Chapter Two

Is Life Sacred?

I call upon all Americans to reflect upon the sanctity of human life. Let us recognize the day with appropriate ceremonies in our homes and places of worship, rededicate ourselves to compassionate service on behalf of the weak and defenseless, and reaffirm our commitment to respect the life and dignity of every human being.

(George W. Bush, proclaiming Sunday, 20 January 2002, as National Sanctity of Human Life Day)

I’m listening to an afternoon programme on the radio. One woman is trying to keep two more from tearing each other apart. The first of these women, a professor so and so, from such and such university, is vehemently opposed to euthanasia, and insists we should all go on living, and should be glad to go on living, until the more or less natural end. The other is someone who works closely with people who are terminally ill, some of whom want to die, and she’s incensed that this other woman should think she knows what’s best for them. They’re arguing about the sanctity of life.

Issues like this get under the skin. And often, when people are for or against this sanctity view, they’re eager to put their ideas into practice, to get people to act in certain ways, and not in others, to change or to defend the laws of the land, to fight more strongly for life, or to be more accepting of death. Passions are roused. And because so much hangs on it, it seems important to find out as soon as possible where the truth lies, and which of these people are right, and which are wrong.

Yet before trying to decide whether life is sacred or not, it’s a good idea, if we can, to sort out just what it is that people believe when they believe, or say they believe, in the sanctity of life. For it can be much less clear than it seems at first. Often people assume they know what an opponent thinks, before they’ve really worked out exactly what their position is. And sometimes people haven’t really thought through what they themselves mean, when they talk about the sanctity of life. So the
first thing here is to try to sift through the different kinds of things that might be meant in claiming that life is sacred. There’s big spread of positions, and some of them might seem to be obviously non-starters. Then it’ll be worth focusing on a couple of more plausible and at the same time more popular views, and looking at them in a bit more detail, to see what they’re about. And if we can be clearer about what they say, we can go on to the big question – are these views true?

Lives

There’s a complication, first, about life. Some people, in claiming that life is sacred, are thinking only about human beings, and human life. And a lot of the time that you hear about the issue on the radio or television, or read about it in the papers, or find that it’s being talked about in parliament, or the courts, it’s human life – and perhaps especially issues to do with abortion, and euthanasia, and maybe also capital punishment – that they’re concerned with. Others, though, think that animal life, or at least some animal life, is sacred as well. So while some vegetarians avoid meat on health grounds, others think that cows, rabbits, turkeys, and maybe also salmon and oysters should be free to live out their lives, just as we, usually, can live out ours. Mary Wollstonecraft seems to have thought this, in her stories designed for the moral education of children, and it’s not much later in the nineteenth century that the RSPCA was founded to look after the interests of animals. A little later still, the last straw for Nietzsche, before his descent into madness, was to come across a man whipping and beating his horse in the streets of Turin. Still others believe that all life is sacred – humans, animals, and plants as well. Although he talked most often about the need for us to have reverence for life, the musician, doctor, and philosopher Albert Schweitzer seems to have been one of the best-known proponents of this wider sanctity view, and some people think that Prince Charles has a similar stance. And a lot of environmentalists, especially the self-styled deep ecologists, objecting to motorways, bypasses, airport runways, believe that all life is of value.

Attitudes

There’s a second issue, more complex, about our attitude to the lives we think of as sacred. Again, there are narrower and wider views. Some people
insist that it’s wrong for us to kill, even though they’re not always troubled by deaths that can be put down to natural causes. But more often there’s a connection made here, with people opposing killing because they think death is always bad. And then a wider view seems to follow through on what is apparently implied by this, and suggests that we should aim as well to preserve or extend life. So doctors should do what they can to keep their patients alive, rather than, as often happens, allowing them in some circumstances to die. A still wider view is that we shouldn’t prevent, or stand in the way of, the creation of life. Catholics, famously, are supposed to believe that contraception is wrong, and that when life is this close, it should not be thwarted. Finally, some people believe life is valuable or sacred in such a way that the more lives there are, the better it is. Not only should we be prepared for babies, if we’re bent on sex, but we should be actively looking for people to have sex with, in order that more babies can be born. And, even though things soon go horribly wrong, Dr. Frankenstein seems to have some such view about the value of life when, by artificial means, he sets about creating what turns out to be his monster. This story still resonates with our fears about the abuse of technology, about hubris, but even if we are wary about ourselves making new people, many of us think it would be good if God had created extra planets, with extra lives upon them.

