-awareness: ‘Passing the mirror test may show self-awareness but failing it does not prove that an animal is not self-aware’.<sup>262</sup> He does not, however, seem to recognise the significance of that limitation when it comes to the risk of underestimating self-awareness in human infants.

The mirror test is relevant to Singer’s argument for better treatment of non-humans, because evidence that a non-human can pass the mirror test provides convincing evidence of some sort of self-awareness and therefore a capacity to suffer. But even if we accept the conclusion that it is morally acceptable to take the life of a being who lacks self-awareness, the mirror test is not relevant to Singer’s argument for infanticide, because an infant who is relevantly aware on Singer’s terms might nevertheless fail the mirror test.

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<sup>261</sup>Rochat, Broesch, and Jayne, 'Social awareness and early self-recognition'.

<sup>262</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 244.

### 3.3.ii Infants perceive themselves to be distinct entities

The ability to perceive oneself as a distinct entity is a difficult capacity to establish, partly because there are many different ways in which that distinctness might be conceived. It might be no more than a recognition that others occupy a different physical space from oneself, for example, but it could also refer more broadly to isolation from the influence of others. To complicate things further, the sense of being separate from others depends not only on an awareness of oneself, but on an awareness of others.<sup>263</sup>

Childness certainly encompasses some of the cognitive capabilities the infant human needs to be aware of that separateness. The conception that an infant is unaware of herself as an individual seems to have its roots in a Victorian view that, according to Rochat, has long ago been consigned by science to obsolescence:

Recent empirical findings suggest that infants do not come to the world with the exclusive expression of self-obliviousness ... Contrary to the assumption of many classic theories of child development, infants are not born in a state of fusion or confusion with environment (the “booming, buzzing, confusion” proposed by William James [in]1890).<sup>264</sup>

Rochat reports that the infant already knows herself to be physically distinct from the rest of the universe by the time she is two months old: ‘By the end of

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<sup>263</sup>Autonomy can be seen as the moral consequence of the awareness of self as separate from others. Moral philosopher Onora O’Neill points out that: ‘[Autonomy] is generally seen as a matter of independence, or at least as a capacity for independent decisions and action. This conception of individual autonomy sees it as relational; autonomy is always autonomy *from* something’ Onora O’Neill, *Autonomy and trust in bioethics* (Gifford lectures; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23. (my italics)

<sup>264</sup>Philippe Rochat, ‘Five levels of self-awareness as they unfold early in life’, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 12/4 (2003), 717–31, 722. The reference is to William James who wrote in 1890 that: ‘[A]ny number of impressions, from any number of sensory sources, falling simultaneously on a mind which has not yet experienced them separately, will fuse into a single undivided object for that mind. ... The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great booming, buzzing confusion.’ William James, *The principles of psychology* (Authorized edn., Dover books on philosophy and psychology; New York: Dover, 1950). It is interesting that in those early, pre-psychology days James considers the infant’s obliviousness to result from a state of over-alertness and excessive receptiveness rather than, as Tooley and Singer suggest, lacking important forms of awareness.

the second month, infants show clear signs that in addition to self-world differentiation, they also have a sense of how their own body is situated in relation to other entities in the environment (Level 2).<sup>265</sup>

She also knows herself to be distinct from other individuals. Anderson, who in 1984 believed that the mirror test demonstrates something relevant to self-recognition, also notes that infants who are too young to pass it are nevertheless already capable of distinguishing between themselves and others: 'Infants as young as 3 months are differentially responsive to a self-reflection and a live peer'.<sup>266</sup> She has already developed the concept of 'contingency' that underlies autonomy; she understands that, even though they look the same, there is an important difference between a being whose body she can control and one that she cannot. On the first day of life, infants already distinguish their own touch from that of others:

In a recent study, we compared [rooting] responses in 24 hour old infants following either a tactile stimulation originating from the index finger of the experimenter or from self-stimulation, infants spontaneously bringing one of their hands in contact with a cheek. Systematic comparison shows that neonates do root significantly more to external compared to self-stimulation.<sup>267</sup>

That sense of awareness of self goes beyond a sense of physical separation from others. Anderson notes that infants of less than a day old respond differently to recordings of their own voice from those of other babies of the same age:

[In 1982, Martin and Clark] investigated the possibility of an 'inborn empathic distress reaction' in human neonates less than 1 day old. They found that neonates responded differently to hearing tapes of themselves crying earlier in the day from tapes of another infant crying. Crying infants who heard their own cry became calm, whereas crying infants who heard another infant's cry continued crying. Calm infants

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<sup>265</sup>Rochat, 'Five levels of self-awareness as they unfold early in life', 723.

<sup>266</sup>Anderson, 'The development of self-recognition: a review'.

<sup>267</sup>Rochat, 'Five levels of self-awareness as they unfold early in life', 722.

who heard their own cry remained calm, whereas calm infants who heard another infant's cry tended to begin crying.<sup>268</sup>

The significance of Martin and Clark's observation, Anderson continues, is that it suggests a meaningful sense in which infants are self-aware that has nothing to do with visually recognising their likeness in a mirror: 'the findings would seem to have implications for this area, specifically raising the possibility that the study of self-recognition could be viably extended to other modalities.'

Whether awareness of self is considered merely as exclusive occupation of a certain physical space, or as a more sophisticated distinctiveness from other individuals in the universe, empirical research makes it clear that it is within the compass of even the very young infant and is therefore part of what constitutes 'childness'.

### **3.3.iii Infants have memory**

Even in the face of evidence that the infant is, at least in some sense, self-aware, Singer's conclusion might still be valid if that self-awareness does not continue for long enough for the infant to have a meaningful understanding of her life extending over time. We do not yet have the technology to establish definitively that infants have a sense of time passing. We do know, however, that over the first few months of life the infant is able to acquire new skills and understanding at a rate that is frankly staggering.

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<sup>268</sup>Anderson, 'The development of self-recognition: a review', 48. The reference is to Grace B. Martin and Russell D. Clark, 'Distress crying in neonates: Species and peer specificity', *Developmental Psychology*, 18/1 (1982), 3–9.

Alison Gopnik is a neuropsychologist and philosopher whose doctoral research in Oxford in the late 1970s examined development of the concepts behind language, including self-awareness and awareness of what is 'non-self', in children between one and two years old. Over the past three decades, Gopnik has carried out a series of studies in developmental psychology. Her book, entitled *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love and the Meaning of Life* was published two years before the most recent edition of *Practical Ethics*.<sup>269</sup> In it, Gopnik reviews the results of her own research and that of others in the field. As the title suggests, Gopnik's main conclusion is that the cognition that characterises childness, while distinct from the cognition of adults, is an effective tool for human meaning-making. Gopnik shows, for example, that there are some ways in which the infant's memory is superior to that of the adult:

... infants develop endogenous attention much later, and it is still developing during the preschool years. Moreover, and probably correlated with this fact, infants and young children appear to have less focused attention than older children—for example, they show better incidental memory.<sup>270</sup>

Incidental memory is the capacity to register and recall perceptions that result from awareness of the environment in general, as opposed to specific elements in it. It is hard to see how the discovery that an infant has a 'better incidental memory' than older children can be consistent with Singer's conclusion that infants are unaware of themselves existing over time.

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<sup>269</sup>Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: what children's minds tell us about truth love & the meaning of life* (London: Bodley Head, 2009).

<sup>270</sup>Alison Gopnik, 'Why babies are more conscious than we are', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 30/5-6 (2007), 503–04. Of course, even very complex social behaviour could simply be mimicry, rather than representing true understanding. But mimicry too is dependent on memory, a capacity for linking cause and effect, and for learning from experience. It must be relevant to any meaningful understanding of sustained self-awareness. The perception that something is novel, the concepts of cause and effect, and connexions between them such as memory, mimicry and learned response all entail some understanding of time passing.

Even before birth, there is evidence that the fetus is able to hear adult speech and by the time she is born to emulate some aspects of it. At birth, babies have already acquired some aspects of their parents' accent:

There is compelling evidence that infants are sensitive to prosodic features of their native language long before speech-like babbling sounds are uttered or first words are produced. Indeed, auditory learning starts as early as the third trimester of gestation, and prosodic features are well preserved across the abdominal barrier, whereas phonetic aspects of speech are disrupted, making prosodic characteristics very salient for the human fetus. In newborns, traces of early auditory learning processes are reflected in perceptual preferences for melodies to which they were exposed prenatally ... The observed melody contours of French and German newborns' crying show that they not only have memorized the main intonation patterns of their respective surrounding language but are also able to reproduce these patterns in their own production.<sup>271</sup>

Responding to Giubilini's call for infanticide in 2013, even Tooley himself retreats (albeit cautiously) from the idea the infant lacks any of the recall skills necessary for personhood:

... it seems to me that the requirement that one be capable of attributing value to one's own life in order to have a right to continued existence is too demanding. It seems to me that all that is needed is that mental states existing at different times be psychologically connected—something that can be done simply by desires concerning future mental states, or memories of past mental states. So I think that the concept of a person that Giubilini and Minerva employ should be replaced by the broader concept of a neo-Lockean person.<sup>272</sup>

Tooley does not commit himself in 2013, as he did in 1972, to the idea that the infant is incapable of the sort of cognition that might confer personhood. If, as he now suggests, all that it required is the capacity to remember past mental states, then evidence suggests the infant might be adequately equipped.

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<sup>271</sup>Birgit Mampe et al., 'Newborns' Cry Melody Is Shaped by Their Native Language', *Current Biology*, 19 (2009), 1994–97.

<sup>272</sup>Michael Tooley, 'Philosophy, critical thinking and "After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?"', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 266–72.

### **3.3.iv Infants are adept at recognising and living in relationship with others**

Psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist Peter Fonagy uses the term 'subjective self' to describe the sort of narrative constructed by the normal infant about herself in relation to other persons:

It is suggested that the infant focuses on the attachment figure as a source of reliable information about the world. The construction of the sense of a subjective self is then an aspect of acquiring knowledge about the world through the caregiver's pedagogical communicative displays which in this context focuses on the child's thoughts and feelings.<sup>273</sup>

What that means is that an infant constructs narrative, not on the basis of her separateness from others, but on the basis of a person-network of which the infant sees herself and her parents to be a part:

A central characteristic of these models of primary 'intersubjectivity' is a shared emphasis on the continuity from infancy to adulthood of subjective emotional experience, of the kinds of 'intersubjective' states of interpersonal relatedness, and of the identity of basic human motives that are supposed to drive the mutual affect-regulation and attunement assumed to characterise dyadic interactions from the beginning of life.<sup>274</sup>

In effect, what Fonagy calls the 'subjective self' represents in infants the idea of biographical narrative that Singer borrows from environmental ethicist Gary Varner: 'Humans, [Varner] points out, typically tell stories about their lives, weaving narratives that bring together where they have come from, where they are now and what they hope for in the future.'<sup>275</sup> Fonagy's work shows that, contrary to Singer's claim, such meaningful biography does not need to

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<sup>273</sup>P. Fonagy, G. Gergely, and M. Target, 'The parent-infant dyad and the construction of the subjective self', *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 48/3-4 (Mar-Apr 2007), 288-328, 288.

<sup>274</sup>*Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>275</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 208. from Varner, *Personhood, ethics, and animal cognition: situating animals in Hare's two level utilitarianism*.

represent awareness of oneself as a distinct entity. Biography can also be meaningful because it represents an inchoate narrative of interdependence.<sup>276</sup>

Even on Singer's terms, then, cognitive abilities that represent a capacity to perceive oneself in relation to others are relevant to moral status. It is a capacity that infants seem to be able to possess to a high degree from the moment they are born. Cognitive neuroscientist Martha Farah has shown that from birth (and perhaps before), humans' understanding of the universe includes a 'person network' that encompasses the infant herself and other humans:

... a certain region of cortex is destined for face recognition as early as age 1 day, and other regions, which are capable of recognizing inanimate objects, cannot take over this function. This striking absence of plasticity implies that the category of human face, as well as its representation by specific brain tissue, is determined essentially at birth.<sup>277</sup>

Child psychologist and psychobiologist Colwyn Trevarthen shows that this person network is restricted to other members of the human species. Humans do not have to learn that distinction; it is part of the way the human brain is 'hard wired' from some time before birth:

The operation of an intrinsic motive formation (IMF) that developed in the core of the brain before birth is evident in the tightly integrated

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<sup>276</sup>According to theologian James McEvoy, Taylor's analysis of Piaget concludes that children are inherently equipped to construct sense from what they perceive: 'Children's language articulates human meaning, and facilitates the discovery of new meaning ... through Taylor's analysis of Piaget's process of transformation, we can understand children's agency as fundamentally interpretative: children grow through the process of articulating meaning.' (James Gerard McEvoy, 'Theology of Childhood: An Essential Element of Christian Anthropology', *The Irish Theological Quarterly*, 84/2 (2019), 117–36, 123.) McEvoy probably has older children in mind here, rather than infants, but the point he is making is relevant to childness more generally; namely, that humans construct meaning at any age, and the way humans do so during the developmental stage we refer to as 'childhood' is no more than one among several constructive modes of such meaning-making.

<sup>277</sup>M. J. Farah and A. S. Heberlein, 'Personhood and neuroscience: naturalizing or nihilating?', *Am J Bioeth*, 7/1 (Jan 2007), 37–48, 43. It is interesting that the infant does not include nonhuman beings in this network of 'persons'.

intermodal sensory-motor coordination of a new-born infant's orienting to stimuli and preferential learning of human signals, by the temporal coherence and intrinsic rhythms of infant behaviour, especially in communication, and neonates' extraordinary capacities for reactive and evocative imitation.<sup>278</sup>

By ten or eleven months of age, an infant is already able to play the part of an adult; he will recognise that a doll represents (but is not actually) a baby, and that in such a representation the infant himself stands in respect of the doll as a parent does to a baby, that the way a parent should relate to a baby is to hug them, and that all this is not 'real' in the same sense that the infant himself is real. These are extraordinarily complicated constructions of meaning about the universe in which the infant exists. They depend on a capacity to learn, to identify with (and care for) other humans, and to form and value relationships. All are tools with which to construct narrative.

### **3.3.v Pride and prejudice: a lesson from history**

Singer is not, of course, deliberately misleading his audience in the way he represents infants and what they can and cannot do. For most of history, adults have believed that the defining characteristic of infants is that they do not yet do the things adults can do as well as adults can do them, and Singer is probably guilty of nothing more than reiterating too uncritically the same conviction. Singer's uneven interpretation of the evidence represents his own rationalisation of the idea that the most important property of infants is that they have not yet acquired the properties that confer personal value on adults; that childness should be valued primarily according to its difference from adulthood.

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<sup>278</sup>C. Trevarthen and K. J. Aitken, 'Infant intersubjectivity: research, theory, and clinical applications', *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 42/1 (Jan 2001), 3–48.

That conviction has parallels with another historical assumption that was similarly once agreed as self-evident by adults; namely, the belief that infants do not feel pain. That belief probably originated in a study by paediatric neurologist Myrtle McGraw, who reached her conclusions as a result of an experiment she carried out in 1941. Her interpretation of its findings led her to promulgate the view that the infant has no more sensation of pain than that of an anaesthetised adult:

Some infants only a few hours or days old may exhibit no overt response to cutaneous irritation such as pin prick. ... this period of hypesthesia is brief; by the end of the first week or ten days most infants react to cutaneous irritation.<sup>279</sup>

The idea that new-born infants cannot feel pain became accepted wisdom and, for much of the twentieth century, babies were routinely operated on while conscious and without pain relief.<sup>280</sup>

Given what McGraw had apparently demonstrated, that was a rational and compassionate approach. If infants cannot experience pain, it would be morally wrong to administer anaesthetics, since anaesthesia during surgery carries definite risks, especially in the first weeks of life. Sadly, over the course of subsequent decades, it became clear that the belief was quite wrong. McGraw had been mistaken in interpreting her findings. We know now that new-

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<sup>279</sup>M.B. McGraw, 'Neural maturation as exemplified in the changing reactions of the infant to pin prick', *Child Development*, 12/1 (1941), 31–42.

<sup>280</sup>In 1987, one correspondent to the *New York Times* wrote: 'Your article on infant pain and its belated recognition by the medical community (*Science Times*, Nov. 24) suggests that unanesthetised surgery has been limited to newborns and that the practice had largely ended by the late 1970's. However, surveys of medical professionals indicate that as recently as 1986 infants as old as 15 months were receiving no anesthesia during surgery at most American hospitals.' (Helen Harrison, 'Why Infant Surgery Without Anesthesia Went Unchallenged', *New York Times*, 17th December 1987, A34.) As recently as 2011, developmental psychologist Philippe Rochat commented that: 'Even today, local anesthetics are not routine in painful procedures on newborns such as heel prick and circumcision, even by pediatricians practicing in state of the art maternity hospitals. The Zeitgeist continues to be that infants have either no feelings, less feelings, or that feeling experience at this early stage might not be as consequential for lack of memory (infantile amnesia).' (Philippe Rochat, 'The self as phenotype', *Conscious Cogn*, 20/1 (Mar 2011), 109–19, 111.)

born infants unquestionably do feel pain, in substantially the same way that adults do.<sup>281</sup> Despite the fact that withholding pain relief had been agreed by most adults in society to be a rational, compassionate and morally correct way of responding to infants, empirical evidence revealed it to have been an act of appalling cruelty. Society's beliefs about the infant's inability to experience pain were rational, in the sense that they were a reasonable inference from what science had indicated was true. But as a matter of fact they were quite incorrect.

Like McGraw, Singer has had to make certain assumptions in order to construct his hypothesis. His interpretation of the evidence regarding infant awareness starts with a prior belief about them:

The embryo, the later fetus, the profoundly intellectually disabled child, even the new-born infant—all are indisputably members of the species *Homo sapiens*, but none are self-aware, have a sense of the future, or the capacity to relate to others. Hence, the choice between the two senses can make an important difference to how we answer such questions as, 'Is the fetus a human being?'<sup>282</sup>

Following Tooley, Singer has chosen to assume that the infant is quite different from the adult in all ways relevant to her capacity to evaluate life. His commitment to that assumption leads him to interpret the evidence selectively, in a way that supports his prior beliefs.

One belief that McGraw and Singer appear to share is that what is objectively true of normal adults is normative for all human beings. In her study, McGraw pricked new-born babies at intervals over the first months of life and observed that, at birth, movements were poorly focused, failing to localise to

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<sup>281</sup>Goksan et al., 'fMRI reveals neural activity overlap between adult and infant pain'.

<sup>282</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 181–82. Singer's inclusion of 'the capacity to relate to others' in this list of criteria is odd. It does not sit well with scientific evidence that new-born infants are in fact extraordinarily adept at relating to others. Nor does it obviously cohere with his claims elsewhere that only rationality and self-awareness can indicate personhood.

where the pinprick actually happened. Over time, the movements became more clearly directed at the pin-prick itself. McGraw noted that these changes were similar to the stages seen in adults as they emerge from anaesthesia, in whom a diffuse, generalised response to pain during deep sleep gives way to increasingly focused movements as consciousness returns. Because the newborn baby acted in the same way as an anaesthetised adult, McGraw inferred she was also *experiencing* her life in the same way. In reality, the difference between infant and adult was not in their capacity to feel pain, but in their capacity to move in a focused manner in response to it. That difference was already known. To conclude anything new about the infant's experience from observations of movement alone was an illicit logical step. McGrath misinterpreted what she observed in infants partly because she assumed the way in which adults respond to pain is the normal way for all patients to respond.

Singer's assumption too is that infants inherently lack something that adults possess, and, like McGraw, he has made that assumption on a false premiss. Singer assumes that infants can be judged to lack self-awareness and reason because they behave in the way adults would behave if adults lacked self-awareness and reason. But that cannot legitimately be assumed. The appearance of lack of awareness in infants cannot on its own be taken as evidence of actual lack of awareness, any more than the appearance of hypaesthesia can only be explained by an actual inability to experience pain.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup>Augustine, showing greater insight into infants than many modern philosophers, points out that the infant's observed inability to act physically is irrelevant when considering the question of her capacity to be meaningfully aware: 'Or was it then good, even for a while, to cry for what, if given, would hurt? Bitterly to resent, that persons free, and its own elders, yea, the very authors of its birth, served it not? That many besides, wiser than it, obeyed not the nod of its

Infants at birth cannot physically articulate words or, as far as we know, even clothe concepts internally with them. That fully explains the infant's superficial appearance of a lack of reasoning. It does so, moreover, without an appeal to anything plausibly related to awareness, since, as Singer correctly points out, it is not necessary to attach a word to a concept in order to assimilate that concept into a constructive and/or logical meaning:

[Stuart] Hampshire's argument is an example of a pitfall to which philosophers of previous generations were especially prone: reaching conclusions from the armchair on a topic that demands investigation in the real world. There is nothing altogether inconceivable about a being possessing the capacity for conceptual thought without having a language, and there are instances of animal behaviour that are extraordinarily difficult, if not downright impossible, to explain except under the assumption that the animals are thinking conceptually.<sup>284</sup>

Singer supports his argument with evidence of the abilities of a chimpanzee called Julia who was unable to talk but could nevertheless reason conceptually. The same point can be illustrated by imagining that, say, an entirely rational and self-aware philosopher awakes one morning to find that overnight he has had a stroke. Unusually, but perfectly plausibly, he finds he has retained his ability to see and hear. His ability to reason remains intact, and he can still move, but he has forgotten how to control his body and so can no longer talk. It would be quite natural for his colleagues to assume that, since he could no longer demonstrate a logical faculty or self-awareness, the philosopher was no longer logical or self-aware. It would be impossible to disprove their assumption

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good pleasure? To do its best to strike and hurt, because commands were not obeyed, which had been obeyed to its hurt? The weakness then of infant limbs, not its will, is its innocence. I myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother. Who knows not this?' (Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). I.vii.11

<sup>284</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 228. Philosopher Daniel Dennett makes a more powerful argument linking personhood with a capacity for language by considering personhood to be a function of moral agency, since verbal communication is a necessary part of reciprocity. D. C. Dennett, *Brainstorms: philosophical essays on mind and psychology* (Penguin science; London: Penguin, 1997).

empirically. Nevertheless, it would neither be true, nor would it be a reasonable conclusion for them to draw on the basis of the facts available to them. Aphasia does not in any way imply dementia.<sup>285</sup> Singer points out the danger of wrongly extrapolating moral conclusions from Julia the chimpanzee's inability to speak but fails to recognise the same danger in infants' inability to act as though they were self-aware.

### **3.4 Summary**

The lesson from McGraw is that when prior beliefs about the similarities and differences between adults and infants cannot adequately be tested against empirical evidence, there is a risk that an adult paradigm is inappropriately assumed in interpreting observations made in infants. Like McGraw, Singer has considered the infant through the lens of adult normativity. Some of the evidence he would need to avoid inappropriate assumptions is unknowable, either because it is inherently existential or because it cannot be uncovered with currently available technology. Other evidence *is* known, but in *Practical Ethics* it appears that Singer himself is unaware of it.

Singer claims that it is 'obviously wrong' to suggest that an infant can value her own life before she is a month old.<sup>286</sup> That conclusion would be sound if it were true that the infant lacks any capacity for apprehending her existence

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<sup>285</sup>There is an important distinction between the capacity for speech, which is merely making words, and a capacity for language. In his own analysis of Piaget's work, Catholic moral philosopher Charles Taylor links a child's language capacity with her capacity to make meaning (Charles Taylor, *The language animal: the full shape of the human linguistic capacity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 4). Taylor concludes that language is not just an instrument for expressing or marshalling ideas that a child already has, but rather, that the acquisition of language permits the child to make 'new purposes, new levels of behaviour, [and] new meanings' that would otherwise be impossible. That making of meaning constitutes a form of reasoning.

<sup>286</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 300–1.

at all, but empirical evidence makes it clear that is not true. Where technology has allowed researchers to overcome the practical difficulties, evidence has steadily eroded the Victorian belief that infants are born into a state of 'booming, buzzing, confusion' and by the time the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics* was published, there was already persuasive evidence that Tooley was wrong in his 1972 claim that the new-born infant is not meaningfully aware. Empirical evidence shows that at the time she is born, the normal infant perceives herself and is aware of others in the universe, and that she is equipped to accumulate new information about the universe and to construct it into systematic knowledge. While we cannot know if infants remember their own past states they certainly possess a highly effective memory.<sup>287</sup>

One of the 'fatal weaknesses' that Hare identifies in the Nazi defence of genocide is that there is no objective way to show who is German and who is not. Notwithstanding Singer's uncompromising rejection of the analogy, it is now clear that his argument for infanticide suffers from the same weakness. It is impossible to know on empirical grounds that he is correct to identify the infant as a human who is not self-aware. Singer has failed to set aside his prior beliefs about the infant and is himself guilty of '... reaching conclusions from the armchair on a topic that demands investigation in the real world.'<sup>288</sup>

Singer is right to argue that there must be a point at which the normal human lacks self-awareness in the same way that a billiard ball lacks hair, but

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<sup>287</sup>It seems likely this is also true of later-term fetuses. Physical changes at birth are largely limited to the lungs and cardiovascular system. The brain is not greatly affected by delivery. As far as the fetus' capacity to make meaning is concerned, the process of birth is of little more significance than moving into another room. Whether there is any sense in which the late term fetus actually does make meaning is harder to determine; it has been suggested that she is deeply asleep much of the time (C. Suwanrath and T. Suntharasaj, 'Sleep-wake cycles in normal fetuses', *Arch Gynecol Obstet*, 281/3 (Mar 2010), 449–54).

<sup>288</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 228.

it is highly unlikely that this condition persists until the infant is several months old. Indeed, it seems likely that it is no longer true by the time a child is born. There is no empirical support at all for Singer's claim that permitting infanticide until a month of age would provide an 'ample safety margin'.<sup>289</sup>

It is a conviction to which Singer nevertheless continues to cling in his argument for infanticide. From the evidence contained within the 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*, his conviction is based entirely on the mirror test, and he does not cite any specific study that uses that one test in infants. His glancing reference to a large, complex field of neurodevelopmental and neuropsychological research, coming as it does at the end of an extended anecdote about a parrot, is a strikingly slender thread on which to depend an entire philosophical argument whose end result is to permit the killing of humans. Changes to medical practice on the basis of Singer's opinion of the infant's cognitive abilities would be no less unsound than those made in response to McGraw's misguided opinion that they could not feel pain. The consequences of such a change, measured in meaningful lives summarily lost, would be no less tragic.

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<sup>289</sup>Ibid., 300–1.

## **Chapter 4. Christian theology: radically redeeming childness**

Having shown that the empirical claims that Singer makes about infants are, at best, unreliable, it might seem that there is no need for further discussion. The utilitarian argument Singer makes depends on his beliefs about the infant's capabilities. If in fact the infant has memory, is capable of perceiving herself and the universe, and is able to construct meaning from what she perceives, then Singer's key beliefs about the infant are wrong and it seems his defence of infanticide is incoherent and must collapse.

Critically, however, Singer's conclusion that the infant is not meaningfully harmed by infanticide does not stand or fall only by his claims about the infant's abilities. It also represents his own judgement about the personal value that those abilities can confer. His claim is that childness represents none at all of the properties that give inherent value to human life. While one way in which that might be true, at least on Singer's own terms, is if the infant were entirely unaware, another way in which it might be true (again, on his own terms) is if the ways in which an infant *is* aware do not represent properties that confer value on her life. Whatever the merit or otherwise of Singer's empirical claims, he is also making an epistemological claim that empirical research cannot disprove. It is a claim about the relative moral value of the properties that characterise the normal infant and those that characterise the normal adult.

### **4.1 Childness: a new anthropology**

On the basis of his moral anthropology, Singer has told us why he thinks infanticide is permissible. It is, he says, because the way in which the infant

perceives and understands herself and the universe (what we have called 'childness') cannot confer value on her life. The result of that way of thinking, as we have seen, is that the difference in value between childness and adulthood is so great that the mere preferences of a being exhibiting adulthood can outweigh the life of a being who exhibits only childness. That potentially offers Christian ethics the chance to respond with a theological alternative; an anthropology in which childness, as well as adulthood, can confer inherent value on the life of its possessor. In that case, the moral conclusions that Singer claims are not explained by his premiss and Singer's argument suffers the second of the two 'fatal weaknesses' that Hare identified in Nazism: '... even if the premisses of these arguments were all right, the users of them have not told us *why* the moral conclusions follow from the premisses.'<sup>290</sup>

On the Christian eudaimonist view I am defending here, the object of moral action is to promote flourishing towards eudaimonia, considered as the individual's own ultimate well-being, in the moral agent and in the moral 'patient'. An individual flourishes to the extent that she is able to participate in certain basic goods that are determined by her nature as a human. The way in which she participates in those goods is determined by her own individual nature. Specifying that general theory to the issue of infanticide is not straightforward. In an effort to explain why moral agents should treat the infant as though she were of equal value to an adult, Christians have found ways to express the infant's personal value in adult terms (that is, the value of the hypothetical adult she already resembles or might become). Such explanations have often succeeded in protecting vulnerable infants but, as they stand, they

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<sup>290</sup>Hare, *Freedom and Reason*.

are inadequate responses because they rely on the possibility of something that might or might not happen. There are, for example, damaged new-born infants who will certainly die long before becoming adults to whom Christians would nevertheless want to ascribe inherent value.

