

## On the idea of intrinsic human worth.

### Introduction

In 1798 William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, conventionally seen as introducing the Romantic movement in British poetry. One of the striking features about this collection is that it systematically attempts to extend what could be termed subjects of poetry to include children, women, the impoverished, the mad. Thus the poem “The Female Vagrant” relates the tale of the woman who loses her husband and children and is obliged to live as a penniless wanderer – but above all, she has lost any faith in herself:

*I lived upon the mercy of the fields,  
And oft of cruelty the sky accused;  
On hazard, or what general bounty yields,  
Now coldly given, now utterly refused.  
The fields I for my bed have often used:  
But, what afflicts my peace with keenest ruth  
Is, that I have my inner self abused,  
Foregone the home delight of constant truth,  
And clear and open soul, so prized in fearless youth.*

In this poem Wordsworth shows us how easy it is for poverty and cruelty to diminish our own fortitude and self-belief. Yet the collection of poems also gives us great hope: for example, in ‘We are Seven’ it is a little girl who affirms the value of human life when she insists to an enquirer that her two dead siblings, buried nearby, have not gone away and there are more than five in her family:

*“How many are you, then,” said I,  
“If they two are in heaven?”  
Quick was the little Maid’s reply,  
“O Master! we are seven.”*

*“But they are dead; those two are dead!  
Their spirits are in heaven!”  
’Twas throwing words away; for still  
The little Maid would have her will,  
And said, “Nay, we are seven!”*

It is easy for us today to dismiss the somewhat mannered tone of the poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* and overlook its central themes. The affirmation of the worth of a human life is accompanied by an implicit democratic declaration that no human subject, whatever their identity, can be excluded from this conception.

More recently, the Oscar-winning film, *Three Billboards from Ebbing* (2017), also addresses the question of the worth of a human life. It has the main protagonist, Mildred, seeking justice for her daughter’s rape and murder. However, the film is not primarily about a crime investigation but the extent to which the local town (its police and citizens) really care about seeking justice: their lack of care is an index of how much (or how little) a human life is valued. Mildred (who is far from being perfect herself) negotiates her way through a maze of prejudices until finally she teams up with the homophobic, racist cop (Jason) in a quest to find justice. Initially they characterise this quest as a retributive endeavour but it ends with the two of them contemplating whether this is really the right

kind of purpose to have. Astonishingly (but in the context of the film, quite credibly) Jason abandons his racist 'tough-guy' persona when obliged to reflect on his deceased chief's comments that to be a good police officer you need compassion. At the same time, Mildred, who is initially wholly and blindly driven by the need for justice for her daughter, begins to reflect that this quest must not be allowed to obscure the precious value of a human life. Right at the beginning of the film we see Mildred 'rescuing' an upturned beetle on a window-sill by turning it right side up with her finger. By the end of the film, Mildred has managed to turn herself right-side up as, with her anger partly assuaged, she sees life more clearly.

Both *Lyrical Ballads* and *Three Billboards from Ebbing* are primarily concerned, I suggest, with exploring the value of a human life and how this value can be expressed. And although this is much more clearly formulated in the movie, both are concerned with the way in which different kinds of identity (gendered, physical, ethnic, cultural) can both obscure but also express that value. What is striking about Wordsworth and Coleridge's poems is the deep generosity that is afforded both to those who are socially 'comfortable' and to the socially under-privileged and marginalised, and it is the same kind of generosity that ultimately makes *Three Billboards* so successful.

In this article I wish to explore the idea of the self as being of 'intrinsic worth'. Initially, I will present this as a philosophical conception and argument. I will then go on to consider this conception in the light of current concerns with identity and recognition – although my comments here will be suggestive rather than comprehensive. I will then go on to consider the role that 'sympathy' plays in recognising and expressing the intrinsic value of a human life. In the final section I will discuss some of the educational implications of these reflections.