Conditions

When these different positions, first, on the kinds of lives, and, second, on the attitudes to life intersect, then a whole range of possible views emerge. Some of these will appear plausible — if you think life shouldn’t be prevented, you’ll think it wrong to neuter the cat, and if you think life should be promoted, you’ll be among those who planted a millennium tree. Yet others might seem just too extreme and far-fetched to count as serious candidates for the sanctity of life view. Surely no one will think the world ought to contain as many slugs as possible. And no one will think we should do all we can to prevent the death of a nettle. But now there are complications that need to be introduced, which show how these absurd views can be avoided. That there might be some such complications is most obvious, perhaps, in cases of killing.

Think just about human beings. Some people believe that killing human beings is wrong under all conditions, no matter what. But others hold that although killing is wrong in general, there can be exceptions. They
might think, for example, that even though life is sacred, capital punishment can be justified. What is wrong is killing the innocent, and it’s because some people do exactly this that they can, or should, be killed in turn. In a related manner, some believers in the sanctity of life allow killing in self-defence. Or, again related, they will permit the killing of one to save many. Or the killing of a foetus to save the life of the mother. What these various qualifications suggest is that the restriction on killing is not, for these people, inflexible, but might in some circumstances be lifted. But now this distinction between absolute and conditional views does not concern killing alone, but can surface elsewhere. So, while it’s possible to understand the sanctity of life as implying we should promote as many new lives as we can, no matter what, it is also possible, and surely more reasonable, to think that any such injunction must be conditional – start new lives as long as there’s space, or if you’ve got the time, or if they won’t interfere with existing lives, or some such condition.

This is an important complication to be clear about. The narrower the view about sanctity, the easier it is to deal in absolutes. The wider the view, the more important it will be, if things aren’t going to be hopeless from the start, that other considerations are allowed into the picture. So it really is possible to believe, for example, that killing human beings is always and absolutely wrong, wrong in all circumstances, wrong no matter what. But it’s much harder to believe this about killing in general. Take Albert Schweitzer. His view wasn’t preposterous. Even though he thought that all life was sacred, and not to be ended without good reason, he still thought we could justifiably kill plants to feed cattle, and then in turn kill cattle to feed human beings.

Values

There’s one further complication that needs to be mentioned just here. It’s about the kind of value that life has. And it involves making two distinctions, one fairly straightforward, the other a bit trickier.

First, there’s a distinction that all sanctity views make. For if you think that life, or maybe just human life, is sacred, you think it has a value or importance beyond its usefulness to others. Life isn’t valuable just as a resource or also as means to an end. Even if people, animals and plants have \textit{instrumental} value – postmen deliver mail, hounds sniff out drugs, potatoes help keep us alive – they have, for sanctity believers, another value, and often a more important value, as well. But what sort of value

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is that? A lot of people want to insist that life, or human life, has *intrinsic* value, or is valuable just in itself. They think life is a good thing independently of its effects or usefulness elsewhere.

But now the harder distinction is this. As well as intrinsic value, there’s maybe a space here for talking about *personal* value, as offering another contrast with value of the merely instrumental kind. So as well as thinking that life may be valuable just in itself, we might think it’s of value to the person, or maybe even the thing, whose life it is. An example will help:

*Uncle Joe.* He’s old, he’s ill, and he’s in hospital. Everyone agrees that it’s just a matter of time. Katarina, who’s always been hard-hearted, thinks it would be better if things could be brought to an end right now. After all, life’s no fun for Joe, he can’t work, he’s no use to anyone, and think of the hospital bills they’d save. Piet’s not interested in the money. And he thinks they should do everything possible to manage the pain, make Joe’s remaining time a thing of dignity and value, and give him a little more of a life he’d want to live. Vincent agrees about the money, but he’s sceptical about whether much more can be done to help Joe. Yet he’s opposed to euthanasia, whether or not this is what Joe wants. He thinks that, however bad it is, life should be lived to the end.

