On the Value of Life

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Abstract

That life has value is a tenet eliciting all but universal agreement, be it amongst philosophers, policy-makers, or the general public. Yet, when it comes to its employment in practice, especially in the context of policies which require the balancing of different moral choices – for example in health care, foreign aid, or animal rights related decisions – it takes little for cracks to appear and for disagreement to arise as to what the value of life actually means and how it should guide our actions in the real world. I argue that in no small part this state of affairs is a consequence of the infirmity of the foundations that the claim respecting the value of life supervenes upon once its theological foundations are abandoned. Hence, I depart radically from the contemporary thought and argue that life has no inherent value. Far from lowering the portcullis to Pandemonium, the abandonment of the quasi-Platonistic claim that life has intrinsic value, when understood and applied correctly, leads to a comprehensive, consistent, and compassionate ethical framework for understanding the related problems. I illustrate this using several hotly debated topics, including speciesism and show how the ideas I introduce help us to interpret people’s choices and to resolve outstanding challenges which present an insurmountable obstacle to the existing ethical theories.
1 Introduction

The notion that life has value (Dworkin, 1994; Jarvis Thomson, 1985), or in the extreme that life is invaluable, is not only ubiquitous in considerations relevant to how modern societies are organized and how many important decisions are made, but also seemingly crucial for them (Coggon, 2021; Cooper et al., 2021). Materially, that is scientifically, the emergence of the notion is easily understood as a socio-cognitive conceptualization of an adaptive, evolutionary product (Singer, 2011a). Succinctly put, it is a cognitive mechanism that has evolved as a means of effecting behaviours – the refrainment from killing a human (or, more broadly, any living being), the drive to help another in mortal danger, etc. – which facilitate social cooperation and in the long term mutually beneficial reciprocity (Joyce, 2007; Street, 2006). From a historico-philosophical viewpoint, the justification of the idea has strong roots in religious belief. This is the case both in Western and Eastern theological traditions. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all alike, teach the sanctity of life, life in these traditions being seen as a gift, indeed one of the greatest gifts, from God. Buddhism, which understands life in fundamentally different terms from the aforementioned Abrahamic religions, nevertheless shares with them the common ground on its sanctity (Keown and Keown, 1995).

The aetiology of the concept of the value of life does little to justify its continued presence in the modern world. The evolutionary explanation inherently cannot provide support for an ethical imperative. After all, there
are numerous evolutionarily\textsuperscript{1} adaptive behaviours which we quite rightly reject as immoral – genocide and rape, for example, can both be evolutionarily advantageous behavioural strategies in certain contexts (Apostolou, 2013).

On the other hand, while consistent and compelling on the premises of the respective belief systems (at least in principle and to the extent that the remainder of the dogma is internally consistent itself), the theological argument cannot be accepted within the framework of the secular states that most of the world’s population lives in. Bayertz (1996) argues that the secularisation of the concept of ‘sanctity of life’, that is its separation from its religious roots, has not led to a loss in authority by virtue of it having been absorbed by the Law. This argument is both philosophically unprincipled and as a consequence possibly dangerously short-sighted. It is philosophically unprincipled because the Law, even if popular and widely accepted, cannot make something morally right. Rather, it is the other way round – a sufficiently strong ethical imperative may be a reason to enact a law. Other laws may be amoral, merely setting up rules that make the running of a society ordered, such as driving on a specific side of the road. Breaking this law is ethically unacceptable not because it is a law, but rather because departing from the agreed upon norm in this particular case would lead to consequences which are morally objectionable. This lack of fundamental grounding of the sanctity of life is also what makes Bayertz’s argument potentially perilous, for one has to ask what will happen once the chimerical foundation of this law

\textsuperscript{1}Unless otherwise noted, I am referring to biological evolution.
becomes more widely recognized. Similar thoughts in a wider context have been expressed by Peterson\(^2\):

“To me I think that that the universe that people like Dawkins and Harris inhabit is so intensely conditioned by mythological presuppositions that they take for granted the ethic that emerges out of that as if it’s just a rational given. And this of course was precisely Nietzsche’s observation as well as Dostoyevsky’s observation.

I’m not arguing for the existence of God. I’m arguing that the ethic that drives our culture is predicated on the idea of God and that you can’t just take that idea away and expect the thing to remain intact midair without any foundational support.”

As will shortly become clear, if it is not already, I am not in full agreement with Peterson on this point — after all, the view I offer herein is itself unmistakably humanist in nature (or rather, sentientist to be strict (Benton, 2013), considering the absence of any special consideration given to humans in particular) and void of all theistic references, explicit or implicit — but I do agree with his criticism of the existing treatments of the concept of the value of life.

