

Imagine yourself in the situation where you are asked to pick the greater of two numbers. You'd likely find yourself simply picking the number with the greatest value. The abstraction of our numerical system allows us to assign an absolute value to each number. However, if we consider the numbers as human individuals, the question becomes entirely different. It becomes much more difficult to pick the greater of two humans because identifying their value is not a trivial task. Notable philosophers have gone in great depth on the issue of human value, and we can gain insight on the matter through their work. By exploring their concepts and ideas, we can come to a strong conclusion that human value must be earned as opposed to given. The value of a human life is determined from the impact the person has made on other human lives. It is always changing, just as life is, and its source comes through the relationships we make with others.

It is important to first expand the concept of value as it pertains to the human being. We often view value as an objective measure of importance. First and foremost we must admit that the value of human life cannot be given in objective terms. There is simply no numerical value or otherwise that we can absolutely assign to the worth of a human. Human value simply *is*, and persists on a transcendental level. However, what we can do is begin to identify how it can be perceived. To do this, we must momentarily shift our focus to human nature.

If we are to look at the value of an individual, what we are really concerned with is their identity. Philosophically, this is usually termed as the "person" rather than the individual. The "person" refers to the intrinsic qualities which are gained rather than given, since "we are born in

the sense of being different from others, [but] we are not born persons.”<sup>1</sup> We are not concerned with biological properties, but rather who the individual really is on a fundamental level. We want to look at the soul of the human, the form. Descartes’ idea of individuality comes from the form or the essence. It is here where value rests, because value transcends time and space, as does the soul. Thus, value and worth must be anchored in the human soul.

Although we are not given value at birth, we are given the ability to pursue it. Our birth gave us life, and it is through life that “we can attain authentic human existence.”<sup>2</sup> Value must be earned rather than given. Vanier emphasizes this point when he says “worth is something to be [proven]; the unique value of each person is not acknowledged to be an intrinsic quality.”<sup>3</sup> What we have made clear is that value is not given at birth, rather authenticity is, which we will come to realize plays an important role in realizing value. Value has no meaning without authenticity. This is important to note early on in our analysis, as all further points that emphasize authenticity imply a direct effect on value.

From this authenticity that is given to us from birth, we have the freedom to exercise our rationality. The fact that we have freedom means that our body is capable of performing acts, governed by our rationale. As Descartes suggests, it is the person that thinks-- not the body. Therefore, actions made by the individual go beyond the scope of the body, into the domain of the soul, where value resides. It is from this fact that the disposition of the person contribute to how we can perceive their value. That is to say, that value is demonstrated through certain

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p61

<sup>2</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p97

<sup>3</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p81

actions made by the person. As long as an authentic-self is carrying out actions with a particular disposition, their value as a human being can begin to be interpreted. Plainly, we are saying that value is built up from the actions made by a person. However, not all actions carry out the kind of value we are concerned with. Recall we want to evaluate an intrinsic value related to the worth and authenticity of the individual. For this, a passive action such as driving to work does not add any *real* value to the individual. The question arises then, what actions are we concerned with?

The actions that human value resides in are the ones that affect others. In fact, “immediacy and togetherness is the most effective form of action.”<sup>4</sup> It is through these kinds of actions that we earn “the power to become unified and enter into reality.”<sup>5</sup> At the forefront we must acknowledge that these different actions can have different degrees of value. Marcel describes the actions, “with something like the mystical communion of souls in worship at the top end, and with something like an ad hoc association for some strictly practical and rigidly defined purpose at the bottom.”<sup>6</sup> Although actions all have different levels, they all contribute to altering the value of a human being. They can be as minor as holding the door open for a stranger, or as committed as a lifelong marriage. By delving deeper into these actions we can begin to see similarities between them.

The source of these kinds of actions towards others “happens from a centre of inwardness.”<sup>7</sup> They come from a deep understanding of ourselves, and of others. Ultimately, they

---

<sup>4</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p51

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p37

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: I. Reflection & Mystery* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950) , p179

<sup>7</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p61

are all rooted in love. A love “that transforms, a love that grows in and through belonging.”<sup>8</sup> In order to build our value as a human being, we must first realize love for ourselves, and then love for others. Love “liberates us from self-centered compulsions and inner hurts,”<sup>9</sup> and only through liberation can we see the bigger picture of which actions we can take. Love allows us to pursue common good, “which helps all to have a better life.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, hate is detrimental to the actions that build value. Acts which have a negative impact on others in society reduce the value of the individual committing them. When our spirits are filled with hate, “we do not feel any responsibility towards others, [and] there is no reason for us to work harmoniously towards the common good.”<sup>11</sup> Hate has an inverse relationship with value. Buber raises a special point when he says, “hate sees only a part of a being. If a man sees a whole being and still hates, he is no longer in relation but in I-It; for to say Thou to a man means to affirm his being.”<sup>12</sup> Buber is referring to his I-Thou concept, and is suggesting that a person who expresses hate even after getting to know another human is treating them as a ‘thing’ rather than a ‘person.’ The importance of the I-Thou relationship “does not mean simply unity or identity, nor is it any form of empathy ... [it] is the word of relation and togetherness.”<sup>13</sup> Can we be so blind as to not see our own humanity within others? In fact, Buber goes so far as referring to this as an Evil, describing “the loneliness of modern man before an

---

<sup>8</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p5

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p5

<sup>10</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p61

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p6

<sup>12</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p59

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p61

unfriendly universe and before men whom he associate with but does not meet.”<sup>14</sup> The point here is that actions carried out with Hate are misaligned with the goal to building human value, and disconnect us from one another.