Piet and Vincent are both opposed to Katarina’s narrow and instrumental slant on human life. But while Piet thinks that Joe’s life can be good for him, Vincent seems to believe it’s just good in itself, even if it’s not good for Joe, that his life should continue, at least until it comes to its natural end.

This idea of personal value is reasonably familiar. Most people, when they are interested in football, or ballet, or whisky, or video games, value these things not because they’re useful, or a means to getting something else. They value them just for what they are. But hardly anyone thinks that whisky, for example, is intrinsically valuable, valuable just in itself. Rather, it’s valuable only because people actually like it. And the point I want to stress here is that, in contrast to whisky, life might be valuable in either of these ways. It might be good that your life continues only so long as there’s something in it for you, only so long as it is of personal value. But life might also be intrinsically valuable, and its continuing good just in itself, independently of whether it’s good for you.

**Religion, Reason, and a Pair of Views**

What exactly does it mean, then, to say that life is sacred? All we’ve done so far is point to quite a few, maybe too many, things that it could mean,
without suggesting any way to choose between them. But perhaps there is
a way. For some people think that what we need to do is to take the phrase
‘the sanctity of life’ literally, look carefully at its historical origins, and
then its true meaning will come to the surface, with others falling by the
way. And taken literally, and looking at its origins, it’s clear that there
is a connection between ideas of sanctity, and beliefs in religion. More
specifically, some people will want to say that this is an essentially
Christian notion, and one that is fairly obviously restricted to killing
human beings.

Is this right? Not altogether, I think, even though there’s quite a bit
in it. The idea of sanctity is, at bottom, an idea that sits at the heart of
a lot of religion, with its insistence on the holy, on places and things that
have been sanctified – groves, icons, temples, bones – and its emphasis
on ritual and sacrament. And certainly Christianity is greatly concerned
with all this. Certainly too, Christianity, and the Judaism that lies behind
it, are greatly concerned with the value of human life in particular – even
though the 6th Commandment says, seemingly generally, ‘Thou shalt not
kill’, it’s pretty clearly concerned just with human beings. But there’s
little point in pretending things are altogether black and white here.
Maybe even Christianity is concerned with non-human life as well. Some
parts of Genesis hint at this, and St. Francis of Assisi certainly thought it
should be. And maybe also it’s concerned with more than stopping us
from killing – one of the things the bible tells us to do is to go forth and
multiply, and, as I’ve noted, many Christians are opposed to contracep-
tion. Another thing to notice is that even if ideas about sanctity are
central to Christianity, the Bible never expressly say that life is sacred,
and neither the Bible in particular nor the Christian tradition in general
expressly condemns abortion, or capital punishment, or war. So there’s
quite a bit of interpretation needed to take some of even the most basic
ideas about the sanctity of life out of their Christian setting.

Conversely, there’s quite a bit of work needed to keep such ideas out
of other religions. Judaism and Islam also put an emphasis, even if not
exactly the same emphasis, on human life, and many other religions have
noticeably wider concerns with the sacredness or value of life, and with
the wrongness of killing. That offshoot of Hinduism, the religion of the
Jains, goes furthest, in asking its followers to allow their own deaths
rather than take any life at all. Nor, importantly, should we stop at
religion. Atheists and agnostics will often admit to a belief in the sanctity
of life, and even if the term ‘sacred’ seems to insist on an explicitly
religious connection, the related notions of reverence and respect are

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available as secular counterparts. So it seems unjustifiably pedantic to insist on a specifically religious, or specifically Christian interpretation to ideas of sanctity. We should accept that language can be a bit loose, and not attempt to tie it down with artificial constraints and limitations.