### **The transcendental conception of human worth**

The conception of human worth that I am proposing may be termed *transcendental*. By this, I mean that the very use of the concept 'human being' and even the very thinking of that term entails a commitment to thinking of human beings in terms of their intrinsic worth. I use the term 'transcendental' in its Kantian sense: that is to say, it is a condition of thinking of the concept 'human' that it also involves the idea of intrinsic worth. This is what demarcates humans from other creatures; the latter may indeed be thought to have worth but it is a prescriptive worth, not a transcendental worth. It is often the case that human beings are valorised for prescriptive reasons alone. A good example of prescriptivism in this sense is the Aristotelian conception of human flourishing, whereby humans have worth on account of their being able to live a life involving rational activity (Aristotle, 1980, Book 1, 7: 1097b22-1098a18). The Aristotelian account has a certain richness which other accounts may lack – for example, it includes the integration of emotional and affective attributes into the idea of flourishing. But from a transcendental perspective this is still not satisfactory. The view that I am proposing simply says that all humans have intrinsic worth, full stop. It does not matter if, for whatever reason, humans are not able to flourish. The Aristotelian conception of human worth immediately runs into trouble when confronted by humans incapable of rational activity. Do they have worth because potentially they might be able to flourish in the future? Or because they might have been able to flourish had circumstances been different? But on the transcendental conception there is no such problem, since all humans have intrinsic worth including all those with learning difficulties, all those suffering from dementia and all those with physical disabilities, of whatever kind. Another way of framing the transcendental conception is to say that the attribute of worth is *unconditional*. There are no set of qualifications whatsoever that a human has to pass before he or she can have intrinsic worth. And, of course, any human that does not fall into the traditional gender binary, for whatever reason whatsoever, still has intrinsic worth. Nor does it matter that one has committed the most heinous of deeds, one still has intrinsic worth.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional Christianity teaches that each and every human being is intrinsically sinful: by contrast, I am suggesting that each and every human has unconditional intrinsic worth.

There is a further, crucial feature, to the transcendental conception. It does not only say that humans as a *collectivity* have intrinsic worth. In addition, it says that each human being has intrinsic worth in their own particularity. Human worth is not a generality in which everybody shares in the way in which persons might share a common feature in being a member of the same club. Thus to think of the term 'human' is to think in terms of each and every individual - no matter who they are or where they live – as having their own intrinsic worth. Moreover, because this worth is *intrinsic*, that is to say, each human is intrinsically valuable, no-one has more 'worth' than someone else, no matter how pure or unsullied their lives might be.

The dimension of particularity in respect of human worth can be understood in terms of the subjectivity of the person and the acknowledgement of this subjectivity. This inwardness or interiority of the person is characterised by a reflexivity in which a person has a conception of themselves which is 'lived' out both with others and in solitary times and moments. It cannot be delineated with any precision because this inwardness is in a state of becoming and is a dimension of all my doings and beings. This reflexivity does not merely embrace an identity; rather, in embracing an identity it also makes it 'mine'. Thus, a gay man (say) is not merely 'gay' in identifying with a certain sexuality: this sexuality is also transformed into a sexuality that is interiorised and invested with a personal significance. But since this interiority cannot be categorised and defined, since it cannot be recognised in any direct form, recognition takes the form of an acknowledgement that proceeds *indirectly* through expression, through implicit signs (including bodily signs and gestures) and enactments which combine to show that the unique interiority of the other is understood and appreciated. This uniqueness proceeds from the very subjectivity of a person and this is why, with the transcendental conception we noted that it is the intrinsic worth of a human being in their particularity that is valued. But the acknowledgement of this uniqueness does not have to be enacted through grand gestures. A simple act of kindness may be performed not to gain approval or gratitude but because it just seems right: and if I do experience gratitude this can, in truth, be only pleasing if it has been unsolicited.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, it would be useless to deny that often, human beings regard non-human creatures as having intrinsic worth and even extend this to inanimate objects such as plants, flowers and especially trees. For example, a person may regard their pet dog as having just as much worth as any human in their lives, perhaps more. But this worth is *conferred* on the dog by its owner, that is, its worth is prescriptive rather than transcendental. The concept *dog* does not necessarily encapsulate the notion of intrinsic worth that the concept *human* does. Rather, the idea of worth is bestowed on the dog. This need not be an individual, private, matter. Whole communities may confer intrinsic worth on a whole species of animal. If this is also supported by words in sacred texts it may indeed seem as if the animal in question (e.g. a cow) is the lucky bearer of a worth that is intrinsic. But on the transcendental conception of human worth, any human anywhere including those outside my community have intrinsic worth. And the same goes for any human being no matter what distress they are in and no matter how near to death they might be. No human being can be 'put down' or 'relieved of their misery' or 'let go'. A doctor is not a veterinary surgeon.

