

On the Value of Life

Ognjen Arandjelović

North Haugh
University of St Andrews
St Andrews KY16 9SX
Fife, Scotland
United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0)1334 46 28 24

E-mail: ognjen.arandjelovic@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9314-194X

The author has no funding sources or conflicts of interest to declare.

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

23 are numerous evolutionarily¹ adaptive behaviours which we quite rightly re-
24 ject as immoral – genocide and rape, for example, can both be evolutionarily
25 advantageous behavioural strategies in certain contexts (Apostolou, 2013).
26 On the other hand, while consistent and compelling on the premises of the
27 respective belief systems (at least in principle and to the extent that the re-
28 mainder of the dogma is internally consistent itself), the theological argument
29 cannot be accepted within the framework of the secular states that most of
30 the world’s population lives in. Bayertz (1996) argues that the secularisation
31 of the concept of ‘sanctity of life’, that is its separation from its religious
32 roots, has not led to a loss in authority by virtue of it having been absorbed
33 by the Law. This argument is both philosophically unprincipled and as a
34 consequence possibly dangerously short-sighted. It is philosophically unprin-
35 cipled because the Law, even if popular and widely accepted, cannot make
36 something morally right. Rather, it is the other way round – a sufficiently
37 strong ethical imperative may be a reason to enact a law. Other laws may be
38 amoral, merely setting up rules that make the running of a society ordered,
39 such as driving on a specific side of the road. Breaking this law is ethically
40 unacceptable not because it is a law, but rather because departing from the
41 agreed upon norm in this particular case would lead to consequences which
42 are morally objectionable. This lack of fundamental grounding of the sanc-
43 tity of life is also what makes Bayertz’s argument potentially perilous, for
44 one has to ask what will happen once the chimerical foundation of this law

¹Unless otherwise noted, I am referring to biological evolution.

45 becomes more widely recognized. Similar thoughts in a wider context have
46 been expressed by Peterson²:

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

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

57 As will shortly become clear, if it is not already, I am not in full agreement
58 with Peterson on this point – after all, the view I offer herein is itself un-
59 mistakably humanist in nature (or rather, sentientist to be strict (Benton,
60 2013), considering the absence of any special consideration given to humans
61 in particular) and void of all theistic references, explicit or implicit – but I
62 do agree with his criticism of the existing treatments of the concept of the
63 value of life.

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

²Peterson, J. (2017). Lecture: The Problem with Atheism. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwi9Q9apHGI>

66 life the same (Harris, 1987)? If this value is infinite, how can any loss of life
67 be justified when juxtaposed by, say, material goods? If it is finite, is this
68 value temporally immutable or can it change? If it cannot change, how can
69 practical decisions in, for example, health care on the priority of treatment be
70 decided upon (Harris, 1987)? Does only human life have value? If so, why?
71 If not, then what is the value of life of a member of a different species (Frey,
72 1987), and can a human life be weighed against an equivalent cumulative
73 (however this accumulation of value may be done) value of lives of, say, pigs?
74 And so on. The vagueness of the concept of the notion of the ‘value of life’
75 as it is used today – in everyday life and politics (Arandjelović, 2021), and
76 the academic literature – makes such questions unanswerable (Singer, 1983)
77 even if a purely normative view is adopted. Even worse, as pointed out by
78 numerous thinkers before me, it allows diametrically opposite positions to
79 be argued (Healy, 1991) starting from apparently the same first principles.
80 Thus, we must seek to understand the notion of the “value of life” better.
81 To quote Nadler (2015) commenting on Spinoza’s writings:

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

84 In this paper I propose a coherent and principled ethical framework which
85 can address the aforementioned questions. My initial claim appears rather
86 extreme and, I appreciate, rather controversial despite that not being my
87 intention – I contend that *life in fact has no inherent value*. Lest the reader
88 summarily reject this as either a nihilistic proposition or one merely aimed

89 at causing outrage, I would like to reassure that neither is the case. Quite
90 on the contrary. I show that starting from this seemingly cynical point,
91 we can arrive at a most humane (but, importantly, not homocentric) and
92 compelling understanding of how we should appreciate life. Moreover, by
93 virtue of its minimal assumptions, the thought framework I introduce allows
94 us to reason and make ethically consistent decisions in a whole range of
95 contexts. For example, it refines our notion of speciesism and explains why
96 in many instances when speciesism is alleged, no actual logical or moral
97 inconsistency is to be found (see Section 3.1).