Thus, with the abandonment of the theological justification of the sanctity of life, a number of difficult questions emerge. Is the value of every human

life the same (Harris, 1987)? If this value is infinite, how can any loss of life be justified when juxtaposed by, say, material goods? If it is finite, is this value temporally immutable or can it change? If it cannot change, how can practical decisions in, for example, health care on the priority of treatment be decided upon (Harris, 1987)? Does only human life have value? If so, why? If not, then what is the value of life of a member of a different species (Frey, 1987), and can a human life be weighed against an equivalent cumulative (however this accumulation of value may be done) value of lives of, say, pigs? And so on. The vagueness of the concept of the notion of the ‘value of life’ as it is used today – in everyday life and politics (Arandjelović, 2021), and the academic literature – makes such questions unanswerable (Singer, 1983) even if a purely normative view is adopted. Even worse, as pointed out by numerous thinkers before me, it allows diametrically opposite positions to be argued (Healy, 1991) starting from apparently the same first principles. Thus, we must seek to understand the notion of the “value of life” better.

To quote Nadler (2015) commenting on Spinoza’s writings:

“To the extent that a person has inadequate ideas, he is acted upon.”

In this paper I propose a coherent and principled ethical framework which can address the aforementioned questions. My initial claim appears rather extreme and, I appreciate, rather controversial despite that not being my intention – I contend that *life in fact has no inherent value*. Lest the reader summarily reject this as either a nihilistic proposition or one merely aimed
at causing outrage, I would like to reassure that neither is the case. Quite
on the contrary. I show that starting from this seemingly cynical point,
we can arrive at a most humane (but, importantly, not homocentric) and
compelling understanding of how we should appreciate life. Moreover, by
virtue of its minimal assumptions, the thought framework I introduce allows
us to reason and make ethically consistent decisions in a whole range of
contexts. For example, it refines our notion of speciesism and explains why
in many instances when speciesism is alleged, no actual logical or moral
inconsistency is to be found (see Section 3.1).

2 Life has no inherent value. But…

Stripped of its theological aetiology, the claim that a life has value is a blanket
assertion. While assertions like this are necessary (principia probant non
probantur), be they explicit or implicit, in any ethical discussion, and can
be soundly defended based on what is common to the cognitive mechanisms
of entities capable of making ethical judgements\(^3\), they can be satisfactory
when their basis is indeed strongly, inherently, and widely present within
the said entities. It is also if not necessary then nearly so, that they do not
lead to mutually contradictory conclusions. On both of these accounts, the

\(^3\)For all practical purposes, at present this means humans though in principle it could
include alien species we come across, or artificially created sentence, whatever physical
form that sentence may take (I am reminded of Stanislaw Lem’s imaginative short story
“Non Serviam” (Lem, 1971) which amongst other things touches upon the subject of
morality of ‘killing’ synthetic in silico sentence).
assertion that life has value is found wanting.

To help us formulate a sounder starting premise, I would like the reader to consider the following thought experiment which I shall hereafter refer to as *The Solitary Person Problem* for convenience:

Imagine a person who enjoys a solitary existence. The person has no surviving family members, lives isolated in far away wilderness, grows their own food, and is content with not having social connections, friends, acquaintances, or romantic interests. Next, imagine the act of killing this solitary individual, instantaneously, i.e. without any prior knowledge of the possibility of this fate, and without any pain, physical or mental.

I ask: is this an unethical act?

An act moralist, and I expect most people, would respond to the question with a firm affirmative, on the basis that killing an innocent person is inherently wrong in itself. This reflexive reaction is implicitly based on the presumed sanctity of life, for they would presumably not have deemed it unethical if I suggested destroying a mud mound rather than life. Hence, I abandon this premise – I claim that there is nothing that makes either of the aforementioned acts *inherently* immoral.

The distinction that is normally made between the destruction of a living and not living entity, as in the two scenarios I described, is arbitrary. That is, it is an arbitrary distinction when examined rationally, which is not to imply
that it is coincidental when viewed through the lens of biological or social evolution. Indeed, the fact that the distinction seems natural and that my suggestion to abandon it may be difficult to accept is something that needs – ney, demands – an explanation, and any moral philosophical framework must offer one if it is to be considered satisfactory.