This last reflection naturally prompts the following thought: if a human life is of intrinsic worth in terms of its particularity then it must surely follow that a person has a sovereign right to end their life at a time of their own choosing. But this would be to misunderstand the nature of the value of life – as if its value lay solely in the fact that it is 'mine' to own and I can do whatever I want with it. But this would be to get things exactly the wrong way round. The value of a life – my life – derives its

value precisely because although I live through and enact a life it is not something that has been self-created. In this sense, a life might better be regarded as a 'gift' which I have not authored. But what if this gift becomes a burden, whether through depression or chronic illness? Yet if a life has intrinsic value, this does not mean that its value is premised on it only being lived out by a physically and mentally healthy human. Remember, the transcendental conception says that a human life has value no matter what the nature or circumstances of a person - period: and this applies to my own life too. This last reflection might suggest that no-one is entitled to end their life no matter what the circumstances. Yet this, also, goes too far. It forgets that the intrinsic value of a life has to be lived through as in the manner of an undergoing. One might still fully acknowledge the value of one's own life and yet feel through an overwhelming physical discomfort and pain that one simply can no longer do it justice.

The logic of the argument therefore does suggest that *in extremis* a person is entitled to end their own life, primarily because they are the ones undergoing that life. The case for ending a life in this way becomes much easier if one has a non-transcendental conception, for then a human life is placed on even keel with the life of any other creature. It is just a life that happens to be my life and I can do with it what I want. This kind of perspective precisely undervalues the nature of a human life and makes suicide or euthanasia a sad but inevitable part of human experience. On the transcendental conception, on the other hand, one is faced with the decision not only of giving up the life one is undergoing but also giving up something that is intrinsically valuable. Even if one is subjectively drawn towards ending one's life one may still resist taking this decision on the grounds that one's life has value on its own account.

It might be thought that the transcendental conception of human worth is nothing new. The dignity afforded to all human beings is one of the striking features of the New Testament: one of the basic teachings of Jesus was that no distinction is to be made between human beings since they all have worth in the eyes of God and that no-one is undeserving of pity and compassion. And certainly, there is no contradiction between the teachings of Jesus and the transcendental conception. Yet I would suggest, in the Christian tradition of religion at any rate, that human worth is dependent on God's love. Its great strength is to say that this love is unconditional: God loves all human beings despite their intrinsic sinful nature. Yet this worth is utterly dependent on God's will. Whereas on the transcendental conception, humans have intrinsic worth simply because they are humans including those who do not know God and will never know him. Of course, it could be argued that the transcendental conception originates with God, and this may be true. But this would be a theological question which makes no difference to the nature of the transcendental conception.

The transcendental conception of the human and human worth has many advantages and successfully addresses many problems. For example, as already noted, it quickly and easily incorporates all those persons suffering from acute dementia into the realm of the human. Moreover, it does not discriminate between 'savages' and 'civilised people' since all humans have unconditional worth. In addition, the transcendental conception recognises human worth as inhering in each and every particular human being. This implies that each person must be respected for their own individuality irrespective of a broader identity which they share with others. This does not mean, of course, that 'identity' becomes an accidental property of the human: in fact the opposite is the case. Identity characteristics of an individual (e.g. gender, ethnic, religious) are invested with dignity and respect because of the intrinsic worth each individual possesses.