98 **2 Life has no inherent value. But...**

99 Stripped of its theological aetiology, the claim that a life has value is a blanket
100 assertion. While assertions like this are necessary (*principia probant non*
101 *probantur*), be they explicit or implicit, in any ethical discussion, and can
102 be soundly defended based on what is common to the cognitive mechanisms
103 of entities capable of making ethical judgements³, they can be satisfactory
104 when their basis is indeed strongly, inherently, and widely present within
105 the said entities. It is also if not necessary then nearly so, that they do not
106 lead to mutually contradictory conclusions. On both of these accounts, the

³For all practical purposes, at present this means humans though in principle it could include alien species we come across, or artificially created sentience, whatever physical form that sentience 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* sentience).

107 assertion that life has value is found wanting.

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

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

118 I ask: is this an unethical act?

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

126 The distinction that is normally made between the destruction of a living
127 and not living entity, as in the two scenarios I described, is arbitrary. That is,
128 it is an arbitrary distinction when examined rationally, which is not to imply

129 that it is coincidental when viewed through the lens of biological or social
130 evolution. Indeed, the fact that the distinction seems natural and that my
131 suggestion to abandon it may be difficult to accept is something that needs
132 – ney, demands – an explanation, and any moral philosophical framework
133 must offer one if it is to be considered satisfactory.

134 My starting point draws from the traditions of Epicureans and Existen-
135 tialists, amongst others (Frey, 1987), and focuses on the experience of sentient
136 beings; in particular, their ability to experience pleasure on the one hand and
137 suffering on the other, the weal and the woe. In *The Solitary Person Problem*,
138 no suffering takes place. The killing is instantaneous. There is neither any
139 physical nor psychological pain effected by the act itself. The person is also
140 unaware of the possibility of them being murdered, so there is no anguish
141 caused by anticipation or fear. Hence, there can be no wrongdoing⁴. So,
142 going back to the question I raised previously, why may the act nevertheless
143 *feel* wrong?

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

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.

150 accept on an unconscious, emotional level. It is indeed difficult to imagine
151 a person who is truly content with fully solitary existence; a person, more-
152 over, who even if without a morsel of care for others is not cared for by
153 somebody else⁵ – a friend, a parent, a sibling, even a pet⁶. Therefore, our
154 unconscious, emotional response, which is understood as being crucial for
155 moral judgement (Young and Koenigs, 2007; Moll et al., 2008) continues to
156 operate without the premises of the thought experiment. This is an example
157 of what Dennett termed an “intuition pump” (Dennett, 2015) – an intuition
158 driven conclusion that in this case rests on intuition developed under condi-
159 tions very much unlike those of the thought experiment that it is applied to.
160 I contend that the same explanation applies to the finding of Faulhaber et al.
161 (2019), of the willingness in some circumstances preferentially to sacrifice an
162 adult, as opposed to *either* a child or an elderly person – a finding that the
163 authors were at a loss to explain and which runs against their hypothesis of
164 life expectancy based utilitarian decision-making. As in *The Solitary Person*
165 *Problem*, there can be little doubt that the premises of the simple experiment
166 were cognitively well understood by its participants. However, this under-
167 standing finds itself at odds with the physical reality that has conditioned
168 our emotional response. We know from experience that running over an indi-
169 vidual does not necessarily result in a loss of life and hence emotionally react
170 in a manner which reflects changes in the probability of death – a kneeling

⁵As observed by *Mötörhead* in *Love me Forever*: “Everyone dies to break somebody’s heart”.

