

## **What Gives Humans Value?**

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**Question: Discuss the advantages the argument from substantial identity has over AEA views in terms of explanatory power.**

Lesson 5 – K. Coughlan – IP

Why do humans have value? One possible answer is that humans have intrinsic value by virtue of the sort of thing they are, i.e., their “substance” as a rational moral agent.

According to Francis J. Beckwith, humans are “ontologically prior to their parts,” meaning they retain this substance as long as they exist, regardless of any changes their bodies may undergo (Beckwith 2007, 133).

An alternative view states that people do not have intrinsic value until they develop certain specified traits or properties. This view inevitably leads to the conclusion that not all human beings are equally valuable. Some have the necessary traits whereas others do not. Francis J. Beckwith refers to such proponents as “anti-equality advocates,” or “AEA” (Ibid., 130).

The substantial identity view is far more consistent with our common perceptions of both morality and of ourselves than is AEA. For example, one logical consequence of AEA is that human beings are no different than artifacts. If we only gain intrinsic value once we have certain “parts” in place then we are akin to machines that come into existence gradually, part by part. Our moral intuition, however, tells us that there is a fundamental difference between humans and machines (although this implication of AEA may be an outgrowth of an allegiance to materialism).

Beckwith also points out that AEA cannot explain why it would be morally wrong to kill a comatose patient who will lose all his memories and knowledge when he awakens (Ibid., 135). He would no longer possess the characteristics that many abortion-choice advocates require for the unborn to have value. While it is true that he can be expected to regain them, the same is

true of a fetus once it is born. If it is permissible to kill the unborn on these grounds, it must also be permissible to kill the comatose patient. If the patient derives intrinsic value by nature of his substance, however, then our moral conclusion would mirror our moral intuition that killing him would be murder.

Finally, by relating value to a developmental trait, AEA makes it into a degreed property. Some humans are further along in their journey toward possessing the necessary traits than others, and therefore some humans must be more valuable. But this runs contrary to our intuition that all humans have equal value, something easily compatible with the substance view.

#### REFERENCES

Beckwith, Francis J. 2007. *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.