But there is one obvious objection to the transcendental conception. Why is it that not only historically, but even today human beings treat each other so badly not simply because they are placed in situations where conflict is impossible to avoid but where the treatment is voluntary? For

example, in India one encounters in the cities, as a matter of course, solitary individuals - 'Dalits' - who are utterly ignored as they sweep the streets, who behave and dress differently from all those who pass them by. It is impossible not to discern them without an acute sense of embarrassment and shame on the part of the discerner. In addition, in western countries and North America, migrants are often perceived as having a lesser worth. Yet, on the transcendental conception, this should not be possible; according to it, the very concept of human carries with it the idea of intrinsic worth. Yet we all see daily occurrences where the actions and speech of many people suggest otherwise.

The transcendental conception is not *logically* necessary: that all human beings have intrinsic worth is different from saying that all unmarried men are bachelors. For the former is *historically* motivated in precisely the same way that neo-Kantian concept of a human as an end in itself is historically situated. That the transcendental conception gradually replaces the prescriptive conception of worth which is *conferred*, is a long, slow process. This should come as no surprise: the evolution and development of moral perspective can be difficult so that dilemmas that face one generation simply do not exist for another. But the attraction of the transcendental conception is its simplicity and this simplicity stems from its unequivocal universality.

It may be thought that the transcendental conception is misconceived in so far as it is recognition that is decisive. I have in mind here the notion that the idea of worth arises from the dialectic of recognition in which the condition of my being a self-consciousness is that I am recognised by another self-consciousness as having intrinsic worth by virtue of the very nature of that consciousness.<sup>3</sup> This basic idea has been given more concrete application by Alex Honneth who suggests that "the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition" (Honneth, 1995: 93). For example, one dimension of social life is self-esteem: "to esteem one another symmetrically means to view one another in the lights of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis" (129). Honneth goes on to explain that "symmetrical must mean ...that one is given the chance to experience oneself to be recognised, in the light of one's own accomplishments and abilities, as valuable for society".

Two comments are in order here. First, although the dialectic of recognition is undoubtedly an attractive idea it is, I think, a mistake to suppose that there can be any *necessity* in this recognition: it has to be voluntary (if it were not then the theory would become pointless). But then this implies that there is no reason, why I should desire recognition from others: a slave owner has no interest in recognition from his slaves (as numerous documents from the ante-Bellum deep South attest); he only wishes for recognition from fellow slave owners. Since the slave owner chooses not to confer the concept of worth on his slaves, the whole notion of recognition fails.<sup>4</sup> The contingency of recognition does not allow the concept to be foundational in the way its proponents wish.

Second, what is needed in addition to the ingredient of recognition is that each has a *conception* of human worth. Recognition is premised on a cognitive grasp of a mental concept of intrinsic human worth: reliance on bare recognition between consciousness's is never enough. Indeed, one could argue that if the very notion of recognition is to do its work, a concept of human worth is essential in order to get the whole process off the ground. That is, as a condition for recognition to have the role it is supposed to play in social life there needs to be concept of human worth that is logically prior to recognition. This is why the slave owner finds it so easy to refuse recognition: he does not have, and has never had, the belief that all humans are intrinsically valuable. That is precisely what he does *not* believe. On the other hand, once the notion of human worth is introduced as a transcendental conception then Honneth's analysis can start to make sense. I can recognise the self-

esteem in another just because the notion of intrinsic human worth is something I implicitly take for granted as foundational to my speech and conduct.

As far as European thought is concerned, the idea of intrinsic worth can be traced back to the Enlightenment, particularly the acceptance of the idea of a self that must be treated as an end in itself. Whilst it is no part of this argument to claim a special role for the Enlightenment thought in this regard, nevertheless Kant's argument does stand out:

“For rational beings all stand under the law that each of them should treat himself and all others, never as a means, but always at the same time as an end in himself” (Kant, 1948, 94)

But it should be noted that the transcendental conception proposed here differs significantly from Kant in this respect: it is not all rational beings that are ends in themselves but all *human* beings. As the above reflections have made clear, the idea of intrinsic worth applies to embodied, material, human beings. It does not merely apply to their 'rational' side.