171 adult appears more likely to die when hit by a car than a standing one.

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

184 **3 Consequences**

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

⁶I 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.

190 this is not so. I will outline a few examples and broad conceptual differences
191 that emerge from the two approaches first, before proceeding with a more in-
192 depth treatment of a problem widely debated at present: that of speciesism.

193 **Cultural awareness** An interesting variable that the dominant debate
194 concerning the value of human life (or life in general) omits is that of cul-
195 ture. All but invariably, the discussion takes place within the confines of the
196 Western-centric, individualistic value system which places the individual at
197 the fore. Indeed, if the dogmatic prescription that human life has intrinsic
198 value is adopted (epitomized by the quote that “Many people believe that all
199 human life is of equal value”, which itself the author does not contest (Singer,
200 2009)), no cultural discussion is necessary – the value is immanent and the
201 surrounding context is irrelevant. In contrast, the ethical framework I pro-
202 pose also permits and explains a sensible degree of cultural variability (I
203 do emphasise the word *sensible*, as cultural variability is neither unlimited
204 in principle nor arbitrary, being built upon those neurophysiological com-
205 monalities that give rise to morality and allow the characterization of most
206 members of our species as moral agents in the first instance; see Section 4
207 for further discussion). Here I am not referring to the variability in how
208 grief is *expressed* (the comparison performed by Wikan (1988) of Egyptian
209 and Mali cultures in this respect provides a poignant example), but to the
210 conceptualization of loss, that is the manner in which life and death are un-
211 derstood within a culture (Parkes et al., 2015) (e.g. it is entirely reasonable

212 to expect different psychological responses to death in cultures which hold a
213 non-dualistic view of life and death). We both can expect and not reject as
214 ethically unsound that in different cultures human life is valued differently
215 given that the context that gives life its value is different.

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

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

230 “This result demonstrates the inverse relation of the expected
231 remaining lifespan of an avatar and the chance to get hit. This
232 decrease in value according to age was highly significant ($p <$
233 0.01).”

234 Yet, the authors' conclusion that this finding provides evidence of utilitarian
235 thinking is unwarranted. In particular, the experiment does not demon-
236 strate a lesser preference of a study participant to harm a younger person,
237 but rather that *fewer* participants prefer not to harm a younger person. In-
238 deed, no examination of the strength of preference was investigated so no
239 positive utilitarian conclusion can be made in an experiment with this de-
240 sign. Thus, rather in opposition to the stated conclusion, the results show
241 that a significant number of people (some 25%) certainly do not exhibit age
242 based utilitarian decision-making in this instance (10% of individuals who
243 did not prefer to harm an adult over a child, and an additional 15% who did
244 not prefer to harm an elderly person over an adult); for the remaining 75%
245 no conclusion either way can be made.

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

256 I argue that the ideas put forward in the present paper offer a better

257 interpretation of findings and, what is more, help reconcile the clear differ-
258 ences between different individuals' choices. Firstly, note that the finding
259 of Faulhaber et al. (2019), of the inverse relation of the expected remaining
260 lifespan and the chance of being chosen to be hit, does not enfirm a *proximal*
261 causal link, that is, that the study participants were less willing to sacrifice a
262 young person because the participants themselves saw longer life expectancy
263 as being of primal importance. Rather, this choice could also be a reflection
264 of a *distal* relationship, that is, a reflection of the grief of the hit person's
265 loved ones, who may see this loss through the lens of "they had so much life
266 ahead of them" which is especially strongly felt in the case of child death,
267 when the parental bond is strongest (Bucx and Van Wel, 2008). Equally,
268 my emergent rather than immanent view of a life's worth lets us understand
269 why a significant number of the study's participants did not demonstrate age
270 sensitive decisions – it is not because these individuals are any less caring or
271 empathetic, but rather possibly because their different experiences and life
272 circumstances made them more appreciative of different cognitive sources of
273 grief, e.g. when the loss of life involves vulnerable individuals ("should have I
274 left my elderly mother by herself?", "I lost my husband of 50 years and now
275 have years of solitude ahead of me", etc.). In so much that it reflects the
276 different origins and reasons for experiencing grief, the emergent viewpoint I
277 argue for *ipso facto* captures the actuality of a life's worth within a specific
278 socio-biological context. Contrast this unifying perspective with the abso-
279 lutist belief in the inherence of value in life: how can it ever hope to reconcile

