**Is Anything Priceless? Are There Inestimable Values?**

A question that looms large in metaethics and which is of the greatest significance to normative ethics is whether anything is genuinely priceless; or in other words: are there inestimable values. It looms large in metaethics because, as the branch of ethics that concerns understanding and explaining what the input values to moral judgment are – i.e. the basic goods and evils over we deliberate to make judgments of what is right, wrong, etc., it is hard to see how we could settle such a matter so apparently early on in our inquiry. We typically think of goods and evils as weighing for or against one another in a sort of coalition-forming calculus, in which the greatest coalition at the conclusion of our deliberation in some manner determines the decision made. Things they weigh for or against a matter \typically – or at least it would seem – would be things that can be weighed. But if there is a priceless value, that is to say, a value of inestimable worth, then it simply cannot be weighed at all, leaving serious questions about how such a value could be handled in moral deliberation at all. But this should not make us blush, since philosophical inquiries, unlike axiomatic ones, have no absolute beginning point, but can and should be elaborated upon at any point seen fit.

The question is, moreover, of the greatest significance to normative ethics because an affirmative answer that yes, there are inestimable values refutes the possibility that utilitarianism can be true.

Normative ethics is the branch of ethics that asks the question: what makes right acts right, and other derivative question. Utilitarianism bases the judgment of right action upon the criterion of the maximization of net positive consequences, choosing as right whatever possible alternative to be considered possesses that quality. But the carrying out of such a deliberative process requires all values relevant to a decision-making situation to be weighed against one another by receiving an estimate value in terms of how good or how bad. Utilitarianism, perhaps because of its usual association with the metaethical theory of hedonism, which claims that all values ultimately reduce to pleasures as goods or pains as evils, usually carries with it a background assumption that all values to be considered in normative ethical deliberation will be finite. But although it is possible for utilitarianism to be true even without its hedonist association, it cannot be true if there are values that cannot be given a value for entry into its cost-benefit analysis. Being aware of this, utilitarians recognize that part of their defense is to deny the existence of inestimable values.

Nonetheless, claiming that there are inestimable values does not lead to an anti-utilitarian stance, since utilitarianism may work for any mundane decision-making situation, i.e., one which does not involve any priceless value, leaving us only with the task of coming up with a way of correctly processing those that do.

A value is inestimable if it cannot be straightforwardly judged as less than any other known estimable value or combination of values. Inestimable values, therefore, are duly treated as infinite values.

Inestimable values, therefore, can neither be augmented nor diminished by finite degree, nor can they be compared arithmetically even to one another, as in: two human beings collectively are worth two thirds of three human beings. In other words, finite mathematics does not work for calculating among priceless things even apart. The logic of this is that it is irrational to trade unless the value of all items to be involved in the trade has been estimated. If some items can simply not be estimated, then they simply ought not be traded.

Clearly, the above is to be taken as an epistemological rule *quoad nos* and not a metaphysical one *quo ad se*.

It follows from their being inestimable that it is unconditionally wrong and inappropriate to trade inestimable values, either for one another or for estimable values. This may in fact turn out to be the greatest argument for their existence, since we certainly do seem to sense that there are some things that categorically should not be traded.

The main thing we notice possessing this quality are humans and human things. We can go ahead and trade cats and dogs under certain situations where convenience requires, we should never do the same with our children. Also, a traded item is a possessed commodity, so a trade human being would be tantamount to a slave. Thus, if we deny the quality of categorical untradability to humans, we make ourselves once again prone to arguments that might justify slavery. I think we should never dare say that slavery is not unacceptable categorically, but acceptable only in the rarest of cases. Unfortunately, this seems to be what the authors of the Thirteenth Amendment had in mind, that slavery was still correct in the case of punishment for crimes. The case against this is that clearly it thwarts the purpose of punishment, which is to help and not harm the one being punished, whereas slavery is always conceived as being for the convenience of the slave owner and not the slave.

Some argue that this claim of inestimable worth for human things is a case of convenient speciesism. But if all this were just to deceive ourselves, could we not have accomplished that same purpose by simply putting ourselves on top without the claim of pricelessness? As a deception, we might not bother noticing that this slightly lower rank precludes our consideration as a greatest possible value, since the notion of a greatest possible finite good is contradictory.

But nor does claiming humans to be priceless imply being of greatest possible value, just of untradable value.

Besides, recognition of our inestimable worth may be just as much of an inconvenience to us than a convenience, since it limits our judgment of things we could do to other human beings for the sake of convenience in good conscience. There are also signs by the way we are treated by other species that there is something unique about us that makes us in a sense daunting to them as well as sometimes peculiarly attractive in some way. It is odd that we should be so daunting, when in fact from an organismic perspective there is nothing remarkable about our abilities, as we are inferior in strength, speed, bite, bodily protection from the weather, and short-term fertility than most other animals that come close to us in size.

The mystery to this claim of the pricelessness of human life may be a cause of suspicion as implying or calling for a theistic metaphysics to explain it. Notwithstanding that it is not a foregone conclusion that an atheist universe would have to be finite, I think honesty requires us to acknowledge that inestimable worth is a palpable quality, something that can be felt. Whether there are higher things and what those higher things might be are perennial questions; our leaning in one direction or another regarding them should not bias us from noticing qualities in things that are readily sensed even if not “observable” according to some narrower reading of the term.