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## Why people matter:

### an introduction to *The Worth of Persons* by James Franklin<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to his recent book *Cooperation with Evil*, Kevin Flannery SJ, identifies the strengths and weaknesses of various ways of analysing the problem of cooperating with evil, that is, assisting another to do wrong. Why is this an important problem? His answer is clear: it is an ‘essential truth’ that all ethics comes down ultimately to the things that individual agents do – or, at least, ought or ought not to do.<sup>2</sup>

Jim Franklin disagrees: the opening sentence of this book is: *Ethics is not fundamentally about what to do*. Why not? Well, what most disturbs us ethically is not anything to do with actions but the terribleness of suffering. In addition, whenever we do ask *why* some action is right or wrong, we find we are led back to reasons that are not in themselves about action but which concern the good or evil of those affected by the action. What makes the act of killing wrong is the evil of the death of the victim.

Franklin says: *When we are confronted with pictures of genocide victims dug up, those of Srebrenica, for example, we know: “Those were people like us, and something terrible happened to them.” Our emotional reaction gives us an immediate insight into the violation and destruction of something of immense value, a human life. It is gross violations of the right to life that most immediately impose on us a sense of the objective inviolability of human worth. That is where we first understand how it is that ethics is objective – that good and evil matter in some absolute sense and that right and wrong cannot all be a matter of mere opinion or personal choice.’* The work of the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita comes to mind.

This direct awareness of evil is one of the points of parable of the Good Samaritan. Robbers attack a man and leave him half-dead by the roadside. Two religious officials pass by on the other side, but a Samaritan, a member of a group normally hostile to robber’s victim, ‘feels compassion for him’ and stops to help. What makes the Samaritan’s action good or right it not a rule or a virtue but the ethical significance of the victim who is in urgent need of assistance. Such cases force us to admit our sense of the worth of persons. But, as Jim says, we can equally become aware of it in more ordinary and more happy circumstances: in our daily life, we affirm the worth, the human worth, of our friends, family and colleagues because we believe in that worth.

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<sup>1</sup> James Franklin. *The Worth of Persons: the Foundation of Ethics*, Encounter Book, New York, 2022

<sup>2</sup>Kevin Flannery, SJ. *Cooperation with Evil: Thomistic Tools of Analysis*, The Catholic University of America Press, 2019; 5

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What, then, is that worth? What is it about humans that gives them that worth? Do they each have equal worth – the perpetrators as well as the victims of the massacre at Srebrenica the hard-hearted religious officials as well as the Samaritan, that pesky sister or brother of yours as well as your beloved parent? What about animals: do they have worth? If so, is it the same as human worth? As for the natural environment: today's 'deep ecologists' argue that all species are equally valuable, some even claiming that rocks are as valuable as animals or people'.

Are our emotional responses – yours, mine, the ecologist who feels this way about rocks - reliable guides to appreciating human worth? If you and I differ in our sense of the worth of other human beings, say a Stalin or a Mao or an Eichmann, is there some objective truth of the matter according to which our emotional reactions can be assessed? What should we make of the sentiment of the Ukrainian woman, interviewed on NPR who, having given birth in the basement of an apartment block -without power or medical support – in the city of Kherson during its occupation by Russian soldiers, reflected with gratitude on the life of her now 7-month-old baby: 'Every life is precious, especially a Ukrainian one.' What about our feelings about ourselves, given that these very feelings are so often apt to deceive us? How should we understand the objective worth, or 'dignity', of every human being? If there is some truth of the matter, what is it?

Franklin's thought is this. Yes, of course, all the topics commonly talked about in ethics – right and wrong, good and evil, virtues, values, consequences, human rights, obligations, dilemmas, etc – though he omitted to mention that most ubiquitous of terms 'outcomes' – they all matter. But none of them is foundational or basic. None of them is free-standing. Below the surface of each lies the question of the worth of persons.