280 the views of those who, for example, see the aforementioned value being
281 in the possibility of one’s future experiences (and hence life expectancy) on
282 the one hand (Sütfeld et al., 2016), and those who see, for example, young
283 children or babies having a lesser moral worth due to their yet undeveloped
284 personhood (Singer, 2011b)? *Contra principia negantem non est disputan-*
285 *dum.*

286 **3.1 Speciesism**

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

294 Proponents of the idea, that is of the objection to the manner humans
295 treat animals merely because they are non-human, have made impressive
296 strides in changing how animal lives are viewed and how animals are treated
297 not only by moral philosophers, but also by the general public. The gen-
298 eral spirit of contemporaneous anti-speciesism⁷ advocates is captured well by
299 Singer (1995):

300 “There can be no reason – apart from the selfish desire to pre-

301 serve the privileges of the exploiting group – to refuse to extend
302 the fundamental principle of equal consideration of interests to
303 members of other species.”

304 What has in no small part contributed to the growth of the anti-speciesist
305 movement and the awareness thereof are convincing rebuttals of existing at-
306 tempts at justifying differential treatment of different species. The most com-
307 mon justification, and indeed intellectually the crudest, is based on cognitive
308 abilities, that is the argument that humans’ greatest intellectual capacity
309 warrants their privileged position (and by extension, that the worth of other
310 species’ lives can be ranked according to the their intelligence). The validity
311 of this line of thinking is readily refuted by observing, for a start, the fallacy
312 that emerges from reasoning on the level of a group membership rather than
313 individual living beings. When thinking is focused on individuals, the cog-
314 nitive ability argument inevitably leads to the conclusion that it is morally
315 acceptable to treat severely mentally disabled people as, say, animals used
316 for meat, or indeed that humans can be ranked by the worth of their lives in
317 accordance to their intelligence. Similar rebuttals (often, perhaps somewhat
318 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 particular, few philosophers profess being speciesist, i.e. few actually advocate speciesism. However, a significant number do argue that the observed pre-eminent treatment of humans (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’.

319 argument focused on self-awareness rather than intelligence (Caviola et al.,
320 2019).

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

329 The moral challenge to anti-speciesists is left wanting. Indeed, in that I
330 agree with anti-speciesists' broad ideas, I do not think that there is a valid
331 challenge to be made and hence neither desire to nor attempt to make one.
332 However, there are a number of specific aspects of the contemporary anti-
333 speciesist thought that require further refinement and better understanding.
334 Much like when it comes to the questions I described in Section 1, anti-
335 speciesist views provide us with little concrete practical guidance as to how
336 one should behave in specific situations which involve the balancing act of
337 choosing between sacrificing different lives. Is a dog's life as valuable as a
338 human's? Or half as valuable? Or ..., etc.? As far as questions like these
339 are concerned there has not been much progress in thought since Bentham
340 (1781) whose sentiments are remarkably in tune with the modern progressive
341 thinking:

342 “A full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more ra-
343 tional, as well as a more conversible animal, than an infant of
344 a day, a week or even a month old. Even if that were not so,
345 what difference would that make? The question is not Can they
346 reason? or Can they talk? but Can they suffer?”

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

352 Unlike the dogmas prevalent in contemporaneous anti-speciesist philos-
353 ophy, the ideas I presented in this article provide us with a moral frame-
354 work to reason about concrete dilemmas, to understand the delineations of
355 speciesism better (and thus to avoid extreme and clearly bizarre conclusions
356 such as that of Jaquet (2021) who concludes that “ethically speaking, all an-
357 imals are equal”⁸), and – importantly – to identify instances when apparent
358 speciesism may in fact not be speciesism at all. Firstly, the reader should
359 notice that in foundational arguments underlying the thought framework I
360 introduce herein, I made no specific reference to humans at all. The pivotal
361 premise centres on the familiar concept – that of the ability of an entity to
362 experience suffering. As such, *mutatis mutandis*, it applies equally well to
363 many animals, it could include alien species we may come across, or indeed

364 artificially created sentience.

