Value, Respect and Attachment

Joseph Raz

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This book, the text of Raz's Seeley Lectures, builds on the ideas Raz previously put forward in *Engaging Reason* (OUP, 2000). While the book's blurb promises that the contents will appeal to 'students and practitioners of law, philosophy and politics', in fact Raz here, as elsewhere, tackles his topic of choice in a highly theoretical fashion and his more practically minded law and politics colleagues may well find the atmosphere of Raz's four lectures too rarefied. False expectations aside, what can the book be enjoyed for?

In the first chapter, 'Attachment and Uniqueness', the overall claim is that there is no incompatibility between universality and contingency of values. This is argued by showing that neither the thesis of the absolute immutability or independence of values, nor the thesis of their historical dependence and individual creation hold. Neither hold but there is truth in both, and it is the interdependence between pre-existing values and self-created values that Raz focuses on in the following chapter, 'Universality and Difference'. This second chapter deals with the human ability to make sense and render intelligible the difference among people's values. Raz rejects the opposition between contingency and intelligibility: the claim that where personal taste and attachment, that is, diversity and social dependence start, intelligibility and universality end. Raz claims instead that there may well be an element of 'brute contingency' that is limiting the intelligibility of value, but also that 'not all aspects of our actions are rendered intelligible by reason' and that in some cases 'our reasons explain why we did what we did, but they do not explain why we did this rather than the equally eligible alternative' (*VRA*, p. 75).

Chapter 3, 'The Value of Staying Alive', is a demanding defence of the view that the continuation of being alive is not unconditionally and intrinsically good. The continuation of being alive is normally only a precondition of good. If this thesis were to be embraced, for Raz, the absolute bar that a principle of 'the sanctity of life' imposes on evaluating matters of life and death, would be lifted. Raz is aware of the counter-intuitive nature of his thesis, but believes that, if correctly appreciated, it would save us 'many contortious arguments'. He recalls the reasoning of the English Court of Appeal, which had to decide whether to order an operation to separate the Siamese twins, known as 'Jodie

and Mary', without which they would not have survived, or uphold the family's wish to reject the operation that would have killed Mary (*VRA*, pp. 79–80). Raz's point is that the judge in this case would have been free to consider Mary's best interest directly had he not been constrained by the false view that life is an intrinsic good, and had he argued that life is, normally, only a precondition of good.

The claim that life has an intrinsic value as such, regardless of its content, cannot be adequately countered, Raz acknowledges, by the intuition that in some cases living a while longer may be an undesirable prospect (for instance, if one is in incapacitating pain). Such intuition loses its appeal when instead of incapacitating pain, we imagine a condition of mild pain only. Nevertheless, that intuition illustrates the irreducible difference between those, like Raz, who find the claim that life has an intrinsic value puzzling, and those who defend it. While the former argue under the assumption that the value of life is to be found in the value of its contents, those who defend the idea of life's intrinsic value deny that the value of its contents, negative or positive as they may be, may ever alter the claim that continued life is of value *per se*. Survival, for example, may conflict with other values, such as being free of pain and, on balance, death may be better than survival for the individual concerned. Raz concedes to his opponents that this would be consistent with survival in itself being valuable and admits he has no argument against adopting such an assumption. All he can do is show that, one by one, any alternative claim proves less adequate than his own.

Chapter 4, 'Respecting People', addresses the possibility that one's life may be an impersonal good, that is, a good with which others can engage, even if the person whose life it is, cannot. 'Could my life present a value to others which they can relate to in ways that are not open to me?' The idea of an intrinsic value as contrasted to an instrumental value is discussed at length and so are both Kant's definition of people as ends in themselves and Nozick's reading of that definition. The most original argument is achieved by linking together the idea of 'a potential of being engaged with in the right way' (read 'value') with the idea that to be a valuer (read 'person') is to have the potential to engage with value in the right way. The two yield the idea that someone who is a valuer is also of intrinsic value.

Although this reviewer is in sympathy with many of Raz's conclusions, there is sometimes something unsettling about the way in which they are substantiated. An example from Chapter 3 can be used to illustrate the point. In refuting the claim that survival is a *component* of what is good for people, even if survival is not of value to the survivor, he argues that 'to be a component of a good is more than to be a condition for the occurrence of the good.' And being alive certainly is not a component of the good, otherwise we would have to imagine that this good component contributes to the good of the

whole and that it contributes to it in a manner that is distinctive to that good. To rescue the reader, he offers the following analogy: ‘The existence of the world is a precondition of savouring the taste of good wine. However, it is not part of the good of drinking wine. Likewise being alive is a precondition of anything being good or bad for me, but it does not contribute to the value of any good’ (*VR4*, p. 108). The solution offered by Raz, that is, that life is a precondition for the occurrence of the good, is shown as superior to the alternative, that is, that life is a component good, solely on the basis of the wine-drinking analogy. This kind of move is repeated in other parts of the text, alongside other more analytic arguments. This means that elements of the structure of reasoning supporting the conclusion that life is not an intrinsic good seem uncomfortably far removed from the gravity of the thesis they are used to support.

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