Take rights. Any plausible claim (and many are not) to a right, or to a duty, indirectly points to the worth of persons, or to a threat to the worth of persons. Virtues? All very well in themselves (faint praise for Aristotle and Aquinas here), but they too point to something more basic than themselves. As do values – we cannot work out why some values are better than others without drawing on the idea that some are in accord with the worth of persons and others are not. And so too, *mutatis mutandis*, with all of what Franklin calls '*the fauna in the ethics zoo*' – the ethics of care, respect for autonomy, individual liberty, consequences, dilemmas. Indeed, when consequentialist colleagues insist that there is a straightforward way of resolving the trolley problem and the life-boat problem, why do we resist? Perhaps it is because both sides of such dilemmas are grounded - in different ways - in the worth of persons. In fact, says Franklin, an ethical approach which focuses on foundations does not even try to solve these dilemmas. Rather, it shows why they are so difficult in the first place.

And so, Franklin sets himself the task of explaining the idea of the worth of persons. He starts with the easy stuff, in a chapter called 'Five false starts and one true one.'

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The false ones: evolutionary ethics, divine command ethics, Hume's story of what motivates our actions, the Socratic claim that virtue is knowledge, and the Aristotelian story which explains right and wrong in terms of what is in accordance with human nature. As he sorts through what he thinks is misguided in these views, Franklin shows how aspects of each of them have undermined the thinking of some of the greatest stars in today's philosophical firmament.

As for the one true start, it is found in Kant, and most of the remainder of the book is devoted to explaining Kant's insight into what it is about persons that gives them their worth.

Franklin pauses first to reply to objections to this 'foundationalist' approach to ethics, that there is no point in this enquiry and, even if there is, any answer to the question 'what is it about persons that gives them their worth?' will be true of only some human beings.

Then he gives an account of the properties of human beings which form the basis of their moral worth. Like a good teacher, Franklin teases us with properties which clearly will not do: shape, for instance, or colour. He says we should identify which properties it is a tragedy for a person to lose. This quickly brings us to rationality, not in the minimalist sense in which we share it other animals or (in a different way) with machines but in the maximalist sense evoked by Hamlet when he reflects on the 'piece of work' that is a man. *"How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals."*

And so, the enquiry turns to the nature of human rationality, practical as well as theoretical. Here understanding is key, understanding why it is or sometimes must be so... in ethics, in aesthetics, in maths. There is more, of course. There is the unity of the self which is the precondition for agency, best recognized when it is subverted by such disorders as self-deception and weakness of will. There is the diversity of the self that includes our embodiment and our engagement with others. There is the recognition that agency requires, in some way or another, freedom, threatened as it always is by internal as well as external factors. And when these general features of the complex whole are laid out, there is the question of how such a generalizing picture can still accommodate individuality, what Gregory Vlastos once called 'the individual existent that bears that person's name'.

Franklin's story is complex, first because this is inherently complex subject-matter and second because at every point he shows how his understanding of the worth of persons coheres with, or stands in contrast to, one or other prominent idea in the history of ethics.

One almost throwaway line brings us back to Kevin Flannery's claim, *that all ethics comes down ultimately to the things that individual agents do*. It is clear why Franklin is unhappy with that claim.

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But when he acknowledges that the elements of an account of human worth must include developable as well inherent properties, he shows what connects his view of ethics with that of Flannery.

Why must the elements of an account of human worth include not only inherent but also developable properties? Because ‘the point of action by humans is to change things, including the actor [himself]’. Thus, contrary to Alphonsus Liguori (who is often thought to be an authority on the matter of ‘cooperation in evil’), no human act is ever truly indifferent, that is, neither good nor bad. Rather, as Aquinas points out, every human act has an effect not only on the world *but also on the agent himself or herself*.

Franklin would agree. Perhaps that is the best pointer to an account of the worth of human persons which is true to both Flannery’s view and Franklin’s view about the subject matter of ethics.

This is a wonderful book, deeply instructive and thoroughly entertaining. Franklin is a natural teacher. On occasion, he made me chuckle, as when I read that the ethics of Aristotle is ‘unserious and egocentric’. Every so often, I scribbled a question mark in the margin to record a point of at least initial disagreement between the author and this reader.

But, of course, when philosophy is done well, there is always more to say! I congratulate Franklin for the gift that he has given us in ‘*The Worth of Persons*’.

**Bernadette Tobin, at the launch of *The Worth of Persons* at the State Library of New South Wales on 19 November 2022**

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