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RATIONALITY AND HUMAN VALUE: AN ARISTOTELIAN RESPONSE TO ROBERT ADAMS

Justin Matchulat

Human beings are typically regarded as having more value than sheep; they are said to bear the image of God or have unique value and dignity. But to specify what grounds this unique value proves quite difficult. Robert Adams argues that a traditional account that grounds this value in rationality will not do, since it cannot satisfy a number of desiderata. But I develop a broadly Aristotelian account of rationality and show that it can indeed account for the rich phenomena Adams points us towards. Moreover, unlike Adams's "complex package" view, my view is able to provide a unified explanation for why these phenomena manifest human beings' unique value.

I. Introduction

In *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, Robert Adams holds a Platonic view of the Good. God is the Good, and all other good things are good by virtue of some resemblance they have to God. Now human beings are generally regarded as having a unique value that is greater than the value of vegetative life and other forms of animal life. They are said to bear the *image* of God in a way that elevates them in value above all other earthly creatures, or in another idiom, to be persons who have dignity. By virtue of what, Adams asks, do human beings have this unique value? As we will see, Adams's answer is rich and has much to recommend it. In what follows, I begin by laying out (i) Adams's criticisms of rival views of human value, including the traditional view based on rationality; (ii) the desiderata he holds any view should meet; and (iii) the virtues of his own view. I then argue, contra Adams, that it is rationality that grounds the unique value of human beings. I develop a broadly Aristotelian view of rationality and show how it can answer Adams's objections, meet his own desiderata, and provide a more unified explanation of the phenomena than Adams's own account.

Before moving forward, note that the view I develop here in conversation with Adams is also viable for those who do not accept a Platonic, theistic ontology. For both Adams and I are seeking a satisfying account of what grounds the value of human persons as persons, or what grounds the dignity of persons. In other words, we are simply seeking the feature(s)



by virtue of which human beings are commonly held to have more value than sheep. And one can be justified in accepting the proposed account of that value even if one does not accept that the causal source of that value is God.

II. Adams on the Value of Human Persons

When inquiring into what grounds the value of human persons as persons, Adams first considers the traditional candidate of *rationality*.¹ He characterizes rationality as “a complex system of capacities—some that we possess in higher degree than sheep, some that we have and they don’t have at all, and perhaps some that we simply share with sheep.”² Adams objects to this solution on the grounds that rationality, taken as a complex system of capacities, admits of degrees: some are able to exercise these capacities well, some not so well, and some not at all. Because rationality admits of degrees, it would be inequalitarian to make it the criterion of value of persons as persons, since a person’s value would wax or wane along with his or her degree of rationality. What is needed is a criterion that does not admit of degrees and can be the ground for having equal regard for human persons as persons. Adams suggests a specific type of rationality, *rational agency*, as a second candidate. He explains, “We could say that one has enough rationality to be a rational agent, and to be as much a rational agent as anyone else (though not rational in *every* sense), if one is able *at all* to do something *for a reason*.”³ But the rational agency criterion for the value of human persons is “much too simple and one-sided,” since it leaves out of view a number of features that Adams holds to be central to human value.⁴ For one, it leaves out of the picture emotional, social, and creative capacities.⁵ More significantly, it leaves out of view the human *body* and in particular human *sexuality*. Why should we think the latter are central to human value? Adams contends that rather than try to simply intellectually nail down a feature that accounts for the value of persons, we should also listen to our emotion of moral horror, our sense of “where we would be most deeply violated.”⁶ Harkening to this sense allows us to see that the human body and sexuality are closely con-

¹The point of speaking of the value of human persons *as persons* is to differentiate this value from the human person’s value with respect to some particular function (such as running) or attribute (such as physical beauty). For simplicity I will hereafter simply use “the value of human persons” unless the context calls for more clarity. Also, I throughout this essay use “human dignity” in a way synonymous with “the value of human persons as persons”; I should note, however, that Adams does not utilize the term “dignity” to this end, perhaps because of its association with Kantian ethical theory.

²Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 116.

⁵Ibid., 117.

⁶Ibid., 116.

nected to our value as human persons, for we experience an acute feeling of moral horror when considering acts of sexual violation such as rape.⁷ And last, Adams claims that we need a view of human personhood that gives due value not just to our rational being, but also to the enjoyment of our vegetative and animal being, which the rational agency view also leaves out.⁸

Adams's settled solution is that the value of human persons is grounded in a complex *package* of features:

What distinguishes us from dogs and daisies is a complex system of features reasonably regarded as excellent. It includes rationality, but also emotional, social, and creative capacities related to rationality but going beyond it in various ways.⁹

Some of the features in the package admit of degrees and allow for ranking among individuals, but the whole package does not admit of degrees and hence the value of human persons as persons cannot be ranked on its basis.¹⁰ Adams's solution for grounding the value of human persons is able to account for (i) egalitarianism with respect to the value of human persons, (ii) a large range of human ways of being (intellectual, emotional, social, and creative), and (iii) the significance of our bodily life and sexuality.