My starting point draws from the traditions of Epicureans and Existentialists, amongst others (Frey, 1987), and focuses on the experience of sentient beings; in particular, their ability to experience pleasure on the one hand and suffering on the other, the weal and the woe. In *The Solitary Person Problem*, no suffering takes place. The killing is instantaneous. There is neither any physical nor psychological pain effected by the act itself. The person is also unaware of the possibility of them being murdered, so there is no anguish caused by anticipation or fear. Hence, there can be no wrongdoing. So, going back to the question I raised previously, why may the act nevertheless feel wrong?

I argue that one of the main reasons stems from the nature of many thought experiments. The premises in *The Solitary Person Problem* are simple and there can be little doubt that any reader will readily understand and accept them on a cognitive level (Davis, 2012). However, the real-life implausibility of these premises, though irrelevant in the context of the very specific phenomenon we wish to examine, is difficult, if not impossible, to

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4I kindly ask any reader who may have objections at this point, to exercise patience and withhold them until Section 4 wherein I discuss potential challenges and offer my answers to these.
accept on an unconscious, emotional level. It is indeed difficult to imagine a person who is truly content with fully solitary existence; a person, moreover, who even if without a morsel of care for others is not cared for by somebody else\(^5\) – a friend, a parent, a sibling, even a pet\(^6\). Therefore, our unconscious, emotional response, which is understood as being crucial for moral judgement (Young and Koenigs, 2007; Moll et al., 2008) continues to operate without the premises of the thought experiment. This is an example of what Dennett termed an “intuition pump” (Dennett, 2015) – an intuition driven conclusion that in this case rests on intuition developed under conditions very much unlike those of the thought experiment that it is applied to. I contend that the same explanation applies to the finding of Faulhaber et al. (2019), of the willingness in some circumstances preferentially to sacrifice an adult, as opposed to either a child or an elderly person – a finding that the authors were at a loss to explain and which runs against their hypothesis of life expectancy based utilitarian decision-making. As in The Solitary Person Problem, there can be little doubt that the premises of the simple experiment were cognitively well understood by its participants. However, this understanding finds itself at odds with the physical reality that has conditioned our emotional response. We know from experience that running over an individual does not necessarily result in a loss of life and hence emotionally react in a manner which reflects changes in the probability of death – a kneeling

\(^5\)As observed by Mötorhead in Love me Forever: “Everyone dies to break somebody’s heart”.
adult appears more likely to die when hit by a car than a standing one.

The reason why this unconscious and unwitting rejection of the framing of *The Solitary Person Problem* is important stems from the impact that the hypothetical act of murder has on others – others which are not present in our cognitive acceptance of the premises of the dilemma, but which in any practical situation do exist. These unseen but emotionally present others, so to speak, would undoubtedly suffer as a consequence of the hypothesised killing, be it because of the loss of the loved one, the reliving of the situation in their imaginations, or the fear that they would have for themselves and those they care about. Thus, we can see that the value of a person’s life is not inherent in the life itself, but rather an emergent property which comes to being through the effects that one’s existence, or indeed the cessation of that existence, has on other sentient beings.

3 Consequences

At first sight, the argument I put forward in the previous section does not seem to have got us any further. It may appear as if I started by rejecting the premise of axiomatic acceptance of the value of life just to derive and accept the same claim, coming to the effectively identical end point, albeit by a different route. However, a more thorough examination readily shows that

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*I use this word for reasons of custom and easier comprehension, despite my preference for one more akin to the phrase ‘animal friend’ considering that the former is usually understood to imply ownership; indeed, in law, pets are often considered mere material possessions of humans. Please see Section 3.1 for further related discussion.*
this is not so. I will outline a few examples and broad conceptual differences that emerge from the two approaches first, before proceeding with a more in-depth treatment of a problem widely debated at present: that of speciesism.

**Cultural awareness** An interesting variable that the dominant debate concerning the value of human life (or life in general) omits is that of culture. All but invariably, the discussion takes place within the confines of the Western-centric, individualistic value system which places the individual at the fore. Indeed, if the dogmatic prescription that human life has intrinsic value is adopted (epitomized by the quote that “Many people believe that all human life is of equal value”, which itself the author does not contest (Singer, 2009)), no cultural discussion is necessary – the value is immanent and the surrounding context is irrelevant. In contrast, the ethical framework I propose also permits and explains a sensible degree of cultural variability (I do emphasise the word *sensible*, as cultural variability is neither unlimited in principle nor arbitrary, being built upon those neurophysiological commonalities that give rise to morality and allow the characterization of most members of our species as moral agents in the first instance; see Section 4 for further discussion). Here I am not referring to the variability in how grief is *expressed* (the comparison performed by Wikan (1988) of Egyptian and Mali cultures in this respect provides a poignant example), but to the conceptualization of loss, that is the manner in which life and death are understood within a culture (Parkes et al., 2015) (e.g. it is entirely reasonable
to expect different psychological responses to death in cultures which hold a non-dualistic view of life and death). We both can expect and not reject as ethically unsound that in different cultures human life is valued differently given that the context that gives life its value is different.