I'll come back to religious views a bit later on, but for now it might seem that we're back at square one, with a big spread of views and nothing to choose between them. But that's not quite right. Remember, what we're really after here is finding out what beliefs in the sanctity of life have going for them. That's more important than finding out what the phrase 'life is sacred' really means. Maybe there just is no one thing that it really means. What we can do, though, is look at some of the suggested interpretations of that phrase, and then ask, given that interpretation, what reasons are there for thinking the phrase is true? And we can focus on just a pair of accounts, both of them apparently plausible, and both of them fairly widely supported, and see what they're about. It's going to be useful to choose accounts with a fair bit of contrast between them, so we'll do just that.

A Reverence for Life

We can start with this, as it's the easier to deal with. It's the view about sanctity that I attributed to Albert Schweitzer. The idea is that all living things are valuable, not for what they can do for us, or for each other, but in themselves. And so it's wrong to kill things without good reason, and generally regrettable when things die, especially when they die prematurely.

This isn't an extreme view. As I've sketched it here, the emphasis is on not killing, rather than actively bringing new life into existence. And it doesn't say that killing is so awful that we must never do it. Even if Jains are theoretically committed to starving to death, still, there is no need to follow them down that route: we can have reverence in the sense intended here even while eating, in moderation, when we need to. But even if it isn't extreme, it's a view with problems.

The first has just been hinted at. This is really a bit loose and sloppy view, and it's hard to pin down what precisely it comes to. While most of us will want to agree that killing without good reason is wrong, we'll very likely disagree about just which reasons are good, and therefore disagree about when killing is justified, and when reverence is displayed. Now if, as I think, most of these questions about life and death are
complex and many layered, that sort of disagreement might not only be expected, but also welcome. The problem, though, is that talk of sanctity and reverence sounds a bit like sloganeering – we’re led by these phrases to expect clear-cut distinctions, only then to have these expectations dashed. If a view is going to be loose and sloppy, if it’s going to be, in the end, one that, hedged with qualifications, almost everyone can sign up to, it’s surely better to be that way openly from the start, rather than presenting itself as sharp edged.

The second problem is more serious. For what about this case?

_Hell-bent on Vandalism._ People think of Amber as a nice girl. Her parents lived in a commune in the 1960s and she’s picked up a lot of their gentle, softly spoken, and peace-loving ways. But she has this darker side. She likes to smash things up, sometimes as a release, when she’s angry, sometimes just for the fun of it. Yet she’s been taught to have reverence for life, and so she won’t pull the cat’s tail, or trample the daffodils. What does she do? She goes into a cave, in deepest Derbyshire, and breaks up the stalactites.

Is it alright for anyone to do this? Maybe you think it is, and think that stalactites don’t much matter. But maybe you think that nettles and ants don’t much matter either. And stalactites, a thousand times rarer, might still matter more. What’s not easy is to agree that it’s alright for Amber to go in for destruction of this kind, and yet to urge her against all forms of killing. What’s not easy, that is, is to think there’s anything particularly distinctive about life. Stalactites aren’t alive, but that doesn’t immediately make them seem any the less important than some of the things that are. And perhaps Schweitzer doesn’t, in the end, think there’s anything particular distinctive about life, either. He wrote:

A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to help all life which he is able to succour, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves sympathy as valuable in itself, nor how far it is capable of feeling. To him life as such is sacred. He shatters no ice crystal that sparkles in the sun, tears no leaf from its tree, breaks off no flower, and is careful not to crush any insect as he walks. If he works by lamplight on a summer evening, he prefers to keep the window shut and breathe stifling air, rather than to see insect after insect fall on his table with singed and sinking wings.
Leaves, flowers, insects might all be alive, but ice crystals certainly aren’t. So if we should go out of our way to preserve them, it must be more than life that we’re concerned with. So is it the whole of nature? Perhaps it is, and perhaps Schweitzer recognizes here that if we are concerned with life beyond the stage where feelings are in the frame, then there’s little reason to insist on a firm boundary between life and non-life. And quite a few people think that the thoughtless, unnecessary and yet wilful destruction of natural things is something we should avoid, whether they’re alive or not. Ice crystals, rock formations, sand dunes, distant planets and stars are all of them things that we shouldn’t break, or kick around, or cover with junk from rockets.