Not only is our value founded in outwards acts towards others, but our own personal view of our own value is in fact shaped by others as well. Marcel tells the story of a young man who attends a cocktail party. As soon as he enters, he becomes self-conscious and notices all sorts of glances made at him by the other guests. In his mind he is thinking of all the different reasons that the guests may be looking at him. He feels that he “has been literally thrown ... to the malevolent lucidity of other people’s glance.”<sup>15</sup> As beings that are fundamentally driven to connect with others, we have all been in a situation where we think of ourselves in terms of what others think of us. It is in this state that we feel our personal value is in the hands of others. Marcel goes on to say that eventually another person approaches and greets our young man. As soon as a conversation begins “all at once a bond is created and, what specially matters, there is a relaxation of tension.”<sup>16</sup> The bond that has been formed has caused the man to find value in himself. This feeling is something shared within all humans, perhaps even in our own experiences and Marcel describes it in detail in the following excerpt:

“When somebody’s presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact.”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p14

<sup>15</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: I. Reflection & Mystery* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), p177

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p177

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p205

Within Marcel's words we find a description that captures the positive feelings we experience in that moment when we find value within ourselves. The self-realization of this value can only be experienced when we become connected in unity with one another.

We have established that one cannot attain a higher degree of value without performing acts that positively impact other human beings. Our actions must come from our authentic soul, and spill outwards towards others. Only by joining "a being to all beings [can] you lure out of it its true individuality."<sup>18</sup> Our value lies in who we are, and we can only find this within "the unity of man and man, of man and the world, of life and death; the unity which is realized by the man who in his own life has direction and meaning."<sup>19</sup> We must be "encouraged to make choices and to become responsible for [our] own lives and for the lives of others."<sup>20</sup> The growth of our individuality does not come in relation to oneself, but rather "in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other."<sup>21</sup>

It is in this light that we raise the dangers of pursuing value improperly. Actions lose their authenticity when they "flow from a need to feel wanted and loved more than from a true desire for others to be well and free."<sup>22</sup> As we learned earlier, without authenticity, there is no value. Buber sheds some light on the issue in the following passage:

---

<sup>18</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p31

<sup>19</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p39

<sup>20</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p15

<sup>21</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p82

<sup>22</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p112

“Wholly ineffective and illusory is the will for social reality of circle of intellectual who fight for the transformation of human relations yet remain as indirect and unreal as ever in their personal life with men.”<sup>23</sup>

Value is more than just thinking in a certain way. It is through action, not thought, that a human can build value. When you commit an act of helping another, it must come from a place of honesty and care rather than a need for approval or to gain something out of it. The person must actually *want* to help others.

It is appropriate to extend the scope of our ideas into the implications of an individual and society, and what role value plays in this connection. We have stressed that value comes from positive actions towards others, but a significant detail has been left unexplored. If man is pursuing positive actions towards others, then he is also pursuing actions towards society, for society is the unification of people. It is a fundamental human quality to want to strive for community. As Buber says, “in this moment of western culture a great longing for community possesses the souls of men.”<sup>24</sup> The human goal to maximize our value is to create a society where “we grow to maturity and discover what it means to be human and to act in a human way.”<sup>25</sup> A society that is built on the “meaningfulness of work and of mutual help, [and] on the leadership of those men who can take responsibility for individual lives.”<sup>26</sup> Each human life must be respected, and cherished. Society is where a “reality of spatial, functional, emotional, or spiritual together exists ... in the workers’ fellowship, in comradeship, and in religious union.”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p46

<sup>24</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p46

<sup>25</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p59

<sup>26</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p47

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p46

Community lies in society, and with it, the hearts of men who are striving to find value and worth in their lives.

A truly valuable human life, belongs to the individual that “[gives] generously of their time, energy, and knowledge so that others may eat, be clothed, find shelter and live in peace.”<sup>28</sup> An individual “who can withstand the thousand fold questioning glance of individual lives, who give true answer to the trembling mouths that time after time demand from them decision.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps these are the kind of qualities we look for if we are placed back in the situation of selecting the greater of two individuals. It is only through looking at the impact that they have made with others, can we realize their human value. Let us not lose sight of our goal: it is not to ‘obtain’ the most value, or compete in value with our fellow man. Instead we must use our authenticity to perform acts that make us see value in ourselves, which contributes to the overall value of the society. When we look at value in this light, we can see the impact it has on the overall goal of humanity. We must strive to create a society that is built on individuals helping one another to find worth, direction, and ultimately value. Only then can we step back and look at things on a grander scale. It is no longer about the value of a single human life, but our entire value as mankind.

---

<sup>28</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), p109

<sup>29</sup> Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p43