### **Identity and Intrinsic worth**

The above reflections on human worth had been originally prompted by the way in which the politics of identity and inclusion/exclusion have assumed an increasing importance. Why is it that questions of identity and exclusion seize our attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? After all, there is nothing new in all of this. Even prior to the publication of Kant's *Groundwork* there were countless examples of exclusion, even in Great Britain, let alone the rest of Europe. The expulsion of Jews in 1290, the treatment of Catholics under the reign of Elizabeth 1, the treatment of Quakers in the seventeenth century - not to mention the colonisation of Ireland that began in earnest with the ethnic cleansing of the local Irish population by the Planters as early as 1556 – all these baleful events testify to the historic prevalence of exclusion of one sort or another. Yet whilst there were witnesses at the time who could readily complain of the injustice and cruelty of these events, ethical infringements and outrages could only be justified or criticised in terms of the norms of Christian culture – whether, for example, the injunctions of charity and mercy had been followed or not.

What critics could not do was to summon the idea of the intrinsic worth of the excluded – each and every single individual. To have done so would be to conjure an abstraction that had no meaning and no obvious application. Such an individual, quite simply, did not exist as an identifiable person or set of persons. Thus Hume, writing before Kant, was – like many of his contemporaries – well aware of the many diverse peoples and customs that existed: but nowhere in his writings will there be found the invocation of a self that has intrinsic worth. Of course, there are many who still insist that Kant's notion of the self is a mere abstraction: but I suggest they protest in vain. The reason is that whether or not we accept the arguments underpinning Kant's ethical stance, the *meaning* and *import* of a self thus conceived has become a permanent dimension in linguistic pragmatics. It is sufficient for such an 'abstraction', by dint of both acceptance and use, to have such a tangible presence that for it *not* to enter into our self-evaluation and our evaluations of others is not merely odd but positively outrageous.

Thus it is that without the idea of an intrinsic self, the politics of inclusion would make little sense. It is in vain that proponents of identity proclaim that their specific characteristics be valued for their own sake: for in virtue of what are they to be valued if not the value of the self that is the subject of those characteristics? Admittedly, it has been proclaimed, at least since Hume, that the self is a fiction and that there is nothing to be grasped beyond a bundle of desires and beliefs. Judith Butler,

more recently, has suggested that proponents of agency also deal in a 'fiction' and that there is no shadowy 'doer' behind the deed and that the doer is constructed by a series of deeds (Butler, 1999, p. 181). But even if Butler is right, the fiction of the self cannot be wished away. It exists in linguistic form, its meaning is recognised and understood. There is no need to proclaim that a fictive self has ontological existence; all that is needed is for the *rhetorical* value of the that self to be recognised as giving claims for identity as legitimate. Sexual, ethnic or religious identities - in terms of their empirical, practical features - cannot of themselves carry value as such: one could just as well approve of those features as one could dislike them. What carries weight, rather, is that those features become intrinsically valuable just because in denigrating or ignoring them, the value of the intrinsic self of their holders is undermined.

What of those who quite consciously oppose themselves to specific identity traits, such as homosexuality? I have in mind the (mainly Muslim) protesters against relationships education (which has recently been introduced into UK schools), who until recently protested noisily each day outside Anderton Park School in Birmingham and who wished for their children not to learn about same sex relationships.<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing they have already had considerable success, with several other Birmingham schools suspending these particular lessons. The fundamental problem is this: the protesters are not able to grasp that respect for the other in terms of their intrinsic self is unconditional: it is not premised on any set of behaviours or beliefs. For such people, the value of a self *is* conditional upon a set of behaviours and beliefs. The paradox is that their actions – and their actions were truly disruptive – invite the response of withdrawing recognition of *their* beliefs and values. Would this be a legitimate response? The answer has to be 'no'. The reason for this is not because their Muslim beliefs carry any special weight compared to other well-founded religious beliefs but because our respect for the holders of them has to be unconditional also, despite their indulgent behaviour. One is obliged to reflect that it is the protestors themselves who need to be not outside the school agitating, but inside the school being educated.