But then why stop here? It’s tempting to think that a blanket disregard for made things (things made by animals — birds’ nests, beavers’ dams — and things made by human beings, including walls, temples, cities) is also something to object to, even when those made things have been abandoned and no longer serve any use. Here too frivolous, thoughtless, unnecessary destruction is something we should avoid.

I’m certainly not suggesting that we shouldn’t in some sense or other respect or revere life, shouldn’t in this way think of it as sacred. But the point is that if we are to think of life as something we shouldn’t frivolously end, we ought to think of nature and artefacts the same way. Perhaps it is just a general respect for things that we should encourage. Once again, the particular and distinctive substance of this view is dribbling though our fingers.

**A Ban on Killing**

The second account to be considered is focused just on human beings. And so it’s a lot narrower in its range. But it’s much stronger in its command. Forget carelessness, frivolity, wanton destruction as things to avoid. Forget too all the fine points about good and bad reasons. It’s black and white. Human life is sacred. And we should never bring it to an end — full stop.

Ask people what they understand by the sanctity of life, whether or not they believe in it, and, if there’s an answer at all, it will most likely be along these lines. It has supporters and opponents both in large numbers. But those who find this view hard to swallow do not, of course, want *carre blanche* to do away with whomever, whenever, they choose. Most people think that killing human beings is wrong in almost all cases.
But many disagree with sanctity believers about why it’s wrong. And they think there are circumstances in which killing can be justified. What circumstances? If we can be clear about just where people want to dissent from this sanctity view, we will, at the same time, be clearer about the view itself.

Make a distinction, first, between factors that lie outside, and those that lie inside the life in question. Look outside, and you might think it is sometimes possible to kill one to save many, or kill a foetus to save the mother, or kill a friendless and more or less useless person to save a scientific genius who is at the same time the life and soul of every party. These are all controversial claims, but I don’t think they’re particularly interesting here. And this is because it’s possible in each case to agree that the life to be ended is valuable, even if you insist nevertheless that it is less valuable than the life, or lives to be saved. This cost-benefit or balance sheet approach can agree that lives have value of the same kind, even if they turn out to be valuable to different degrees. More interesting, because more challenging to the sanctity view, is the claim that some lives – some human lives – might be ended not because they are somewhat less valuable than other lives but because they are not of value at all. In such lives, some people will say, the sorts of circumstances that normally give life its value are altogether missing. And so it might not be at all a bad thing, and might even be a good thing, if such lives are ended.

Three sorts of case need to be considered here. In the first, the human life is allegedly not yet of value, even if it will be of value in the future. In the second, the life is of no value now, even though it was in the past. In the third case, the life is not now, never was, and never will be of value. These three cases correspond to real cases that any of us might encounter: (1) certain sorts of abortion cases; (2) cases concerning those with Alzheimer’s disease and so-called persistent vegetative states; and (3) those with congenital malformations and defects such as anencephaly, where someone is born without a brain. Now what seems to be true is that the sorts of things that we most evidently value in human life – self-consciousness, ideas of the future and the past, an ability to relate to and to enjoy both the world and other people – are absent from lives like these. So if such lives are valuable nevertheless, their value must have some other kind of explanation. The point can be put more vividly. Some people use the term ‘person’ not as a synonym for human being, but to pick out those whose lives are marked by self-consciousness, a sense of time, an awareness of others. Give the term this precise meaning and it seems, possibly the second, are not why these are special. How do object to the foetus is not a vegetative brain damaged cases, cases, often enough al thinking, are altogether missing.

Another person, someone who would object to the foetus is not a vegetative brain damaged cases, cases, often enough al thinking, are altogether missing. There’s li certainly why and because. Why is the sanctity view. But like these, some irre always. Life Believers argue, first, there’s so it’s a less
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it seems, first, that there might be persons who are not human beings - possibly God, perhaps dolphins or chimpanzees, maybe Martians. And, second, and here more importantly, using 'person' in this sense, it's going to be clear that there are human beings, or human organisms that are not yet, or no longer, or never will be persons. So the question is why these human beings have a special value nevertheless, and a special value that other things - tigers, geese, oaks - do not have. For remember, the sanctity view being considered here holds that human beings are special.