365 The ideas I put forward provide a means of addressing in concrete terms
366 the aforementioned problems. Firstly, I emphasise that the ethical framework
367 I introduced provides *direct* judgement at the level of a specific sentient
368 individual only – a specific dog, a specific human, etc. – as opposed to any
369 grouping thereof (the value of dogs’ lives vs human lives, the value of human
370 children’s lives vs adult lives, etc.). Statements as regards the latter should
371 only be understood as linguistic shorthands for averages, that is, in Bayesian
372 terminology, values obtained by integrating out any latent unknowns across
373 the respective groups (Arandjelović, 2012). Just as the values of two different
374 humans’ lives are not *a priori* deemed as being the same, neither are two
375 animals’, etc. Indeed, it could not be otherwise – the aetiology of the value of
376 life proposed in Section 2 makes no presumptions or qualifications as regards
377 to the species of sentient beings, and as such neither does it falter in the face
378 of the futile and ill-conceived task to define species’ boundaries, nor does it
379 lead down absurd wynds with Jaquet (2021).

380 The value of the life of a *specific* dog, a *specific* pig, or indeed any other
381 *specific* sentient monad, whatever it be, emerges from its sentient environ-
382 ment rather than its own sentience – it is hypostasized through the consid-
383 eration of suffering that the loss of said life would effect. In this we can see

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.

384 the emergence of the objective, objective that is not absolute and fixed but
385 fluid and changeable, it being contingent on the subjective. Thus, keeping
386 in mind the linguistic shorthand that the reference to the value of life of
387 a specific species is within the proposed moral schema, it can be expected
388 for example that, *mutatis mutandis*, the more socialized behaviour or the
389 greater the degree of empathetic response exhibited by a species is, the more
390 its members' lives should be valued (by *any* moral agent, which at present
391 means humans). Further to the aforesaid moral prescription, this observa-
392 tion helps shed light on a series of findings in the literature and casts doubt
393 on the popular interpretations thereof. Consider the work of Caviola et al.
394 (2019) for example, in which the authors assert:

395 “For example, we treat dogs with special moral status while
396 simultaneously factory farming and eating pigs – despite the fact
397 that dogs and pigs have similar mental and emotional capabili-
398 ties.”,

399 and view this observation as providing *prima facie* evidence of speciesism.
400 Yet, we can now see that this is not at all the case, for dogs and pigs likely
401 exhibit differing socialization and empathetic traits (Landsberg and Denen-
402 berg, 2014b,a; Marshall-Pescini and Kaminski, 2014). Indeed, there is plenty
403 of evidence of dogs' intra- and inter-species empathy (Custance and Mayer,
404 2012; Karl and Huber, 2017). This is hardly surprising, given that dogs have
405 been bred by humans with specific aims in mind, socialization often being
406 one of them. While it is entirely possible that pigs are no different, that is

407 rather beside the point: it is sufficient to note that most people will have had
408 experiences evidencing empathy in dogs, thereby creating at least a perceived
409 differential. The consequent differential treatment cannot be considered as
410 speciesist as it is not *unjustified* (recall the common definitions of speciesism
411 I quoted at the beginning of this section). Hasty conclusions similar to those
412 of Caviola et al. (2019) are abundant in the literature. As another recent
413 example, consider the article by Wilks et al. (2021):

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

424 There are multiple errors in the claim of Wilks et al. (2021) that can be
425 readily highlighted. As I have already explained, and as have many before me,
426 cognitive abilities are entirely inconsequential in this debate. In view of the
427 novel aspects of the present work, so is the last of the authors’ observations
428 (also see Section 4). Wilks et al. (2021) eventually conclude:

429 “Thus, the strong form of speciesism exhibited in adults may
430 be a socially acquired ideology.”