Not only are those explanations inadequate; on their own, they may be dangerous, because they perpetuate the idea that adulthood in some sense represents what is morally normative. Rather than proposing an alternative, theological, anthropology of childness, such arguments rely on the same assumption that underlies Singer's own evaluation: that it is only full expression of the properties of adulthood that can give a human full moral value.

In *Ideas for a Theology of Childhood*, Catholic theologian Karl Rahner suggests that it is difficult to construct a theology of the child, because the Bible assumes that readers will already understand what 'childness' is and so does not explicitly set it out:

As soon as we look more closely into what is said about the child, especially in scripture, we notice that in reality it is almost always presupposed that we already know what a child is, so that no explicit information on this point is given to us.<sup>291</sup>

Lutheran theologian Marcia Bunge points out that there is no shortage of appearances by children in the Bible:

The actions and words of children themselves are varied and often central to biblical accounts of events or the stories of families, tribes, and nations. Children are depicted as singing, rejoicing, and praising God as well as rebelling, committing wrongs, and turning from God. They learn from adults yet also are recognized as prophets and models for adults.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>291</sup>Karl Rahner, 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in Cornelius Ernst (ed.), *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* (The electronic centenary edn.; Limerick, Ireland: The Centre for Culture, Technology and Values, 2004), 5.

<sup>292</sup>Marcia J. Bunge, 'Introduction', in Marcia J. Bunge (ed.), *The child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), xiv. Although much has been written on the importance of children as metaphors in the Bible, much less research has been done on what that implies about the value theology should ascribe to childness itself and why.

Children have nevertheless received remarkably little attention from theological ethicists, she goes on: 'Systematic theologians and Christian ethicists have said little about children, and they have not regarded serious reflection on children as a high priority.'<sup>293</sup> Theologian Adrian Thatcher considers that, in practice, most theologies are 'adult' theologies whose effect is to marginalise children:

Feminist theology, sexual theology, lesbian and gay theology, and queer theology, for all their liberatory intent, generally collude with the hiddenness of children. It is only a partial defence for these theologies to argue that their interests are elsewhere for that is precisely the charge against them. Such theology usually blasts theology for its mind-body dualism and its neglect of the body. The new dualism is the divide between adults and children!<sup>294</sup>

It is largely in a theological vacuum, in which there is no clear anthropology of the child, that Christian ethics' general objections to Singer's utilitarianism must be applied to the particular issue of infanticide. As we have seen, Christian theology has, however, provided three important foundation stones on which such a specific objection might be developed: the idea that eudaimonia is a more rationally defensible object of ethics than preference satisfaction is, the idea that value must depend on purpose, and the idea that morally correct action benefits the agent as well as the moral patient.

#### **4.1.i First foundation stone: eudaimonia**

The first is an acknowledgement that human flourishing is not evaluable by a single dimension such as preference satisfaction. The centrality of humans

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<sup>293</sup>Marcia J. Bunge, *The child in Christian thought* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Cambridge, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 3.

<sup>294</sup>Adrian Thatcher, 'Theology and Children: Towards a Theology of Childhood', *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, 23/4 (2006), 194–99, 194.

themselves to the project of Christian ethics means its consequential focus is on improving the quality of actual people's existence. The range of ways in which an individual being might participate in human goods is wide and unique.<sup>295</sup>

Christian eudaimonism has its origins in Aquinas' appropriation of Aristotelian ethics for Christianity. At its heart is the idea that humans achieve happiness in its fullest sense (eudaimonia, rather than, as on the utilitarian view, pleasure or avoidance of suffering) only when they are in a perfect relationship with God, but that in the meantime an individual human flourishes by participating in certain basic 'goods'. Aquinas suggests it is God who represents what humans mean by the superlatives 'infinite' and 'perfect' and so a relationship with God is the logical ultimate objective of a well-lived life:

If a whole be not the last end, but ordained to a further end, then the last end of a part thereof is not the whole itself, but something else. Now the universe of creatures, to which man is compared as part to whole, is not the last end, but is ordained to God, as to its last end. Therefore the last end of man is not the good of the universe, but God himself.<sup>296</sup>

While Aquinas sets them in a Christian context, the concepts of flourishing and eudaimonia do not have to depend on any particular metaphysical commitment because as an idea they are logically inescapable. If it is agreed that ethics has teleological direction—if it is agreed that correct moral action should be directed towards some objective—then the concepts of 'good' and 'better' are also already agreed. And if 'good' and 'better' are agreed, then there is no escaping

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<sup>295</sup>Singer is scathing about the moral relevance of uniqueness: '[T]he fact that something is unique is not in itself a reason for preserving it—we don't try to preserve snowflakes. A canine fetus is also, no doubt, genetically unique. Does this mean that it is as wrong to abort a dog as a human?' (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 318.) Of course the difference in value between a dog and a human is not explained by their shared uniqueness but by the vast difference between the suite of capacities to which the word 'unique' attaches in each case.

<sup>296</sup>S. Th. I-II q2 a8.

the fact that there must also be 'best', or that achieving it is the only rational ultimate object of ethics.

Perry suggests that the perfection of eudaimonia anchors the goal of moral action in something objective: 'It is objective, because some things are worth desiring whether anyone desires them or not (such things will also be worth training oneself to desire)'.<sup>297</sup> Furthermore, since eudaimonia represents the highest possible quality that an individual's existence might attain, it succeeds in encompassing the idea that such quality is highly complex, and that there are many different ways in which the moral agent can act in order to promote flourishing:

It is plural, because the good comes to humans in concrete forms, such as friendship and knowledge and aesthetic appreciation and meaningful labour, which cannot be ranked or summed on a single scale.<sup>298</sup>

If eudaimonia is translated merely as 'happiness' then there is a sense in which even accounts of the quality of human existence that are highly reductionist, such as those of Joseph Fletcher (see later), might be described as forms of Christian eudaimonism. But it is the dimension of aspiration to perfection that makes eudaimonia a rational choice for the ultimate goal of ethics. It makes sense for ethics to be directed at perfecting the quality of a person's existence, but it is less obviously logical to aim at something *lower* than perfection. That perfection is not only in extent, but in breadth.<sup>299</sup> Theories like Fletcher's that focus on only a subset of modes in which an individual can flourish are undoubtedly teleological, but they are not properly described as forms of eudaimonism because the happiness they seek to promote is not eudaimonic.

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<sup>297</sup>Perry, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 12.

<sup>298</sup>Ibid.

<sup>299</sup>See S. Th. I-II q. 94 aa2 & 3.

Catholic philosopher of law John Finnis suggests that although Aquinas does not attempt to define exactly what each of the basic human goods comprises—in the same way, perhaps, that Aristotle does not set out exactly what must be meant by eudaimonia even though the concept itself is central to his theory—he identifies the broad areas of human existence whose quality matters and which should therefore concern the moral agent:

The basic human goods which first practical principles identify and direct us to are identified by Aquinas as (i) life, (ii) “marriage between man and woman and bringing up of children [*coniunctio maris et feminae et educatio liberorum*]” (not at all reducible to ‘procreation’), (iii) knowledge, (iv) living in fellowship (*societas* and *amicitia*) with others, (v) practical reasonableness (*bonum rationis*) itself, and (vi) knowing and relating appropriately to the transcendent cause of all being, value, normativity and efficacious action (*ST I-II q. 94 aa. 2 & 3*).<sup>300</sup>

Finnis suggests that basic human goods can be expressed in modern terms and include knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, religion and life.

In order to show that childness has inherent moral value at all, Christian eudaimonism must show that an individual who possesses the properties that childness represents is enabled, by virtue of those properties, to participate in human goods and therefore to flourish. To argue further that the inherent value of childness is *just as great* as the value of adulthood, Christian eudaimonism

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<sup>300</sup>John Finnis, ‘Aquinas’ Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy’, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 edn.: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018). See also Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus* (1; Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press., 1983). <http://twotlj.org/G-1-5-D.html> (accessed May 2017). Grisez suggests it is underlying intuitions and feelings, rather than formal reasoning, that reveal what makes individuals flourish, often by disclosing ways in which the individual is not flourishing in the present moment: ‘One can infer the basic human goods from the privations which mutilate them. Harmony is the common theme of several. We experience inner tension and the need to struggle for inner harmony; the good is self-integration. Our practical insight, will, and behavior are not in perfect agreement; the goods are practical reasonableness and authenticity. We have strained relationships and conflicts with others; the goods are justice and friendship. We experience sin and alienation from God; the goods are the peace and friendship with God which are the concern of all true religion.’

has to show that adulthood and childness confer on their possessors the same capacity to flourish, so that taking an individual's life would rob her of the same chance to flourish, irrespective of the proportions of childness and adulthood she possesses at the time.

It seems at first sight that such a contention might be difficult to sustain. Some of the characteristics that all infants must have in common by virtue of what is meant by the term 'infant' obviously preclude their participation in some basic human goods, which are therefore outside the scope of any normal infant. No normal infant is capable, for example, of participating in goods that depend on formal reasoning. That puts out of reach of the infant many of what are often considered basic human goods. Finnis suggests that basic goods include knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, religion and life.<sup>301</sup> Catholic theologian Germain Grisez lists seven basic human goods. Three are 'substantive' goods that are independent of a faculty for formal reason (life and health, knowledge and activities of skilful work and play) but the other four are 'reflexive' goods that demand a capacity for choosing (self-integration, practical reasonableness, justice and friendship, religion or holiness).<sup>302</sup> Finnis takes even 'life' to mean 'every aspect of the vitality (*vita*, life) which puts a human being in good shape for self-

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<sup>301</sup>John Finnis, *Natural law and natural rights* (2nd edn., Clarendon law series; Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86–90. Author's original italics.

<sup>302</sup>Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*. <http://twotlj.org/G-1-5-D.html> (accessed May 2017). Grisez suggests it is underlying intuitions and feelings, rather than formal reasoning, that reveal what makes individuals flourish, often by disclosing ways in which the individual is not flourishing in the present moment: 'One can infer the basic human goods from the privations which mutilate them. Harmony is the common theme of several. We experience inner tension and the need to struggle for inner harmony; the good is self-integration. Our practical insight, will, and behavior are not in perfect agreement; the goods are practical reasonableness and authenticity. We have strained relationships and conflicts with others; the goods are justice and friendship. We experience sin and alienation from God; the goods are the peace and friendship with God which are the concern of all true religion.'

determination' which implies that even the good of being alive is contingent on aspects of adulthood. According to those interpretations, there are many basic goods which are barred to the normal infant.

But humanness, as well as childness, is a quality of infants. If 'human nature' is defined by what all humans have in common, then the corollary must be that any human, including the infant, participates in human nature. Properly considered, the human infant cannot be a different 'kind of thing' from other humans because being an infant is part of what it is to be any human. A human is the same individual when an infant as she is while she is a child, a young or a middle-aged adult or in her senescence. The normal infant's participation in human goods cannot be entirely distinct from that of human adults, even though it has more in common with that of other infants.<sup>303</sup>

In that case there must be ways in which both childness and adulthood can equip an individual to flourish. According to Catholic theologian Anthony Celano, Aquinas '... bases his theory of correct reasoning on the human ability to discover an underlying order in any field of inquiry'.<sup>304</sup> Discovering 'underlying order in any field of enquiry' encompasses a more capacious sense of making meaning than logic alone, and Thomas understands reasoning to include emotion (a response of the affect to what is perceived) as well as logical

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<sup>303</sup>To the inexperienced eye the human infant can even look as though she has more in common with non-human infants than she does with non-infant humans. As has already been shown, empirical evidence indicates that such a resemblance is essentially superficial and is largely explained by the infant's unquestionable inability to speak or to move voluntarily.

<sup>304</sup>Anthony Celano, 'Medieval Theories of Practical Reason: The Thomistic Doctrine of Practical Reason', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason-med/>>, accessed 1st March 2017. Celano goes on to point out that this does not mean Aquinas considers formal reasoning to be unimportant to the task of discovering order: 'The order of reasoning which determines metaphysical knowledge is derived from a recognition of the principle of non-contradiction. Reasoning from the notion that being and non-being are contradictory terms, a metaphysician argues for certain conclusions about the nature of being'. Contrast with Barth's reservations about scientific logic Barth, *Church Dogmatics I*, 1 §1.

faculties such as intelligence (the capacity for calculative logic) and volition (the willingness to be guided in practice by such understanding, rather than by feelings). All are ways in which order can be created from disorder. Questions 5–17 of *Summa Theologica I-II* deal with the breadth of what it means to possess a reasoning faculty. Aquinas does not offer a hierarchy of human goods, and gives goods that depend on intellectual ability, such as knowledge and reason, no higher prominence than those that depend for example on a capacity to have relationships with others. He explains that what a person desires is as relevant to moral reasoning as what they logically understand:

... it must be noted that, since every inclination results from a form, the natural appetite results from a form existing in the nature of things: while the sensitive appetite, as also the intellective or rational appetite, which we call the will, follows from an apprehended form. Therefore, just as the natural appetite tends to good existing in a thing; so the animal or voluntary appetite tends to a good which is apprehended.<sup>305</sup>

One implication of the interpretation of human goods offered by Finnis and Grisez is that an individual who can participate in all of them must have a greater capacity to flourish than one who can participate in only some. Aquinas, on the other hand, represents all human goods as examples of the same single precept of natural law, which is a consequence of human nature. 'There is in man,' says Aquinas, 'an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society ... In this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law.'<sup>306</sup> There is no sense that,

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<sup>305</sup>S. Th. I-II, q8 a1. Thomas gives the example of a judge who demands that a thief be put to death in the name of justice, and the same thief's family, who want him pardoned. Both, Aquinas suggests, represent good moral reasoning: 'Thus a judge has a good will, in willing a thief to be put to death, because this is just: while the will of another—e.g. the thief's wife or son, who wishes him not to be put to death, inasmuch as killing is a natural evil, is also good.' S. Th. I-II, q19 a10.

<sup>306</sup>S. Th. I-II q. 94 a3.

in order to flourish equally, humans must all be able to participate equally in every individual good, because all the goods are ultimately referable to the same single precept.

Theologian Rufus Black illustrates that more general way to conceive of human goods using a hypothetical response to the information that a colleague is having dinner with friends that evening. The repeated question 'Why?' establishes a series of increasingly fundamental objectives, such as having not seen them for a while, wanting to catch up with them and wanting to maintain a friendship with them. Finally, however:

... I would ask again, "Why?" And to this your reply is likely to be simply, 'Because I value my friendship with these people'. Here you are offering 'friendship' as a practical reason which explains and justifies what you are doing. [This] reveals that the pursuit of friendship can be a reason for acting that requires no further reason to justify it. We could ask the same sort of series of questions about all the activities we (and others) pursue in our daily lives. Finnis, Grisez and Boyle suggest that, if we did so, we would arrive at a list of our 'most basic' or ultimate reasons for doing things. They call these ultimate reasons for acting 'basic human goods'.<sup>307</sup>

The goods of human nature are revealed, according to Black, not only in the sort of settled intentions or decisions that require the cognitive properties of adulthood, but in the most fundamental way in which all humans think in order to reach those intentions and decisions.

On that view, there are human goods in which childness can equip humans to participate. While an infant can never be in what Finnis calls 'good shape for self-determination', we know that she has 'basic or ultimate reasons' for doing things. Her responses are more than just reflexes. Fonagy's concept of the 'subjective self' shows that the normal infant is highly capable of the sort

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<sup>307</sup>Rufus Black, 'Introduction: the new natural law theory', in N Biggar and R Black (eds.), *The revival of natural law: philosophical, theological and ethical responses to the Finnis-Grisez school* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2000), 6.

of constructivist learning about the universe that can legitimately be described as discovering ‘an underlying order in any field of inquiry’.<sup>308</sup> The normal infant may, indeed, be better equipped for such discovery than the normal adult. Gopnik shows that, while an adult’s awareness is typically focused on the detail of what she perceives, an infant’s awareness is aimed at eliciting as much data as possible about the universe, as quickly as possible and from as many sources as possible. Gopnik dubs these different forms of awareness ‘spotlight’ consciousness and ‘lantern consciousness’. Spotlight consciousness illuminates intensely the specific things on which it focuses but leaves other things completely dark. ‘Lantern’ consciousness illuminates everything equally, though the light that falls on any one area is less intense. Spotlight consciousness is schooled (and therefore limited) by what a person already expects to see and considers to be important, while lantern consciousness makes no such prior assumptions. Gopnik considers that the greater reach of lantern awareness permits the infant to perceive more of the universe than the adult:

Babies are more conscious than we are. They are ceaselessly and broadly engaged in the kind of information-processing and learning that adults direct only at limited, relevant events. And babies are less subject

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<sup>308</sup> Fonagy, Gergely, and Target, ‘The parent-infant dyad and the construction of the subjective self’. In fact, all normal humans, whatever their age, continually construct and reconstruct an account of reality that explains their sensory perceptions. The range of ways in which they make sense of what they perceive is wide. It encompasses, for example, aesthetic appreciation, intuitions and empathy as well as logical inference. If those could all be identified and meaningfully measured (which they cannot), there would be a range of possible ‘scores’ for each ability, varying by individual. One individual might score highly on the ‘empathy’ range, for example, but much less on the ‘logic’ one, while the reverse might be true for someone else. Without an explanation as to why some forms of reasoning should be valued more highly than others, neither empath nor logician could reasonably be considered abnormal or incapable of reason. That individual reasoning profile is likely to remain more or less constant throughout most people’s adult life. Without some catastrophic event it would be unusual to lose a capacity for aesthetic awareness, for example. Such catastrophic events—usually some form of brain injury—typically result in damage to, or complete loss of, faculties, though they can occasionally confer new modes of awareness, for example an understanding of music (see Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: tales of music and the brain* (London: Picador, 2007)).

to the processes that actively cause unconsciousness in adults— inhibition and habituation. When adults are placed in a situation that is functionally similar to babies, such as traveling in a strange country or meditating in certain ways, we experience a similarly vivid but distributed phenomenology—consciousness becomes a lantern instead of a spotlight.<sup>309</sup>

Adults, according to Gopnik, usually demonstrate spotlight consciousness, which allows them to focus on a small part of what is around them and to perceive it in great detail. Babies, on the other hand, demonstrate lantern consciousness, which allows them to see a much greater proportion of the world around them. The consciousness that characterises adulthood is, in a sense, much more limited than what characterises childhood, because it focuses on a subset of data in order to consider it carefully and so restricts the scope of what is perceived.

Relationship is a mode of flourishing for which humans are particularly well equipped by childhood. Fonagy shows that childhood is characterised by a way of constructing meaningful narrative that is shaped principally by awareness of relationships:

A central characteristic of these models of primary ‘intersubjectivity’ is a shared emphasis on the continuity from infancy to adulthood of subjective emotional experience, of the kinds of ‘intersubjective’ states of interpersonal relatedness, and of the identity of basic human motives that are supposed to drive the mutual affect-regulation and attunement assumed to characterise dyadic interactions from the beginning of life.<sup>310</sup>

According to Aquinas, it is in a relationship with God that individual human flourishing is at its optimum: ‘Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing

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<sup>309</sup>Gopnik, ‘Why babies are more conscious than we are’, 504.

<sup>310</sup>Fonagy, Gergely, and Target, ‘The parent-infant dyad and the construction of the subjective self’. Fonagy and colleagues point out here that even adults do not, in fact, construct a biographical narrative on the basis that they exist in isolation from others.

else than the vision of the Divine Essence'.<sup>311</sup> There is nothing in the capacities necessary for a relationship with God that puts it beyond the reach of the infant. Rahner points out: 'Childhood itself has a direct relationship with God. It touches upon the absolute divinity of God not only as maturity, adulthood and the later phases of life touch upon this, but rather in a special way of its own.'<sup>312</sup> The infant's childness (in this instance, her cognitive adaptation for relating to others) is relevant to her capacity to flourish and, on the Christian eudaimonist view I am defending here, confers inherent value on her existence because in the present moment it permits a relationship with God.

None of this is intended to suggest that an individual is *never* helped towards eudaimonia through the exercise of capacities that characterise adulthood, such as formal reasoning or indeed by having her preferences met. But those are only two among many ways in which humans can flourish, and among those other modes of flourishing are some that, given what science has shown, are within reach of the infant. A normal infant illustrates vigorous vitality, highly efficient accumulation of knowledge, intense socialising and rapid acquisition of skills. She is capable of complex and appropriate affective responses, and her capacity to observe, and to learn from what she observes, suggests that she is capable of some forms of calculative, emotional or volitional reasoning. Those broader ways of reasoning as fundamental ways of apprehending and making order out of disorder, rather than as a capacity for logic or self-

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<sup>311</sup>S. Th. I-II q3 a8. *The visio beatifica* represents a specifically Christian understanding of eudaimonia.

<sup>312</sup>Rahner, 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* The electronic centenary edn. 3.

determination, put participation in some basic human goods within the compass of an infant.

Nor, of course, does the argument I am making imply that all human goods are within the infant's grasp. But it is not necessary for a single individual to participate in every specific human good in order to flourish. Infants are not autonomous, and they cannot procreate, but they certainly incline to know truth and to live in society. Furthermore, if the highest good for humans is, as Aquinas suggests, in a relationship with someone other than oneself, then it is something that normal infants are equipped by their childness to do very well indeed.

#### **4.1.ii Second foundation stone: purpose**

The second foundation stone is that flourishing relies on an individual's purpose. Again, the idea that value cannot be separated from the ideas of meaning and purpose is not a specifically Christian one. It is rational to consider a knife to be objectively valuable when it is sharp, because a knife is intentionally designed to cut. But even when a knife has become blunt, meaning-making beings will continue to accord it a value that relates to sharpness, because that is relevant to the function for which it was designed. In order to know how to judge how well a piece of metal is functioning it is first necessary to know whether it was designed as a knife or a paperweight. It can be both heavy and sharp, but those inherent properties are merely facts; they are impossible to evaluate meaningfully without some prior concept of purpose. Sharpness is a virtue in a knife but an inconvenience in a paper-weight. The

properties of being heavy but blunt are obvious desiderata for a paper-weight but would restrict the value of a knife. Whether the properties of a certain piece of metal make it an inconveniently blunt knife or a conveniently heavy paper-weight depend entirely on what function that piece of metal is intended to fulfil. It is logical nonsense to attempt to evaluate inherent properties without reference to some idea of purpose or function.

The idea that personal value is rooted in ideas of individual purpose is expressed in the term 'telos'.<sup>313</sup> MacIntyre suggests it is the meaning they give to their own actions that provides humans with such purpose. Ethics as it applies to humans, MacIntyre argues, must orbit the lived existence of human beings:

I have suggested so far that unless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately.<sup>314</sup>

An individual's eudaimonia, he goes on, is defined by the narrative context in which each individual lives her life. What he means is that each individual is the author of a story in which he or she is the principal character. Eudaimonia is undermined if that story lacks direction:

I am the *subject* of a history that is my own and no one else's, that has its own peculiar meaning. When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*. Hence the point of

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<sup>313</sup>The term 'teleological' is derived from 'telos'. Teleological moral theories are not, however, theories that rely on an idea of individual narrative and meaning; they are theories predicated on the belief that moral action should be directed towards some defined end. Bentham's utilitarianism is a teleological moral theory, but it would be hard to find in it a place for individual telos.

<sup>314</sup>MacIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory*, 203.

doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such a person to have been lost.<sup>315</sup>

MacIntyre goes on to say that an individual's telos derives from the narrative she creates, which in turn derives from the wider context of her life, and especially the traditions of the society (*polis*) in which it is lived.

MacIntyre's suggestion that telos describes the ends that humans set for themselves feels weak, as though humanity were trying to lift itself by its own moral bootstraps. Evangelical theologian Oliver O'Donovan believes that a universe that is created and ordered to some purpose offers a more convincing source for human purpose. There are ways in which humans might choose to behave that will help to make the universe function well or badly. Since humans are part of the universe, they will flourish best when they choose to contribute to its well-functioning. The well-being of humans is determined by the purpose and function of the universe, including themselves, and by their own willingness to participate in it:

Aristotle starts from the observation that all human activity strives for some good ... some goods and activities are hierarchically subordinated to others as means to ends; and we may therefore conceive of a single end: of-all-action to which all other goods and activities are subordinated and towards which they all strive. This 'good for man' Aristotle identifies as 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*).<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup>Ibid., 217. MacIntyre's description of the effect on humans of lacking *telos* maps almost perfectly onto the psychiatric and sociological concept of 'anomie' identified by Emile Durkheim in his landmark 1897 study of suicide (Emile Durkheim, John A. Spaulding, and George Simpson, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Routledge Classics; London: Routledge, 2002). The kind of narrative that MacIntyre describes is also superficially similar to Gary Varner's idea of 'biographical life' (Varner, *Personhood, ethics, and animal cognition: situating animals in Hare's two level utilitarianism*. which, as will become clear later, is important in Singer's defence of infanticide. An important difference, however, is that an Aristotelian narrative specifically ascribes some purpose. Varner's biographical life, on the other hand, refers to a way of creating order from what is perceived, which might or might not involve ascribing purpose. In biographical life, purpose emerges (if it emerges at all) from meaning rather than, as on the Aristotelian view, meaning being dependent on purpose.

<sup>316</sup>Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and moral order: an outline for evangelical ethics* (2nd edn.; Leicester, England: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 220–22.

Like Aquinas, Augustine appropriated Aristotelian metaphysics for Christianity, suggesting that the nature of humans is as much part of the way the universe is constructed as the force of gravity itself:

If we were stones, waves, wind or flame, or anything of that kind, lacking sense and life, we would still show something like a desire for our own place and order. For the specific gravity of a body is, in a manner, its love, whether a body tends downwards by reason of its heaviness or strives upwards because of its lightness. A material body is borne along by its weight in a particular direction, as a soul is by its love.<sup>317</sup>

Augustine links moral behaviour here to the nature of the individual, and anchors both to the place of the individual being in an ordered universe.

O'Donovan expresses the same idea in less allegorical terms:

... the concept of a human nature is actually inseparable from the concept of nature as such. Without 'nature' around it in which it can take its place, 'human nature' can be nothing but an insubstantial phantom, visible only through some ectoplasmic formula such as 'radical freedom'.<sup>318</sup>

On a Christian moral anthropology, an individual's telos is determined by God's ordering of the universe:

One cannot speak of the flourishing of any kind without implicitly indicating a wider order which will determine what flourishing and frustration within that kind consist of. An acorn flourishes by becoming an oak; but why should this be a more successful thing for it to become than pig's food? We have to choose between a purely anarchistic answer, based on an ultimate competition between all species, and an answer which points to the value for other beings of there being oaks and not just acorns. So it is, when we speak of the flourishing of a human being, that we raise the question of the wider order within which the content of human flourishing is determined.<sup>319</sup>

Again, the concept that telos represents is part of the grammar of human ratiocination and does not rely on Christian revelation. Nevertheless, the notion

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<sup>317</sup>Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods (eBook: Penguin Classics, 2008). bk. XI Ch. 28.

<sup>318</sup>O'Donovan, *Resurrection and moral order: an outline for evangelical ethics*, 18.

<sup>319</sup>*Ibid.*, 34–35.

that what is morally right is connected to the nature of humans and what will enable them to flourish sits particularly comfortably with the Christian idea of telos as 'vocation'; that is, the idea that humans have a part to play in the smooth functioning of a universe that was created for them by God. Christian moral realism claims that the way in which humans flourish depends on the part they play in a universe that was created by a loving God with their flourishing in mind; in other words, a universe that has a purpose. A human is a person because the relation in which she stands to God defines a role for her in the universe. Catholic theologian Robert Spaemann argues that the value of each person is inseparable from the role she has been given:

Persons are 'individuals' (*Individuen*), not in the sense that they are *instances* of a universal concept but as the particular individuals they are, who in an individual and irreplaceable way *are* the Universal. They are not parts of a larger whole, but totalities. In relation to them, everything else is only a part.<sup>320</sup>

Spaemann locates the true sense of 'person' in the theatrical origin of the word *prosopon*, meaning a face or mask that an actor would don for a performance. It was not the actor's performance—not what he was capable of doing—but the part he was being asked to play: '... in contrast to our modern usage, the person was not what lay behind the role and made the performance possible. It was the role itself, and what lay behind that role was 'nature' ...'<sup>321</sup> On that basis, Spaemann suggests that every human has full value as a person, because each is taking a role in the same performance. It is the specific narrative offered by an individual's role in an ordered Creation which O'Donovan describes as her vocation:

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<sup>320</sup>Spaemann, *Persons: the Difference Between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, 19.