How do we know, though, that these are not persons? Some people object to the science invoked here. They say we cannot be sure that the foetus is not already thinking, that the patient in a coma or a persistent vegetative state is certain never to recover, or that those with congenital brain damage won't improve with help. But although there are difficult cases, cases in which there can be doubt about what is or will be going on, often this is just clutching at straws. In many cases we do know enough about the workings and failures of the brain to know that thinking, self-consciousness, and standard human responses to the world are altogether absent.

Another kind of objection insists that important facts have not been given their proper weight. The normal foetus, they say, is a potential person, something that in the normal run of nature will develop into someone like you and me, and thus will then be valuable. Conversely, those with Alzheimer's or who are severely and irreversibly comatose were fully fledged persons, and so were of value. And anencephalics are undoubtedly members of a species whose normal members are persons. There's little point in arguing with any such claims, for they are all certainly true, but the problem, for the sanctity believer, is to explain why and how they are relevant. So she was a person with a valuable life. Why is that a reason for thinking her life is of value now?

One distinction that we drew earlier comes into play here. Critics of the sanctity view will agree that life has, often, more than instrumental value. But, many of them want to say, life is of no personal value in cases like these. Foetuses, anencephalics, those with Alzheimer's disease, or in some irreversible coma, neither want, nor have an interest in staying alive. Life isn't good for them. So why, in such cases, is killing wrong? Believers in life's sanctity have two ways they might respond. They might argue, first, that life is always good for those whose life it is. Maybe there's something in this where a normal healthy foetus is concerned, but it's a less convincing response in the other cases. Or they might insist,
instead, that whether or not it is of personal value is beside the point. For life, and in particular human life, is intrinsically valuable, valuable just in itself, no matter what.

Another sort of case still needs to be considered. It also involves this distinction about value, and will throw light on, and pose problems for, the sanctity view. Think about the cases discussed so far, where someone is not, in the sense outlined, a person. I’ve suggested that it isn’t easy to see how such lives have value. And these non-persons cannot themselves have a view about the value of their lives. In other cases lives maybe do have value. And views about that value can be expressed.

Wanting Out. Driving to California, José and Ramon crash on the interstate freeway. Some people say they were going too fast, some blame the truck driver, others say it was just one of those things. They survive, but their injuries are horrific, both in near-constant pain, unable to work or look after themselves, José in a wheelchair, and Ramon confined for the remainder of his days to a hospital bed. Things don’t get better. José decides, eventually, to throw himself from the Golden Gate Bridge. Ramon, though, can neither help nor harm himself. He asks the doctor if he can do anything to bring his life to an end.

José and Ramon have a lot in common. They are both persons – both, in spite of their injuries, still self-conscious thinking beings. And they are both able at times to get some small pleasures out of life – their lives are not unremitting agony from one day to the next. But they both believe their lives are, on balance, no longer worth living, and they want them to be over. The difference is that while José is able by himself to end his life, Ramon cannot do this, and needs, if he is to get what he wants, the help of others.

Many believers in the sanctity of life will object to both deaths. Even if there are reasons to make a legal distinction, allowing suicide, while prohibiting euthanasia, the cases are morally on a par. It is wrong to kill others, whether or not they want to die, and it is wrong too to kill ourselves. But why is it wrong? If you subscribe to this sanctity view, then you’ll insist that José and Ramon are making some kind of mistake in wanting things to end. Even if there are many bad things about their lives, and even if they’ll never improve, still something of considerable value is being overlooked. Either it is good for them to continue living, or, even if it isn’t good for them, it’s good just in itself that these lives should continue. Their lives are of either personal, or intrinsic value. But there are, I think, real problems with both of these claims. It’s certainly true that exaggerating term and worth liv been bett after the wasn’t tc Chatterto a poet so get it rig someone isn’t in a José and is all so 1

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true that people can make mistakes about the value of their lives, exaggerating the bad and neglecting the good, or looking to the short term and forgetting the long. And, falsely believing that life is no longer worth living, people can end their lives when, it seems, it would have been better for them to continue. Romeo was right to be upset when, after their plan went wrong, he found Juliet seemingly dead. But she wasn’t to die for. Nor was he. Both of them would have got over it. Chatterton, too, almost certainly over-reacted when he took his failure as a poet so much to heart, and ended his life at 18. But equally, people can get it right. There are cases where there’s just not enough of value in someone’s life to compensate and counter the bad, and where it really isn’t in any way good for them to go on living. Maybe it’s like this for José and Ramon. Maybe pain, frustration, the hopelessness of the future is all so much that they’re right to think they’ll be better off dead.