**Equal but...not quite** The discomforting choice of which person’s life to save is a problem not seldom faced by various kinds of professionals, for example in health care when resources are limited (a good example is that of the United Kingdom’s Exercise Cygnus, during which ‘the key policy decision’ was to adopt an approach whereby treatment is denied to certain sections of the population (Jones and Hameiri, 2021), or in the design of certain artificial intelligence agents such as self-driving cars (Faulhaber et al., 2019; Sütfeld et al., 2016)).

Indeed, the wealth of data collected within the context of the latter scenario provide interesting insight. Consistently, given the choice between harming a child or an adult, the majority of people opt to harm the adult. The same preference for saving the younger individual, though by a lesser majority, is seen when the choice is that between an adult and an elderly person (Faulhaber et al., 2019). Faulhaber et al. (2019) report:

“This result demonstrates the inverse relation of the expected remaining lifespan of an avatar and the chance to get hit. This decrease in value according to age was highly significant ($p < 0.01$).”
Yet, the authors’ conclusion that this finding provides evidence of utilitarian thinking is unwarranted. In particular, the experiment does not demonstrate a lesser preference of a study participant to harm a younger person, but rather that fewer participants prefer not to harm a younger person. Indeed, no examination of the strength of preference was investigated so no positive utilitarian conclusion can be made in an experiment with this design. Thus, rather in opposition to the stated conclusion, the results show that a significant number of people (some 25%) certainly do not exhibit age based utilitarian decision-making in this instance (10% of individuals who did not prefer to harm an adult over a child, and an additional 15% who did not prefer to harm an elderly person over an adult); for the remaining 75% no conclusion either way can be made.

Rather than the conclusion that the authors put forward, the interesting aspect of the findings of this study and other similar efforts lies in the observed heterogeneity in people’s moral choices. Note – and lest I be misunderstood, I state this not as a criticism but merely as a point of emphasis and contextualization – that the study is firmly in the realm of scientific inquiry; it does not ask what the right way of making choices is, but rather what choices people do make. While the understanding of the latter cannot be used as a prescription for the former, any moral theory that stands a chance of being practicable has to contend with and be compatible with material constraints, be they biological, social, etc.

I argue that the ideas put forward in the present paper offer a better
interpretation of findings and, what is more, help reconcile the clear differences between different individuals’ choices. Firstly, note that the finding of Faulhaber et al. (2019), of the inverse relation of the expected remaining lifespan and the chance of being chosen to be hit, does not enfirm a proximal causal link, that is, that the study participants were less willing to sacrifice a young person because the participants themselves saw longer life expectancy as being of primal importance. Rather, this choice could also be a reflection of a distal relationship, that is, a reflection of the grief of the hit person’s loved ones, who may see this loss through the lens of “they had so much life ahead of them” which is especially strongly felt in the case of child death, when the parental bond is strongest (Bucx and Van Wel, 2008). Equally, my emergent rather than immanent view of a life’s worth lets us understand why a significant number of the study’s participants did not demonstrate age sensitive decisions – it is not because these individuals are any less caring or empathetic, but rather possibly because their different experiences and life circumstances made them more appreciative of different cognitive sources of grief, e.g. when the loss of life involves vulnerable individuals (“should have I left my elderly mother by herself?”, “I lost my husband of 50 years and now have years of solitude ahead of me”, etc.). In so much that it reflects the different origins and reasons for experiencing grief, the emergent viewpoint I argue for ipso facto captures the actuality of a life’s worth within a specific socio-biological context. Contrast this unifying perspective with the absolutist belief in the inheritance of value in life: how can it ever hope to reconcile
the views of those who, for example, see the aforementioned value being
in the possibility of one’s future experiences (and hence life expectancy) on
the one hand (Sütfeld et al., 2016), and those who see, for example, young
children or babies having a lesser moral worth due to their yet undeveloped
personhood (Singer, 2011b)? Contra principia negantem non est disputan-
dum.