<sup>321</sup>*Ibid.*, 21–22.

In the Old and New Testaments Christian thinkers found a different kind of historicity that must be attributed to the individual human being, a historicity given to him, not as a mere open-endedness in temporal existence but as a definite vocation from God which constituted him as a person, a 'someone who ...' this that or the other, from before his first act or thought.<sup>322</sup>

It is nonsensical, on that view, to make a normative claim for adulthood over childness, because their value cannot be defined in any terms other than those of the narrative that provides a role with its context. It makes no sense to distinguish between an individual's flourishing while she is an infant, and her flourishing while she is an adult, because her flourishing is defined by her own vocation, and not by her age at any given moment in time. It would be as nonsensical to isolate the flourishing of the infant from that of the adult she will become as it would be to claim that what is done to a patient's arm today is not simultaneously done to the whole patient.

It is therefore important to consider what is the vocation for which the human can be fitted by childness. Aristotle believed the infant in the present moment does not possess a rational soul and so does not yet represent a human person in a meaningful sense. He concluded that the infant's telos, and therefore her value, derive from the fact that she can become an adult.

Given the limitations of the ancient world's knowledge of the infant's cognitive capabilities, some caution is needed in interpreting Aristotle's account. But there can be little doubt that he is right to suggest that, in an ordered universe, it is part of the purpose of childhood to prepare the way for development into adulthood, and that some of the value of childness is

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<sup>322</sup>Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or made?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 53.

explained by the fact that it equips the infant to fulfil that purpose. Two sorts of narrative express the infant's purpose in terms of what her flourishing will achieve in adulthood: developmental and evolutionary. *Developmental* narratives suggest that an infant's flourishing now is important to the extent that it leads to the flourishing of the adult she will become. Fonagy has explained that what the individual encounters in the first few months and years of life is continuous in her personal biographical narrative with what she experiences in adulthood. Joshua Hordern, a theologian with a particular interest in healthcare ethics, notes that those early experiences can influence the way in which she participates in human goods throughout her life:

... there is the corroborative insight from neuroscience that affective neural networks are always shaping people's participation in the world. For example, neural patterning laid down during infants' initial experience of the world forms their future life deeply. These affective neural pathways cannot be shut off, except by strange injuries and illnesses such as that of Phineas Gage, but rather constantly form people's participation in the environment into which they are born, live, and have their being. In this sense too, we are always beginning emotionally.<sup>323</sup>

Jean Piaget, whose work has been the foundation of modern developmental psychology, constructed his theories on the basis of such a developmental narrative. In a critique of Piaget's work, anthropologist Allison James writes that

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<sup>323</sup>Joshua Hordern, *Political affections: civic participation and moral theology*, ed. Press Oxford University (Oxford scholarship online; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62–63. Phineas Gage was an American railway worker who in 1848 sustained an injury in which a tamping iron was blasted through his cheek and up through his skull before landing on the ground some feet away. Remarkably, he survived, but the iron had caused catastrophic damage as it passed through the left temporal lobe of his brain. He was reported to have lost many of his personality traits as a result, leading friends to say he was 'no longer Gage'. Modern interpretations suggest that even under these extraordinary circumstances much of the affective damage recovered over the remaining twelve years of Gage's life (M. Macmillan and M. L. Lena, 'Rehabilitating Phineas Gage', *Neuropsychol Rehabil*, 20/5 (Oct 2010), 641–58).

Piaget's purpose was explicitly to show the developmental route by which children become adults:

Piaget's concern was to understand how children develop the rationality characteristic of adult thought. Thus, he set out to map, systematically and through experimentation, the changes that occur in children's ways of thinking as they grow older and gradually learn to adapt to more complex environments.<sup>324</sup>

Piaget's work, she suggests, is suffused with the sense that what a child is able to do in the present moment represents a *forme incomplète* of what the adult is able to do.

Erik Erikson's stage theory, too, illustrates the idea that the flourishing of an adult depends on the experiences of the infant.<sup>325</sup> Erikson was a psychoanalyst who took an explicitly teleological approach to defining normal human psychosocial development. He describes eight developmental stages, each characterised by a set of psychosocial 'crises' which the individual meets and, in meeting, develops the personal skills that enable her to progress normally into the next stage. The function of infancy, according to Erikson, is to resolve relationships into trustful and mistrustful ones. The result of successfully negotiating infancy is the establishment of hope, and a belief that

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<sup>324</sup>Allison James, 'Agency', in Jens Qvortrup, William A. Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig (eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 36. That analysis of Piaget is not the only reasonable one. Piaget's interest in developmental psychology arose from his more general interest in the nature of knowledge and how humans of all ages acquire it. He argues that, like adults, children's development relies on their interaction with the world so that, providing they are given the opportunity to learn, the task of observing their psychological development becomes the same as the task of teaching them to be effective adults: 'Mrs. Isaac's work has two objectives; psychological and educational. On the one hand she wants to show what 'intelligence' means in children, and on the other she wants to see what that intelligence allows children to be taught. But in reality those are not two objectives, but only one. Mrs. Isaacs has made her observations in pupils attending a school which she herself has designed specifically to give children as much opportunity as possible for spontaneous learning. Under those circumstances there is no real distinction between psychological observation and educational experimentation.' (Jean Piaget, 'Le Developpement Intellectuel Chez les Jeunes Enfants', *Mind*, 40/158 (1931), 137–60. My translation)

<sup>325</sup>See Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the life cycle* (New York, London: Norton, 1994).

others are trustworthy, which form the basis for a capacity for developing and maintaining relationship with others. Psychological difficulties in the adult can, according to this theory, be attributable to a failure to learn that the infant can trust others and is, in her turn, a trustworthy individual. The infant must possess the cognitive tools necessary to learn trust and hope in order to form relationships as an adult. For the adult to flourish in the present, it is necessary that the infant should have flourished in the past.

*Evolutionary* narratives express the idea that the infant's flourishing is important to the survival of the human species as a whole. Messer has pointed out that although it is impossible to infer from biology alone what ends are 'proper', there are proper ends which, in an ordered universe, biology can and does serve:

For the reasons I have given, it seems clear that an understanding of 'nature' in a morally or theologically significant sense cannot straightforwardly be had from a scientific inspection of the world alone ... a more satisfactory understanding of Aquinas' dictum will recognize that we cannot understand what nature is apart from its end, which is graciously given by God and made known in Jesus Christ.<sup>326</sup>

Since genes are likely to be conserved to the extent that they increase the probability of the infant's survival into adulthood, genetic factors will, for example, favour a relationship in which the infant is cared for by adults: 'The evolutionary advantage of parental care', Dawkins goes on, 'is so obvious that ... It has been understood ever since Darwin.'<sup>327</sup>

Developmental narratives are 'prelude' accounts that express the current value of childness in terms of the training childhood offers for becoming an

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<sup>326</sup>Messer, *Respecting life: theology and bioethics*, 174.

<sup>327</sup>Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 108.

effective adult, while evolutionary narratives are ‘promissory note’ accounts that explain the value of childness as a means of achieving something for adults; a way of ensuring, for example, that packets of genes are kept safe until they can be passed to and expanded in the next generation. Both make clear that the flourishing of the adult must contain within it the flourishing of the infant. To be effective as an adult, a human being must first have navigated infancy and flourished as an infant. Both narratives therefore represent childness as inherently valuable—but only to the extent that the infant flourishing that childness facilitates contributes to adult flourishing.<sup>328</sup>

Part of the value of an infant must lie in her potential to become an adult. It does not follow, however, that her value is exhausted by that potential alone, as promissory and prelude accounts both seem to imply. Acknowledging that an infant’s telos or vocation must include preparation for adulthood should not entail conceding that the moral agent is entitled to treat the infant as though the *only* purpose of infancy were preparation for adulthood. Teleological accounts that entirely restrict the value of childness to the extent to which childness can

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<sup>328</sup>Contemporary theologians Joel Shuman and Brian Volck pose the rhetorical question: ‘What are children for?’: ‘... we may be told something like ‘Children aren’t for anything; they’re ends in themselves’. This may be true, but there’s scant evidence we believe it. In oral presentations on pediatric hospital rounds, for instance, a child is often described as “a product of an unplanned pregnancy,” with the implicit understanding that “unplanned” pregnancies are problematic. In this and other ways, children are subjected to unspoken tests of value, both to the parents and to “society”.’ (Joel James Shuman and Brian Volck, ‘What are Children For?’, in M. Therese Lysaught et al. (eds.), *On moral medicine: theological perspectives in medical ethics* (3rd edn.; Grand Rapids, Mich. Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012). Unfortunately Shuman and Volck do not go on to provide a theological explanation as to ‘what children are for’, and as the chapter unfolds it becomes clear that their chief concern is with the idea of family planning, rather than anything to do with children. Ironically, perhaps, the authors themselves seem to value children primarily as a means to illustrate the undesirability of medical interventions intended to manage fertility in adults.

facilitate adult flourishing are expressing the idea that an infant's purpose is solely to mature; that is, to exchange childness for adulthood.

Underlying that idea is the assumption that maturation is inevitably linked to an increase in moral status. That, as moral philosopher Tamar Schapiro points out, represents a value judgement on the part of adults:

Masters in general are more skilled than apprentices, but being a master does not simply consist in being a skilled apprentice. To attribute a status concept is to draw something like a distinction in kind, and our question is about the meaning of concepts as they figure into that sort of attribution.<sup>329</sup>

The term 'maturation' implies a sense of arriving at a point that is in some sense better than the point of departure, and so it is inherently an evaluative judgement. The idea that maturation represents an increase in moral value needs to be explained, and it is, at most, only partly explained by the changes that the transition from childhood to adulthood actually represents. While there are clearly some ways in which an adult can reasonably be said to be 'better' than an infant (an adult is, for example, physically stronger and better able to make independent decisions, both of which are useful attributes under certain circumstances), there are others in which it would be reasonable to suggest it is the infant who more closely represents what is ideal. A visitor to earth from another planet might report back along the lines that most humans are born perfectly healthy, but then deteriorate rapidly so that by the time they reach eighteen they have lost much of their capacity for physical healing after injury and most of their ability to learn new skills, and their respiratory and circulatory

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<sup>329</sup>Tamar Schapiro, 'What Is a Child?', *Ethics*, 109/4 (1999), 715–38, 725.

systems have degenerated to a point where they constantly require high concentrations of oxygen if they are to survive at all.

Since Aristotle, the acorn has been used as a metaphor to illustrate the idea that the purpose of something young in the present is to become something older in the future.<sup>330</sup> One limitation of the acorn metaphor is that those who use it usually take for granted that an oak is obviously more valuable than an acorn to start with, which, in considering the value of childness, presupposes the point under contention. In order to set aside the potentially prejudicial idea that what is mature is inevitably more nearly ideal than what is immature, a better arboreal metaphor might be the elder tree. On an elder, flowers appear in June, while berries appear in September. It is possible to make wine from both elderflowers and elderberries. Whether the wine-maker considers the elder tree to be fully developed and ready for harvest in June or in September depends on whether his aim is to make elderflower wine or elderberry wine. The value of the bush in June, compared with that in September, depends on which wine he has chosen to make rather than on the fact of three months having passed, or the properties of flowers or berries themselves. It would be irrational to suggest that berries are inherently complete or ideal in a way that the flowers that precede them are not.

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<sup>330</sup>For example, Coady: 'In ordinary discourse, the term 'human being' is a kind name like 'pig' or 'oak tree', and it is simply absurd to think of a pig embryo as a pig, an acorn as an oak tree, or an embryo as a human being.' (C. A. Coady, 'The common premise for uncommon conclusions', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 284–8.) Coady's point is about rejecting arguments from potential, but his implication is clearly that development from the first word of each pairing to the second represents a change in value, which presumes the point that should be under contention.

In the face of an assumption that the only purpose of childness is to exchange it for adulthood, the inferiority of the infant relative to the adult is assured by her very normality. Infants and children find themselves in a predicament that Schapiro calls 'normative immaturity':

It is in Kant's political writings ... that we find a model of normative immaturity which can shed light on the adult-child distinction. That model is the state of nature. The state of nature is the predicament of prepolitical society. By looking at it in detail, I suggest, we can learn something about the predicament of childhood.<sup>331</sup>

Archard suggests that this kind of account of the child primarily as a 'work in progress' has been the basis in moral philosophy for certain assumptions about a child's moral status:

If an adult human's moral status derives from the fact of her being rational, autonomous, and responsible, it follows that a child, which is an unfinished adult, is essentially that which is not yet fully rational, autonomous, or responsible. The 'not yet' is crucial. A child is unlike, say, an animal in lacking capacities and characteristics that it can never acquire. The child is, by contrast, incomplete but open to completion. Indeed, the work of finishing will normally be accomplished by the progress of time. But, although the 'yet' qualifies the 'not' in this crucial manner, it also indicates that what comes later is the fulfilment of a prior lack.<sup>332</sup>

An account that characterises childness wholly by reference to adulthood, says Karl Rahner, cannot be right on the Christian view:

Childhood itself has a direct relationship with God. It touches upon the absolute divinity of God not only as maturity, adulthood and the later phases of life touch upon this, but rather in a special way of its own. The special character of childhood may always be fading away so far as we are concerned, and may also disappear into that which comes afterwards in point of time, so that it seems only to derive its justification and its value from this, but this is not so. This morning does not derive its life simply from the afternoon which follows.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>331</sup>Schapiro, 'What Is a Child?', 725.

<sup>332</sup>Archard, 'The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics', 92.

<sup>333</sup>Rahner, 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* The electronic centenary edn., 3.

The idea that a child is in some way less complete than an adult derives, he suggests, from a flawed understanding of creation:

In virtue of the fact that we are naturally orientated outwards to the world about us we men are extremely liable to the temptation of interpreting ourselves according to the categories, models and prototypes which confront us from the purely physical or merely biological environment in which we live. And we do the same thing with time too. We interpret the time which belongs to the specifically human dimension, the dimension of man's personal history, in terms of the laws of physical time as these have been worked out and established. Now this means that we think of ourselves in terms that are unphilosophical, unhuman and un-Christian.<sup>334</sup>

If other beings in the universe benefit by having oak trees as well as acorns, as O'Donovan suggests, they presumably also benefit by having acorns as well as oak-trees.<sup>335</sup> The ordering of the universe does not exclude the possibility that in the present moment acorns might flourish, not only because they will be oak trees later, but also because they are acorns now.

Any account that equates telos with transition must inevitably discount the value of childness because, if the infant's only purpose is to mature into an adult, then adulthood is childness' only goal and the teleological significance of childness is simply that it gives way to adulthood. On that view, childness itself is of no value (it may even represent disvalue). Since childness is the defining characteristic of the normal child, and *a fortiori* the normal infant, the characteristics that make the infant or child normal simultaneously ensure that

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<sup>334</sup>Ibid., 1. Rahner goes on to suggest that Christians are particularly prone to this privative view of childness because Christians already see human life as a means to some other end: 'Now, it is precisely the Christian above all who seems to lay special emphasis on the merely subordinate role of childhood, this character which it bears as preparation for the life that is to come, by comparison with the stage of adult life, which in consequence seems to be understood as life in the true sense, as the goal and measure of life.'

<sup>335</sup>O'Donovan, *Resurrection and moral order: an outline for evangelical ethics*, 34–35.

she lacks (relatively or, in the case of the infant, absolutely) the characteristics that might give her full value as a person.

In order to avoid that presupposition, the transition from one stage to another—a child’s becoming more adult-like—needs to be carefully differentiated from the attribution of any augmentation in personal value as a result of that transition. On the account offered by Spaemann and O’Donovan, an individual’s telos or vocation represents the role God has given her to play. At any epoch in her life, each human has a vocation which defines her own individual participation in human nature. That *vocational* narrative explains that there is a third mode in which an infant might flourish that references telos, or vocation, without needing to reference maturation; a mode in which she can flourish by virtue of already being an infant and possessing childness. On that basis, the teleological value of childness is not solely in its capacity to give way to adulthood.

In the opening paragraphs of his *Ideas for a Theology of Childhood*, Rahner sets out the question he is addressing: ‘In the intention of the Creator and Redeemer of children what meaning does childhood have, and what task does it lay upon us for the perfecting and saving of humanity? That is the question before us.’<sup>336</sup> The question is simply expressed, but behind it is a radical rejection of adult-normative presumptions. Rahner assumes from the outset that childness does not merely represent preparatory prolegomena to

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<sup>336</sup>Rahner, ‘Ideas for a Theology of Childhood’, in *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* The electronic centenary edn. 1.

the properties that adults will need in order to fulfil their vocation. Those who possess childness have their own role to play in God's purpose:

Probably there is no religion and no philosophic anthropology which insists so manifestly and so strongly upon this point as one of its basic presuppositions as does Christianity; the point namely that the child is already the man, that right from the beginning he is already in possession of that value and those depths which are implied in the name of man. It is not simply that he gradually grows into a man. He is a man. As his personal history unfolds he merely realises what he already is ... The child is the man whom God has called by a name of his own ... The child is the man who is, right from the first, the partner of God; he who opens his eyes only to keep that vision before him in which an incomprehensible mystery is regarding him; he who cannot halt at any point in his course because infinity is calling him.<sup>337</sup>

The transience of childhood, as well as childness itself, can be used in God's service. According to Christian ethicist and Barth scholar William Werpehowski, its evanescence is part of what Barth calls the 'recognizable, normative accounts, perhaps even 'ideals' of a child's characteristic disposition or orientation' that shape human vocation during the phase of childhood:

The third portrayal is a bit more systematic, although it refers explicitly not to "being a child" but rather to "the young's" specific opportunity to realize their "freedom in limitation". Finite persons respond to God's call; they have a limited time and stand in a particular 'vocation' or 'place of responsibility.' That place includes one's chronological stage of life.<sup>338</sup>

Rather than waiting for God to call her once she has acquired the necessary skills, an infant is already, in the present moment, the person who is being called. The way in which she responds (not just the response she makes, but the manner of that response) is different from the response she will make as

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<sup>337</sup>Ibid., 3–4.

<sup>338</sup>W. Werpehowski, 'Reading Karl Barth on Children', in M.J. Bunge (ed.), *The child in Christian thought* (Grand Rapids, GA: Eerdmans, 2001), 392–93.

an adult, but it is fitted for the vocation she has as a child.<sup>339</sup> The properties that childness represents are those the infant and child need in order to respond. They would be less able to fulfil their vocation if they were to possess only adulthood.

#### **4.1.iii Third foundation stone: intersubjectivity**

A third foundation stone offered by Christian theology is that the value of a moral decision cannot be understood individually, but only as the result of an interaction between two or more people. Moral action is inherently intersubjective on the eudaimonistic view because a right action will enable an ordered universe to work better, and, since the universe includes the agent taking the action as well as the person to whom the action is done, the same morally correct act will promote the flourishing of both simultaneously.

Caring for infants is an example. One way in which childness contributes to the ordered functioning of Creation is in supporting human communities. Community is defined largely by the existence of children within it. Jesus links the absence of infants with apocalyptic inversions of the natural order, alongside mountains falling instead of rising, hills burying instead of elevating, and living, growing wood becoming dry, consumable tinder:

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<sup>339</sup>The spiritual status of the child who dies as an infant has been a matter of theological debate. Patristic scholar Maria Doerfler, tracking the varied views of early Christian writers, suggests that some—notably Augustine—considered that infants were born into sin and only saved by baptism, while others—notably, on Doerfler’s account, Mar Jacob of Sarug—considered that an infant’s death should be a cause for rejoicing because she has died sinless: ‘The infant’s spiritual state, however, is akin to that of Adam’s original purity ... Given that infants therefore resemble the newly formed Adam in their beauty and innocence, God has already pronounced judgment upon them, Jacob insinuates, when he called creation ‘very good’ in Genesis 1:31. Were the child to attain adulthood, however, he would experience his own ‘fall’ along the treacherous road of life, as Jacob describes it ...’ Maria E. Doerfler, ‘The Infant, the Monk and the Martyr’, *Le Muséon*, 124/3-4 (2011), 243–58, 250.

Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, "Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!" Then they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?'.<sup>340</sup>

The present existence of community inherently entails the existence of children, and the flourishing of each individual person depends to a greater or lesser extent on the participation and flourishing of children in the community in which he or she lives.<sup>341</sup>

The vocation of an infant is part of, and springs from, her relationships with others and the nature of society itself. Cahill suggests that this purpose accords infants an inherent value that does not rely either on passive future potentiality or on a present capacity for reason:

... explaining exactly why genetic humanity or potentiality is important is hard, since an acorn is not indeed an oak ... Perhaps a productive line of investigation would be to consider how these individuals are part of the human community by participating in its relationships, whatever their individual qualities. As many biblical scholars have argued, and as I agree, the 'image of God' in Genesis 1 should be understood in terms of relationships to other human persons and to God, not in terms of the isolated individual. Human communities place members in relation to other members, where the strong sometimes bear up the weak. This is a quality we admire and consider noble. Human beings are in relationships to other humans that are different from relationships to non-human species. The 'covenant' of our interdependent relationality is extended to individuals who do not exhibit all the species' distinctive characteristics.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>340</sup>Luke 23:28-31

<sup>341</sup>Systematic theologian Jürgen Moltmann interprets the state of being a child as a metaphor of hope for society as a whole: 'Every child brings a little new beginning into the world and grows into the sunrise of God's coming reign of peace. Children belong within this transcendental dimension where they can be themselves and can unfold their being. A society that forces its children into the mold of the present adult world loses its own future. Every child is a chance for the coming reign of peace and the decrease of violence and power. Thus we expect a little opening into the messianic time with every new-born child.' (Jürgen Moltmann, 'Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope', *Theology Today*, 56/4 (2000/01/01 2000), 592–603, 601.)

<sup>342</sup>Cahill, 'Moral reason, community belonging, and global justice', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 77.

The capacity to participate in relationships with other humans is an inherent quality in humans. Farah argues that, from a cognitive neuroscience perspective, it is interaction with others that reveals, and perhaps even defines, personhood. Intuitive recognition of other humans as the same 'sort of thing' as ourselves is not merely culturally conditioned; it is part of the way the human brain is designed:

... recent neuroscience evidence suggests a surprising level of automaticity of person processing by this network, as well as a high degree of innateness. By the term *automaticity* we mean the tendency of the person network to be triggered by certain stimulus features even when we are aware that the stimulus is not a person. By the term *innateness* we mean the genetically preprogrammed nature of the system, without a need to learn that persons exist in the world. The autonomous development and functioning of the person network has important implications for how we think about persons.<sup>343</sup>

If Cahill is right, such inherent neuropsychological properties can confer inherent worth because humans do not flourish only by virtue of the characteristics that enable them to be autonomous *from* others, but also by virtue of the characteristics that enable them to live in community *with* others.

#### 4.2 Summary

I have acknowledged that empirical evidence shows that the way an infant perceives, and is equipped to perceive, herself, God and the universe is different from the way in which an adult does so. I have labelled those ways 'childness' and 'adulthood' respectively. While recognising that Singer is not alone in his conviction that the properties represented by childness are inherently less valuable than those represented by adulthood, I have refuted it

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<sup>343</sup>Farah and Heberlein, 'Personhood and neuroscience: naturalizing or nihilating?', 42.

on the basis of a Christian anthropology of the child that builds on three foundation stones offered by theology's general objections to Singer's utilitarianism.

According to the first, any capacity that enables a being to flourish can confer inherent moral value. While there are some things a human can do best while she is an adult (that is, they characterise adulthood), there are others she can do best while she is an infant (that is, they characterise childhood), and some she can do in both phases of her life. If all those can promote her flourishing, then in both states she has inherent consequential worth on the Christian eudaimonist view I am defending. I have shown that the properties of childhood do not restrict, and can often facilitate, participation in human goods and therefore human flourishing.

According to the second, flourishing is shaped by purpose. The purpose of childhood is different from that of adulthood and, while all human infants participate in human nature, there might be modes in which all normal human infants flourish that are distinct from the modes in which any normal human adult will do so. That means the human infant's flourishing in the present moment might be promoted by actions that are different from those that would promote flourishing in an adult.

Finally, an important way in which humans can flourish is to engage, albeit in an inchoate manner, in relationship with God and with others in community. Relating to others is a pre-eminent characteristic of childhood for which the infant is already equipped at the time of birth and, on the eudaimonist view I am defending, can promote the flourishing of the infant herself and of those caring for her.

The insight offered by the Jesus of Luke's gospel is that there is nothing to justify a conclusion that a certain way of thinking is less valuable simply by virtue of the fact that it characterises humans during the phase of childhood. A commitment to the idea that adulthood is inherently more valuable than childness must therefore be explained. It cannot be justified on the grounds that time has passed between childhood and adulthood, because time passing does not on its own increase an individual's moral status. Nor can it be justified on the grounds that during that time certain skills have been acquired, because that conclusion depends on a prior commitment to the idea that skills are important to moral status only to the extent that they resemble adult skills.

An assumption that the only purpose of infancy is to reach adulthood must inevitably lead to a conclusion that infancy is of less value than adulthood, and that its value is a promissory note for the value the infant will have when she is adult, or else a prelude to adulthood during which the infant is acquiring morally important characteristics. By defining moral status in terms of properties that infants lack, but will acquire with the passage of time, the infant can only ever be understood in reference to something she has not yet achieved. If the term 'infant' means no more than a being who is in some sense less than what she will become, then the conclusion that childness confers a lesser status on those who possess it than adulthood does is inevitable.

There are obvious parallels with speciesism, which similarly describes a tendency to ascribe greater or lesser moral value to groups of beings in ways that are arbitrary because they are not rationally explainable by anything inherently true about those beings. To paraphrase Singer, it could be said that

if there were any single aspect of a rational approach to ethics in children that would distinguish it from others, it would be the fact that topics were approached with a conscious disavowal of any assumption that those who think like adults have, merely because they think like adults, any distinctive worth or inherent value that puts them above those who think in other ways.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>344</sup>In the opening pages of *Practical Ethics*, Singer sets out his distinctive, overarching ideological commitment to rejecting just this sort of arbitrary prejudice: 'It could be said that if there is any single aspect of this book that distinguishes it from other approaches to such issues as human equality, abortion, euthanasia and the environment, it is the fact that these topics are approached with a conscious disavowal of any assumption that all members of our own species have, merely because they are members of our species, any distinctive worth or inherent value that puts them above members of other species' (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 12).

## Chapter 5. Humanness: interpreting the image

In the previous chapter I have argued that one, potentially persuasive, Christian theological response to Singer is to urge an anthropology in which adulthood is accorded no greater moral value than childhood. That presents a problem, however, because adulthood represents the properties on which moral theology and philosophy have often relied in order to explain the categorical distinctiveness of human beings as a species. A capacity for formal reasoning not only distinguishes humans as infants from humans as adults; it also distinguishes humans from other animals. Normal humans are, in general, good at formal reasoning in a way that members of most other species are not, and abandoning a capacity for formal reasoning as the principal criterion for personhood removes one of the features that mark *Homo sapiens* from non-human animal species.

Singer's ideological claim, of course, is that such a categorical distinction between humans and non-human animals is in any case purely classificatory and of no moral relevance. Singer is prepared to use the term 'person' only in order to examine without pro-human prejudice the normative claims that personhood might represent. If personhood is explicitly linked with a quality of being human, then it expresses precisely the kind of speciesism that he abhors. His aim is to dissociate the idea of personal value from membership of a category and locate it instead in certain characteristics that any being might possess:

Accepting these differences between normal mature humans and nonhuman animals, we could see the wrongness of killing, not as a black and white matter, dependent on whether the being killed is or is not a person, but as a matter of degree, dependent on, among other things, whether the being killed was fully a person or was a near-person or had no self-awareness at all, the extent to which, by our best estimate, the being had future-directed desires, and how central those desires were to the being's life.<sup>345</sup>

Since, on the utilitarian view, the agent's moral responsibility expresses no more than the moral patient's capacity to benefit from whatever moral action she proposes to take, all the elements of personhood that are relevant to moral action are already expressed by the characteristics that enable a being to benefit from correct moral action or be harmed by moral action that is wrong. Such characteristics are spectral, so there is no definable category of beings to whom the label 'person' can be attached with any normative confidence. It makes no sense, he suggests, to treat an individual in a certain way because she belongs to a group that, in general, is characterised by certain attributes without considering whether or not she herself possesses those attributes. It is entirely illogical, says Singer, '... that we [should] treat individuals, not in accordance with their actual qualities, but in accordance with the qualities normal for their species.'<sup>346</sup>

Singer considers that what is true between different species is also true for individual humans in different phases. Development is not a series of discrete and distinctive stages, but a continuum. The fact that conception, birth, viability and quickening are to a certain extent perceptible to an observer does not mean they map onto any defensible account of augmenting personal value:

Our discussion has shown that the liberal search for a morally crucial dividing line between the new-born baby and the fetus has failed to yield

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<sup>345</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 104.