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

447 There is another interesting aspect of this discussion – a more contro-
448 versial one, I expect – which emerges from my ideas: humans are attached
449 to dogs. As such, humans (that is, their emotional responses) contribute
450 significantly to the aforementioned milieu of sentience when considering the
451 value of dogs’ lives, in a manner different than when the focus is on the value

452 of pigs' lives. While this fact may appear as an epitomization of human-
453 centric speciesism, it is no such thing. Were it the case, for example, that
454 pigs bonded with another emotional and empathetic species, a pig's death
455 would effect the consequent suffering of the members of this other species
456 too, which would contribute to their lives' moral worth. No special place is
457 afforded to humans. As I noted already, it could not be otherwise for there
458 is no element in my schema that grants *a priori* any special treatment to
459 humans or indeed any other form of sentience⁹.

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

465 4 Challenges

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

⁹For 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.

468 Needless to say, I welcome all challenges – it is the proverbial probing and
469 poking, the tossing and turning of an argument that helps it to be understood
470 better, reinforces its strength, and leads to its refinement. To direct any
471 forthcoming criticism better, prevent a misunderstanding of my arguments,
472 and make future discussion more fruitful, in this section I address some of
473 the more common objections and questions I received in discussions with my
474 colleagues.

475 **4.1 Spiral to nihilism**

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

489 The key flaw of this objection emerges from its unstated but nevertheless

490 clear assumption that the mere presence of malleability permits as a possi-
491 bility an arbitrary degree thereof, that is, it fails to consider the limitations
492 that sentient beings' neurology (and, to emphasise again, this neurology is
493 to be understood in its widest possible sense and not as restricted to the
494 familiar scope of biological neurology) imposes. We are not *tabulae rasae* –
495 *no* learning system is, for learning requires both a degree of flexibility, learn-
496 ing implying a kind of change, *and* a degree of constraint, which guides
497 the aforementioned change in a specific manner. Indeed, there is a large and
498 ever-mounting body of evidence to demonstrate humans' intense attachment
499 to their kin, real or perceived (Whitehouse, 2018; Robert et al., 2019), as well
500 as the hesitance to harm others even under the conditions of intense social
501 and circumstantial pressures (Sapolsky, 2017). While one does not have to
502 look very hard to find examples of violence, indeed even appalling examples
503 thereof – recent historical events suffice for this – at scale, this behaviour is
504 virtually without exception contingent on the feeling of fear for one's own
505 safety and the illusion of 'otherness' (Sapolsky, 2019). Interestingly, the the-
506 sis of the present article directly addresses the latter by its lack of reliance on
507 or even reference to all inconsequential characteristics of a sentient monad
508 – their species, sex and gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, terrestri-
509 ness, even material composition (e.g. biological or non-biological) – instead
510 from the very onset firmly focusing minds on sentience itself and itself alone.
511 In this way, my schema inherently emphasises kinship, and removes artifi-
512 cial and ill-conceived boundaries which enable the notions of 'us' and 'them',

513 thus working to increase rather than diminish our valuation of life in its most
514 general terms.

515 4.2 Denial of a life's potential

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

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

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

554 **5 Conclusion**

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

576 with my colleagues and friends – and explain the flaws that these frequently
577 exhibit, be it because certain aspects of my proposals are misunderstood and
578 misinterpreted, or because incorrect implicit assumptions are made in the
579 process.

580 **References**

581 Apostolou, M. (2013). The evolution of rape: The fitness benefits and costs
582 of a forced-sex mating strategy in an evolutionary context. *Aggression and*
583 *Violent Behavior*, 18(5):484–490.

584 Arandjelović, O. (2012). A new framework for interpreting the outcomes of
585 imperfectly blinded controlled clinical trials. *PLoS One*, 7(12):e48984.