3.1 Speciesism

Speciesism is broadly understood either as “the unjustified disadvantageous
consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one
or more particular species” or as “the unjustified disadvantageous considera-
tion or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more
particular species for reasons that do not have to do with the individual ca-
pacities they have” (Horta, 2010). The debate over which definition is more
appropriate is not of relevance here, so I shall not pursue it further.

Proponents of the idea, that is of the objection to the manner humans
treat animals merely because they are non-human, have made impressive
strides in changing how animal lives are viewed and how animals are treated
not only by moral philosophers, but also by the general public. The gen-
eral spirit of contemporaneous anti-speciesism advocates is captured well by
Singer (1995):

“There can be no reason – apart from the selfish desire to pre-
serve the privileges of the exploiting group – to refuse to extend
the fundamental principle of equal consideration of interests to
members of other species.”

What has in no small part contributed to the growth of the anti-speciesist
movement and the awareness thereof are convincing rebuttals of existing at-
tempts at justifying differential treatment of different species. The most com-
mon justification, and indeed intellectually the crudest, is based on cognitive
abilities, that is the argument that humans’ greatest intellectual capacity
warrants their privileged position (and by extension, that the worth of other
species’ lives can be ranked according to the their intelligence). The validity
of this line of thinking is readily refuted by observing, for a start, the fallacy
that emerges from reasoning on the level of a group membership rather than
individual living beings. When thinking is focused on individuals, the cog-
nitive ability argument inevitably leads to the conclusion that it is morally
acceptable to treat severely mentally disabled people as, say, animals used
for meat, or indeed that humans can be ranked by the worth of their lives in
accordance to their intelligence. Similar rebuttals (often, perhaps somewhat
clumsily, referred to as based on “marginal cases”) apply equally well to the

7I use the terms ‘anti-speciesist’, ‘anti-speciesism’, etc., in a manner consistent with
previous authors, though this terminology may be a source of some confusion. In par-
ticular, few philosophers profess being speciesist, i.e. few actually advocate speciesism.
However, a significant number do argue that the observed pre-eminent treatment of hu-
mans (and hence also those species useful to humans) is not speciesist in that it is not
unjustified. In other words, they challenge the very notion of speciesism (at least in certain
contexts) (Cohen, 1986; Williams and Moore, 2009). Hence, ‘anti-speciesist’ should not
be understood as being synonymous to ‘not speciesist’.
argument focused on self-awareness rather than intelligence (Caviola et al., 2019).

A seemingly more challenging case against anti-speciesism is based on moral agency. According to its proponents, humans should enjoy a privileged position because humans alone are capable of reasoning about morality. Nevertheless, the seemingly higher sophistication of this argument is superficial, for a refutation similar to the cognition based one shows it to lead to unacceptable decisions – neither very young children nor severely mentally disabled people can be considered to be moral agents; yet, we recognize their rights and, further, enshrine them in Law (Arandjelović, 2021).

The moral challenge to anti-speciesists is left wanting. Indeed, in that I agree with anti-speciesists’ broad ideas, I do not think that there is a valid challenge to be made and hence neither desire to nor attempt to make one. However, there are a number of specific aspects of the contemporary anti-speciesist thought that require further refinement and better understanding. Much like when it comes to the questions I described in Section 1, anti-speciesist views provide us with little concrete practical guidance as to how one should behave in specific situations which involve the balancing act of choosing between sacrificing different lives. Is a dog’s life as valuable as a human’s? Or half as valuable? Or . . ., etc.? As far as questions like these are concerned there has not been much progress in thought since Bentham (1781) whose sentiments are remarkably in tune with the modern progressive thinking:
“A full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more ra-
tional, as well as a more conversible animal, than an infant of
a day, a week or even a month old. Even if that were not so,
what difference would that make? The question is not Can they
reason? or Can they talk? but Can they suffer?”

Bentham, like many others since him, recognizes the irrelevance of intelli-
gence and ability in this context, and in turn focuses on sentience and the
ability to experience suffering. Yet, this focus falls flat faced with The Soli-
tary Person Problem – there is no suffering therein. As explained previously,
the mistake lies in the fixation on the suffering of the apparent victim.