<sup>346</sup>*Ibid.*, 164.

any event or stage of development that can bear the weight of separating those with a right to life from those who lack such a right in a way that clearly shows that, when most abortions take place, the fetus lacks a right to life. The conservative is on solid ground in insisting that the development from the embryo to the infant is a gradual process, not marked by any obvious point at which there is a change in moral status sufficient to justify the difference between regarding the killing of an infant as murder and the killing of a fetus as something that a pregnant woman should be free to choose as she wishes.<sup>347</sup>

Even the process of birth, despite the seismic changes it entails in other respects, does not impact significantly on changes in the way the brain works and, on the preference utilitarian view, does not represent any categorical change in the value of an individual life.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>347</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>348</sup>The 'continuity thesis' is the view that the late-term fetus is morally equivalent to the new-born baby. It has been an important plank of moral philosophical and, to a lesser extent, theological objections to abortion. The thesis cuts both ways, and Singer uses it to shore up his defence of infanticide: 'We have already seen that the strength of the conservative position lies in the difficulty liberals have in pointing to a morally significant line of demarcation between an embryo and a new-born baby. The standard liberal position needs to be able to point to some such line, because liberals usually hold that it is permissible to kill an embryo or fetus but not a baby. I have argued that the life of a fetus (and even more plainly, of an embryo) is of no greater value than the life of a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-awareness, capacity to feel and so on, and that because no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. Now we have to face the fact that these arguments apply to the new-born baby as much as to the fetus.' (ibid., 342.) If moral status is dependent on a certain set of cognitive capacities (i.e. what the fetus and baby are *capable* of doing mentally), then Singer is right to suggest that birth itself is of little moral significance, because what the brain is capable of doing does not change significantly during the process of a normal birth. If, however, the claim is that moral status is dependent on a specific mode of cognitive functioning (i.e. what the fetus and baby are *actually* doing mentally), then the factual basis for arguing that fetus and new-born baby are of equal status is not as clear, since our knowledge of the facts is incomplete. That brings the question of moral status back to a question about the way in which a being thinks, rather than simply the extent to which they can think at all, and so leaves the way open for epistemological debate about what sort of cognition can confer moral status. Moral philosopher Jose Luis Bermudez argues that what we now know about developmental psychology tells us that the continuity thesis is wrong: 'I ... argue for two claims. The first is that the lives of neonates (newly born infants) can have certain features which make their lives morally significant in a way that many contemporary theorists would deny. In particular I will draw attention to recent and important work in developmental psychology. The second claim will be that these features are such that they can in principle be possessed only after birth. Possession of these features is a function not just of the infants' physiological and neurophysiological development but also of the fact that they are outside the womb. If both of these claims are accepted, then we have to deny the Continuity Thesis that the end- of-term fetus and the neonate are, in most normal circumstances, morally equivalent.' (J. L. Bermudez, 'The moral significance of birth', *Ethics*, 106/2 (Jan 1996), 378–403.) Other objections to the continuity thesis do not attempt to explain a difference in inherent value, but rather appeal to the intuitive difference in the ways that adults feel when faced with a fetus on the one hand or a new-born baby on the other (see, for example, Coady, 'The common premise for uncommon conclusions').

Singer wishes the claim of special value represented by the term 'person' to have no more meaning than the sum of the properties it contains. Those properties, he argues, constitute all that is morally relevant about personhood:

We have broken down the doctrine of the sanctity of human life into two separate claims, one that it is especially serious to take the life of a member of our species, and the other that it is especially serious to take the life of a person. We have seen that the former claim cannot be defended. What of the latter? Is there something about the life of a rational and self-conscious being, as distinct from a being that is merely sentient, that makes it much more serious to take the life of the former than the latter?<sup>349</sup>

In identifying the attributes that 'person' represents, Singer chooses as his authority seventeenth century philosopher John Locke, who argued that the hallmark of personhood is awareness that one is thinking:

We must consider what 'person' stands for. I think it is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing at different times and places. What enables it to think of itself is its consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking and (it seems to me) essential to it. It is impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving that he perceives. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. It is always like that with our present sensations and perceptions. And it is through this that everyone is to himself that which he calls 'self', not raising the question of whether the same self is continued in the same substance. Consciousness always accompanies thinking, and makes everyone to be what he calls 'self' and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now that it was then; and this present self that now reflects on it is the one by which that action was performed.<sup>350</sup>

Every spectral variable has a fixed anchor point at zero, and Singer is now in a position to identify with confidence the category of 'non-person'. While it might

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<sup>349</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 4181.

<sup>350</sup>Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Book II: Ideas*, 115.

not be clear when a heap of straws becomes a haystack, it is absolutely clear when there are no straws at all. On the utilitarian view, there are human beings who cannot be harmed by any given moral action because they lack any of the characteristics they would need in order to be so harmed. When it comes to being killed, Singer argues, the infant is one.

### **5.1 Christianity's objection: *Imago Dei***

Contemporary theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff points out that scripture does not make clear what it is about being human that explains humans' special status:

To be a human being is to have worth. Jesus does not indicate what that worth is, other than to say that it is much greater than the worth of birds and sheep and to suggest that it is a worth one has *qua* human being. Presumably, the worth he had in mind was that of bearing the image of God. What is to be noted, then, is that in these passages Jesus appeals to our worth as human beings to explain God's care for each and every one of us ...<sup>351</sup>

The idea that humans are made in the image of God expresses the special value of humans. The explanation it offers of that special value depends on how the idea is interpreted. Protestant theologian Paul Ramsey observes that: 'Two types of theory regarding the image of God may first be distinguished, two ways of thinking about man according to which may be classified most of the traditional discussions about human nature.'<sup>352</sup> One way, Ramsey goes on, is to suggest that the difference between humans and other animals consists in possession of certain properties that only humans have in common with God:

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<sup>351</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 131.

<sup>352</sup>Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville, Ky. London: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1950), 250. Author's italics.

One view singles out something *within* the *substantial form* of human nature, some faculty or capacity man possesses, and identifies this as the thing which distinguishes man from physical nature and from other animals ... Aristotle's definition of man as a rational animal may be cited as the outstanding example of ways of thinking about man which specify some capacity, some substantial part of human nature, as the essence of what it means to be in the image of God. Christians who follow in Aristotle's train simply make use of the religious label, the *imago Dei*, for everything he intended to say.<sup>353</sup>

Depending on what criteria they choose to use, substantialist conceptions might offer several possible accounts of the normative relationship between *imago Dei* and moral status as a person. One is that being in God's image is contingent on a human's making moral decisions that are the ones God himself would make. It is an articulation of individual rectitude that requires the individual to make morally correct decisions.<sup>354</sup> Another is that imagehood refers to a human as an actual or analogical representation of God in Creation. It is a claim of human authority that relies on humans' awareness of the special relation in which they stand to God and to Creation, and of their responsibility to care for Creation as God would do.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup>Ibid. Ramsey brackets together the tasks of separating human from non-human and of distinguishing physical from non-physical aspects of the individual human. Ramsey hints here that to take a relational view of *imago Dei* might mean abandoning body-mind dualism, although in his own exposition of it (*vide infra*) he makes imagehood contingent only on a spiritual relationship.

<sup>354</sup>Theologian and teacher Marc Cortez considers this to represent a third category of interpretation of *imago Dei*, which he calls 'functional': "This [functional] approach argues that the *imago Dei* is something human persons do, rather than something that human persons are. The image is a function of the human person (or the human community) and not a structure of the human person's being." Marc Cortez, *Theological anthropology: a guide for the perplexed* (Guides for the perplexed; London: T & T Clark, 2010), 21. Cortez goes on to suggest that there is a fourth category, which he calls 'multifaceted' and which draws on all three interpretations: relational, structural and functional.

<sup>355</sup>Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a commentary*, trans. John Scullion (London: Minneapolis: SPCK Augsburg, 1984). There are many different ways in which humans might resemble God. Westermann suggests that those which have received particular theological attention are memory, intellect, will, spiritual capacities, noble qualities, intellect, freedom, spiritual nature, religious and moral personal life, personality, understanding, will, self-consciousness and intelligence (149).

Perhaps the most widely accepted substantialist interpretation represents rationality as the defining characteristic that man and God have in common.<sup>356</sup> Protestant theologian Louis Berkhof comments that theological debate around the *imago Dei* symbol has traditionally been dominated by interpretations that link it with some capacity for reasoning and correct moral choice: ‘The early Church Fathers were quite agreed that the image of God in man consisted primarily in man’s rational and moral characteristics, and in his capacity for holiness ...’<sup>357</sup> Augustine asserts that the property which humans have in common with God is rationality:

And mark in what respect man is called God’s image, and man of earth, returning to earth: the first is in respect of the *reasonable soul* which God breathed, or inspired into man, that is, into man’s body; and the latter is in respect of the body which God made out of the dust, and gave it a soul, whereby it became a living body ...<sup>358</sup>

He considers that reason, and distinctiveness from non-human animals, are mutually defining. It is humans’ capacity for reason that makes them similar to God, and it is also what makes them different from other species:

At this point we must also note that God, after saying to Our image, immediately added, And let him have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the other irrational animals. From this we are to understand that man was made to the image of God in that part of his nature wherein he surpasses the brute beasts. *This is, of course, his reason or mind or intelligence, or whatever we wish to call it.*<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>356</sup>On that view, arguments from *imago Dei* do not necessarily lead to a conclusion that the moral agent should treat only humans as persons. Non-humans who share those characteristics could also potentially be considered to be in God’s image. A structural definition of personhood that relies on a faculty for logic and individuality would encompass supernatural beings such as angels. This leads Aquinas, for example, to approve of a substantialist account of personhood for one of the reasons that some theologians reject it: because it can accommodate the possibility of non-human persons (S. Th. I q29 a4).

<sup>357</sup>Louis Berkhof, *Systematic theology* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), 202.

<sup>358</sup>Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*. XXIV. My italics.

<sup>359</sup>Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. J. Quasten, W.S.J. Burghardt, and T.C. Lawler (1; New York: Paulist Press, 1982). ChXX.30. My italics.

Aquinas too appears to link the quality of humanness with rationality in the way that Ramsey attributes to Aristotle: 'Further, we are like to God chiefly in our intellect, because we are the image of God in our mind, as Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. vi)'.<sup>360</sup>

In the twenty-first century, there are some difficulties with the idea that it is a capacity for formal reason that makes members of the species *Homo sapiens* godlike or special to God. One is that it seems to fly in the face of evidence that members of other species are, in fact, capable of some form of reasoning. Philosopher Shane Glackin summarises some of the empirical research suggesting that dolphins, for example, are capable of feats of cognition that seem closely to resemble formal reason:

Researchers describe dolphins using clearly rational and strategic behaviour in hunting, problem-solving, understanding grammatical distinctions in human speech—between, for instance, “take the surfboard to the frisbee” and “take the frisbee to the surf-board”—scouting for the group, and communicating to others about food sources, dangers, and the like. Dolphins can distinguish between impossible and merely difficult questions, and understand complex categories like “anything man-made and bigger than a breadbox”. They can, on request,

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<sup>360</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Los Angeles: Coyote Canyon Press, 1947), I q14 a2. Aquinas may not be as committed as Ramsey suggests to rationality as a criterion for personhood. His interest in the relationship between personhood and the image of God is not primarily an attempt to reach a normative definition of moral status, but rather to explore the nature of the divine persons of the Trinity. While he agrees that rationality is necessary to any meaningful definition of 'person', he does not consider a faculty for reason to be the only criterion for personhood in an individual human. A person, on Aquinas' view, is simultaneously an individual being and an example of a more general type of beings who are capable of reason: 'Furthermore, in a more special and perfect way, the particular and the individual are found in the rational substances which have dominion over their own actions; and which are not only made to act, like others; but which can act of themselves; for actions belong to singulars. Therefore also the individuals of the rational nature have a special name even among other substances; and this name is "person". Thus the term "individual substance" is placed in the definition of person, as signifying the singular in the genus of substance; and the term "rational nature" is added, as signifying the singular in rational substances.' (S.Th. I q29 a1). Aquinas takes personhood to be a particular and individual manifestation of rationality, and reason in turn to be a manifestation of participation in Godhead, or imagehood. Personhood constitutes a singular instance of a rational nature, but the characteristics that make it singular are not defined by reason as a faculty for logic alone.

‘volunteer’ novel behaviour, and may refuse a ‘reward’ for performing a particular trick until they have mastered it to their own satisfaction.<sup>361</sup>

If members of other species can be rational, then it seems hard to argue that the special status of humans can be explained by a capacity for reason alone.

A more serious consequence of using a capacity for reason as the yardstick for personal value is that it fails to account for value in the many members of *Homo sapiens* who lack such a capacity. If formal reasoning is the only determinant of the quality of humanness, then some individual humans must be classified as non-persons. Anglican theologian Joseph Fletcher does not flinch from the conclusion that there are humans who are not persons, and believes it is fairly easy to define who they are.<sup>362</sup> He distils the concept of a capacity for reason into fifteen pass/fail criteria for humanhood, of which he considers IQ (intelligence quotient—largely a measure of a faculty for logic) to be the most important:

Any individual of the species *Homo sapiens* who falls below an IQ grade of 40 in a standard Stanford-Binet test, amplified if you like by other tests, is questionably a person; below the mark of 20, not a person. *Homo* is indeed *sapiens* in order to be *Homo*.<sup>363</sup>

Fletcher believes that the life of a human who lacks a faculty for reason is of less value than that of a human who possesses it:

Defective fetuses, defective newborns, moribund patients—all of these are human lives. Some physicians would ‘sacrifice’ such human lives

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<sup>361</sup>S. N. Glackin, ‘Dolphin natures, human virtues: MacIntyre and ethical naturalism’, *Stud Hist Philos Biol Biomed Sci*, 39/3 (Sep 2008), 292–7, *ibid.* Glackin’s sources are Louis Herman, ‘What the dolphin knows, or might know, in its natural world’, in K. Pryor and K. S. Norris (eds.), *Dolphin Societies: Discoveries and Puzzles* (California: University of California Press, 1998), 349–63., K.S. Norris, ‘Looking at dolphin schools’, in K. Pryor and K. S. Norris (eds.), *Dolphin Societies: Discoveries and Puzzles* (California: University of California Press, 1998), 7–16., Norris, ‘Looking at captive dolphins’, in *Dolphin Societies: Discoveries and Puzzles*, 293–303.

<sup>362</sup>Joseph F. Fletcher, *Humanhood: Essays in Biomedical Ethics* (Prometheus Books, 1979), 12–16.

<sup>363</sup>*Ibid.*, 12. On the basis of IQ alone, Fletcher would consider as ‘questionable’ persons around a third of those with Down’s Syndrome and around one human in a hundred who has no pathology but is simply at one end of the IQ distribution among the population of normal humans.

sometimes, others would not. But do they understand the import of their policy? If there is any ground at all, ethically, as I would contend there is, for allowing or hastening the end of such lives, it must be on a qualitative ground that these lives are subpersonal.<sup>364</sup>

Fletcher's unapologetic exclusion of large numbers of humans from the moral protection offered by the label 'person' is perplexing and offensive to most people who care for such individuals.<sup>365</sup> It would certainly exclude many of my patients who lead a life which they themselves seem to consider rich and full. Yet Fletcher appears to be doing no more than attaching numbers to a concept that many Christian theologians already agree; namely that it is a capacity for rational thought that distinguishes persons from non-persons. His interpretation of humanhood is perhaps extreme in its narrowness, but his account is substantially the same as many theological interpretations of what it means to be in the image of God.

One response is to argue that, while substantialist interpretations are correct to suggest there is some defensible pass/fail criterion for personhood, that criterion should be something other than logical reason. Ramsey sets out a number of alternative candidate attributes:

Instead of reason other aspects of human nature, themselves not so cool or dispassionate in their functioning, may be defined as the image of God. Influenced by romanticism we may incline toward the belief that the capacity most commanding respect is man's faculty for imagination and artistic creativity. Influenced by Kant's dictum that 'nothing in the whole world, or even outside the world, can possibly be regarded as good

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<sup>364</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 155. Fletcher, like Singer, seems to believe that the only way in which a doctor can value a patient is to keep her alive for as long as possible, and that doctors routinely decide to allow patients to die on the grounds that they are imperfect and so of lesser value. Both beliefs are incorrect.

<sup>365</sup>Singer, on the other hand, applauds Fletcher's approach to defining moral status and, without granting the implication that they are the sole preserve of members of the species *Homo sapiens*, agrees that the list successfully captures the attributes that are morally important: 'There is another use of the term "human", one proposed by Joseph Fletcher, a major figure in the development of bioethics. Fletcher compiled a list of what he called "Indicators of Humanhood" that includes the following: self-awareness, self-control, a sense of the future, a sense of the past, the capacity to relate to others, concern for others, communication and curiosity'. *Ibid.*, 176.

without limitation except a good will,' we may be greatly impressed with man's moral capacity, his moral will or moral freedom, and call these the image of God in him. This, in general, is the viewpoint of personalistic idealism. All these views have in common the definition of the image of God as some capacity native to man or some part of the substantial form of his nature.<sup>366</sup>

Another is to argue that a conception of reason should be more capacious than IQ or logic if it is to be the criterion for personal value. Human beings' awareness of themselves owes as much to immediate desires, beliefs and feelings as it does to the ordered or sustained understandings of cause and effect that comprise formal reasoning. Martha Nussbaum points out that it is incorrect to assume judgments are meaningless unless they are arrived at through the exercise of formal reasoning:

It is tempting [to suggest] these are drives or affective forces that really do not have an intentional evaluative content. I shall argue that this would be the wrong conclusion: we cannot explain these emotions and the way they motivate us without thinking of them as value-laden intentional attitudes toward objects.<sup>367</sup>

In children, for example, emotions are at least as important to self-awareness as formal reasoning:

By now we can see how these emotions support the child's ability to act, as they mark off patterns of salience and urgency in her surroundings; we also see how they may support generous and beneficent action. But we also see a darker set of connections. ... None of these problems threatens the account of emotion as value-laden recognition: for it is from evaluation that they all arise.<sup>368</sup>

According to Catholic philosopher Brian Davies, Aquinas considers that to be a kind of reasoning:

[In] lallae Aquinas also argues that emotion cannot be severed from understanding or how we think ... Aquinas holds that understanding or

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<sup>366</sup>Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 251.

<sup>367</sup>Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Emotions and Infancy', in Library Ebook, Library Ebooks Corporation. Ebook, and Ebl (eds.), *Upheavals of Thought: the Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 79.

<sup>368</sup>*Ibid.*, 297.

thinking or perceiving is critical when it comes to having emotions ... He thinks that emotions are triggered by how, rightly or wrongly, we perceive the world to be.<sup>369</sup>

Biggar, too, while accepting the substantialist pass/fail principle, insists it must not be limited by understandings of rationality that are too narrow. He considers personhood to rely on reasoning in a much broader theological sense, in the context of an individual's relationship with God and the vocation that results from it. Meaningful narrative, he points out, can emerge from a range of modes of awareness:

We hold that [the value of biographical life] lies in the individual's obedient response to God's vocation to play an inimitable role in upholding and promoting created goods; and that this theological concept of responsibility pushes the boundaries of worthwhile, biographical, personal human life out from active and assertive forms to embrace passive, receptive and appreciative ones too.<sup>370</sup>

Biggar acknowledges that the cognitive ability measured by IQ is only one way among many in which a being can appreciate the universe. In enacting the kind of 'worthwhile, biographical, personal human life' that Biggar is describing, the list of *dramatis personae* includes a number of diverse players such as intuitions, memories and emotions as well as reason.

Evaluating personhood using Biggar's more extensive conception of reason reduces the likelihood of misclassifying a person as a non-person. By

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<sup>369</sup>Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa theologiae: a guide and commentary* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 391.

<sup>370</sup>Nigel Biggar, *Aiming to kill: the ethics of suicide and euthanasia* (Pilgrim Press, 2004), 47. Biggar's use of the term 'responsible' rather than 'responsive' is important. 'Responsive' can refer to an automatic relationship between cause and effect that requires no moral agency. A patient is said, for example, to 'respond' to a drug because it has worked, not because she herself has taken any conscious decisions in the matter. The term 'responsible', however, denotes some kind of moral reasoning. According to Biggar, therefore, in order to have full moral value a human must possess the cognitive capabilities demanded by such reasoning (see also Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a commentary*, 150.: '[a person is] ... one whom God can address as "You" and an "I" who is responsible before God').

embracing as worthwhile other 'passive, receptive and appreciative' forms of life, he largely avoids the risk of an over-narrow account of the capacities needed to construct biographical narrative. If the idea of reason is conceived broadly enough, then 'reason' becomes something that almost all humans can do, even those who are young or cognitively impaired. It nevertheless still leaves open the possibility that some humans could be judged as non-persons because, even on Biggar's terms, they would fail the personhood test. Of those, some are damaged humans who are unable to enjoy life because their brains have already died and whom, according to a model of body-mind dualism, it seems reasonable to consider no longer persons.

The normal human infant, however, would also fail the test. The broad 'passive, receptive and appreciative' forms of Biggar's concept of responsibility certainly manage, as he intends, to push the boundaries of worthwhile, biographical, personal human life. They do not, however, push the boundaries far enough to enable an infant to be considered capable of obediently responding to vocation.<sup>371</sup> Even Biggar's generous and well-considered substantialist account therefore fails to offer a credible consequential objection to infanticide.

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<sup>371</sup>That should not be taken to mean that no infant is capable of any kind of moral agency. Augustine certainly thought that the mental processes of infants are morally relevant. The inability of infants to harm others, he suggests, is a function of their physical limitations, and nothing to do with any lack of capacity to reason morally: '... the weakness then of infant limbs, not its will, is its innocence.' (Augustine, *Confessions*. Augustine concedes that it would be unfair to rebuke an infant in the same way as to rebuke an adult, but only because his definition of 'infant' excluded the possibility that the child could talk or interpret speech, and there is no practical value in trying to rebuke a child who cannot understand it. (Colin Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX* (10; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1990). Even so, while a capacity for speech is a necessary condition for moral discourse in practice, it says little about a capacity for moral reasoning itself. Again, aphasia does not imply dementia. Nevertheless, it seems implausible to suggest that the infant's capacity for obedience is that of an adult, and any account that links personal value with such a capacity must conclude that the infant is inherently less valuable.

Most substantialist interpretations are at the same time reductionist, in the sense that they attempt to express all of human value in a finite number of terms; sometimes even in a single term. Twentieth century Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann suggests that any such interpretation is difficult to reconcile with a scriptural account of imagehood:

F.K. Schumann had written: "The *imago Dei* does not consist in any particular detail of the person but describes the human being as a whole without limiting itself to anything taken in isolation." We are on firm ground here. The discussion whether the image and likeness of God referred to the corporeal or the spiritual aspect of the person has brought us to the conclusion that the question has been placed incorrectly. Gen 1:26f. is concerned neither with the corporeal nor with the spiritual qualities of people; it is concerned only with the person as a whole.<sup>372</sup>

Ramsey agrees that substantialist interpretations have made a false start in defining personhood according to the presence or absence of certain properties. A more satisfactory type of theory regarding the image of God, he suggests, locates the quality of humanness in an individual's relationship with God. Ramsey expresses that interpretation using the analogy of an image in a mirror: 'The image of God is rather to be understood as a relationship *within which* man sometimes stands, whenever like a mirror he obediently reflects God's will in his life and actions.'<sup>373</sup>

According to a relational interpretation of *imago Dei*, imagehood consists in the relation in which each individual human stands to God. Barth considers that the quality of humanness cannot be analysed as one or more properties:

Man is the repetition of this divine form of life; its copy and reflection. He is this first in the fact that he is the counterpart of God, the encounter and discovery in God Himself being copied and imitated in God's relation to man. But he is it also in the fact that he is himself the counterpart of his fellows and has in them a counterpart, the co-existence and co-

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<sup>372</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a commentary*, 150.

<sup>373</sup>Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 255.

operation in God Himself being repeated in the relation of man to man. Thus the *tertium comparationis*, the analogy between God and man, is simply the existence of the I and the Thou in confrontation. This is first constitutive for God, and then for man created by God. To remove it is tantamount to removing the divine from God as well as the human from man. On neither side can it be thought away. That it is God's divine and man's human form of life is revealed in the creation of man. God wills and creates man when He wills and creates the being between which and Himself there exists this *tertium comparationis*.<sup>374</sup>

There is a distinction between the concepts of 'relation' and 'relationship' that is important in contrasting the relational interpretations of Barth and Ramsey. To describe two beings as 'in relation' to one another is a claim of objective fact that does not rely on any interaction between them. Even inanimate objects stand in a certain relation to one another. The idea of relationship, on the other hand, requires there to be some form of mutual awareness and response.

Theologian Molly Haslam points out that Ramsey makes humanness contingent on *relationship*; the way an individual interacts with God. As Ramsey represents it, a relationship with God is in place only when humans respond obediently to God's will. The idea of obedient response must depend on a certain cognitive capacity, so that Ramsey's interpretation (like the substantialist ones he rejects) potentially excludes infants as well as those who are cognitively impaired.<sup>375</sup>

Barth, on the other hand, considers *imago Dei* to express the fact of the specifically human *relation* in which each member of *Homo sapiens* stands to God, irrespective of how or whether she chooses to respond:

*Imago Dei* does not consist in anything that man says or does. It consists, as man himself consists, as the creature of God. He would not

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<sup>374</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III, 1 §41* (London: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2004), 185.

<sup>375</sup>Molly Claire Haslam, *A constructive theology of intellectual disability: human being as mutuality and response* (1st edn.; New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 104.

be man if he were not the image of God. He is the image of God in the fact that he is man.<sup>376</sup>

Barth is not suggesting that the quality of being human is a consequence of that relation or can be inferred from it. Nor is humanness constituted merely by the fact that a being stands in *some* kind of relation to God; if it were, then any creature could be said to be human since everything in creation relates to its creator. Rather, the specifically human relation in which every human stands to God, and the quality of being human, are susceptible of no analysis except in terms of one another. They are, in effect, synonymous.

While that relation expresses the quality of humanness, on its own it does not explain why humanness is a quality that should confer any particular value. Wolterstorff considers that the nature of God is such that, in practice, he loves all those who stand in such a relation to him:

... being loved by God gives a human being great worth. And if God loves equally and permanently each and every creature who bears the *imago dei*, then the relational property of being loved by God is what we have been looking for [to account for inherent worth]. Bearing that property gives to each human being who bears it the worth in which natural human rights inhere.<sup>377</sup>

It is that love for us, on Wolterstorff's view, that gives the quality of humanness its special moral value.

Many theological ethicists who work in healthcare favour a relational interpretation of *imago Dei* that accords all humans equal worth because it offers protection to the sort of people they care for in their everyday practice.

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<sup>376</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III, 1*, trans. Geoffrey William (tr) Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth (tr) Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 184.

<sup>377</sup>Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, 352–53. Later, Wolterstorff is careful to distinguish this hypothetical claim of a logical relation between worth and God's love from his own personal conviction that God actually does confer worth on every human by loving them: 'I have not argued that God does in fact so love every creature who bears the *imago dei* ... The reader will have discerned, however, that I do in fact hold those convictions.' *Ibid.*, 360.

John Wyatt is a contemporary Christian ethicist and also a practising consultant in neonatology who cares for sick and often premature new-born babies. In *Matters of Life and Death*, Wyatt argues that personhood is synonymous with a being's participation in Godhead:

The meaning of personhood is derived from the Godhead. In philosophical language, it is ontologically foundational. You cannot define what it means to be a person using other more foundational concepts such as rationality or individuality. To be a person is to be both a unique 'other' and to be in communion, in relation, with other persons.<sup>378</sup>

Wyatt rejects the substantialist idea that personal value can be explained by a subset of the capacities or characteristics an individual might possess. Specific moral characteristics such as a capacity for reason are no more than epiphenomena that might or might not accompany the relation in which a specific human stands to God.