Perhaps all those who reject the idea value of the intrinsic worth of the human self, stand in need of education. But, it should be noted, it would be a mistake to suppose that this necessarily needs to take the form of learning in great detail about other cultures and beliefs. The fact that one may be not especially interested in a set of religious beliefs does not entail that one has no respect for the persons holding them, nor does it mean that one cannot acknowledge their importance for the believers. This is why, from the standpoint of those demanding recognition of an identity and their non-exclusion are mistaken if they suppose it is required that others understand and appreciate their way of life and that a lack of understanding and appreciation of specific identity features undermines respect. For if the respect was there in the first place there would be no need to push forward those specific identity characteristics.

The upshot of the preceding reflections is the suggestion that conflicts and misunderstandings over inclusion/exclusion arise from a lack of understanding in respect of the intrinsic worth of the self. But possibly we should not be too surprised about this. For it may seem at first sight that people are being asked first, to grasp an abstract concept (namely that of intrinsic worth) and, second, to use it in a non-discursive manner. However, it is not required of anyone that they need be able to elucidate or articulate this concept, except perhaps, in the seminar room. Rather, its use is usually implicative. Sometimes this can be disingenuous. For example, the wearing of the hijab might be put down to 'personal choice', in which one has no right to interfere. Put like that, it might seem as if the wearing of a hijab is no different from wearing an ordinary headscarf. But if it is added that personal choices like this should be *respected* then the implication is clear: such a choice reflects the well-founded values of the wearer and whether or not we share those values we do acknowledge the

integrity of the person who has them. By contrast, unless the circumstances are special, we would not talk about 'respecting the personal choice' of someone who is wearing a headscarf when it is the outcome of a contingent personal preference. The willingness to use and understand concepts in an implicative way requires some degree of sophistication as well as education, but it is part of learning a moral language. This means that the precise substance and contours of human worth can never be fully laid out and defined. However, because the concept of human worth is grasped transcendently it can be *shown* and *expressed* through words, actions and gestures.

### **The role of Sympathy**

We were talking of the phenomena of exclusion and inclusion; the suggestion is that these matters become important because the concept of self as having intrinsic worth plays an underlying role in our conception of the human. In addition, the suggestion is also that we must be educated into an understanding of the role that this concept plays. But how is this to be achieved? Here, one of Kant's predecessors can be of service, David Hume. I have already mentioned that I doubt very much that one will find in the whole Humean corpus any reference to the notion of intrinsic worth. What Hume does articulate, however, is the idea of sympathy. Unlike Rousseau, Hume did not envisage the role of sympathy as a kind of primal, instinctual faculty. Hume says that "any affection infused by sympathy....is first known....by those external signs in the countenance and conversation'. He then goes on to say that this 'idea' (i.e. that which results from external signs) is 'converted into an impression , and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself' (Hume, 2000, 2.1.11.3). Thus sympathy is a process in which observations and encounters are absorbed and reflected upon before they assume the form of a 'passion'. Hume's account of sympathy therefore includes a cognitive element (see Frazer, 2010, p. 41-4 for an extensive discussion of this point).

Thus a perception of the value of another may be expressed through sympathy, that is, through a sentiment or passion. For example, in the United Kingdom the scandal of the treatment of the Windrush generation of British citizens who entered the UK as Caribbean migrants many years ago and were subsequently denied British citizenship, provoked a sympathy for their plight, outrage at the injustice inflicted on them and shame that one could be a citizen of a country in which government actively promoted and implemented policies that were not only racist but inhumane and thoroughly disrespectful to the persons involved. In short, they were being treated as if their lives had little or no value.<sup>6</sup> The outrage goes further than 'feeling sorry' for those so circumstanced; the sympathy is accompanied by an implicit understanding of what is at stake, namely the intrinsic value of a human life. We are alerted by the simple facts of the case (e.g. persons who in most cases had worked for decades in the UK and yet denied citizenship), but our sympathy goes further than this. It is the perception that the worth of a human life is being denigrated that occasions the particular kind of sympathy; a denigration that is not the outcome of contingent factors or just one erroneous decision but which has resulted from systematic policy and the systematic application of rules and procedures.