Unlike the dogmas prevalent in contemporaneous anti-speciesist philos-
ophy, the ideas I presented in this article provide us with a moral frame-
work to reason about concrete dilemmas, to understand the delineations of
speciesism better (and thus to avoid extreme and clearly bizarre conclusions
such as that of Jaquet (2021) who concludes that “ethically speaking, all an-
imals are equal”8), and – importantly – to identify instances when apparent
speciesism may in fact not be speciesism at all. Firstly, the reader should
notice that in foundational arguments underlying the thought framework I
introduce herein, I made no specific reference to humans at all. The pivotal
premise centres on the familiar concept – that of the ability of an entity to
experience suffering. As such, mutatis mutandis, it applies equally well to
many animals, it could include alien species we may come across, or indeed
The ideas I put forward provide a means of addressing in concrete terms the aforementioned problems. Firstly, I emphasise that the ethical framework I introduced provides direct judgement at the level of a specific sentient individual only – a specific dog, a specific human, etc. – as opposed to any grouping thereof (the value of dogs’ lives vs human lives, the value of human children’s lives vs adult lives, etc.). Statements as regards the latter should only be understood as linguistic shorthands for averages, that is, in Bayesian terminology, values obtained by integrating out any latent unknowns across the respective groups (Arandjelović, 2012). Just as the values of two different humans’ lives are not a priori deemed as being the same, neither are two animals’, etc. Indeed, it could not be otherwise – the aetiology of the value of life proposed in Section 2 makes no presumptions or qualifications as regards to the species of sentient beings, and as such neither does it falter in the face of the futile and ill-conceived task to define species’ boundaries, nor does it lead down absurd wynds with Jaquet (2021).

The value of the life of a specific dog, a specific pig, or indeed any other specific sentient monad, whatever it be, emerges from its sentient environment rather than its own sentience – it is hypostasized through the consideration of suffering that the loss of said life would effect. In this we can see

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8It is fascinating that upon reaching this conclusion the author does ask how it is that this moral worth is so uniform across the Animalia kingdom, from its most to the least sentient of its members, but then vanishes into nothingness as the leap across the boundary into the Plantae, say, is made.
the emergence of the objective, objective that is not absolute and fixed but fluid and changeable, it being contingent on the subjective. Thus, keeping in mind the linguistic shorthand that the reference to the value of life of a specific species is within the proposed moral schema, it can be expected for example that, mutatis mutandis, the more socialized behaviour or the greater the degree of empathetic response exhibited by a species is, the more its members’ lives should be valued (by any moral agent, which at present means humans). Further to the aforesaid moral prescription, this observation helps shed light on a series of findings in the literature and casts doubt on the popular interpretations thereof. Consider the work of Caviola et al. (2019) for example, in which the authors assert:

“For example, we treat dogs with special moral status while simultaneously factory farming and eating pigs – despite the fact that dogs and pigs have similar mental and emotional capabilities.,”

and view this observation as providing prima facie evidence of speciesism. Yet, we can now see that this is not at all the case, for dogs and pigs likely exhibit differing socialization and empathetic traits (Landsberg and Dennenberg, 2014b,a; Marshall-Pescini and Kaminski, 2014). Indeed, there is plenty of evidence of dogs’ intra- and inter-species empathy (Custance and Mayer, 2012; Karl and Huber, 2017). This is hardly surprising, given that dogs have been bred by humans with specific aims in mind, socialization often being one of them. While it is entirely possible that pigs are no different, that is
rather beside the point: it is sufficient to note that most people will have had experiences evidencing empathy in dogs, thereby creating at least a perceived differential. The consequent differential treatment cannot be considered as speciesist as it is not *unjustified* (recall the common definitions of speciesism I quoted at the beginning of this section). Hasty conclusions similar to those of Caviola et al. (2019) are abundant in the literature. As another recent example, consider the article by Wilks et al. (2021):

“Previous studies have suggested that adults exhibit speciesism. For example, adults value humans more than animals even in cases in which humans have equal or lower cognitive capacities than animals. Thus, one possible explanation of our findings is that children are far less speciesist than adults. Although we found that children weakly prioritize humans over dogs and pigs, we do not know whether this is because of speciesism or because of other factors, such as the belief that humans have more sophisticated cognitive capacities or that they experience more happiness over their lifetimes than dogs or pigs do.”

There are multiple errors in the claim of Wilks et al. (2021) that can be readily highlighted. As I have already explained, and as have many before me, cognitive abilities are entirely inconsequential in this debate. In view of the novel aspects of the present work, so is the last of the authors’ observations (also see Section 4). Wilks et al. (2021) eventually conclude:
“Thus, the strong form of speciesism exhibited in adults may be a socially acquired ideology.”