Haslam, herself a physiotherapist working with patients with cognitive impairment as a result of brain damage, considers that any substantialist conception of personal value carries risks of harming vulnerable humans that Christians should find unacceptable:

There are a number of problems with this approach to understanding the imago Dei symbol. An obvious one is the tendency to consider the possession of that quality or capacity which distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation as an attribution to human being of superior status when compared to those beings who do not possess it ... And because in the history of the imago Dei theology what distinguished human being from the rest of creation was often a characteristic that transcends our physical nature, including especially our 'spiritual' or intellectual nature, the result has been the devaluation and often abuse

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<sup>378</sup>Wyatt, *Matters of life & death: human dilemmas in the light of Christian faith*, 58. Wyatt is expressing Barth's idea of the *analogia relationis* in which human relationships (both with other humans and with God), and the relationships within the Trinity, are analogous to one another: 'As God is free for man, so man is free for man; but only inasmuch as God is for him, so that the *analogia relationis* as the meaning of the divine likeness cannot be equated with an *analogia entis*' Barth, *Church Dogmatics III*, 1 §41, 195.

of animals and inanimate objects — and those individuals with profound intellectual disabilities.<sup>379</sup>

Haslam is concerned that substantialist interpretations prejudge the question they are intended to answer. If there are to be structural criteria that determine full moral value then, in order to decide what properties should constitute such criteria, it is first necessary to decide which properties are morally important. That in turn entails a prior judgment about what a being with full value is like, which is the question under contention. Because they leave no room for an appeal to values that are objective or outside themselves, substantialist arguments leave the way open for syncretic interpretations of *imago Dei* that lend specious theological authority to a particular culture's privileging of certain characteristics over others. As Haslam points out, 'Christian theologians [tend] to valorize those qualities in the society to which they belong.'<sup>380</sup>

## **5.2 Vocation and humanness**

In addition to relieving ethics of the necessity to decide what moral properties are morally relevant, and how much of them an individual might need to qualify as a person, relational interpretations of *imago Dei* anchor the quality and value of humanness in the idea of vocation. According to a relational interpretation of *imago Dei*, any account that attempts to represent human nature structurally as

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<sup>379</sup>Haslam, *A constructive theology of intellectual disability: human being as mutuality and response*, 94. Haslam's inclusion of inanimate objects in this list seems puzzling at first sight but in fact is consistent with her reservations. According to the sort of structural account of value that substantialism represents, the moral agent can treat inanimate objects in any way she pleases because they lack any capacity to benefit or be harmed by her actions. But if, as Haslam goes on to suggest, value depends on some quality or essence of the object (which we might call its 'nature') then some actions might constitute misuse even if they do not harm the object that is misused.

<sup>380</sup>Ibid.

the sum of individual characteristics is inevitably an inadequate description of reality. An individual's value cannot be assessed against some prior measure (in contrast with Fletcher's assessment of personal worth using IQ, for example). Rather, according to O'Donovan, personal value is uncovered in the interaction between beings: '... there are no 'criteria of personhood' by which a person could be recognized independently of, or prior to, personal engagement'.<sup>381</sup> The initial step in correct moral action is to engage with another human in relationship, without having first attempted any structural assessment of her moral value:

Our argument has not been that we can know persons by *observing* their capacity for relationship. We have said that we know them *in* relationship, which is to say, when we abandon the observer's stance altogether and commit ourselves to treating them as persons. Of course, persons are intended for relationship, and will therefore (barring accidents) develop the personal attributes and capacities. But that is a very different thing from taking these attributes as a supposedly objective criterion for determining their status as persons. Personality *discloses* personhood; it does not constitute it. Personal attributes develop, as self-consciousness develops, but persons do not develop, for they are not in a category of quality, but of substance.<sup>382</sup>

O'Donovan is making three fundamental claims here for the dependence of personal value on relationship. The first is that a capacity for interaction with others is one of the purposes of being human: '... persons are intended for relationship ...'<sup>383</sup> The second is that it is interaction with others that *discloses*

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<sup>381</sup>O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a person?', in *Abortion and the sanctity of human life* 125–37, 126.

<sup>382</sup>*Ibid.*, 127. O'Donovan recognises and avoids the risk that, on a relational account, a human might be evaluated according to her capacity to form relationships and be classed as a non-person to the extent that she lacks such a capacity (as a person might, for example, if she suffered a communication disorder on the autistic spectrum such as Asperger's).

<sup>383</sup>There is a risk that O'Donovan's relational account can be taken to suggest that personal value exists only in the estimation of others; that a human is a person only to the extent that she is perceived as such by other people. Personal engagement uncovers personal value but

that capacity: '... we know [persons] *in* relationship, which is to say, when we abandon the observer's stance altogether and commit ourselves to treating them as persons.' The third is that correct moral action should be taken in the context of an interaction which also discloses personal value; it is not a calculated response to the presence or absence of certain criteria for moral status. Acting correctly towards someone is not an obedient response to the fact that she possesses certain properties that confer value. Rather, correct moral action is a compassionate response to another's humanity.

According to O'Donovan, the moral agent's own flourishing too is contingent on such engagement. The parable of the Good Samaritan, he suggests, illustrates that engaging with others as though they possess full moral value promotes the flourishing of the agent who acts, as well as the 'patient' who is acted upon.<sup>384</sup> The relational context of the parable is made clear by the fact that Jesus told it in response to the question 'who is my neighbour?' The injured man's value was in contention because, unlike the Levite who preceded him and passed by, the Samaritan had no particular duty towards the man and would not even have considered himself to be of the same race. The Samaritan's commitment to interacting with the injured man as though his well-being were nevertheless of concern to him was material to his own standing as a moral agent, as well as to the injured man's status as the sort of being to whom correct moral action should be done. An agent's

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is not its source. O'Donovan is not suggesting that an individual's value is created in the course of, still less in the same fact as, a relationship: 'We are not saying that personhood is conferred upon the subject simply by our willingness to treat him or her as a person. Rather the opposite: we discover the personhood of the other by his personal dealings with us ... Personality discloses personhood; it does not constitute it' (Ibid.).

<sup>384</sup>Luke 10:29-37.

commitment to caring for another individual is part of an interaction that uncovers not only that individual's personhood but also that of the agent herself.

Biggar rejects the idea that an individual's value is determined by the fact of her vocation, rather than by her willingness to be obedient to it, or her ability to carry it out well. It is inconceivable, he insists, that an individual's capacities are not relevant to her personal value:

O'Donovan is wrong to imply that I am constituted as an individual simply by my vocation. How can I have a vocation if I am not—and cannot again become—a subject, a centre of free agency, a bearer of responsibility, capable of hearing and responding. A person is constituted *both* by his vocation *and* by his capacity for response to it. ... It is our judgement, then, that neither O'Donovan nor Finnis nor Grisez succeed in arguing away, either theologically or philosophically, the good sense of drawing a distinction between biological and biographical human life.<sup>385</sup>

To have full moral value as a person, on Biggar's view, it is not enough to have a human's place in Creation. An individual must be able to respond by choosing to occupy that place effectively. Biggar uses as an illustration the case of Tony Bland, who lived in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) for some years following

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<sup>385</sup>Biggar, *Aiming to kill: the ethics of suicide and euthanasia*, 39. Catholic thinkers John Finnis and Germain Grisez base their objections to allowing patients like Bland to die on their rejection of a model of body-mind dualism. See John Finnis, 'Misunderstanding the case against euthanasia: response to Harris's first reply', in John Keown (ed.), *Euthanasia Examined: Ethical, Clinical and Legal Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 62–71, 69.: '[Bland] has lost the capacity (ability) to think and feel—but not the humanity, the human life, which until his death goes on shaping, informing, and organising his existence towards the feeling and thinking which are natural to human life (i.e. which human life is radically capable of and orientated towards)' and Germain Grisez, *Living a Christian Life: Life, Health, and Bodily Inviolability*, pp. <http://www.twotlj.org/G-2-8-A.html>.: 'Bodily life and functioning, therefore, are important not only insofar as life is the very reality of the person, but insofar as the body is the medium of interpersonal communion in and through which persons fulfill themselves.' Biggar chooses to challenge Grisez and Finnis by re-affirming that dualist model. An alternative would be to argue that the flourishing of someone who is a person (whether on monist or dualist grounds) might be imperilled by the interventions needed to keep someone alive to an extent that out-weighs the good of her life. O'Donovan's argument, on the other hand, is monist only in the sense that an individual person cannot be resolved into identifiable structural properties (see O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a person?', in *Abortion and the sanctity of human life*, 125–37, 130.: 'There is no sign of behaviour of which we can say, "There he is present! There he has gone!" ... All we can do is act personally, as person or as friend.')

an accident in 1989.<sup>386</sup> Biggar explains that PVS describes a state of human existence in which:

... the brain stem remains alive and functioning, but not the brain's cortex. The former supports basic bodily functions; the latter supports consciousness. Accordingly, the PVS patient is able to breathe and digest unaided, and he is capable of reflex movement, especially in response to painful stimuli. However, lacking cognitive function, he can neither see nor hear nor feel pain and emotion nor communicate. Nor can he feed himself.<sup>387</sup>

Bland was prevented from dying only by the medical team's intervention with artificial feeding and fluids.<sup>388</sup> Biggar considers that, although Bland continued to participate in the human good of living, he no longer merited the label 'person':

... it is odd to say of human beings whose brains are so damaged as to have destroyed any actual capacity for intellectual acts, that they retain the 'radical capacity' for participating intelligibly and freely in human goods, and are therefore still persons ... what possible sense can it make to say that they retain a capacity, radical or otherwise, for intellectual activity? What sense can it make to say of someone like Tony Bland, whose capacity to feel and to think had been irrevocably lost, that his persisting human life went on "shaping his existence towards" feeling and thinking? None that is obvious.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>386</sup>The vegetative state is 'a clinical condition of complete unawareness of the self and the environment, accompanied by sleep-wake cycles, with either complete or partial preservation of hypothalamic and brain-stem autonomic functions. In addition, patients in a vegetative state show no evidence of sustained, reproducible, purposeful, or voluntary behavioral responses to visual, auditory, tactile, or noxious stimuli; show no evidence of language comprehension or expression; have bowel and bladder incontinence; and have variably preserved cranial-nerve and spinal reflexes. We define persistent vegetative state as a vegetative state present one month after acute traumatic or nontraumatic brain injury or lasting for at least one month in patients with degenerative or metabolic disorders or developmental malformations.' (Stephen Ashwal et al., 'Medical Aspects of the Persistent Vegetative State', *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 330/21 (1994), 1499–508.)

<sup>387</sup>Biggar, *Aiming to kill: the ethics of suicide and euthanasia*, 177. Biggar's description is accurate, although cortex and brainstem are only two among many of the functional areas of the brain. For most other areas the dualist distinction Biggar makes between processes that are conscious and those that are unconscious, and the localisation of those different sorts of process to specific areas of the brain, are much less clear cut than for cortex and brainstem. Biggar is correct, however, to say that an individual such as Tony Bland whose cortex is severely damaged is highly unlikely to be able to construct a meaningful biographical narrative, or to recover such a capacity in the future.

<sup>388</sup>I am using the term 'artificial' to encompass any form of eating and drinking that requires it to be given by a third party using some form of medical technology, including (as in the Bland case) a simple plastic tube into the stomach.

<sup>389</sup>Biggar, *Aiming to kill: the ethics of suicide and euthanasia*, 37.

Biggar's concern is that interpretations of *imago Dei* which offer no structural criteria for personhood make it difficult for doctors to allow the lives of humans to end, even when it would be better for them if they were to die. Relational interpretations cannot classify any human as a non-person, and so potentially fail to protect individuals like Tony Bland from being forced in the name of their membership of *Homo sapiens* to carry on living through medical interventions, long after it would have been better for their lives to have ended peacefully.

Biggar is right to recognise that such protection is necessary. One of the absolute values that doctors are expected to hold is to respect human life. The idea that the life of a human has particular value is made explicit in the Hippocratic Oath ('I will not give a drug that is deadly to anyone who asks [for it], nor will I suggest the way to such a counsel and likewise I will not give a woman destructive pessary') and by the General Medical Council ('Patients must be able to trust doctors with their lives and health. To justify that trust you must show respect for human life ...').<sup>390</sup> The General Medical Council does not, however, explain exactly what it might mean to 'respect' human life. There are at least two different ways in which a clinician might accord life its proper value. If life is considered as an abstraction from an actual patient's existence, then a reasonable interpretation of 'respect for life' would be that a doctor should always act to prolong any patient's life for as long as possible, using any means at the doctor's disposal. While such a course would technically satisfy the demands of respect for life in the abstract, Biggar is right that it might easily jeopardise the well-being of an actual living patient. For some patients, in effect,

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<sup>390</sup>Miles, *The Hippocratic Oath and the ethics of medicine*, ii. See also General Medical Council, *Good Medical Practice*.

the result of deciding to continue interventions that delay death would be to prolong dying, rather than living. As Biggar suggests, that can be avoided if the doctor considers her a 'non-person' on substantialist grounds. In that case, withholding a medical intervention is permissible because it is a rational response to the fact that the doctor has fewer obligations towards a non-person.<sup>391</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to think that relational interpretations of *imago Dei* necessarily preclude withholding or withdrawing interventions that might delay death. Human flourishing is shaped by ends as well as means. If the end is a life well-lived, then merely remaining alive is not of itself an independent human good and death need not always work against a person's flourishing. In a created universe, as Ecclesiastes put it: 'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die'.<sup>392</sup> Another way in which a doctor can respect human life, then, is to value the well-being of the patient whose life it is, and to value her life instrumentally alongside other contributors to that well-being. Wyatt considers the distinction between value considered merely as preserving life, and value considered as optimising the quality of an individual's existence, to be extremely important:

Two contradictory attitudes to the medical care of preterm or congenitally malformed new-born infants can be discerned in our pluralistic society. The two attitudes have their historical roots in the classical Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian ethical traditions respectively. The former views new-born infants as of potential value only whereas the latter emphasises the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual made in God's image. Recent secular philosophical reflection has provided a

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<sup>391</sup>Prolonging the life of such an individual would be worse than futile on the utilitarian view. It would be morally reprehensible, because it would consume resources that might otherwise prolong the life of someone to whom the agent does have a duty; someone who does care about continuing to live.

<sup>392</sup>Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 (New International Version).

rationale for infanticide of the sick or abnormal new-born. A Christian approach to the care of the new-born prohibits intentional killing yet may encompass the withdrawal of treatment that is inappropriate or unduly burdensome. Medical care should be based upon respect for the value of the individual, protection of the defenceless from abuse or exploitation, and wise stewardship of limited health-care resources.<sup>393</sup>

Relational interpretations of *imago Dei* require that the agent act compassionately to every member of the species *Homo sapiens*, but they do not require on that basis that all humans be kept alive for as long as possible. There are circumstances under which clinicians can accord proper value to a living person by choosing not to intervene to extend her life. That is usually because the intervention itself is so unpleasant that, taking into account both the likelihood of delaying a patient's death on the one hand and the certainty of reducing the quality of her existence on the other, its net effect would be to harm the patient instead of helping her. It would be irrational to introduce an intervention that makes a patient worse. Hordern points out that compassion does not need to set aside reason:

The affectivity of compassion does not entail that it is somehow non-rational or anti-rational. Rather, compassion is directed towards situations, people or things with which it is concerned. This directedness or 'aboutness' of compassion indicates that we can ask questions about its intelligibility and reasonableness—whether understanding of an individual's suffering is being appropriately grasped and communicated in this case.<sup>394</sup>

Having accorded Bland full value as a human person and decided on that basis to act compassionately towards him, it is quite consistent to argue that the

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<sup>393</sup>John Wyatt, 'Ethical issues in the application of medical technology to paediatric intensive care: two views of the newborn', *Sci Christ Belief*, 8/1 (Apr 1996), 3–20. Wyatt is using 'potential' in the scientific sense of probability rather than in the theological sense that corresponds to 'nature' (contrast with Charles Camosy, 'Engaging with Peter Singer', in John Perry (ed.), *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 192.: '... passive potential (or mere probability) adds nothing to the moral status of an entity, but the Church's 'substance' position is that any being of a rational nature—that is, a being with active potential for personal traits—counts as a person.')

<sup>394</sup>Joshua Hordern, *Compassion in primary and community healthcare*, 25.

nature of the damage that he has suffered is such that his flourishing and that of others around him will be imperilled more by the interventions needed to keep him alive than by withholding them. In that case, the act of a compassionate agent should be to withhold those interventions. The moral point is not that Bland need not be kept alive because he lacks the properties of humanness; rather it is that a compassionate agent whose object is to promote his flourishing should preserve him, and those who care for him, from the interventions that keeping him alive would entail.

### **5.3 Substantialist and relational interpretations: a synthesis**

Substantialist interpretations link moral decision making to attributes of the moral patient. Relying on such a judgement can lead easily to adopting criteria that are so narrow that they permit doctors to kill some humans who are enjoying their existence. Haslam is right to identify that evaluating personal worth according to specific structural criteria carries a risk that the moral agent might imagine she need not concern herself with the flourishing of individual members of the species *Homo sapiens* who do not meet those criteria, and that most substantialist accounts offer inadequate protection to such humans.

That conclusion is not inevitable on all substantialist accounts, however. The risk diminishes as the criteria for personal value are broadened. The greater the range of properties that are considered to confer personal value, the smaller the risk of undervaluing a human on the basis of a substantialist interpretation. According to Ramsey, a relational interpretation of imagehood requires that every property which characterises an individual should be in God's service:

Man is a theological animal to the root of his essential being. However significant from other points of view may be man's capacity as a culture-producing, history-bearing animal, or however important the fact that man is "a living nature which possesses reason," nothing about man not presently involved in response to God can be called God's image ... In the course of Christian thought, most of the decisive and distinctive Christian interpretations of man have been of this sort.<sup>395</sup>

If all an individual's properties, or characteristics, are relevant to vocation then a relational interpretation can be seen as the logical extreme of a substantialist one, in which every possible property that might be relevant to moral value has been taken into account. Fletcher's exclusion of a child with an IQ of 30 from the category of human person is wrong, not because IQ is irrelevant to flourishing, but because there are many other ways in which such a child can flourish that are nevertheless human in quality because they are relevant to her relationship with God. A capacity to flourish can rely, for example, on reasoning in the broad, often intersubjective, and almost aesthetic sense of being aware of others, including God. Such an inchoate contemplation of God describes the fact of a relationship with him, and so expresses a criterion for moral value that relational interpretations, as well as substantialist ones, can accommodate.

On that very broad interpretation, the quality of humanness that marks an individual's nature refers not only to a capacity for reason, relationships, preferences or pleasure, or even to the sum total of all the capacities an individual human possesses, but also to the almost infinitely numerous ways, and combinations of ways, in which each of them impacts on all the others. A talented Bonobo ape might reason as well as a human but, unless all those

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<sup>395</sup>Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 255.

other relevant attributes were exercised in the same way as a human, the reasoning will retain a quality that is 'Bonobo' rather than human.<sup>396</sup>

When a human interacts with another human being whose brain has been damaged, she engages with him as a damaged human being. She does not see a chimpanzee, a dog or a pig. Robert Spaemann argues that the fact that humans and animals are 'different kinds of thing' remains morally relevant, irrespective of how similar the cognitive capabilities of individual instances of each might be:

... a disabled individual with whom we can never have personal communication is inevitably treated not as a normal being but as a sick one. A broken chair does not strike us as being other than a chair; it is simply a chair broken. And so it is with a human incapable of personal expression, i.e. of the expression of intentionality: we see him as a sick human being in need of help. We look for ways of helping if we can, for ways of restoring 'nature' ...<sup>397</sup>

On the very broad view, humanness is not a pass/fail evaluation which any being might achieve if her cognitive processes are up to the mark or lose if they

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<sup>396</sup>That does not pre-judge the issue of whether that difference is always morally relevant. There might well be theological reasons why humans should treat beings with the rationality of Bonobo apes, for example, with the same compassion as those with the rationality of humans. See David L. Clough, *On Animals: Volume II: Theological Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018).

<sup>397</sup>Spaemann, *Persons: the Difference Between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, 243. This argument provides the fourth of Spaemann's six reasons that '... argue for the truth of our intuitive conviction that all human beings are persons'. In his rejection of substantialist ideas of value, there is a danger of failing to recognise the relevance of an individual's characteristics to how a valued individual should be treated. Spaemann is right that we continue to see a chair as a chair, even when it can no longer be used to sit on and that we continue to see a disabled individual as a human, however severe her cognitive impairment. But it would not be the action of a rational agent to choose to sit on a broken chair as though it were not broken. It is true that the fact that a chair is broken is not material in any classificatory sense, but it certainly is material to the way we treat a particular instance of the general type. Even though a damaged human remains an instance of the category 'person', the rational agent will act differently in respect of a damaged person from the way in which she will act in respect of one that functions normally. And even if we agree with O'Donovan that an infant's capacity to value her own life is irrelevant to classifying her correctly as a person, that capacity might be pertinent to whether infanticide will militate against her flourishing. Nevertheless, a chair should be evaluated by its ability to function as a chair and not, say, as a door-stop. Similarly, a human who is damaged or immature is not a vegetable; she remains an immature or damaged human.

are not. The quality of humanness is a property of each individual part as well as the sum of those parts.

The risk of misclassification posed by substantialist interpretations of *imago Dei* is, of course, eliminated if an individual's value is assessed against a range of properties that is sufficiently broad. If the criteria include everything a human might need in order to fulfil her vocation, then a substantialist interpretation will ascribe personal value to the same humans as a relational one. The only way to assess what those attributes are in an individual human, however, is to interact with her. As with the relational interpretation, in practice the moral agent's first step on that very broad substantialist view has to be to commit herself to personal engagement with that individual. In order to know how to act correctly in respect of a patient, a doctor must first attribute to her full moral value.<sup>398</sup>

My objective has been to show that Singer is wrong to believe that childness is inherently less valuable than adulthood. For reasons which I have set out earlier I have tried to construct an argument that is consistent with a distinctively Christian anthropology but does not depend on it. In showing that Singer is wrong to characterise human infants as 'a different sort of thing' from other humans on the basis of the way they are aware, I have made it more difficult to argue that humans are categorically distinguishable from non-human animals on the basis of a capacity for reason or logic. On the argument I have made,

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<sup>398</sup>Wyatt uses the analogy of a flawed masterpiece: 'In place of the Lego-kit view of humanity, then, we have what I call the flawed masterpiece view of humanity. Yes, the masterpiece may get defaced, it may decay from old age, the varnish may be cracked and yellowed, the frame may be riddled with wood-worm. But through those imperfections we can still perceive a masterpiece ... medicine is more akin to art preservation and restoration than it is to Lego-kit construction'. Wyatt, *Matters of life & death: human dilemmas in the light of Christian faith*, 60.

ultimately there is no way to explain humanness or non-humanness in structural terms, but only by reference to a relation to God in which only humans stand. While I have explained the value of human *childness* in terms ‘which ought to sound reasonable to any intelligent person’, the account of *humanity* that I have set out finds itself ultimately dependent on an axiom that is distinctively Christian; namely, that the uniqueness of humans among all animals expresses the relation in which humans stand to God.<sup>399</sup> Barth points out that it is impossible to know how a non-human animal stands in relation to God, except that it is quite different from the relation in which humans stand:

Whether and how the animal may be soul and body is hidden from us, since we can neither take the place of the animal and see and appreciate its content from inside, nor can we set up such communication with an animal as would enable it to give us information on the point ... Even the animal has spirit. But we do not know how it has Spirit, i.e., what it means for the animal that through the Spirit it is the soul of a body. We can know, however, what it means for man ... [Man] exists in the execution of this self-recognition and self-responsibility before his Creator. As far as the animal is concerned, we do not even know whether its being fulfils itself in a corresponding or similar or very different action.<sup>400</sup>

I have provided an explanation as to why infant humans should be treated better than Singer suggests, but my account offers humans no justification for ignoring the suffering of animals. It is not clear whether there is any sense in which a non-human animal can be said to have a vocation, but animals can certainly suffer or be preserved from suffering, and the act of inflicting or relieving suffering in animals can impact on the flourishing of humans because they are part of the same creation. Genesis 2:19-20a leaves little doubt that humans are in some kind of authority over other animals:

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he

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<sup>399</sup>Hauerwas, *Resident aliens: life in the Christian colony*, 71.

<sup>400</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III*, 2 §46 (Online version edn.; Alexandria, district of Columbia: Alexander Street Press, 2007), 395.

would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.<sup>401</sup>

Westermann points out, however, that such authority is manifest in humans' recognition that humans animals are part of the same creation: 'The meaning is not, as most interpreters think, that the man acquires power over the animals by naming them ... [but that] ... the man gives the animals their names and thereby puts them into a place in his world'.<sup>402</sup> Theologian David Clough suggests that it is compassion for the non-human animals with whom we share this ordered universe that makes humans distinctive:

Construing anthropology as human *vocation* frames clearly my argument that our identity must be discovered in relationship with and in response to God; naming ourselves as one of God's *animal* creations at once rules out any final definition of our identity through contrast with other animals and ensures that our anthropology is grounded in the animality we share with our closest creaturely neighbours; *creature* recalls the solidarity in creatureliness in which we exist alongside everything that God has made. We find what it means to be human in encounter with God in the context of our network of relationships with other human beings, other animals, and other creatures.<sup>403</sup>

The more broadly flourishing is considered, the more obviously distinct human flourishing becomes from the 'flourishing' of other animals. But that is not because of what humans can do that animals can't; it is because of the specifically human vocation that humans have. Part of that vocation is to concern ourselves with other creatures.

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<sup>401</sup> Genesis 2:19-20 (New International Version).

<sup>402</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a commentary*, p. 228. See also David L. Clough, *On animals. Volume I: Systematic theology* (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2012).

<sup>403</sup>David L. Clough, 'Not a Not-Animal: The Vocation to be a Human Animal Creature', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 26 (02/01 2013) 17. More controversially, Clough argues that there is no good scriptural, Christological or revelatory authority for believing that human animals are special among God's creatures.

On the basis of Christian eudaimonism there are therefore perhaps reasons to think Christians should hold themselves to a higher standard even than Singer. Singer enjoins humans to avoid causing suffering to animals as an automatic response to certain properties possessed by the animal, such as sentience. On Singer's account, the need to treat animals with compassion is restricted by the capacity of the animal to suffer. An account of compassion for non-human animals that is based on human vocation has no such restrictions. If human flourishing is promoted in the exercise of compassion for a non-human animal, then the reasons humans should treat non-human animals well are to be found, not in the nature of animals, but in the nature of humans.

#### **5.4 Summary**

When it comes to making practical moral decisions, accounts of human value from substantialist and relational interpretations of *imago Dei* seem irretrievably at odds with one another. A relational interpretation requires the agent to proceed as though the question of an individual's value were resolved, by interacting with her as though the question of her personal value were already established. Most substantialist interpretations, on the other hand, demand a prior step to establish whether she possesses the quality of humanness in anything other than a technical sense. Such interpretations fail to protect infants, and many other humans for whom Christians should feel moral concern, if they explain the distinctiveness of humans solely on the basis that it is the nature of humans to be able to reason.

Substantialist interpretations need not fail in that protection, however, if they take the substantial quality of humanness to represent the sum total of all

the properties an individual might use in her vocation. In that case, the value of an individual human represents all those properties and the way they interact with each other. It is not contingent on the extent of any one property or even a subset of them. The range of properties that might enable a human to flourish represents everything she is capable of doing in God's service.

Ultimately, the categorical distinction between human and non-human animal is not explainable by the properties each possesses, but by the relation in which each stands to God. Broadening the criteria for moral value to include all the capabilities that enable a being to flourish throws the distinction between human and non-human into sharper relief, however, because the more properties one takes into account that are peculiarly human, the greater their combined power in interaction with each other to discriminate human from non-human.

That concept of personal value is so broad that, even on the substantialist view, it can only be uncovered by another human in the context of a relationship, so that the act of assessing value itself becomes a relational act and, for the purpose of guiding moral action in practice, substantialist and relational interpretations require the same prior and unconditional commitment to personal engagement.

## Chapter 6. Aspiring to childness: the lessons children offer to adults

So far, my argument has been that childness, exemplified by infants, is not inherently less valuable than adulthood. In this final substantive chapter, I am going to go further, and to argue that childness might enable humans to flourish even when they have become adults.

Bunge suggests that scripture reveals two quite distinct evaluations of childness: '... 'Childlike' is used to refer to ... *immature* as well as *admirable* behavior.'<sup>404</sup> The first adjective, 'immature', corresponds to the conventional Aristotelian evaluation that childhood is important primarily because it leads to adulthood, so that the principal characteristic of childness is that it is something adults should leave behind them.

The adjective 'admirable', however, begins to express a much more subversive idea. It is that childness represents properties that adults themselves should sometimes aspire to acquire. Bunge goes on to observe that, in scripture, children are often introduced as a metaphorical device that illustrates the way in which adults, too, might flourish:

[Children] are recognized as prophets and models for adults. Biblical texts also often refer indirectly or metaphorically to children and childhood. Individuals and nations are referred to as children of God and sons and daughters of God, with God as their father or, sometimes, mother.<sup>405</sup>

According to Luke, Jesus goes so far as to identify himself metaphorically with children in order to illustrate the nature of hierarchy in the Kingdom of God:

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one

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<sup>404</sup>Bunge, 'Introduction', in *The child in the Bible*, xiv.