Thus, to extend Hume's account, the occasioning of sympathy does not rely only on the visible signs (e.g. of distress or pain). These do indeed provoke such a sentiment but it needs the extra dimension of an implicit understanding of the value of a life for sympathy to be durable – otherwise our sentiment may be strongly felt one day only to disappear the next when something else takes over. There is an interesting analogy with recognition. Just as human worth as a transcendental concept is needed for recognition to do its work, so the same could be said of sympathy. Without the logically

prior concept of worth the sympathy we show may be dependent on contingent factors, such as whether I feel a social or psychological affiliation with the person who is the object of sympathy. Sympathy provides an affective medium through which the concept of human worth can be expressed.

Sympathy should not be confused with pity. I may pity someone who is in a distressed state through no fault of their own. In this expression of concern for another I evince a sentiment towards a fellow sentient being: I may pity an animal that is injured, for example. Whereas with sympathy there is an *understanding* of someone's distress, prompted by a perception of human worth which we both share. Of course, it may happen that pity characterises our first response, to be supplemented by sympathy once there arises an understanding of their situation. My sympathy is premised on the reality of an intrinsic worth which we both share. That is why if a person is distressed through circumstances that they have brought upon themselves we may still feel sympathy. We, along with Dickens, sympathise with Mr Micawber in his indebtedness, despite the fact he is entirely to blame for it because we understand, only too well, human frailty which exemplifies human worth without necessarily diminishing it.

Part of the development of sympathy is a proper and fair recognition – acknowledgement - of different identities – ethnic, religious, gender-based. In this regard, I suggest that the historic modernist trope of the mainstream majority which, through its enlightened moral discernment, welcomes the excluded into its midst (with the aim of abolishing the insider/outsider distinction) is no longer feasible.<sup>7</sup> Politically and socially, mainstreams have themselves become fragmented and arguably do not have the kind of moral authority that they once had; subjectively everyone is both an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. This is to be welcomed. Social fragmentation undermines the arrogance of the mainstream and, in learning how to be both an insider and an outsider, a certain social and personal modesty may be cultivated in the individual. This could almost be seen as a pedagogical goal: the cultivation of a more modest demeanour, as a way of coping with the paradoxes of inclusion/exclusion. This modesty is sometimes in short supply as the rhetoric of inclusion discourses can sometimes become shrill and insistent (a point noted by Papastephanou, 2019). This has the effect of alienating sympathy, but not merely because of the way that demands may be expressed. The problem, rather, is that identity characteristics may be in danger of being valorised simply on their own account, in isolation from considerations of human worth.

By contrast, I am arguing that the discourse of inclusivity be characterised by a sympathy which acknowledges the element of human worth. As I have argued, it is just this element which gives claims for inclusion their force and point. It is an undisputed fact that social identities also develop their own vocabularies and discourses. But it is a mistake to suppose that recognition of a specific identity can only be accomplished if one is able to 'speak' thoroughly the discourse of that identity. It is not necessary to master each and every separate identity-based discourse in order that appropriate recognition be afforded; rather, we need to learn the signs and gestures through which we acknowledge the human worth of the individuals whose social identity is under consideration. And it goes without saying that proponents of an identity must also learn how to recognise sympathy when it is sincerely shown without also insisting that interlocutors must, through a performative regime, comply fully with the demands of an identity-based discourse.

The importance of the concept of human worth gets forgotten if it is supposed that humans are social all the way down, that every person alive (or dead) is merely the product of a social discourse. This 'sociological' view of human lives is one that comes easily and naturally to us all, embedded as it is in modernist (and post-modernist) perspectives and language. But it needs to be corrected – and

complicated – by a view of human beings that places their intrinsic worth in the heart of our speech and action. What better place to start learning this than at school?

### **Pedagogical Implications**

My account of the concept of intrinsic worth has been in terms of its role in forming the arc of a moral world which I inhabit. This may make it seem that somehow the notion of worth cannot be taught: it is learned through the process of living out a life in that world. It may seem as though the idea of human worth is mysteriously imbued through its being a ‘form of life’. There is some truth in this observation, especially when we consider how sympathy cannot be taught as such but rather is developed through a social environment of responding to the enactments of others. However, I suggest more can be done, especially in a school setting.