Yet if believers in life’s sanctity accept this, and shift to the other view, stressing intrinsic rather than personal value, then their position seems yet more harsh. Can we really believe that even if someone’s life is thoroughly wretched, does nothing for them, will never improve, they should, in spite of their strong and considered wish to the contrary, go on living? And that they should do this because it is somehow good just in itself, or good for the universe that their lives continue? It’s not simply that this view is harsh. And my worry isn’t just that I don’t see how this good for the universe can outweigh the bad for the person, it’s the bigger worry that this notion of the intrinsic value of life makes no sense at all.

Religion Revisited

I said we’d come back to religion. For some people will object that this aspect of the sanctity view is being ignored. Look at things from the religious perspective and, the suggestion goes, both the distinctiveness of human life, and the outright ban on killing can more easily be explained.

There are various points to be made. First, religious believers often say that what makes us special is that we alone have souls. Moreover, we all have souls, no matter how young, old, under-developed, decrepit, or incapacitated we are. A lot of people doubt whether this is true, and even among themselves Christians have puzzled and argued about exactly when a soul attaches itself to a foetus. But even if we assume there are souls, and that they are present in human bodies for the duration, not much is done for the sanctity view. For believers in souls, Christians and
non-Christians alike, often think that the soul is in some way trapped in the body, and will be released from this often unhappy confinement at the moment of death. Socrates held such a view, centuries before Jesus was born, and believed for that reason his death wouldn’t be the tragedy that others feared. So even if it might be a bad thing, were it possible, to destroy a man’s soul, the value of the soul doesn’t give us any reason not to destroy his body.

Another religious view is that life is a gift from God, and not ours to end. So we show a lack of respect for this gift if we bring about the death of a human life, no matter what its condition. But this isn’t altogether clear. First, if it’s really a gift, and not something that’s simply on loan, it’s presumably ours to do with as we wish. More important, perhaps, if human life is a gift, so too is animal and plant life. But we are permitted, most people and most Christians believe, to end those lives.

The religious perspective has one more attempt. Human beings, and they alone, are all made, and all equally made, in the image of God. It’s this that sets our lives apart from animal and plant life. And it’s this that explains why our ending a human life is in effect an attack on God. But this view is hard to swallow. It’s hard to see how the differences between human lives, especially the differences between persons and non-persons, are merely superficial, and that there is beneath them something of equal value, or equal worth. And it may even be tempting to echo the near blasphemous thoughts of David Hume, in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, and to think that if God really did make us all in his image, then he’s not much of a craftsman.

Perhaps these arguments have more merit than I’m suggesting, or perhaps religion has other things to say that might explain why killing human beings is always wrong. But, obviously, one of the problems for any of these arguments is that they’ll only work for people who themselves adopt the religious perspective on life. If sanctity views have to depend on religion, then they’re unlikely to win the day.

Is Life Sacred?

Where does this leave us? Some of what I’ve said here is controversial, but none of it is quite as controversial as it may seem. Again, the temptation, and one to be avoided, is to see things as more clear-cut, more black and white, than in fact they are. In arguing against some

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The main point of this chapter, then, has not been simply to clear things up, even though some things are, I hope, now clearer than they were. Rather, its point has been more to resist attempts, via an appeal to the sanctity of life, to clear things up. If things aren't so often black and white, if they're rarely neat and pat, then we have no option, in thinking about matters of life and death, to look at a range of issues on a case-by-case basis. And that's what we'll do.

Why so negative about sanctity? Perhaps it's already clear, I think there really are a lot of good questions about life and death. Many views about the sanctity of life provide neat and pat answers to these questions. But they are too neat, too pat, and make the questions less good. They remove work that needs to be done.

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