<sup>405</sup>Ibid.

who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.”<sup>406</sup>

He chooses to draw on his listeners' own experience of parenthood to illustrate something of God's love for humans:

What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?<sup>407</sup>

The language Jesus uses here is powerful and visceral. In trying to impart to his disciples the power of God's love, Jesus is drawing on the natural instincts of parents to want to feed their children, and to want to protect them from harm. He conjures up a picture of a child who, expecting food, receives instead something that is not merely inedible, but is actively deadly.

The aim of metaphor in scripture is often to clarify a theological concept using mundane illustrations that most people would recognise. Rahner suggests that the reverse is also true; that such metaphors also throw light on theological truths that should shape the way adults should understand childness in daily life:

The real situation here is not simply that we already possess concepts of child and childhood in the purely human and natural sense, which are then applied in a secondary and metaphorical sense in order to express a religious reality... it is only through the revelatory usage of the terms 'child' and 'childhood' that the depths and fulness of the human concepts as such can be realised and appreciated in their entirety.<sup>408</sup>

According to the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus goes further than suggesting that childness equips an infant for an infant's vocation. He uses childness as a

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<sup>406</sup>Luke 9:47-48 (New International Version), See also Matthew 18:4-5, Mark 9:36-37.

<sup>407</sup>Luke 11:11-12. See also Matthew 7:7-11.

<sup>408</sup>Rahner, 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* The electronic centenary edn., 7.

metaphor for the human ideal in the present. There are, he suggests, some important circumstances under which adults should aspire to childness:

People were also bringing babies to Jesus ... When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him, and said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.<sup>409</sup>

Jesus was incarnate as an infant and child as well as an adult and, as Barth points out that there are ways in which he exemplifies childness as well as adulthood:

As man, he does not just do something quantitatively greater than [other men] do, but something qualitatively better. But he does this very different thing as and because, like them in all things, he is totally different from them. He is God's Son of Man in childlike obedience, childlike trust, and full self-giving to him.<sup>410</sup>

The gradual exchange of childness for adulthood as an individual develops through childhood does not represent an increase or a decrease in her personal value, because the qualities of both are equally able to confer such value.

Anglican theologian Jeremy Worthen points out that the context of Jesus' comments suggests that the children he had in mind were babies:

Mark in contrast to the other two Synoptic accounts uses the word "taking in [his] arms" (Mark 9: 36 and 10:16). Mark therefore seems at least to hint at the possibility that the children referred to in these narratives could be—or include—infants, who might most readily require or accept being held by adults in a public context.<sup>411</sup>

Despite the reference to babies, it is clear that in his comments Jesus is referring to properties that can also characterise older humans. In the same way that the relevance of Singer's discounting of the value of childness goes beyond his evaluation of a human currently living in the epoch of infancy or

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<sup>409</sup>Luke 18:15-17 (New International Version). See also Matthew 19:13-15 and Mark 10:13-16.

<sup>410</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV, 4 §76* (London, New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004), §75.

<sup>411</sup>Jeremy Worthen, 'Babes in arms: speechlessness and selfhood', in Angela Shier-Jones (ed.), *Children of God: towards a theology of childhood* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 47.

childhood, so Jesus' commendation of childness is applicable to humans of any age. By holding up aspects of a child's thinking as an example of what is ideal, Jesus insists that childness is evaluable on its own terms, whether it appears in an infant, an older child, an adolescent or even an adult.

There are two properties of childness that Luke's Jesus is suggesting adults should try and retain. Contemporary commentator Darrell Bock suggests that faith is one: 'This passage [Luke 18:15-17] calls [adults] to reflect on faith. We should look at a child hanging on its mother's arm and ask, "Do I turn to my Father in heaven like that?"'<sup>412</sup> Rahner suggests that childness enables humans to apprise a situation trustfully, without having set an agenda beforehand and without any preconceptions or prior expectations:

The children can serve him as examples of lack of false ambition, of not seeking for dignities or honours, of modesty and lack of artificiality in contrast to their elders, who are unwilling to learn anything from them (Mt 12:2 ff.; 19:13 ff.)<sup>413</sup>

A willingness to see things without prejudice is one of the modes of meaning-making that growing up often takes from us as, over the course of childhood, we exchange childness for a more sophisticated adulthood. Its loss makes us poorer because it restricts our ability to generate hypotheses and so construct narratives about what we perceive. Pablo Picasso is said to have remarked: 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.'<sup>414</sup> Hans Christian Andersen tells the story of the Emperor's new clothes. In the story, a vain ruler is duped by two wily tailors into believing they

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<sup>412</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (NIV application commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>413</sup>Rahner, 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* The electronic centenary edn, 6.

<sup>414</sup>Quoted in Laurence J. Peter, *Quotations for our time* (London: Souvenir, 1996).

have made him a magic suit of clothes that is invisible and intangible to fools but can be seen and touched by all wise men. As news of the magic suit is promulgated across the kingdom, no-one is prepared to admit he cannot see the clothes. Once the 'suit' is finished, the emperor parades majestically through the streets of his kingdom amid cheering throngs of subjects, all of whom, loath to confess themselves fools, claim to admire the emperor's new clothes. Finally, one little boy, who does not realise he is supposed to be able to see something, points out that the emperor is, in fact, entirely naked.

While the attributes of childness are manifest at their most extreme in infants, the capacity of infants to demonstrate them is obviously limited, and it is to older children that commentators have usually turned in order to illustrate that adulthood alone has limitations, considered as an ideal way of being aware of the world. The central figure of Andersen's story is a child, rather than an infant, but again Andersen's commentary is not about infants, or even about childness; it is about the danger to humans of relying only on adulthood in how we see and interpret the world. The claim of the story, like that of the Jesus of Luke's gospel, is not that children are characterised by more 'adulthood' than adults sometimes assume, though that might also be true.<sup>415</sup> It expresses the

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<sup>415</sup>It probably *is* true. In a ground-breaking empirical ethnographic study in children dying from cancer, anthropologist Myra Bluebond-Langner demonstrates that children are: 'willful, purposeful individuals capable of creating their own world as well as acting in the world others create for them.' Bluebond-Langner's main concern is to alert adults to the fact that children understand far more of what is going on around them than adults imagine (M. Bluebond-Langner, *The Private Worlds of Dying Children* (Princeton University Press, 1980), 7. In his critique of her work, Hoffmaster suggests that this gives all children the status of persons and as such that 'they have a right to know what is happening to them.' (Hoffmaster, 'The Rationality and Morality of Dying Children', 31.) Bluebond-Langner herself is less committed to notions of personhood and rights. She argues that children and adults both exist in the same web of persons, and that the ways in which they participate in it are not as different as was hitherto believed. An individual, she argues, should be invited and enabled to participate in decisions about herself to the extent that she wishes to do so and is capable of it, irrespective of whether she is an adult or a child (Myra Bluebond-Langner, Personal Communication, 2013).

much more radical idea that childness itself is a boon to humans (as adults as well as when they are children) because childness allows its possessor to avoid certain presuppositions. The little boy in Andersen's story did not hear or understand the narrative agreed among adults on the basis of their adulthood, and the wisdom and truth of his observation flowed from that failure to fall in with the adult narrative. In the stories, the special value of the children's constructed narrative of meaning was not *despite* their difference from adult constructions, but *because* of those differences.

The Romantic poets believed that it is imagination, rather than formal reasoning, that provides human beings with the most valid means of making sense of the universe. In his analysis of representations of subjectivity in British Romantic literature, academic Alan Richardson suggests that William Blake considered adulthood to be frankly inimical to the task of constructing narrative of the universe, fettering imagination with 'mind-forg'd manacles'; responses catechistically learnt that prevent most adults from observing truths that children can still see:

Blake ... [has] the child articulate a counterstatement that directly addresses the "one-sided and gloomy official seriousness" of the adult world. His answer to his own question is subversive rather than doctrinal, implicitly confronting the authority claimed by his pastors, masters and parents with an image of the creator not as the Almighty Father but as himself childlike: "He is called by thy name/For he calls himself a Lamb/He is meek & he is mild/He became a little child:/I a child & thou a lamb,/We are called by his name."<sup>416</sup>

Although adulthood is characterised by some forms of imagination, philosopher Charles Taylor suggests that they are no more than vestigial remnants of a capacity to use play that characterises childness:

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<sup>416</sup>A. Richardson, 'The Politics of Childhood: Wordsworth, Blake, and Catechistic Method', *ELH-Engl. Lit. Hist.*, 56/4 (1989), 853–68, 863.

[Play acting] is a kind of complement to language, in that it is a way of stepping out of our situation which allows us to live it in a different way. It allows us to see our predicament from a different vantage point, and it builds up a capacity to live on several levels, which the adult normally has. The adult acts, in fact, in reference to a situation which has many levels beyond that of his immediate spatial or interpersonal predicament; he also lives in relation to social, political, professional, religious, or ideological realities. The life of the imagination is thus in part the successor activity in adult life of the play acting of the child; it continues to feed the ability to extend the situation in which we live.<sup>417</sup>

The child plays because she is not committed to any one hypothesis about what she perceives.

That freedom from prior assumptions is relevant to the construction of biographical narrative, which requires the brain to be able to perceive new information about the universe as well as to construct meaning out of information that is already held there. Childness, as we have seen, is characterised by 'lantern awareness' which allows infants to perceive much more about the universe than the more focused 'spotlight' way in which normal adults perceive things most of the time. One reason that the infant brain is particularly good at soliciting new information is that it has not yet committed itself as irrevocably as the adult brain has to prior ideas about the universe:

Even very young infants have extensive exogenous attention capacities. When they are presented with even highly subtle and conceptually unexpected novel events, they immediately focus their gaze on these

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<sup>417</sup>Charles Taylor, *Human agency and language* (Taylor, Charles, 1931- Philosophical papers; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 159. Taylor is careful here to describe adult imagination as a successor to the play acting of childness, rather than defining play acting in reference and as a precursor to adulthood. Some psychologists consider play to represent a peculiarly complete and aesthetic mode of apprehension that provides the basis of much of what is important to, and distinctive in, all narrative-constructing beings: 'Within its boundaries and objectives the play-world exhibits a totality of meaning and value that is strikingly complete and perfect ... play decision releases a world of unreality which needs no justification from outside itself. It is a self-sealed world, delivering its own values in and for itself, the freedom and joy of play ... it has no other object than itself.' Kenneth Schmitz, 'Sport and Play: Suspension of the Ordinary', in Ellen W. Gerber and William John Morgan (eds.), *Sport and the body: a philosophical symposium* (2d edn.; Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1979), 28. See also Karl Barth and Clarence K. Pott, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Barth, Karl, 1886-1968. Works. 2007; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986): 'play is something so lofty and demanding that it requires mastery ... Beautiful playing presupposes an intuitive, childlike awareness of the essence or centre — as also the beginning and the end — of all things.'

events ... [A] suggestive picture emerges. When infants and young children process information, there is much less top-down control and inhibition. Infants are sensitive to any information-rich stimuli, not just those stimuli that are relevant to their goals and plans. And because they have much less experience, more stimuli will be information-rich for them than for us. With less top-down inhibition their processing and plasticity will be more distributed and less focused than those of adults.<sup>418</sup>

The result is that babies are less likely to overlook what they perceive:

Babies are more conscious than we are. They are ceaselessly and broadly engaged in the kind of information-processing and learning that adults direct only at limited, relevant events. And babies are less subject to the processes that actively cause unconsciousness in adults— inhibition and habituation.<sup>419</sup>

The sheer amount of new information presenting itself for processing by the infant brain means the infant is less likely to focus on one part of what the infant perceives. The more pedestrian adult brain fails to notice much of what is around it because it has usually already decided what is important and what is not.<sup>420</sup>

Adults are, however, capable of the ‘lantern’ awareness that characterises childness and is most obvious in infants.<sup>421</sup> We use it to see the world during the taxi ride from an airport to the hotel in a new country. Using lantern awareness, things that are mundane and would normally go unnoticed force themselves on our attention because we have not seen them before. Unfamiliar makes of car are driving on the wrong side of the road, signposts are

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<sup>418</sup>Gopnik, 'Why babies are more conscious than we are'.

<sup>419</sup>Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*.

<sup>420</sup>Christian psychologist Rebecca Nye argues on empirical grounds that during childhood humans are peculiarly well equipped for spiritual experience: ‘spirituality in childhood has remarkable strengths and capacities ... Indeed, one of the clearest messages about children’s spiritual life is that, quite naturally, it enjoys both quality and quantity, which are rarely sustained into adulthood, where more artificial or more effortful attentions seem required.’ Rebecca Nye, *The Child’s Curriculum* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 139. See also Rebecca Nye, ‘Relational Consciousness and the Spiritual Lives of Children: Convergence with Children’s Theory of Mind’, in H.K. Reich, F.K. Oser, and G.W. Scarlett (eds.), *Psychological Studies on Spiritual and Religious Development Being Human: The Case of Religion* (Pabst, Wolfgang Science 1999)..

<sup>421</sup>Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*.

in different colours and are written in a foreign language, and there are species of tree and flower that are entirely new to us. It soon passes but, while it persists, lantern awareness is a valid way of perceiving the world that can contribute to human flourishing in adults as well as infants and children.

Another way in which, according to Rahner, Jesus exhorts adults to aspire to childness is a willingness to depend on others:

What is implied in this saying in which he holds up the child to us as an example is something far more important: that we can be like children in being receivers and as such carefree in relation to God, those who know that they have nothing of themselves on which to base any claim to his help, and yet who trust that his kindness and protection will be extended to them and so will bestow what they need upon them.<sup>422</sup>

Luke's Jesus considers that there are circumstances under which it is dependence, rather than autonomy, that enables humans to flourish.

Relationship with other persons, according to Fonagy, is the basis for an infant's 'subjective self':

A central characteristic of these models of primary 'intersubjectivity' is a shared emphasis on the continuity from infancy to adulthood of subjective emotional experience, of the kinds of 'intersubjective' states of interpersonal relatedness, and of the identity of basic human motives that are supposed to drive the mutual affect-regulation and attunement assumed to characterise dyadic interactions from the beginning of life.<sup>423</sup>

Rather than representing biography as an account of self as a distinct and persistent entity, Fonagy explains that the infant's 'subjective self' springs

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<sup>422</sup>Rahner, 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in *Theological investigations vol VIII., pt II., Ch. 3* The electronic centenary edn. 6. Rahner's reference is to Mark 9:36-37: 'He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me"' (New International Version). See also Mark 10:16 'And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them'.

<sup>423</sup>Fonagy, Gergely, and Target, 'The parent-infant dyad and the construction of the subjective self', 292. Fonagy and colleagues point out here that even adults do not, in fact, construct a biographical narrative on the basis that they exist in isolation from others.

primarily from a narrative of dyadic relationships of which the individual understands herself to be a part.

In his seventeenth century *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, non-conformist theologian Matthew Henry suggests that children serve as a model to adults in their capacity to ‘... receive the benefits of [the Kingdom] with humility and thankfulness, not pretending to merit them as the Pharisee did, but gladly owning himself indebted to free grace for them, as the publican did’. According to Henry, Jesus references children in order to illustrate the sort of thinking that adults must emulate because it is indispensable to grace: ‘... unless a man be brought to this self-denying frame he shall in no wise enter into that kingdom.’<sup>424</sup> Worthen suggests that the infant’s character is a ‘dialectic of dependence and dynamism’ that perfectly equips her for trust and self-giving.<sup>425</sup>

The potential to benefit from dependence is not limited to those who are young and/or cognitively impaired, and as humans become adult there is a danger that we ‘unlearn’ a capacity to depend that, in reality, continues to be important to human flourishing. Worthen believes that the dependence of infants on others is one of the modes of flourishing that adults often lose:

Dependency and dynamism find their interface in desire: desire that needs the other, and desire that seeks the horizon of ‘more’, ‘further’. Such desire is both trust and thirst, and is the root of the selves constructed from infancy on and of our conscious relatedness to the divine through these variously constructed selves. From the perspective of Christian theology, all human desire—including the desire of the unspeaking, ‘unserved’ infant—strives towards the horizon of the God who created us for Godself, beginning and ending in trust in that God and in God’s self-gift. Just as the connection of the desire for the good—for beatitude, in Augustine’s argument—to the desire for the eternal and thereby for God does not depend on the link being consciously

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<sup>424</sup>Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged* (New edn.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008).

<sup>425</sup>Worthen, ‘Babes in arms: speechlessness and selfhood’, in *Children of God: towards a theology of childhood*, 45.

accepted in the case of adults, so it does not depend on the capacity for its being consciously articulated in the case of children.<sup>426</sup>

Having no prior belief that they should live independently of the care of others, and being under no delusion that they can do so, infants are enabled to participate in relationship in ways that might contribute to the flourishing of all humans. Christian theological ethicist Gilbert Meilaender rejects as implausible the idea that human flourishing must be underpinned first and foremost by autonomy: 'We are dependent beings, and to think otherwise—to make independence our project, however sincerely—is to live a lie, to fly in the face of reality.'<sup>427</sup> It is simply not true that human flourishing must rely on a capacity for autonomy in the sense in which it is often used in medicine.<sup>428</sup> The quality of an individual's existence does not rely only on a capacity to make and act on plans outwith the influence of others. Respect for autonomy will certainly often promote the flourishing of those who possess it, but humans can flourish despite, and even as a result of, their dependence on others. A child-like willingness to be 'taken into another's arms' can contribute to the flourishing of an individual while she is an infant, an older child or even as an adult.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>426</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>427</sup>Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: a primer for Christians* (Third edn., Ebook central; Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 47.

<sup>428</sup>The 'Redeeming Autonomy' programme under way at the Australian Catholic University seeks to formulate a Christian theological critique of that understanding: 'this key concept [autonomy] is entirely ceded to secular philosophy and culture, and, in truth, to a particular (Kantian) strand of this culture. In the face of this situation, theologians, and those open to religious practice, have a choice: to cede the ground, and to abandon, or reject, the concept of autonomy; or, to refuse to cede the ground, and to unsettle some assumptions about the concept, and about what is being protected and cherished when autonomy is defended. The 'Redeeming Autonomy' programme chooses the second option (C. Insole, 'Redeeming autonomy: Agency, vulnerability, and relationality', <<https://www.acu.edu.au/research/our-research-institutes/institute-for-religion-and-critical-inquiry/our-programs/religion-and-theology/redeeming-autonomy>>, accessed 1st December 2019).

<sup>429</sup>The primary importance of a capacity to trust others, rather than a capacity for independence, is beginning to gain currency outside Christian ethics. Moral philosopher Onora O'Neill makes it the main theme of her book *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*:

Jesus uses the dependence of a child on her parents as a metaphor for the relationship between God and the children of Israel. The language is of tenderness and protection, even when it is undeserved: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!'.<sup>430</sup> Jesus' choice of metaphor for God's love—the way that parents care for their children—has a corollary that tells us something about the way Jesus sees childness. If the role of parenthood is to feed and protect infants, then it must be a property of childness to depend for food and protection on parents. Barth considers that such properties of childness are fundamental to what it means to be human at all. A theological concept of God as 'Our Father', he points out, relies on a reciprocal concept of adults as God's children:

[Jesus Christ] is the Son of Man who lives and acts as the Son of God, and may be known as such, by being the executor of God's love in childlike obedience and service, in childlike trust, in the doing of his will, in unrestricted self-giving, and by glorifying him as his Father in this way.<sup>431</sup>

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'Autonomy has been a leading idea in philosophical writing on bioethics; trust has been marginal. This strikes me as surprising. Autonomy is usually identified with individual independence, and sometimes leads to ethically dubious or disastrous action. Its ethical credentials are not self-evident. Trust is surely more important, and particularly so for any ethically adequate practice of medicine, science and biotechnology. Trust—or rather loss of trust—is a constant concern in political and popular writing in all three areas.'

O'Neill, *Autonomy and trust in bioethics*, 2. O'Neill argues that it is reasonable to extend the idea of autonomy beyond individual freedoms and independence so that it includes reliance on others within a trustful relationship, and contrasts the focus on autonomy in medical with environmental ethics—Singer's main concern—in which the main focus has been on justice. She suggests that the two 'arms' of bioethics—medical and environmental—are becoming less divergent over time. Not, she argues, because the emphasis on autonomy on the one hand or justice on the other is becoming any less, but because both can be expressed as manifestations of rights. Rights therefore provide a vocabulary in bioethics that is common to both.

<sup>430</sup>Luke 13:34, Matthew 23:37-39. Similarly, when he refers to the disciples themselves as his children, Jesus is using a metaphor that illustrates a desire to protect. For example, John 13:33: "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come" and Mark 10:24 "The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!' (New International Version).

<sup>431</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, 4 §76, §74.

He suggests that exercising the dependence that characterises childness is therefore a way in which adults should honour God:

In invocation of God the Father everything depends on whether or not it is done in sheer need (not self-won competence), in sheer readiness to learn (not schooled erudition), and in sheer helplessness (not the application of a technique of self-help). This can be the work only of very weak and very little and very poor children, of those who in their littleness, weakness, and poverty can only get up and run with empty hands to their Father, appealing to him.<sup>432</sup>

The scriptural image is of a right relationship between parent and child in which it is both the purpose of the parent to care for their infant, and the purpose of the infant to be cared for by a loving parent. In the light of that purpose, weakness itself paradoxically becomes strength and dependence becomes flourishing. Adulthood, with its emphasis on rational autonomy, makes dependence more difficult. It is the adult who retains the faith and humility to which childness predisposes who is enabled to flourish in relationship with God.

### **6.1 Prior convictions**

The idea that adults should aspire to the faith and trust that characterise childness is counterintuitive to most modern doctors. In the twenty-first century, it is a capacity for rational autonomy that clinicians typically hold to be the most important principle in medical ethics. Respect for autonomy is one of the four pillars of medical ethics set out by Beauchamp and Childress:

The autonomous individual acts freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan, analogous to the way an independent government manages its territories and sets its policies. A person of diminished autonomy, by contrast, is in some respect controlled by others or incapable of deliberating *or acting on* the basis of his or her desires and plans.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>432</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>433</sup>Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 99–100. My italics.

That use of the term 'autonomy' derives from the need to preserve individuals from the sort of exploitation suffered by Jewish prisoners at the hands of Nazi research doctors during the Second World War. Although it was conceived as a way to ensure that those who are capable of making informed decisions are not prevented from doing so, many doctors and moral philosophers have come to give the possession of personal freedom a value in itself that is independent of other personal properties or moral values. Lawyer and bioethicist Carl Schneider remarked in 1998 that, over the years that followed, 'Patient autonomy has achieved paradigmatic status in both the ethics and the law of medicine.'<sup>434</sup> In 1995, bioethicist John Harris feels confident on utilitarian grounds that the life of a person who lacks autonomy is of little value:

The point of autonomy, the point of choosing and having the freedom to choose between competing conceptions of how, and indeed why, to live, is simply that it is only thus that our lives become in any real sense our own. The value of our lives is the value we give to our lives.<sup>435</sup>

The first century audience hearing Jesus' words about children and childness would perhaps have found them no less counter-intuitive than most adults would today. Thatcher points out that Jesus' approach is radical even in the context of the rest of the Bible:

Outside the teaching of Jesus children are discouragingly depicted in the New Testament. The author of Ephesians contrasts 'the full stature of Christ' with the gullible state of childhood which Christians are to eschew. (Eph.4:14) The author of 1 Timothy thinks that having children

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<sup>434</sup>Carl Schneider, *The practice of autonomy: patients, doctors, and medical decisions* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>435</sup>John Harris, 'Euthanasia and the value of life', in John Keown (ed.), *Euthanasia Examined: Ethical, Clinical and Legal Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11. Biggar objects to Harris' conclusion that inherent personal value consists in possession of autonomy alone: '...the centre of gravity of Harris' account clearly lies, not in *the value* that we give our lives, but in *the act of our giving value*. Value [according to Harris] resides not in what we decide, but in *that* we decide. And this deciding is not responsible to anything outside of itself - it is strictly "for ourselves"; its only reason lies in the *arbitrium* of the individual, her arbitrary assertion' Biggar, *Aiming to kill: the ethics of suicide and euthanasia*, 40. Author's original italics.

is how women overcome the gendered consequences of the fall of Eve. (1 Tim.2:15) ... Paul's inspirational poem about the greatest of the Spirit's fruits, love, is less positive about the provisional and immature state of childhood: "When I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child; but when I grew up I finished with childish things." (1 Cor.13:11) In the same letter he complains that when he came to Corinth "I had to deal with you on the natural plane, as infants in Christ. I fed you on milk, instead of solid food, for which you were not yet ready. Indeed, you are still not ready for it ... " (1 Cor.3:1b-3a)<sup>436</sup>

The moral status of children in the early Christian church reflected the somewhat lowly evaluation of a child's life by adults in Graeco-Roman society. Children were part of a hierarchical culture in which child was subordinate to adult in the same way that slave was subordinate to freeman. Although it 'Christianised' that household ordering, theologian Margaret MacDonald comments that the early church did not altogether dispense with it:

There are clearly points of contact between the Colossian household code ... and the ideologies and perspectives of slaveholding. The command that children are to obey their parents 'in everything' (Col 3:20) is repeated in the reference that slaves are to obey their masters 'in everything' (Col 3:22). Although freeborn children were certainly not

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<sup>436</sup>Thatcher, 'Theology and Children: Towards a Theology of Childhood', 194-95. To this litany Thatcher could have added Jesus' own comments about childish peevishness in Matthew 11:16-17 (NIV): 'To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' Thatcher may be overstating Paul's apparent contempt for the state of childness. New Testament theologian Beverly Roberts Gaventa points out that although Paul observes that there is a difference between adulthood and childness, he does not suggest one is more valuable than the other: 'The analogy is simple and straightforward. In the lines that follow, Paul contrasts what is seen in a mirror with what is seen in a face-to-face encounter, and what is seen at present with its eschatological fulfillment. To speak, think, and reason as a child does not, in this context, reflect negatively on children so much as it acknowledges that adults have greater [= larger] capacities.' (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, 'Finding a Place for Children in the Letters of Paul', in Marcia J. Bunge (ed.), (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 237). According to Eastern Orthodox theologian John Behr, in *Pedagogus* Clement of Alexandria suggests that Paul is referencing milk as the promise of a relationship with God in which children find it particularly easy to participate: 'Clement was attempting to reconcile the words of St Paul, that adults are fed with solid food rather than the milk appropriate for children (1 Cor. 3: 2), to the image of the Promised Land as one running with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8). For Clement, childhood in Christ is maturity compared to the Law. As man's relationship to God will always be that of a child, so too, the food of Christians, Christ himself, is milk to them, yet inedible solid food to those outside Christ ... The Church is a virgin mother, who, before Christ's incarnation, was alone and not fully a woman, and so had no milk; but now, having brought forth her child, the milk, as virgin and mother, she calls all her children to her and nurses them with this holy milk' (John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 157-58).

equated with the enslaved either in theory or practice (although their daily existences were often shared), one nevertheless senses a parallel between the authority of masters and fathers in the following grammatical construction.<sup>437</sup>

It appears that, even though the church believed that children were made in the image of God, like most of their contemporaries, early Christians considered the properties that constitute childness to represent something less valuable than adulthood.

In introducing his book *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, contemporary theoretical ethicist John Wall suggests that society in the twenty-first century retains the same sort of preconceptions about children:

Children are a third of all humanity. Yet all too often children are considered merely undeveloped adults, passive recipients of care, occupying a separate innocence, or, perhaps, in need of being civilized. Across diverse societies and cultures, and throughout history and today, serious questions of human being, purposes, and responsibilities have usually been considered chiefly from the point of view of adulthood. Childhood has had to borrow its senses of meaning and humanity from those thought to embody them in some fuller, more advanced, or more important way.<sup>438</sup>

It is perhaps surprising that such a perception has persisted into an age that largely rejects arbitrary prejudice. It is a long time since it was considered acceptable for landlords to display a placard qualifying a vacancy with the addendum 'No Irish' on the grounds that the Irish are lazy and likely to spend their rent money on drink. Nor would it any longer be acceptable for public

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<sup>437</sup>Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The power of children: the construction of Christian families in the Greco-Roman world* (Ebook central; Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), 49. Later, however, MacDonald points out that in these letters St. Paul's exhortations suggest he himself has made a more radical re-evaluation of the child. That is revealed both in the fact of his addressing children directly at all, and by encompassing slave children in the promise of spiritual rewards: 'The direct appeal to children and the promise of inheritance to slave children offered hope in a world in which life was often brutal for children'. Ibid., 56.