I have in mind here Michael Hand’s bold claim that certain moral standards can be (and should be) taught in schools. In particular, Hand holds that standards which can be justified beyond reasonable doubt may be subject to ‘directive moral enquiry’ (Hand, 2018: 37) in a pedagogical setting. This would include standards against killing and causing harm (p. 68). I think Hand slightly undermines his case by arguing that moral values cannot be agreed upon (this he covers in chapter 4, ‘Consensus on Content’) as the whole thrust of *this* paper is that there is at least one value that conditions the very possibility of moral discourse. But on the main contention of Hand – that we should be bold in teaching moral standards and not flinch unless those standards are seriously contested – I think he is absolutely right. In the case under consideration – the value of human worth – could that be simply taught through developing the appropriate moral standards, for example, standards relating to prohibitions on causing harm to other humans? I would suggest that whilst this is necessary, more is needed. In particular, children and pupils need to understand the intrinsic value of a human life over and above understanding and subscribing to certain standards of behaviour.

I suggest there may be two approaches here. The first is the teaching of – though a repertoire of pedagogies – the value of *peace*. For one of the visible expressions of the acknowledgement of the worth of another is living peaceably together, without hatred, resentment or conflict. I take it that peaceful conduct amounts to more than merely ignoring or avoiding others: the need for peace arises when the social circumstances make it impossible for conflict to be resolved without mutual engagement. It is this engagement that enables persons to acknowledge each other through learning both differences and commonalities. The value of peace can be learnt through practical endeavours in which that value is ‘lived out’ in such a way that peace becomes a cornerstone of one’s moral world. Fortunately there are pedagogical aides available: For example, UNESCO (2017) provides material for teachers regarding role play and conflict resolution. It emphasises the importance of building a ‘culture of peace’ which is present “when there is respect for human rights, cultural diversity, solidarity, a rejection of violence” (UNESCO, p. 14). This particular document originated in the Horn of Africa but this kind of approach could be applied more widely, for example in London in respect of resisting knife-crime.

The other approach is more didactic and consists in giving children and students the opportunity of considering case studies of what happens when the intrinsic value of human life is ignored. The two I have in mind are the Holocaust and the Slave Trade (although, regrettably, other examples could be chosen). Both of these have a particular historical significance that still reverberates today. In the former example, it is not enough to dwell at great length on the violence inflicted on Jews: children need to know something about those lives that were uprooted and destroyed and also they need to know what it is that Europe has lost with the destruction of its Jewish communities. In the second case study, it is not enough to dwell on the organisation of the slave trade itself; its implications,

particularly for the United States must also be understood. These include the institution of slavery, the Civil War and the deliberate and intentional perpetuation of racism through institutional and cultural means right up to the present day. The purpose of what may be termed a more instructive approach is to leave children in no doubt about what happens when the value of human life is disregarded. Its effects are calamitous for everyone.

The purpose of ethical education, thus construed is the moral formation of the child such that an acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of human life becomes second nature and as much a part of one's identity as talking, walking and breathing. My suggestion is that appropriate pedagogies may be enlisted in pursuit of that end.

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<sup>1</sup> This is why wrongdoers have to be punished: they have not recognised the worth of others. At the same time, punishment is a badge of respect regarding their intrinsic worth: "Punishment is regarded as containing the criminal's right and hence by being punished he is being honoured as a rational being..... Still less does he receive it [i.e. the honour due to him] if he is treated as either a harmful animal who has to be made harmless, or with a view to deterring and reforming him." (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 71)

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph owes much to the discussion of Kierkegaard and indirect communication by David Wood in his *Philosophy at the Limit* (1990), p. 105-117.

<sup>3</sup> The dialectic of recognition arises out of Hegel's reflections on the master-slave relationship – see Hegel, 1977, 116-117.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion by Patterson (1982, 98-99).

<sup>5</sup> For a basic account of this topic see BBC news pages: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-49755250>

<sup>6</sup> For those unfamiliar with this topic, Wikipedia sets out the basic facts – see the wiki entry 'Windrush Scandal'.

<sup>7</sup> Such an observation is widely shared – e.g., see Papastephanou (2019), p. 311.