Adams's desiderata point towards highly significant aspects of the value of human persons, and I agree that any adequate theory of this value needs to meet these desiderata. Although Adams's solution has explanatory power to meet these three desiderata, one might find his complex package of features view an unsatisfying explanation. For nothing is said about why *these* features make it into the package or about what unifies the features in the package. But there is an option for grounding the unique value of human persons that Adams does not consider. One might give a plausible account of *rationality* such that it does *not* admit of degrees. In the next section, I lay out such an account of rationality that is broadly Aristotelian and can indeed meet Adams's desiderata.

⁷Ibid. Adams writes, "This is one of the places at which we can learn from the emotion of moral horror. Our sense of where we would be most deeply violated is probably a better clue than the traditional speculations are to the contours of the image of God in us, and thus of what is sacred in us and what it is that constitutes the value of persons as persons. . . . The sense of violation clearly marks sexuality as an area intimately linked with our personhood and its value. I doubt that we can expect a thoroughly satisfying rationale on this point. To an outside view, nutrition seems as closely connected as sex with our personal being. Yet the force-feeding of a conscious adult, while certainly offensive, and perhaps an outrage, does not seem to reach the same level of horror as rape."

⁸Ibid.: "One of the ways in which I think the excellence that all of us possess just by being persons involves more than rationality is that it begins with the simplest functions of animal and vegetative life."

⁹Ibid., 117.

¹⁰Ibid.

Before I do, we should note two points about Adams's treatment of the value of human persons that I will be following. First, with respect to the value of persons as persons, Adams does *not* take up cases of human beings affected by severe developmental problems, disability, or humans at early stages of in utero development.¹¹ (For sake of brevity, I will henceforth refer to this set of cases as *marginal cases*). Adams assumes paradigm cases of human beings that are fully functional or close thereto and seeks to account for their dignity. For the purposes of this essay, I will follow Adams and limit myself to accounting for human dignity in this range of cases. So I will assume that *at least* in this set of paradigm cases, which includes most human beings, human beings qua persons have unique value or dignity, and will argue that the view of rationality I develop can account for dignity in this range of cases. This view is of course compatible with the view that all members of the human species, including the marginal cases, have dignity, but I won't assume or argue for that conclusion in this essay. For a comprehensive defense of this view would require another project, due to the range of cases and metaphysical issues involved. However, the view of rationality and human dignity I develop could put one in a position to make such an argument, and in a later section I consider some ways such an argument could go.

Second, Adams holds that the value of human persons as persons is egalitarian, i.e., it does not admit of a more or less. While I find this view eminently plausible, some may take issue with it. But in this essay I will not take up the further project of arguing for this egalitarian thesis, but will follow Adams in assuming it. I will then argue that, *contra* Adams, rationality properly understood can account for the egalitarian nature of the value of human persons or human dignity.

III. Getting Rationality Right

Adams rejects the view that rationality can ground the value of persons as persons since rationality admits of degrees. Peter Geach takes on the same type of objection in the course of defending the traditional definition that the human being is a rational animal. Geach writes,

There is one old objection to this traditional definition [the human being is a rational animal]: that men are rational in various degrees, and some of them only to a very slight degree, so that by this definition their humanity too would vary considerably in degree. This is an error of category, precisely in the Aristotelian sense of the word: it confuses "rational" as a differentia of a species with "rational" as expressing some actual capacity. "Rational" as a differentia relates not to capacities of first level, capacities for certain specific performances, but rather (as has well been put by Anthony Kenny) to a capacity *to acquire capacities*. There is a wide

¹¹Adams does discuss humans in utero with reference to the notion of the *sacred*, though he does not attribute to them the value of persons as persons. See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 114. For more on Adams's understanding of the sacred, see note 22 below.

variety of capacities that human beings can acquire and other animals cannot: what is innate in every man born is the capacity to acquire such capacities.¹²