<sup>438</sup>John Wall, *Ethics in light of childhood* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 1.

houses to reserve the right to refuse entrance to gypsies on the grounds that gypsies are likely to steal what they can. Yet, for many, it continues to seem reasonable for shopkeepers to put up a sign saying 'No Schoolchildren'. Even in contemporary society, presuppositions about children are not seen to represent the same kind of arbitrary prejudice as the assumption that all Irish are shiftless, or that all gypsies are thieves.

When it comes to dividing people into those with greater and lesser value, humanity has form. We tend to divide the world into 'in groups' of people whom we consider of greater value, and 'out groups' of those whose value we consider to be less. Such divisions are rarely rooted in anything objective or even agreed.<sup>439</sup> The privilege that societies often give to adulthood over childness may be explained by the fact that, over time, society has come to ascribe particular value to a faculty for formal reasoning, a priority that led Charles Darwin to conclude that the way in which women think is inferior to the way in which men think:

It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>439</sup>Evidence suggests that some of the strongest factors influencing the emergence and definition of in- and out-groups lack any kind of objective significance in themselves: 'Cultural boundaries have often been the basis for discrimination, nationalism, religious wars, and genocide ... arbitrary symbolic markers, though initially meaningless, evolve to play a key role in cultural group formation and ingroup favoritism because they enable a population of heterogeneous individuals to solve important coordination problems.' (C. Efferson, R. Lalive, and E. Fehr, 'The Coevolution of Cultural Groups and Ingroup Favoritism', *Science*, 321/5897 (2008), 1844–49, 1844.)

<sup>440</sup>Charles Darwin, *The descent of man part III*, eds Adrian J. Desmond and James Moore (London: Penguin Classics, 2017).

Darwin is persuaded that the intuitive cognition he considers to be characteristic of women is of a lower order than the more logical cognition he considers to be characteristic of men: 'The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman ...'<sup>441</sup>

Most philosophers and scientists of Darwin's time would have agreed with his argument that, if the way women think were as good as the way men think, society would have allowed them to achieve the same things as men. The fact that society has not done so proves that women's thinking is inferior to men's, and so it is acceptable for society to conclude that women are inferior to men and to treat them accordingly; for example, by discounting the value of women's creative and philosophical contributions to society.

Darwin represented his conviction that logical thinking is better than intuitive thinking as though it were the only conclusion that could be drawn by reasonable people. In Darwin's account, the inferior nature of humans who do not think logically both explains the inferiority of such thinking and is simultaneously also explained by it. If the assumption is not adequately interrogated, it becomes difficult to avoid circular reasoning because the

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<sup>441</sup>Ibid. Whether or not Darwin was right to believe that men and women think systematically differently remains unclear. The claim would be more critically received today than it was among the audience of nineteenth century men whom Darwin was principally addressing, but the prevailing view is that there is such a difference (for example, D. M. Greenberg et al., 'Testing the Empathizing-Systemizing theory of sex differences and the Extreme Male Brain theory of autism in half a million people', *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*, 115/48 (Nov 27 2018), 12152–57). Critics point out, however, that the variability within such huge numbers of people means a knowledge of the difference between men generally and women generally is not a valid basis on which to make any judgement about an individual man or woman (Gina Rippon, 'No, that study doesn't prove that men and women think differently', <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2018/11/no-study-doesn-t-prove-men-and-women-think-differently>>, accessed 24th June 2019.) It might be reasonable to identify gender archetypes, but the evidence certainly does not support stereotyping.

answer begs the question and, if enough people agree with the initial prejudice, it becomes almost impossible to recognise that it is a circular argument.

Since it is possible for normal humans to reason in ways that are not logic, the correct conclusion ethics should draw is that among equally valuable sorts of person there are many different ways of reasoning, of which a faculty for logic is only one. Moral philosopher Barry Hoffmaster observes that, in practice, that is not what ethics concludes. In the twenty-first century, reason is usually considered more or less synonymous with logic and stands in opposition to emotions, intuitions or instincts:

The formal reason of philosophy is rule-governed reasoning, the kind of inferential reasoning used in logic and mathematics. This view percolates through ordinary understandings of rationality as well, exemplified by the familiar use of the expression, "That's not logical," to mean, "That's not rational." Deducing theorems from axioms in logic or geometry is a paradigmatically rational activity, and this paradigm can easily be extended to other domains so that the application of moral principles or rules of law to the facts of cases likewise is a paradigmatically rational enterprise.<sup>442</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary specifically distances reasoning from modes of cognition that are not logical:

'Rational' ... Having the faculty of reasoning; endowed with reason. Esp. in *rational being*, *rational creature*, *rational soul*, etc. ... That uses, or is capable of using, the faculty of reasoning; having sound judgement; (in extended use) sensible, sane, lucid. ... Based on or derived from reason or reasoning, esp. as opposed to emotion, intuition, instinct, etc.<sup>443</sup>

That is usually how medicine understands the term. In science, a theory is rational if each step is explained by the one before, and the way in which doctors use it reflects that scientific use. The World Health Organization (WHO)

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<sup>442</sup>Hoffmaster, 'The Rationality and Morality of Dying Children', 30.

<sup>443</sup>'Rational' *Oxford English Dictionary online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158502?rskey=9kJHnd>> (Date Accessed). (Online edition accessed October 2018).

defines rational medical practice exclusively in terms of the need for careful logic in prescribing medications.<sup>444</sup>

Over time, rationality has become a yardstick for moral value in medicine because doctors must distinguish carefully between patients who can reason logically and those who cannot. A duty to respect autonomy imposes on a physician the obligation to ensure that the patient is fully informed. That requires the patient to be capable of a process of reflection, deliberation and evaluation.<sup>445</sup> It also imposes some negative obligations, especially to ensure that interventions are not carried out in a patient who has not given permission for them, so that respect for autonomy in medical practice is expressed in the medico-legal understanding of ‘informed consent’.<sup>446</sup> The ability to reason logically about medical interventions defines the legal concept of ‘capacity’ and the criteria for such capacity—or, more importantly, what needs to be shown in order to demonstrate that capacity is absent—are set out in the Mental Capacity Act of 2005. Doctors must not proceed with an intervention without a patient’s permission unless a person is unable to make a decision for herself.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>444</sup>‘... patients [should] receive medications appropriate to their clinical needs, in doses that meet their own individual requirements, for an adequate period of time, and at the lowest cost to them and their community.’ World Health Organisation, *Promoting Rational Use of Medicines: Core Components - W.H.O. Policy Perspectives on Medicines*.

<sup>445</sup>Harry G. Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’, in John P. Lizza (ed.), *Defining the beginning and end of life: readings on personal identity and bioethics* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

<sup>446</sup>Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 99–100. ‘... at minimum, self-rule that is free from both controlling interference by others and from limitations, such as inadequate understanding, that prevent meaningful choice. The autonomous individual acts freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan, analogous to the way an independent government manages its territories and sets its policies. A person of diminished autonomy, by contrast, is in some respect controlled by others or incapable of deliberating or acting on the basis of his or her desires and plans. For example, prisoners ... often have diminished autonomy.’ Political philosopher Isaiah Berlin describes the modern conception of autonomy succinctly as ‘the freedom to act, not to be acted upon’ (Isaiah Berlin, *Two concepts of liberty: an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 27). See also Jessica W. Berg, ‘The Legal Requirements for Disclosure and Consent: History and Current Status’, in Jessica W. Berg and Paul S. Appelbaum (eds.), *Informed consent: legal theory and clinical practice* (2 edn.; Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41–74.

<sup>447</sup>Department of Health, *Mental Capacity Act (2005)*.

The property of possessing a faculty for logic in the patient therefore determines a doctor's moral obligations towards her. If a patient possesses such a faculty, it would be considered wrong for a doctor to intervene without her permission even if the decision she takes will result in avoidable harm.<sup>448</sup> Doctors will act on the decision of a rational person *because it was taken by a rational person*. If the same decision were made by someone lacking capacity, on the other hand, doctors would consider themselves under a moral obligation to over-ride it.<sup>449</sup> Different moral rules apply to patients labelled 'rational' and 'non-rational', giving the terms evaluative as well as descriptive power.<sup>450</sup>

Catholic moral philosopher Susan Krantz distinguishes two broad ways in which reason and rationality can be understood:

... 'reason' may be understood broadly in two ways: (1) it may be understood as a calculative faculty, a logical activity, which determines what follows from what; or (2) it may be understood as a faculty of insight, an intuitive or insightful activity, which discerns the essence or nature of a thing.<sup>451</sup>

The dangers of an over-restrictive understanding of reason are clear. If reason is a calculative or logical faculty then it is hard for medical ethics to give childhood the same moral value as adulthood. But even most adults are not thinking logically most of the time, and if a capacity for reason is conflated

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<sup>448</sup>Kant's disciple, idealist philosopher Johann Fichte, points out that to claim rights against reason is nonsense. Yet people do so all the time, Fichte goes on resignedly, because: 'Man is afraid of subordinating his subjectivity to the laws of reason. He prefers tradition or arbitrariness.' (Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin, 1846), vol. 7, 176., quoted in Berlin, *Two concepts of liberty: an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958*, 20).

<sup>449</sup>Under the Mental Capacity Act (2005) this would be a legal as well as a moral obligation, providing those caring for the patient—especially her family—agreed. What that means is that, paradoxically, there are circumstances under which a patient lacking capacity is more likely to receive treatment that is logically correct than the patient who possesses it.

<sup>450</sup>What medicine does not do, however, is to suggest that the difference reflects or represents any difference in the relative personal values of a rational and a non-rational person. Doctors are expected to distinguish clearly between them, but they are not expected to value the life or well-being of a rational person more highly than that of a person who lacks rationality.

<sup>451</sup>Krantz, *Refuting Peter Singer's ethical theory*, 35.

entirely with a faculty for logic then it would be easy to dismiss much of normal human cognition at any age as morally irrelevant. Hoffmaster points out that the role of formal reason in everyday problem-solving is relatively limited: 'Formal reason is not adequate to explain how we think through real-life problems and make moral decisions about them'.<sup>452</sup> Singer himself acknowledges that it is a more capacious sense of rationality that impels us to behave ethically in the first place:

I am now suggesting that rationality, in the broad sense that includes self-awareness and reflection on the nature and point of our own existence, may push us towards concerns broader than the quality of our own existence ...<sup>453</sup>

Logic is not the only mode in which humans habitually reason and, in practice, people do not restrict their understanding of what is reasonable to what is logical. It is, for example, hard to explain on the basis of logic what it is that attracts one person to another, but most people would hesitate to conclude that two people are being unreasonable when they fall in love. It is hard to explain why people should choose to gaze at a painting, listen to music or—less comprehensibly still—decide to gather to watch twenty-two other people kicking a football around a field. These are not *rational* behaviours in the sense that they result from formal reasoning, but they are all perfectly *reasonable* in the sense that they can nevertheless contribute to flourishing. The distinction between what is reasonable and what is rational is intuitively clear, but it is difficult to explain etymologically, because it results from a conceptual gap between two ideas that are not distinguished in the Latin word *ratio* from which 'reason' and 'rational' both derive. *Ratio* can refer to reckoning in the sense of

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<sup>452</sup>Hoffmaster, 'The Rationality and Morality of Dying Children', 30.

<sup>453</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 646.

logical induction or deduction. But *ratio* can also refer to understanding, in the aesthetic sense of the way in which any being engages with the universe, including itself. Reasoning of that second sort would encompass a being's many modes of perception through her senses, and the myriad forms of awareness that shape those perceptions into a 'biographical' narrative that makes some order of what she perceives.

A restricted interpretation of reason as logic is particularly dangerous for infants. Infants (like women) represent a subset of normal, reasoning human beings, yet if formal reasoning were the only basis for assessing the value of human cognition then childness would be of little or no value for no better reason than that it is a way of reasoning that is different from that of some adults.<sup>454</sup>

Moral philosophers who are uncomfortable with that conclusion have looked for alternative ways to explain why an agent should treat an infant as a special case. Thomas Beauchamp and theologian James Childress, authors of principlism, wish to ascribe inherent value to the life of the infant, but in order to do so they have to abandon the accounts of rationality and autonomy that have provided their explanation for personal value in adults. They find

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<sup>454</sup>Children, moreover, represent a category to which every human being has belonged. Within the set of humans, the subset 'infants' is logically different in kind from the subset 'women', because 'infant' is a phase sortal; that is, it represents something that all humans are at some point in their existence. As a matter of logic, the distinction is important. The logical relationship to the set of cats represented by 'tabby' is not the same as 'kitten', because 'kitten' describes a phase that some cats happen to be in now, rather than a special sort of cat. A cat can go its whole life without being tabby, but a phase of kittenhood is inherent in what it means to be any kind of cat. Notwithstanding the importance of phase sortality to academic logic, the distinction between the subsets 'infant' and 'women' is not relevant here. In the here and now, there are infants and women, both of which are categories of normal human being, just as the category of normal adult men is.

themselves instead having to rely on a deontological claim about the purpose of medical ethics:

A worrisome feature of [a theory based on cognitive properties] is that infants, the senile elderly, persons with a severe mental disability and others we generally view as having a secure moral status lack the cognitive capacities to attain moral status ... This theory therefore does not function, as does the first theory, to ensure that vulnerable human beings will be protected.<sup>455</sup>

Beauchamp and Childress want to conclude that a correct moral theory should protect the life of an infant. On the basis of the infant's own properties, however, they cannot find terms in which to express or explain that life's value and have to turn instead to how a moral theory should function.

Most contemporary accounts in medical ethics evaluate childness with reference to the value of adulthood, reflecting the idea that adulthood is the goal towards which childhood is directed and that adulthood represents the fulfilment of childhood. Some express a child's value in terms of how like an adult she is now, locating the inherent present value of a child in the degree to which she has already doffed childness. An individual's value, on that view, augments over time as she becomes increasingly similar to the ideal adult, and she acquires full moral value only at the point where she has exchanged the characteristics of childness entirely for those of adulthood. Such evaluations represent infancy and childhood merely as a 'prelude' to adulthood. They struggle to account for inherent value in childness and, therefore, in infants.

The more usual means by which medical ethics currently avoids the conclusion that infants are inherently valueless is the argument from potential. The argument from potential locates the inherent value of a child now in the

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<sup>455</sup>Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 72.

value of the adult she is expected one day to become. The infant's value in the present moment does not flow from what she is like in the present moment; rather, it expresses the value she will have when she has exchanged childness wholly for adulthood. An argument from potential represents the infant's value as a sort of 'promissory note' in which her value now is borrowed from the value she will have in the future. The infant, lacking attributes of moral status such as rational autonomy in the present moment, is accorded the same value she would have if she were already as rational and autonomous today as she is expected one day to become.

Tooley sets out the utilitarian objection to the argument from potential using a thought experiment in which he posits a chemical that, if injected into a kitten, would imbue the kitten with all the attributes of moral status enjoyed by adult humans:

Suppose at some future time a chemical were to be discovered which when injected into the brain of a kitten would cause the kitten to develop into a cat possessing a brain of the sort possessed by humans, and consequently into a cat having all the psychological capabilities characteristic of adult humans. Such cats would be able to think, to use language, and so on. Now it would surely be morally indefensible in such a situation to ascribe a serious right to life to members of the species *Homo sapiens* without also ascribing it to cats that have undergone such a process of development: there would be no morally significant differences.<sup>456</sup>

Having received the injection, Tooley considers that the kitten would become human in all ways relevant to how it should be treated by other humans. Tooley goes on to point out that there would be nothing immoral in choosing to withhold that injection from the kitten so that it remained a non-human kitten:

[I]t would not be seriously wrong to refrain from injecting a new-born kitten with the special chemical, and to kill it instead. The fact that one could initiate a causal process that would transform a kitten into an entity

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<sup>456</sup>Tooley, 'Abortion and Infanticide', 36.

that would eventually possess properties such that anything possessing them *ipso facto* has a serious right to life does not mean that the kitten has a serious right to life even before it has been subjected to the process of injection and transformation. The possibility of transforming kittens into persons will not make it any more wrong to kill new-born kittens than it is now.<sup>457</sup>

If it would not be wrong to withhold a 'humanness' injection from the cat in his thought experiment, he goes on, then on the same reasoning it would not be wrong to prevent a human infant from acquiring full moral status.

Tooley holds the view that the infant's cognitive limitations, like those of a cat, mean the infant does not possess the attributes of full moral status in the here and now, and he dismisses as irrelevant the future possibility of adulthood because it does not describe any properties of the infant at the moment moral action is considered. After all, if the infant is despatched today then the question of her future is emphatically resolved. In their paper advocating infanticide as 'after-birth abortion', Giubilini and colleagues, too, reject arguments from potential, caricaturing them along lines that are essentially the same as Tooley's:

It might be claimed that someone is harmed because she is prevented from becoming a person capable of appreciating her own being alive. Thus, for example, one might say that we would have been harmed if our mothers had chosen to have an abortion while they were pregnant with us or if they had killed us as soon as we were born. However, whereas you can benefit someone by bringing her into existence (if her life is worth living), it makes no sense to say that someone is harmed by being prevented from becoming an actual person. The reason is that, by virtue of our definition of the concept of 'harm' in the previous section, in

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<sup>457</sup>Ibid. Tooley was writing in the middle of the twentieth century, when relatively little was known about the infant's neuropsychology. We now know that the cognitive abilities of the normal new-born infant are considerably more sophisticated than Tooley understood at the time. Kuhse points out that Tooley's argument here is inconsistent with his defence of abortion and infanticide, because those defences too are on grounds that rely on the quality of a person's existence in the future: 'If one accepts Tooley's argument that there is an obligation to refrain from bringing wretched people into the world, then one must also accept the reverse: an obligation exists to bring additional happy people into the world. In this case, both abortion and infanticide are wrong.' Helga Kuhse, 'Michael Tooley on possible people and promising', *Camb Q Healthc Ethics*, 2/3 (Summer 1993), 353–8.

order for a harm to occur, it is necessary that someone is in the condition of experiencing that harm.<sup>458</sup>

Setting aside their questionable assertions about what an infant does and does not know about her own existence, the practical point Giubilini and colleagues make here is valid; namely that, when it comes to decisions regarding moral action in the here and now, the agent cannot rely solely on an account of hypothetical value at some point in the future. The probabilistic concept of potential to which Giubilini and Tooley object expresses no more than a possibility, and the mere likelihood that an infant will reach rational adulthood in fifteen years' time might be of little relevance to how the agent should treat her today. The fact that most infants will become adults does not mean that this particular infant will become an adult, and it would be problematic to evaluate her purely on the grounds that she will. If potentiality is considered as the possibility of what an individual might achieve, then it is of limited relevance presently to many vulnerable members of *Homo sapiens*. Children who are terminally ill, for example, have no value according to that interpretation of argument from potential, because they will never reach adulthood.

Many utilitarian ethicists consider that on those grounds the argument from potential must be dismissed entirely. Philosopher and erstwhile colleague of Singer's, Cecil 'Tony' Coady, argues that prepending the adjective 'potential' must logically remove all present value from any object to which it refers:

We must be wary of the traps that can beset the use of adjectives like 'potential'. 'Potential' does not function in the way many standard adjectives do. A happy dog is of course a dog, as a snappy tie is a tie, or a sad face a face. But just as a decoy duck is emphatically not a duck

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<sup>458</sup>Giubilini and Minerva, 'After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?'. Camosy responds that '... although the authors are correct in claiming the logical connection between abortion and infanticide, they are mistaken in their moral anthropology and so misunderstand which way the reasoning should cut.' Charles Camosy, 'Concern for our vulnerable prenatal and neonatal children: a brief reply to Giubilini and Minerva', *J Med Ethics*, 39/5 (May 2013), 296–8).

and an imaginary win is not a victory at all, so a potential champion is not yet a champion of any sort.<sup>459</sup>

Coady, like many utilitarians, seems to regard arguments from potential as a moral sleight of hand, designed to assure human infants of a special status for which there is, in reality, no rational explanation. Theologian Charles Camosy points out, however, that when Christian theologians refer to 'potential' they do not restrict its meaning to something about an infant that might become true in the future. Christian ethicists use 'potential' to indicate something about the infant that is already true in the present moment:

[Singer and the Church] agree that passive potential (or mere probability) adds nothing to the moral status of an entity, but the Church's 'substance' position is that any being of a rational nature—that is, a being with active potential for personal traits—counts as a person. Membership in the species *Homo sapiens*, though not significant in and of itself, does indicate what really matters morally about the fetus and infant: their being substances of a rational nature.<sup>460</sup>

If potential is considered in the active way that Camosy sets out then Tooley, Singer and Coady have not argued away entirely its moral relevance. The distinction Coady draws between different sorts of adjective is important, and he is right that the value of an object might be qualified by the word 'potential'. He is wrong, however, to imply that calling something 'potential' inevitably removes all its value in the present moment. The adjectives 'imaginary', 'decoy' and 'potential' do not, as Coady claims, have comparable effects on the object they describe. It is true that a win that is imaginary has, by definition, no existence in the present moment. But that is because of the specific meaning of the adjective 'imaginary'. The effect of other adjectives would be different. A

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<sup>459</sup>Coady, 'The common premise for uncommon conclusions', 285.

<sup>460</sup>Camosy, 'Engaging with Peter Singer', in *God, the good, and utilitarianism: perspectives on Peter Singer*, 192. Camosy suggests somewhat optimistically that this disagreement between Singer and Christian ethics about the relevance of passive potential is 'very narrow'.

decoy duck, for example, certainly does exist. Furthermore, even if the value of a decoy duck is not the same as that of a living duck, its value indisputably depends on the extent of its resemblance to an actual waterfowl of the family *Anatidae*. Calling something a 'decoy' duck firmly links its value with the nature of an actual duck, because a decoy with no resemblance to a duck would be of no value at all.

Similarly, even if calling someone a 'potential' champion should not be taken to mean that her prowess is the same as that of an actual champion, it is not merely speculation about her future but a relevant evaluative statement about her in the present moment.<sup>461</sup> There are people in the present moment who cannot be reasonably described as potential champions, because as a matter of fact they lack the necessary attributes. There are other people who (again, in the present moment) do have those attributes and can be so described. It is true of me that I neither speak Portuguese nor play professional tennis. I have a flair for language, however, and so it would be reasonable to describe me as a potential speaker of Portuguese. On the other hand, I have no talent whatsoever for ball-games and no reasonable person would ever describe me as a 'potential professional tennis-player'.<sup>462</sup> The fact that I have one potential but not the other expresses something that is true about me now (*in the present moment* I am good at languages but lack hand-eye

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<sup>461</sup>Later in the same paper, Coady seems to acknowledge this when he remarks, apparently inconsistently: 'None of this is to deny, of course, that the potentiality of an entity sometimes provides a reason for according it some value or respect.' Coady, 'The common premise for uncommon conclusions', 285.

<sup>462</sup>This illustrates that the idea of potential-as-nature can express a limitation on what a being can become, as well as its extent. An infant's nature represents the limits of what she might achieve. She might well grow up to become less than her nature would have permitted (for example, if she sustained a brain injury), but even if she were not injured, she could not grow up to become *more* than her nature permitted.

coordination). It does not express only what might or might not become true about me later on.

A child's potential, too, expresses something about what her actual value is now, not just what that value might become. Camosy points out that once we recognise that a child's potential-as-nature expresses something about him now, then a child can meaningfully be said to have potential even if there is no possibility that he will survive to adulthood:

Some might argue here that Patrick's potential for gaining personal capacities is actually a fiction. No such treatment exists and thus the potential is zero. However, this is ... mathematical potential (or 'probability') rather than potential of kind or nature. Such mathematical potential can be influenced by a host of factors that have no moral relevance — many of them social. Consider that an infant born with bone cancer may have a mathematical probability of becoming a person of zero given her social situation (say, she is born in the remote areas of a developing country with no technology to treat such a disease), but that means nothing for her actual moral status — in light of her natural potential for personhood. Indeed, such potential would be realized if she lived in a different social situation.<sup>463</sup>

Camosy is representing potential as more or less synonymous with an individual's nature. It expresses something about what the individual is objectively like in the present moment. The concept of potentiality as present nature means it is relevant to how the moral agent should treat her in the here and now, because her nature determines the specific mode in which a being can flourish as an individual human. That remains true even if she can never survive to become a rational adult. On the basis of that understanding of potentiality as an expression of the infant's nature, Camosy goes on to claim that: '... all newly born infants have the dignity and worth of persons, [and] the

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<sup>463</sup>Camosy, *Too Expensive to Treat?*, 57.

good of their lives cannot be directly acted against in infanticide.<sup>464</sup> Camosy is claiming that because an argument from potential demonstrates that the life of infants has some inherent value, it is reasonable to conclude on the same basis that the inherent value of the infant's life is the same as that of the adult.

That is too great a leap. Camosy is right to suggest, *contra* many utilitarians, that potential as nature confers some value on an individual life in the present moment. But surely those are not grounds for concluding that the value of the present infant is the same as the value of an actual present adult. Showing that an acorn has some value because its nature is characterised by 'oakness' does not, on its own, justify concluding that its value is already that of an oak tree. Nor does that argument alone explain why the present value conferred on an infant's life by her future potential is enough to over-ride the practical benefits of extinguishing her if she is not wanted.<sup>465</sup> Potential confers some inherent personal value but, on its own, an argument from potential does not rule out the possibility that the life of an infant might be less valuable than that of an adult. As in the 'prelude' evaluation, the value of childness on the 'promissory note' account is defined largely in reference to that of adulthood.

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<sup>464</sup>*Ibid.*, 61–62. The concept of 'dignity' is one of those that, in his introduction to *Practical Ethics*, Singer discounts in ethical debate on the grounds that it is intangible ('We all know what preferences are, whereas claims that something is intrinsically morally wrong, or violates a natural right, or is contrary to human dignity invoke less tangible concepts that make their truth more difficult to assess.') Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 51.

<sup>465</sup>Singer's mentor and author of preference utilitarianism R. M. Hare argues on utilitarian grounds that even passive potential is enough to account for full value in the fetus: 'The potentiality of the embryo to develop into someone who can enjoy the listed benefits (let us say for short 'into a grown person') is important just because, if it does, that grown person will benefit. The benefit is not to the embryo. Nor is it to the foetus [sic] or even the neonate. The preservation of embryos, foetuses and neonates is important just because if they are preserved they will turn into grown people who will benefit from existing (not indeed because bare existence in itself is a benefit, but because in normal circumstances those who exist can have other benefits like those listed).' R. M. Hare, 'When does potentiality count? A comment on Lockwood', *Bioethics*, 2/3 (Jul 1988), 214–26, 216. Contrast with M. Lockwood, 'Hare on potentiality: a rejoinder', *Bioethics*, 2/4 (Oct 1988), 343–52.

Neither prelude evaluations that express her value now as the extent to which she currently resembles an adult, nor promissory note evaluations of the infant that express it as the probability that she will one day become an adult, offers an entirely satisfactory account. Both express the value of childness in terms of the value of adulthood and so represent the same assumptions about the normative power of adulthood over childness that Jesus rejects.

Christian philosopher Stephen Clark points out that the difference in moral value on which prelude and promissory evaluations depend is in reality no more than a reflection of current society's privileging of a capacity for formal reasoning (which he attributes to ideas of moral reciprocity):

That children below 'the age of reason' have no rights in their own right is a necessary consequence of any doctrine that limits the class of rights holders to the class of recognisably and actually rational entities, entities whose deliberate co-operation is needed if any corporate action is to be undertaken, and whose forbearance can only be purchased by reciprocal forbearance.<sup>466</sup>

A society that has already decided that full moral status is represented by adulthood, and that the defining feature of an infant or child is that she does not yet possess only adulthood, must conclude that the moral status of the child is less than that of the adult. Such a conclusion is no more than the logically inevitable consequence of a particular societal construct in which the specific forms of thinking associated with adulthood are lionised. Wall suggests that the effect of ascribing such a difference in moral status is tantamount to evaluating children as less than human: '... if children are to be fully included as members of the human community, some basic sense of 'the human' is ultimately required, one that does not silently assume adulthood as its model.'<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>466</sup>Stephen R. L. Clark, *The political animal: biology, ethics, and politics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 59.

<sup>467</sup>Wall, *Ethics in light of childhood*, 7.