This is highly misleading. The claim indeed may be correct, but the study offers no evidence which would make this explanation preferable to an alternative one. For example, again looking through the lens of the aetiological schema I introduce, it may be the case that children as they are growing up acquire a better understanding (rather than any social bias) of animals and humans alike, their extent of socialization, their ability to connect with one another, their ability to grieve, etc., thus with age becoming more appreciative of the contextual sentient milieu which I argue gives meaning to the concept of the ‘value of life’. ‘Preference’, a word oft-used by Wilks et al. (2021), does not necessarily imply bias, nor indeed arbitrariness. I am of course not claiming that considerations akin to the framework I propose in this paper are learnt and performed consciously, but rather merely that similar cognitive mechanisms are implicitly involved in people’s unconscious (and indeed, often inconsistent) judgements. The additional benefit of the proposed schema thus lies in the explication of these mechanisms which can help raise them to the conscious and deliberate level of decision-making.

There is another interesting aspect of this discussion – a more controversial one, I expect – which emerges from my ideas: humans are attached to dogs. As such, humans (that is, their emotional responses) contribute significantly to the aforementioned milieu of sentience when considering the value of dogs’ lives, in a manner different than when the focus is on the value
of pigs’ lives. While this fact may appear as an epitomization of human-centric speciesism, it is no such thing. Were it the case, for example, that pigs bonded with another emotional and empathetic species, a pig’s death would effect the consequent suffering of the members of this other species too, which would contribute to their lives’ moral worth. No special place is afforded to humans. As I noted already, it could not be otherwise for there is no element in my schema that grants a priori any special treatment to humans or indeed any other form of sentience.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not claiming that people do not exhibit speciesist behaviour. Not at all. I only wish to warn of the possibility of some behaviour being incorrectly interpreted as such, as well as to illustrate how the ideas I put forward in the present article offer a solid and concrete basis for understanding this issue with nuance.

4 Challenges

I have little doubt that the ideas I put forward in the present paper, as indeed any other philosophical contribution, will elicit various kinds of criticism.

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9 For completeness, let me recognize the sole aspect of my thesis which the rare extremist may argue to be homocentric – the very focus on sentience and suffering. Such readers see even this to be a reflection of exceptionalism in that it places emphasis on that which we, as humans, find important, namely the aforementioned sentience and suffering (thus, instead, advocating alternatives such as panpsychism). I reject such challenges as utter nonsense. If they were truly to be accepted, then it would be necessary to recognize that any form of reasoning or debate about the world or its conceptualization are homocentric, given that these processes too take place in the human mind, thus leading to a reductio ad absurdum induced paralysis in action and thought.
Needless to say, I welcome all challenges – it is the proverbial probing and poking, the tossing and turning of an argument that helps it to be understood better, reinforces its strength, and leads to its refinement. To direct any forthcoming criticism better, prevent a misunderstanding of my arguments, and make future discussion more fruitful, in this section I address some of the more common objections and questions I received in discussions with my colleagues.

4.1 Spiral to nihilism

The framework I put forward in this article inherently rejects sempiternal absolutism in favour of a fluid and normative view of the value of life. By proposing that the value of a life is not immanent in that life itself but rather that it is set in existence by the surrounding and extrinsic to it context of consciousness, leads to a value which is neither absolute nor under the full control of that self, that is malleable and changeable. Therefore, it seems reasonable to consider the concern that if the views that I advocate in this article were widely accepted, this could lead to a downwards spiral whereby: (i) upon the acceptance that life has no immanent value, life is valued less by individuals in a society, (ii) by lessening its societal valuation, life is indeed made less valuable, thus leading to a gradual acceptance of progressively worse treatment of others (as usual, here I am including not only humans but also other sentient beings too).

The key flaw of this objection emerges from its unstated but nevertheless
clear assumption that the mere presence of malleability permits as a possibility an arbitrary degree thereof, that is, it fails to consider the limitations that sentient beings’ neurology (and, to emphasise again, this neurology is to be understood in its widest possible sense and not as restricted to the familiar scope of biological neurology) imposes. We are not *tabulae rasa* – no learning system is, for learning requires both a degree of flexibility, learning implying a kind of change, and a degree of constraintment, which guides the aforementioned change in a specific manner. Indeed, there is a large and ever-mounting body of evidence to demonstrate humans’ intense attachment to their kin, real or perceived (Whitehouse, 2018; Robert et al., 2019), as well as the hesitance to harm others even under the conditions of intense social and circumstantial pressures (Sapolsky, 2017). While one does not have to look very hard to find examples of violence, indeed even appalling examples thereof – recent historical events suffice for this – at scale, this behaviour is virtually without exception contingent on the feeling of fear for one’s own safety and the illusion of ‘otherness’ (Sapolsky, 2019). Interestingly, the thesis of the present article directly addresses the latter by its lack of reliance on or even reference to all inconsequential characteristics of a sentient monad – their species, sex and gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, terrestrialness, even material composition (e.g. biological or non-biological) – instead from the very onset firmly focusing minds on sentience itself and itself alone. In this way, my schema inherently emphasises kinship, and removes artificial and ill-conceived boundaries which enable the notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’,
thus working to increase rather than diminish our valuation of life in its most
general terms.

