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HUMAN ACTIVITIES IN THE UNIVERSE AND ETHICAL VALUE
OF LIFE

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Abstract

The spatio-temporal limitations of human existence can be considered a threat to the significance of our lives. Ronald Dworkin proposes two competing models or metrics for the evaluation of our activities: the impact model and the challenge model. Using the first model involves assessing the contribution that an individual life brings to the objective value in the world, according to agent neutral and global standards. The second model is based on the assertion that our personal events, achievements and experiences can have ethical value even when they have no impact beyond the particularity of the life in which they appear. The assessment in this case is based on agent relative and localized standards. The purpose of the article is an analysis of how the two models solve the problem of the long term significance of our individual lives. If the ethical value of an individual life is the sum of its consequences, then, to the extent that they have no substantial effects on the world as a whole, human lives are threatened by insignificance. In the second case, it depends only on individual performance as a response to those challenges that we consider important for our own existence. This second view provides a more plausible explanation for how our achievements could remain meaningful even on a cosmic scale..

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1. Introduction

We are profoundly and subjectively involved in the search for meaning within our own existences. Given the general and abstract character of our ethical concepts, their active interpretation is essential in order to avoid the risk of impulsive, inconsistent or arbitrary actions. The continuous interpretation of moral responsibility in the particular circumstances of one's life is also connected to the problem of life's significance. Because of the diversity of our views on the value of human life, a debate on the significance of our individual achievements implies the ability to assume a point of view that has to be detached from the particular value concepts that define our everyday discourse. Such a perspective has practical significance in terms of providing insights into the relevance our normative evaluations of everyday life situations.

2. Problem Statement

In order to assess the meaning horizon of our personal achievements and experiences, we have to consider our activities depending on their extrinsic properties (Kauppinen, 2016, p. 288). Value and non-value predicates are different: a complete description of the predicates of value we use remains a difficult task because of the nature of their descriptive properties (Hartman, 1960, p.191). In this regard, assuming that the nature and properties of value are describable, we can take into consideration the following thought experiment: suppose we know for sure that the world will end and humanity will vanish without a trace not long after we die. In spite of the diversity of our individual moral convictions this knowledge would affect our attitude throughout the remainder of our life span from the moment we acquire as well as our ability to lead value-laden lives (Scheffler, 2013, pp. 19-20).

3. Research Questions

If we lose confidence in the long-term significance of our projects, then to what extent do we still have reason to think our lives are meaningful?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is an analysis of the relationship between the value of our activities assessed according to their extrinsic properties and the long-term significance of our individual lives.

5. Research Methods

Starting from the premise that the value of human activities depends on their extrinsic properties, Ronald Dworkin proposes two competing models or metrics (Dworkin, 2002, pp. 252-253) for the evaluation of our activities: the *impact* model and the *challenge* model.

The *impact model* involves a strictly consequentialist standpoint that restricts the value of an individual life to the agent neutral value of its consequences. The value of an individual life lies in the consequences it has on the rest of the human world or on the world of all sentient beings, if we expand the definition. If generally speaking the value of life consists in its product (Dworkin, 2002, p. 251), then

human actions lack inherent moral value and can only have an instrumental value that is a mere reflection of the consequences they produce. The actual impact that an individual life can have consists in its contribution to the objective value in the world. Concerning the significance of human activities, the impact model's advantage is that it links the issue of the ethical value of human activities to the independent value of objective states of affairs. Therefore in order to apply this evaluative model it is necessary: to accept the existence of objective value, to reflect in agent neutral terms on the consequences of human actions and finally to assume global standards against which to judge how significant our events, achievements and experiences really are.

By using the *model of challenge* we assume that the value of an individual life assessed in agent relative and localized terms, consists in "its inherent value as a performance" (Dworkin, 2002, p. 251). Regarding the evaluation criteria, when we use the impact model we are judging the value of our events, experiences and achievements according to the worldwide value change they bring. By adopting the challenge model the assessment will be based on the particular circumstances of our personal performance. If our personal life, understood as an individual performance rather than its consequences, is in itself a value-laden process then, accordingly, our achievements and experiences can be valuable even if they have no impact beyond the life in which they occur because of their non-instrumental and therefore final value. As an adequate response to the particular challenges that every moral agent regards as significant for his own existence, even when assessed by its extrinsic properties, human life appears as an end in itself. Changing the extent of the human reality that determines the value of an individual life means that it is no longer the entire world in question but the proximity of our particular experiences.

6. Findings

Given that the generating precondition of the entire debate is the ability to assume a standpoint that remains detached from our own particular situations, the relationship between the value of our activities and their significance appears in two instances. If the value of the consequences that our actions have is *purely instrumental* and is measured relative to local parameters, then we do not have to worry about the mediocrity of our achievements. If it is measured relative to global parameters, then we have to worry about the mediocrity of our individual achievements. If the value of human achievements and experiences is measured by the sum-total of their consequences on the entire universe, then our individual existence is threatened by insignificance because our activities cannot bring long-lasting improvements to the world. An individual's life has such a finite impact on the world that one's accomplishments diminish in terms of value until they lose all importance (Seachris, 2013, p. 605). What somebody could accomplish within a certain community on Earth throughout approximately seven decades cannot matter too much, provided we take into consideration the billions of human beings that have belonged, belong, or will belong to space-time. The sense of life lacking meaningfulness seems inevitable when we have at our disposal a point of view so distant from the particularity of our lives. When we project them objectively on the background of the whole space-time, even if we do not deem them entirely unimportant or trivial, their significance still tends to diminish dramatically (Nagel, 1979, p. 12).

The problem is that the radicalism of such a perspective can lead to doubt regarding the existence of life's final value. Adopting a detached point of view we implicitly admit that there is nothing capable

of conferring a final or absolute character to our goals and most profound values. The contribution that even the most extraordinary person could bring to the objective value in the entire universe remains “indescribably small” (Dworkin, 2002, p. 254). Even if we manage to create something that has instrumental value for all humanity like, for example, a cure for AIDS, its impact is not going to last forever. If we do not accept that human life has intrinsic value, then this objection can be overcome only by proposing a theory of objective value that can withstand indefinitely. For example the aesthetic value of a great work of art cannot be in any way diminished by the fact that, says Dworkin, “it is surrounded by billions of light years of aesthetic nullity” (Dworkin, 2002, p. 254). Because it is independent of time and space it would be a perennial contribution to the objective value in the universe. But can our creations withstand indefinitely given the transience and fragility of human existence? The question is obviously rhetorical and the consequence is the long-term insignificance of any human activity.

Given that that all meaningful lives imply goals and fundamental values which the moral agent judges as possessing final value, the value of our achievements and experiences determined by the quality of our response to those challenges we regard as significant for us, appears in two instances. If it is measured relative to global parameters then their individual value depends on how each other person will react in similar circumstances. If measured relative to local parameters then their individual value does not depend on how each other person will react in similar circumstances. In both cases, if our achievements and experiences are evaluated using the challenge model, then *every individual life retains its ethical value* even if our activities have no impact beyond the set of circumstances or facts that surround our lives as particular events (Dworkin, 2002, p. 253).

7. Conclusion

A meaningful life is possible even if our moral performance in meeting the challenges of our own existence does not depend on substantial projects that may have a long-term or global impact. Assuming that our everyday actions have ethical value, forces us to face the objection of a self-indulgent attitude but allows our judgments on life’s significance to be more applicable and provides a more plausible explanation for how our achievements could become meaningful. If human actions have final value then the existence of humanity could be the most important event in the entire universe even if the vastness of the cosmos makes the existence of every particular human being seem utterly insignificant.

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