Furthermore, the point at which a being moves from childhood to adulthood is itself a subjective judgement. Theologian Ronald Green points out that attempting a biological description of what is normative to personhood on the basis of developmental category, such as the stages of childhood *versus* adulthood, is a task without absolute meaning, because such categories are simply part of humans' attempts to organise knowledge. Development is, in reality, continuous. Categorical distinctions are often helpful for systematising what we know, but they are not ultimately part of the way things are. They are something that humans have decided on:

First ... biology usually offers not decisive events but only continuous processes of development. Second, in making status determinations we do not so much identify a point on a developmental continuum where moral respect should be accorded as choose that point.<sup>468</sup>

Since any break-point between childhood and adulthood is subjectively defined, Green argues that it would be nonsense to claim that there could be any objective difference in value between the two states. If there is no reason to assume the child is progressing towards an ideal simply by getting older, then to privilege one over the other is an instance of subjective narrative construction, because the choice of where childhood ends already represents a judgement about what is ideal. That depends on the circumstances, the dispositions and the objectives of the individual making the judgement.

If, as Luke's Jesus suggests, there are ways in which adults should take on some of the properties of childness in order to flourish, then exchanging childness for adulthood does not of itself represent a progression from what is less than ideal towards what is ideal, and the argument from potential fails.

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<sup>468</sup>Green, 'Stem Cell Research: A Target Article Collection Part III - Determining Moral Status', 20.

## **6.2 Dependence and the cognitively damaged child**

In the introduction to my thesis, I described how mourners at a child's funeral identified her life as being inherently valuable, despite the fact that she herself was unable to respond to those around her and was indeed almost certainly unaware that they existed. Anwen's story illustrates that there is a disconnect between utilitarian conceptions of personal value as a function (in the mathematical sense) of certain properties or abilities that an individual possesses, and the intuitive evaluation that normal humans make of one another that is independent of such properties. Those mourning Anwen did not do so in proportion to her capacity to reason, to experience pleasure or to prefer to live, but because they already considered her life to be of inherent value.

Although Anwen's story served to illustrate that particular point, in other respects she does not represent the children who are the focus of this thesis. I have set out to explain inherent value in the normal infant; Anwen was neither normal, nor was she an infant. Other than in my introduction, I have focused on the cognitively normal child because my argument has been that an anthropology of childness must accommodate what is now known about the normal cognitive abilities of the infant. In contrast with normal infants, there is little empirical evidence in children who are cognitively damaged and, without it, there is a danger of assuming the same improbable parallels that Singer does between damaged infants and non-human animals. The great majority of cognitively impaired children engage, often very joyfully, with the world around them, and it is easy for their parents and others working with them to recognise

that there are ways in which they themselves can flourish through participation in certain basic human goods and so have inherent value on the argument I have made in normal infants.

There are some children, however, like Anwen, whose cognition is so damaged that they appear to have no such awareness at all.<sup>469</sup> We have seen that there are dangers in an over-restrictive understanding of what it means to reason, but an understanding that is too capacious also carries some risk. If there is no restriction at all, the terms 'reasoning' and 'rationality' can become vacuous because they encompass cognitive processes that are reflexive and do not demand any kind of consciousness at all. The idea of reasoning without consciousness seems implausible and, on that basis, it is hard to see any sense in which Anwen might be said to reason at all.

One of the insights that Christian theology has offered the project of medical ethics is that morality is intersubjective. In making moral decisions intended to promote flourishing in someone else, the moral agent ensures that her own flourishing too is promoted. That accords some value to moral decisions, even where they are made in respect of those who lack any property that might enable them to benefit. There is no utilitarian sense, for example, in which a dead body can be said to 'deserve' to be treated well, but there is undoubtedly a sense in which a Christian who treats a dead body with respect moves closer to attaining eudaimonia by doing so. The concept of dignity is an expression of that idea. A medical student who treats with respect the cadaver she is dissecting on the grounds that it has been a person is offering no benefit

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<sup>469</sup>There is an objection that we cannot be sure of that limited awareness. The objection is valid, but it is irrelevant. While it is not certain that any individual child lacks awareness, it is certain that such children exist, and their value needs to be explained.

to the cadaver and so there is no utilitarian value to her actions. There is, however, a sense in which she herself is 'made better' by showing respect.<sup>470</sup> Furthermore, other humans, observing that respect for humanity in general and therefore for themselves, are also enabled to flourish. Even though the cadaver is dead it can be said to 'deserve' respect because it represents the body of a person.<sup>471</sup> There is a sense in which the cadaver remains human, and so deserves some of the respect due to humans, because other humans relate to it as such. The cadaver does not care how it is treated, but when deciding to treat the cadaver as though it did care, the student's moral reasoning is shaped by an understanding of the needs and perceptions of other humans, whose bodies will also one day be dead. When the student acts in accordance with that reasoning, she herself is enabled to flourish.

If a person's flourishing can be promoted or imperilled by the way in which she treats a human who has died, the same must be true of how she treats a human who is still living, whether or not that human herself is aware of how she is being treated. Nurse Kelly Ursell, one of the team of people caring for Anwen at the hospice where she died, wrote a long poem which was printed

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<sup>470</sup>Anthropologist Greg Dening takes the same idea further when he considers the dignity of the 'voiceless dead' in interpretations of history (Greg Dening, 'Giving the Past Its Dignity', in Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss (eds.), *Perspectives on human dignity: a conversation. 1* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007). Again, dignity here refers to the idea that there are people who cannot themselves benefit from being treated well, but whom Dening argues should be treated as though they can for the sake of other humans.

<sup>471</sup>Christian ethicist and professor of clinical anatomy D. Gareth Jones locates the importance of such respect in a theology of the physical body: 'Respect for the dead body now foreshadows respect for the resurrection body in the future. Consequently, any willingness to desecrate or devalue the dead body shows a disregard for what that person may become, alongside a disregard for what that person has been ... our bodies constitute the one common strand between what we are now and what we may become.' (D. Gareth Jones, 'The dead body as an object of investigation', in John J. Fitzgerald and Ashley John Moyse (eds.), *Treating the body in medicine and religion: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives* (1st edn.; London: Routledge, 2018), 202).

in the Order of Service at her funeral. In her poem, Ursell sets out what she saw as the source of Anwen's value:

A butterfly flew into our lives  
How privileged are we  
She fluttered in all colours bright  
And whispered—please take care of me ...  
Our butterfly loved to be loved  
And we showed her, every minute every day.<sup>472</sup>

The poem's theme is the importance *to her carers* of Anwen's dependence on them. As far as Ursell is concerned, the way in which she interacted with Anwen was not a response to properties that Anwen possessed or lacked. Rather, Anwen's value was expressed in an interaction between them that was characterised by Anwen's dependence. The poem makes it clear that Anwen, who was quite unable to respond to her carers, nevertheless contributed to their flourishing, to such an extent that they felt 'privileged' in their interaction with her, because she depended on them.

John Wyatt too illustrates how even those with little or no cognitive ability can promote the flourishing of others:

His life exercised a most extraordinary ministry. There he was, the smallest little shrimp within the congregation ... we shared him among the congregation. He became, in the end, almost like public property. His parents would be on one side of the room, and he would be shared amongst people on the other side of the room. People would take it in turns to cuddle him, and then to learn from his own life and from the attitude of his parents ... the three of them exercised a strong hold in those precious, very short, seven months that will live indelibly with us, all those of us who were members of the church at the time.<sup>473</sup>

The condition from which this child was suffering was Edward's Syndrome, a congenital disorder in which there is an additional copy of chromosome 18

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<sup>472</sup>© Kelly Ursell 2016, with permission.

<sup>473</sup>Wyatt, *Matters of life & death: human dilemmas in the light of Christian faith*, 187–88.

causing severe cognitive and physical impairment that usually leads to a child's death within days or weeks of birth. It is likely that he, like Anwen, was largely unaware of his interaction with others. It is not clear that there was any sense in which he was able to respond meaningfully, let alone be obedient in any meaningful sense. It would nevertheless be hard to claim that there was no sense in which he contributed to the flourishing of others and, in so doing, in which he himself could be said to flourish on eudaimonistic grounds.

According to relational interpretations of *imago Dei*, all humans are (to pursue Spaemann's theatrical analogy) 'acting in the same play'. I have argued that childness is a quality of the *prosopon* or mask the normal infant wears in order to do so (that is, her individual participation in human nature). It is designed for the role she is intended to play and cannot rationally be evaluated in terms that are not related to that role. The normal infant's dependence promotes both her own flourishing and those caring for her. Neither Anwen nor Wyatt's baby with Edward's Syndrome was a normal infant, but they both had in common with normal infants a capacity to promote flourishing in others as result of their dependence. That capacity is a property that can confer value on their lives and that of other children like them.

### **6.3 Summary**

While participation in human goods can often demand the sort of reasoning that adulthood represents, it can also be facilitated by the broader sort of cognitive processing that characterises childness. A capacity for flourishing can sometimes be restricted by abandoning the perspective of a child in favour of

that of an adult. The children in Luke's account are permitted by their childness to understand something of the kingdom of God that thinking only as an adult would might obscure.

The account subverts the assumption that adulthood inevitably and only represents the perfection of childness. Childness is characterised by a lack of prejudgment and by a willingness to depend on others; modes in which adults too might flourish but which are typically lost in adulthood. Faith—the capacity to engage with the situation at hand without settled preconceptions about what does and does not matter—and humility—a willingness to depend on others and to recognise that dependence—facilitate relationships in which adults, as well as children, can flourish. The infant is perfectly fitted for her purpose by some of the very characteristics that in adults are often considered weakness. Infants offer an illustration of the wider truth, expressed by St Paul, that a capacity to be vulnerable and dependent can facilitate human flourishing: '[The Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.'<sup>474</sup>

There are some basic goods in which humans can participate during infancy in the same way as during other periods of their life. There are also modes of human flourishing for which infants are better equipped than adults. Some of those modes are nevertheless within the compass of the adult, and childness therefore sometimes represents an ideal to which adults should aspire in order to fulfil their vocation and maximise their own flourishing. Childness, with its capacity to facilitate human faith and dependence, is

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<sup>474</sup>2 Corinthians 12:9 (New International Version).

revealed as evaluable in its own right, and not only by privative contrast with adulthood.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

Some of my fellow medical ethicists have found it objectionable that in the twenty-first century a doctor and pharmacologist should look to theology for an account of the moral implications of medical decision-making in children. Medicine is a science, they argue, and, like any other science, it should be informed by empirical evidence. While the outcome of medical interventions is a matter of truth or falsehood, religion is no more than commitment to a belief.

Some even consider it immoral. Christianity represents a set of personal values; attempting a Christian theological critique of medical ethical issues appears to some to be unethical in itself. It is the patient, not the doctor, who is entitled to bring personal values to bear on medical decisions. The proper role of a doctor is that of a neutral adviser, whose responsibility is to set out truth in as disinterested a manner as possible. To make an appeal to a system of ethics that is rooted in Christian beliefs introduces values that are neither held by the patient nor are matters of empirically demonstrable fact. At best, many doctors believe, such values are irrelevant, and at worst they represent a form of coercion that a doctor should consider unacceptable.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>475</sup>According to the GMC, it is acceptable within reason for doctors to allow their practice to be influenced by their own values: 'You may choose to opt out of providing a particular procedure because of your personal beliefs and values, as long as this does not result in direct or indirect discrimination against, or harassment of, individual patients or groups of patients. This means you must not refuse to treat a particular patient or group of patients because of your personal beliefs or views about them. And you must not refuse to treat the health consequences of lifestyle choices to which you object because of your beliefs.' (General Medical Council, 'Personal beliefs and medical practice', <<https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/personal-beliefs-and-medical-practice/personal-beliefs-and-medical-practice>>, accessed November 2018.) Among utilitarian ethicists there is growing impatience with conscientious objection on the grounds that the result might be to limit a patient's access to treatment that is legal and which she herself wants (see, for example, J. Savulescu and U. Schuklenk, 'Doctors Have no Right to Refuse Medical Assistance in Dying, Abortion or Contraception', *Bioethics*, (Sep 22 2016)). A more sophisticated argument is made by

That view misunderstands Christian theology which, like science, is legitimately concerned with establishing truth, whether it is observed in experiments or inferred by reasoning. A theological critique can offer valuable scrutiny of the claims of moral philosophers and Christianity should hold ethicists to account for the accuracy of some of the claims (empirical and otherwise) that their theories entail.

At the same time, it is also important for Christians to urge the truth of the gospel story and what that story says about humans and their value. If the primary duty of a doctor is to remain disinterested rather than compassionate, there is little room for the sense of shared humanity that one person might feel for another who is in distress. That denies concepts such as dignity, virtue, or duty that many feel are important in the way humans treat one another. The Christian story, on the other hand, celebrates such inter-subjective ideas and offers an explanation for their moral importance, ultimately by reference to something that is objective, even if it is not measurable; namely the nature of God and of humans. A Christian theological critique can help ensure that ethics does not move too far from its roots in shared humanity.

In the fourth century, it was enough for Christianity to respond to a society that approved of infanticide by setting out its claim that the life of a human is uniquely valuable because humans are in the image of God. While

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paediatrician philosopher Dominic Wilkinson, who suggests that a doctor should sometimes be prepared to experience moral unease in the interests of her patient's well-being (D. Wilkinson, 'Conscientious Non-objection in Intensive Care', *Camb Q Healthc Ethics*, 26/1 (Jan 2017), 132–42). Wilkinson echoes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conclusion in respect of a Christian's response to the evil of Nazism: 'The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living. Only from such a historically responsible question will fruitful solutions arise, however humiliating they may be for the moment.' (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer works. Vol. 8, Letters and papers from prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (Widerstand und Ergebung; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 42).

Christian theology should continue to argue on its own metaphysical terms, I have suggested that in the twenty-first century Christian ethics needs to address a generation of doctors who have been trained to see themselves as scientists and sceptics. I have argued that doctors are drawn to teleological accounts because, like other decisions in medicine, they offer a rational connexion between intention and outcome. A moral theory that hopes to influence medical practice is effectively a medical intervention and, to persuade doctors of its authority, it must be able to express its impact in the same consequential terms as that of other medical interventions; namely the extent to which it will improve the quality of human existence. It is hard to argue away the logic of an approach that insists consequences are morally important and explains some link between the actions a doctor should take and the needs of an individual patient. Yet it seems to fly in the face of the Christian claim that all humans possess special value, irrespective of their individual capacities, because they are made in God's image. I have suggested that the task facing those who wish Christian ethics to influence medical practice is to set out a theory that retains the good sense of teleology while at the same time is consistent with, and explainable by, the metaphysical assertions of the Christian gospel.

While my fellow physicians were puzzled by my choice of Christian theology as a way of looking at medical ethics, it was my decision to focus on infanticide that mystified some of my colleagues in theology. If the aim is to re-affirm for a medical audience the value of human life, they argued, surely it would make more sense to do so through an exploration of abortion. After all, they pointed out—quite correctly—the number of doctors who advocate

infanticide is small, and the number who carry it out smaller still. Certainly, those numbers are dwarfed by the number of doctors who carry out termination of pregnancy. Perhaps infanticide is a 'straw man' whose importance in practice is trivial because, irrespective of what abstract philosophers like Singer might say, in reality no-one seriously thinks infanticide is permissible.

It is true that most doctors currently support abortion but oppose infanticide. When it comes to considering how the value of a person relates to their inherent properties and capacities, however, there is a good practical reason to focus on infants rather than fetuses. The advent of new technology, especially functional magnetic resonance imaging, means that scientists are in a position to demonstrate the cognitive abilities of the new-born human with ever greater confidence. While it is unlikely that the technology will provide new information about fetuses, at least in the foreseeable future, there will certainly be more evidence in infants. Since it is improbable that an infant's cognitive capabilities undergo abrupt or significant change at the moment of birth, arguments about infanticide that appeal to such evidence must also inform arguments about late-term abortions.

In any case, it is surely too complacent a view to imagine no-one takes infanticide seriously. Several legislatures have now decriminalised infanticide at parents' request, though until now usually only for very sick infants. In the UK, doctors often feel under pressure to accede to parents' wishes in respect of interventions in their child without reference to the interests of the child herself. Furthermore, ethics is uncomfortably difficult to pin down; most doctors are busy and only too willing to accept well-argued moral short-cuts if they are offered. The sad truth is that Singer's defence of infanticide is an illustration of

the sort of plausible utilitarian argument that, left unchallenged, has the power to persuade doctors to change their practice. There is no doubt that killing a baby is always simpler, as well as cheaper, than rearing a child. That is especially true if the child is cognitively impaired. Faced with such an infant, a doctor finds herself having to estimate probabilities of survival or disability, weighing benefits and harms of which she cannot possibly be certain while at the same time counting costs of which she is only too well aware. Singer reassures doctors that there is no need for personal anguish or moral unease. The infant lacks certain morally key abilities, and so can be extinguished with a clear conscience; all the doctor need do is ask her parents what they prefer.

Even if we could be sure that most doctors would never be drawn to the practical benefits of infanticide itself, that way of thinking about human worth is important. Representing the value of persons according to the individual properties they possess allows the possibility that the worth of some humans can be altered simply by re-evaluating those properties. The value of a being becomes no more than an expression of the capabilities a particular society in a particular era chooses to privilege. Infanticide is important, not only because it is already changing the way medicine treats vulnerable children, but also because it illustrates a reductionist way of thinking about the worth of all humans.

Some have wondered whether a theological response to Singer is necessary at all. His defence of infanticide appears to rely heavily on an interpretation of empirical data that is highly flawed and has been contradicted by more recent research. It seems that Singer's defence of infanticide can be hoist with his own empirical petard.

I have argued, however, that showing Singer's empirical claims to be unjustified is not enough to refute his defence of infanticide. Singer's moral theory relates the moral value of a decision, not to an individual's properties *per se*, but to the effect of those properties on her capacity to benefit or to be harmed by a specific decision. He does not claim that value is conferred on a human's life by the fact that she is capable of persistent self-awareness, but because such a capability leads her to prefer to live. While science has shown that an infant is capable of self-awareness and memory, it would be impossible to demonstrate empirically that those capacities mean she wishes to avoid being killed. Singer's proposition is not a question that can be 'proved wrong' by scientific study, because empirical evidence can neither demonstrate that infant awareness is irrelevant on Singer's own terms nor that his terms are wrong in the first place. His proposition must be refuted rationally.

According to Singer, the value of an individual is explainable by a subset of that individual's own properties. To act correctly, a doctor need only accurately identify those properties and respond automatically to the moral obligations they impose. I have suggested that, in the context of human caring, such automaticity is undesirable because it engages only the doctor's logical reasoning. It would diminish a doctor's flourishing to kill a cognitively impaired child on the basis of Singer's utilitarianism because in doing so she is enjoined to set aside her feelings of common humanity. I defend relational interpretations of *imago Dei* which are predicated on the idea that the value of being human expresses a relation in which only humans can stand to God, and so cannot be resolved into individual properties. There is no property or set of properties that explains personal worth. The distinctiveness of human from non-human

animals, accordingly, cannot be expressed by a difference in the extent of properties each might possess, but itself expresses a quality that pervades all of those properties. Humanness, on that view, has no meaning except by reference to God and his purpose, and while the argument I have made for the inherent value of childness can be defended on purely rational grounds, I have found no way to account for a difference in the inherent value of humans and animals that does not rely on a distinctively Christian understanding of humanity.

Some ethicists express the fear that, if there are no clear structural criteria against which to decide that a member of *Homo sapiens* should no longer be considered a human person, doctors will feel compelled to prolong her life even when it is likely that she can no longer flourish as a human. I have argued that such a concern mistakenly conflates two ideas that should be kept quite distinct; namely the value of a person expressed as a hypothetical obligation to prolong life *per se*, as opposed to a compassionate commitment to promote her individual flourishing. The two ideas are not the same. They can indeed be at odds, since medical interventions that prolong life always simultaneously imperil other modes of flourishing. If the benefits of continuing to live are outweighed by the threat to flourishing that an intervention needed to prolong life would represent, then withdrawing or withholding the intervention is an act of compassion that expresses, rather than denies, an individual's value.

In summary, Peter Singer wishes to characterise society's antipathy towards infanticide as a fad that should pass, imposed on the world by Christianity's

arbitrary insistence that all human life is of special worth. We should, he insists, return to the ancient view that the decision as to whether or not a child should live is that of her parents. Singer rationalises his view by a theory which asserts that everything an infant is able to do is irrelevant to the value of preserving her life. That represents not only a claim that the life of an infant is of no value because of the capacities she lacks, but also a claim that the capacities she possesses are of no value because she is an infant.

In this thesis, I have argued that theological criticisms of Singer's general moral theory, while sound, fail to refute Singer convincingly on the specific question of infanticide because they do not challenge the underlying evaluation of childness that his theory represents. The value that Singer ascribes to the cognitive properties of adulthood, and the value he allows those of childness, are so utterly divergent that he is able to conclude that the life of a human who possesses only the latter is of no inherent value at all. Current theological critiques, I have suggested, offer no teleological grounds on which to object to those profoundly different evaluations. The reductionist claims that allow Singer to believe that the life of an infant is valueless because she lacks a single cognitive property are, I argue, often shared by theologians. Among interpretations of *imago Dei* are many that similarly seek to express human worth in terms of one or more specific properties that infants do not possess. I have argued that, in order to defeat Singer's arguments for infanticide, Christian theology must appeal to a correct anthropology of the child. In this thesis I have set out an anthropology that draws on Christian eudaimonism, research in developmental neuropsychology, and the theology and philosophy of childhood.

I have defended a distinctively capacious conception of reason espoused by many theologians, and have suggested that one insight Christian ethics can offer to contemporary debate in medical ethics is that the range of cognitive processes that contribute to humans' experience of their life is much broader than a formal faculty for logic. That goes some way to challenging an extreme reductionist account, but I have argued that it still shares with that account the same fundamental idea that an individual's worth represents the sum of certain properties that she might possess. A broader definition of reasoning is certainly *necessary* in order to refute Singer, but I have argued that it is not *sufficient*. Unless it extends to encompass every property that might facilitate flourishing, it cannot avoid the same conclusion that there might be some properties of an individual that cannot confer personal value, or that an individual who possesses only those properties might have no value at all. Nor, in the absence of some external yardstick for value, can such an account say what those irrelevant properties are, or which are the properties that *do* confer personal value. I have argued that most substantialist interpretations of *imago Dei* make it difficult for the agent to know how widely she should cast the net of her moral concern, and so risk excluding vulnerable humans like infants whose flourishing should, in reality, matter to Christians.

I have argued that a relational interpretation of *imago Dei* offers greater protection because it requires the doctor to treat all her patients as though the question of personal value were already resolved. Her moral responsibility starts with acknowledging the common humanity that she shares with her patient, and she discharges that responsibility first and foremost by treating him as though the quality of his existence were of concern to her. In doing so, she

is exercising properties of love and fellowship that tend towards her own flourishing.

Singer supports his argument with an interpretation of empirical evidence regarding the infant's cognitive abilities. Theology, I have suggested, is legitimately concerned with truth and falsehood and, to the extent that science is rational and uncovers truth, it is theology's ally. Having scrutinised Singer's empirical assertions, I make the claim they do not represent any serious attempt to review the evidence and that, ultimately, Singer's understanding of the infant is incomplete—dangerously so for one whose views are influential in shaping public opinion. His appeal to evidence from experimental and developmental neuropsychology is selective and his interpretation of it is heavily influenced by his own prior beliefs and ideology. He has scattered research references over his defence of infanticide but they are essentially no more than a decorative garnish.

I have then outlined an argument against infanticide that builds on key ideas which emerge from the eudaimonistic critique that some Christian theologians have already made of Singer's general moral theory: that the object of ethics is to perfect individual well-being in all its dimensions, that value depends on purpose and that ethics governing human behaviour is ineluctably intersubjective. Those ideas are, I argue, rationally defensible without reference to any particular metaphysical position.

I have defended the position taken by theologians that Singer's conception of the good is too thin. The object of ethics as a teleological endeavour must be properly defined. That cannot be in terms that represent only a subset of human experiences such as self-awareness or preference

satisfaction. Push-pin, poetry, appetite satisfied (and, paradoxically, the experience of appetite itself) are all quite different sorts of pleasure. The joys of eating a good meal, of an unwelcome swim on a cold morning, and of giving up one's time or even life for others do not all represent happiness on the utilitarian view, but they are all ways in which human existence is enriched and enabled to be of greater quality. The complexity of human well-being is, I have argued, expressed by the Aristotelian term 'eudaimonia'. Eudaimonia represents the perfection of flourishing and is a capacious term that refers, not only to the idea of subjective enjoyment of existence in the present moment (pleasure), or to the absence of suffering, but also to the idea of living to some purpose.

I have also defended the position that, in order to be meaningful at all, value must be seen in the context of a purpose. According to relational interpretations of *imago Dei*, the context that provides the value for human properties is 'vocation', or the place that an individual human has in a Creation ordered by God. In that context, all of an individual's properties have value because they are all available to be used in God's service. Importantly, the value of the properties is not that they *are* used in God's service, otherwise the value of an individual human would always be contingent on her capacity to comprehend and obey, which would bring value back to a restricted conception of reason as a form of logic.

By focusing the debate on a Christian anthropology of childness, I have set out a counter-proposal that might persuade doctors that Singer is wrong and that infanticide does, in fact, cause meaningful harm to patients. If his empirical claims are set aside, Singer's defence of infanticide boils down to a belief that thinking and feeling in the manner of an infant is less important to

moral value than thinking and feeling in the manner of an adult. In making that claim, Singer is largely aligning himself with traditional moral philosophical thinking. Even theologians who have championed the value of the child have often done so solely by reference to the value of an adult, and so have colluded in the same idea that adulthood is inherently of greater value than childhood.

I have rejected the idea that the cognitive properties of the adult represent the yardstick by which all cognitive properties are measured in humans, and hence the idea that the properties that characterise children are inherently less valuable than those that characterise adults. The cognitive properties an infant possesses are morally relevant because they represent human capabilities that God could put to use in furthering his plan for Creation. The Jesus of the gospels points out that the way adults think and are aware is not the only way in which humans can understand important truths.

Although it is Jesus' comments on children that draw theology's attention to the tendency to assume adult thinking is always better than children's thinking, it is not a specifically Christian claim; the tendency is there for anyone to observe, and it is open to those of any faith or none to infer that such an assumption is incorrect. Furthermore, modern empirical research shows that infants are capable of some forms of meaning-making, especially those that facilitate learning and dependence on others. I have defended the claim that humans can sometimes flourish better in dependence than in autonomy, and better through the exercise of looking to learn from others than relying on systems of knowledge they have already constructed and internalised. The specific properties whose value Jesus extols are those that permit humans to depend willingly on others, and those that minimise the risk that, faced with a

truth she has not previously encountered, a human wrongly believes she already fully understands it. Both sets of properties, I suggest, find expression in the new-born infant and, on that basis, infants are able to participate in human goods.

The argument I have set out affirms the importance of outcome to moral deliberation. While it is consistent with the idea that all humans are in the image of God, I have argued that its force does not rely on that belief but on arguments that are persuasive in themselves. Where Singer finds himself having to restrict his account of the quality of an individual's well-being to preference satisfaction or the experience of pleasure, the Christian idea of flourishing expresses it in terms that can encompass all the ways in which a human's existence might be made better. Where Singer struggles to find any objective yardstick for evaluating moral action, Christian eudaimonism anchors the value of moral action in an individual's flourishing, which in turn depends on her nature and purpose or vocation. Where Singer is unable to explain why one person should concern herself with the needs of another in the first place, the form of Christian eudaimonism I have defended explains that it is by attending to the flourishing of others that we ourselves flourish.

I have shown that Singer's exclusive concern for the continuing well-being and existence of humans who are self-aware and prefer to live is indefensible except on its own terms because, as a matter of fact, there are modes of human flourishing that do not depend on self-awareness or on a capacity to formulate preferences.

I have then shown that some of the ways in which humans experience their life during infancy exemplify those other modes of human flourishing. They

depend on her vocation as an infant in the present moment as well as her capacity to fulfil an adult's vocation later. Irrespective of whether or not she expects to continue to exist, there is no reason to imagine the infant does not currently enjoy human goods, and to kill her would deprive her of that enjoyment.

Furthermore, I have argued, infanticide imperils the flourishing of those who carry out or approve the killing. If extinguishing an infant is no more than an automatic response to the absence of certain properties, then it appeals to the agent's humanity only in the most rudimentary and minimal sense of exercising logic. There is no compassion or purpose; only correct calculation. Exercise of that narrow form of moral reasoning diminishes an individual's participation in fellowship with others.

In this thesis, I have shown that the reason infanticide is wrong is not merely a minoritarian conviction from the fourth century that has inexplicably persisted. Nor is it solely because infants will one day become adults, or because for human beings to permit the killing of other human beings, simply on the basis that there are certain ways in which they cannot think, distorts and impoverishes what it means to be human and to live alongside other humans.

Infanticide is also wrong because the result would be to extinguish individual humans who, in the present moment, are flourishing and are promoting flourishing; humans who are currently engaged in enjoying their own lives and helping to fulfil their own vocations and those of others.

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