4.2 Denial of a life’s potential

Another common objection to my argument which I encountered with some
frequency, one aimed at the ethical fundamentals of the argument itself rather
than consequences extrinsic to it, could be succinctly described as objection
on the grounds of denial of a life’s potential. The objection is simple and not
without attraction: the very act of killing a living being denies it the right
to pursue life and its pleasures, the ultimate injury to Schopenhauer’s “will
to life” ("Wille zum Leben") (Przygodda et al., 1916). Thus, the challenge is
to one of the very premises of my argument, that is that in taking a being’s
life, there is no inherent and necessary sentient harm involved – the harm, as
my opponents would argue, lies in the withdrawal of possible future positive
experiences and indeed life itself.

Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of this viewpoint, I find it unconvinc-
ing. Its superficial appeal, I contend, has much to do with language – in
words of Condillac, “L’art de raisonner se réduit à une langue bien faite”.
Whether death and dying are expressed in predicative or objective terms,
e.g. “Peter died.” or “Peter lost his life.”, they are treated as something
external to the being they are associated with, apparently pulled asunder by
means of lax wording. The structurally similar-sounding sentences “Peter
lost his life” and “Peter lost his bicycle” do not express the same subject-
object relationship between ‘Peter’, and respectively ‘his life’ or ‘his bicycle’.

In the former sentence, despite the apparent grammatical suggestion, rather than the object, ‘life’ is inseparable from the subject, that is ‘Peter’. Similarly, ‘life’ should not be understood as standing in attributive relationship to ‘Peter’. Being in any state presumes being. Being dead can thus only be understood as a linguistic shorthand, rather than a meaningful philosophical claim pertaining to being – one cannot be dead for there is no one to be. This linguistic limitation should come as no surprise, for in the main, everyday language evolved within the context of and for the purposes of expression of thoughts containing scarce or simplistic philosophical content. It also reflects the difficulty of imagining oneself being dead (to intentionally use the kind of phrasing that I just objected to) (Smullyan, 2003). In particular, it is hard if not impossible to escape conceiving of us persisting as witnesses of the world without us, in some hazy, nebulous vision of our continuing anti-empyrean presence as an incorporeal – but sentient! – phantasm. Thus we continue, aware and sentient, watching and being aware of all that we enjoy alive, but no longer able to actually experience it, suffering in perpetuity. Thankfully, for all the amazing art that this cognitive illusion has inspired, it remains but an illusion – there is no suffering in it.
5 Conclusion

Mainstream contemporary ethicists and the public alike are in agreement that life has value – first and foremost human life, but also increasingly so animal life too. Yet, the explication of this broad principle which would raise it to reality by facilitating its application in complex, real-world decision-making is left wanting. In no small part, this is a result of the unfirm foundations that the premise of life’s intrinsic value is left to rest upon once theological beliefs are abandoned. Hence, in this paper I propose a new, non-theological view of the aetiology of the value of life. Like many other thinkers before me, I argue that sentience, and in particular a being’s ability to experience suffering, ought to be the pillar to be built upon. Thereforth I part ways with the previous thought. Unlike those before me, I argue that it is not the sentience of the being whose life’s worth is considered that raises this worth to reality, but rather that the actuality of this worth emerges from the sentience of other beings in a relationship with the aforementioned subject. Perhaps surprisingly, this rejection of immanence, of value intrinsic to life, rather than leading to nihilistic or dystopian conclusions, gives rise to a thoroughly compassionate and dynamic moral milieu that works in conjunction with the cultural ethos to explain and direct complex decisions in ethical problems that stumble the existing, dogmatic and prescriptive theories. I showcase this with particular care in the context of speciesism. Finally, I also discuss potential challenges to my ideas – indeed, challenges that I encountered in discussions.
with my colleagues and friends – and explain the flaws that these frequently exhibit, be it because certain aspects of my proposals are misunderstood and misinterpreted, or because incorrect implicit assumptions are made in the process.

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