586 Arandjelović, O. (2021). AI & democracy, and the importance of asking the
587 right questions. *AI & Ethics Journal*, 2(1):2.

588 Bayertz, K. (1996). Introduction: sanctity of life and human dignity. *Philos-*
589 *ophy and Medicine*, 52:XI.

590 Bentham, J. (1781). An introduction to the principles of morals and legis-
591 lation. Technical report, McMaster University Archive for the History of
592 Economic Thought.

593 Benton, T. (2013). Humanism= speciesism? Marx on humans and animals.
594 In *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy*, pages 240–279. Routledge.

- 595 Bucx, F. and Van Wel, F. (2008). Parental bond and life course transitions
596 from adolescence to young adulthood. *Adolescence*, 43(169):71.
- 597 Caviola, L., Everett, J. A., and Faber, N. S. (2019). The moral standing of
598 animals: Towards a psychology of speciesism. *Journal of Personality and*
599 *Social Psychology*, 116(6):1011.
- 600 Coggon, J. (2021). Lord Sumption and the values of life, liberty and security:
601 before and since the COVID-19 outbreak. *Journal of Medical Ethics*.
- 602 Cohen, C. (1986). The case for the use of animals in biomedical research.
603 *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 315:865–870.
- 604 Cooper, J., Dimitriou, N., and Arandjelović, O. (2021). The science that
605 informs government policy, its quality and ethical implications – a lesson
606 from the UK’s response to 2020 CoV-2 outbreak. *Journal of Bioethical*
607 *Inquiry*, 18(4):561–568.
- 608 Custance, D. and Mayer, J. (2012). Empathic-like responding by domestic
609 dogs (*canis familiaris*) to distress in humans: an exploratory study. *Animal*
610 *cognition*, 15(5):851–859.
- 611 Davis, M. (2012). Imaginary cases in ethics: A critique. *International Journal*
612 *of Applied Philosophy*, 26(1):1–17.
- 613 Dennett, D. C. (2015). *Elbow room: The varieties of free will worth wanting*.
614 MIT Press.

- 615 Dworkin, R. (1994). Life's dominion. *Theological Studies*, 55(1):175.
- 616 Faulhaber, A. K., Dittmer, A., Blind, F., Wächter, M. A., Timm, S., Sütfeld,
617 L. R., Stephan, A., Pipa, G., and König, P. (2019). Human decisions in
618 moral dilemmas are largely described by utilitarianism: Virtual car driving
619 study provides guidelines for autonomous driving vehicles. *Science and*
620 *Engineering Ethics*, 25(2):399–418.
- 621 Frey, R. G. (1987). Autonomy and the value of animal life. *The Monist*,
622 70(1):50–63.
- 623 Harris, J. (1987). Qalyfying the value of life. *Journal of Medical Ethics*,
624 13(3):117–123.
- 625 Healy, J. (1991). Sanctity of life. *The Linacre Quarterly*, 58(4):69–77.
- 626 Horta, O. (2010). What is speciesism? *Journal of Agricultural and Environ-*
627 *mental Ethics*, 23(3):243–266.
- 628 Jaquet, F. (2021). A debunking argument against speciesism. *Synthese*,
629 198(2):1011–1027.
- 630 Jarvis Thomson, J. (1985). The trolley problem. *Yale Law Journal*, 94(6):5.
- 631 Jones, L. and Hameiri, S. (2021). Covid-19 and the failure of the neoliberal
632 regulatory state. *Review of International Political Economy*, pages 1–25.
- 633 Joyce, R. (2007). *The evolution of morality*. MIT press.

- 634 Karl, S. and Huber, L. (2017). Empathy in dogs: With a little help from a
635 friend—a mixed blessing. *Animal Sentience*, 2(14):13.
- 636 Keown, D. and Keown, J. (1995). Killing, karma and caring: euthanasia in
637 Buddhism and Christianity. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 21(5):265–269.
- 638 Landsberg, G. M. and Denenberg, S. (2014a). Social behavior of dogs. In
639 *MSD Veterinary Manual*. [https://www.msdsvetmanual.com/behavior/
640 normal-social-behavior-and-behavioral-problems-of-domestic-animals/
641 social-behavior-of-dogs](https://www.msdsvetmanual.com/behavior/normal-social-behavior-and-behavioral-problems-of-domestic-animals/social-behavior-of-dogs).
- 642 Landsberg, G. M. and Denenberg, S. (2014b). Social behavior of swine. In
643 *MSD Veterinary Manual*. [https://www.msdsvetmanual.com/behavior/
644 normal-social-behavior-and-behavioral-problems-of-domestic-animals/
645 social-behavior-of-swine](https://www.msdsvetmanual.com/behavior/normal-social-behavior-and-behavioral-problems-of-domestic-animals/social-behavior-of-swine).
- 646 Lem, S. (1971). Non serviam. *S. Lem, A Perfect Vacuum*, trans. by M.
647 Kandel (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).
- 648 Marshall-Pescini, S. and Kaminski, J. (2014). The social dog: History and
649 evolution. In *The Social Dog*, pages 3–33. Elsevier.
- 650 Moll, J., Oliveira-Souza, R. d., Zahn, R., and Grafman, J. (2008). The
651 cognitive neuroscience of moral emotions.
- 652 Nadler, S. (2015). On Spinoza’s ‘Free Man’. *Journal of the American Philo-
653 sopherical Association*, 1(1):103–120.

- 654 Parkes, C. M., Laungani, P., and Young, W. (2015). *Death and bereavement*
655 *across cultures*. Routledge.
- 656 Przygodda, P., Fichte, J., and Hartmann, E. v. (1916). A. Schopenhauer. In
657 *German Philosophy*, pages 174–219. Springer.
- 658 Robert, L., Virpi, L., and John, L. (2019). Self sacrifice and kin psychology
659 in war: threats to family predict decisions to volunteer for a women’s
660 paramilitary organization. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 40(6):543–550.
- 661 Sapolsky, R. (2019). This is your brain on nationalism: The biology of us
662 and them. *Foreign Affairs*, 98:42.
- 663 Sapolsky, R. M. (2017). *Behave: The biology of humans at our best and*
664 *worst*. Penguin.
- 665 Singer, P. (1983). Sanctity of life or quality of life? *Pediatrics*, 72(1):128–129.
- 666 Singer, P. (1995). *Animal liberation*. Random House.
- 667 Singer, P. (2009). Speciesism and moral status. *Metaphilosophy*, 40(3-4):567–
668 581.
- 669 Singer, P. (2011a). *The expanding circle: Ethics, evolution, and moral*
670 *progress*. Princeton University Press.
- 671 Singer, P. (2011b). *Practical ethics*. Cambridge University Press.

- 672 Smullyan, R. M. (2003). *Who knows?: A study of religious consciousness*.
673 Indiana University Press.
- 674 Street, S. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, 127(1):109–166.
675
- 676 Sütfeld, L., Gast, R., König, P., and Pipa, G. (2016). Ethical decisions: Profound impact of assessment methodology, well described by one-
677 dimensional value-of-life scale. *Poster Presented at KVIT 2016, Linköping, SE*.
678
679
- 680 Whitehouse, H. (2018). Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of
681 extreme self-sacrifice. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 41.
- 682 Wikan, U. (1988). Bereavement and loss in two Muslim communities: Egypt
683 and Bali compared. *Social Science & Medicine*, 27(5):451–460.
- 684 Wilks, M., Caviola, L., Kahane, G., and Bloom, P. (2021). Children prioritize
685 humans over animals less than adults do. *Psychological Science*, 32(1):27–
686 38.
- 687 Williams, B. and Moore, A. (2009). The human prejudice. *Peter Singer*
688 *Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, 3:77.
- 689 Young, L. and Koenigs, M. (2007). Investigating emotion in moral cognition:
690 a review of evidence from functional neuroimaging and neuropsychology.
691 *British Medical Bulletin*, 84(1):69–79.