So Geach would claim that Adams is committing a category mistake. Adams treats rationality as a first-order capacity, a capacity for specific (presumably intellectual) performances. First-order capacities, such as my capacity to read Latin, indeed admit of degrees. But rationality should not be identified as such a first-order capacity, but rather as a higher-order capacity to acquire a wide range of first-order rational capacities, including the capacity to read Latin. To illustrate, because I have a rational nature, I possess this higher-order capacity of rationality, and hence am capable of learning a language; because of my acquired capacity to speak English, I have the capacity to tell stories; and because of my capacity to tell stories, I have the capacity to entertain children with stories about hobbits and orcs. Here we see a hierarchy of rational capacities; rationality is the capacity at the top of the hierarchy that enables all of the more specific rational capacities. To take another example, I have a capacity to play the guitar, but not a capacity to play Spanish Flamenco music; nevertheless, my capacity to play the guitar enables me to acquire the capacity to play Spanish Flamenco music. Here again we see a hierarchy of capacities. Following Geach's line of thought, it is plausible to say that my capacity to play the guitar could ultimately be traced back to one overriding capacity: by virtue of my higher-order capacity of rationality, I am capable of exercising practical rationality, one manifestation of which is art, which can in rational beings with bodies like ours take on the form of playing the guitar.

It should be clear that on the Aristotelian understanding of rationality I am advancing, rational activity is not at all limited to discursive, abstract thinking. As Harold Joachim says in his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Thought (intelligence, reasoning), as man's distinctive character, permeates all his being and doing."¹³ Playing the violin, dancing, having a conversation with a friend, deliberating about a career, building a doghouse, playing a game, enjoying a beautiful landscape or the scent of roses, speculating about the nature of the universe, praying—all of these are manifestations of our rationality.¹⁴ Each of

¹²Peter Geach, "What is Man?" in *Truth and Hope* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 18. For the view of Anthony Kenny that Geach cites, see Kenny, "The Geography of Mind" in *Essays on the Aristotelian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68–69.

¹³Harold Joachim, *Aristotle, The Nichomachean Ethics: A Commentary*, ed. D. A. Rees (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 2. Ralph McInerny makes the same point: "Aristotle is not distinguishing human action from fiddling, fishing, and flauting; rather he is after what each embodies in its way, namely, rational conscious activity." See Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 22.

¹⁴See Geach, "What is Man?" 19, where Geach gives a rich description of the numerous and varied rational activities that manifest our rational capacities:

these is an exercise of a specific rational capacity that can be developed because of the sort of beings we are, rational animals. We can see that on this view, our social and creative capacities are types of first-order rational capacity. Furthermore, rationality is obviously the grounds for rational agency. By virtue of being a rational animal, I can exercise practical rationality and do things for reasons.

In addition, rationality is what accounts for the distinctive richness of human emotional life, and this in two ways. First, it is reasonable to think that human emotions are dependent upon beliefs.¹⁵ A simple argument would be that emotions are intentional, intentional states depend upon a network of concepts and beliefs, and therefore emotions depend upon beliefs. Consider my love for another human being. This love depends upon a number of beliefs I have about her: I believe that she is truthful and not deceptive in how she presents herself, that she has such and such a history, that she has such and such attributes, and so forth. It is rather questionable whether I could experience love for another in a distinctively human way without having a set of beliefs about the world in general and that person in particular. I am not saying that the emotion of love can be reduced to beliefs, but that a set of beliefs forms an essential part of the background for the human experience of love and also enters into that experience. What is more, not only do human emotions require a background of

It would take an immensely long description to cover even roughly the activities manifesting the rational capacities men can acquire. Most of these activities have some close connection with language, but they extend far further than linguistic performances. What I give here is a mere sampling. The composition of music, and the invention of forms of dance and ceremonial. The building of houses and other structures, whereby man becomes able to live in varied and very mutable climates and is not confined to a particular ecological niche. The mastery of fire and flames, as means of heating and lighting, which also serve for preparing food-stuffs and other materials for human needs. The playing according to rules of all manner of games, athletic and intellectual. The devising of methods and standards of measurement. The devising of tools and machines for all sorts of purposes under human handling: the forelimbs of beasts are specialized, e.g. for walking or clawing, man's hand alone is *organon organōn*, the tool adapted for making and using tools. The devising of instruments of observation that supplement human sense-organs. The devising of means of transport, by land and sea (and now in the air). The preservation of traditions about ancestors and about the past generally, so that the inventions and discoveries of one generation are not lost to later generations. The use of language, not just for messages about the immediate environment, but for telling stories and for speculations about the origin and nature of the world we live in. All manner of representative arts. And finally, activities aimed at getting into contact with some superior being or beings who can govern the course of man's world and grant his petitions.

Such are rational activities; we may see and hear all around us the huge difference they make to our environment.

¹⁵The view that human emotions are dependent upon a network of beliefs is advanced by Donald Davidson. See "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 156–158; see also "Rational Animals" in *Actions and Events: Essays on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore and Brian P. McLaughlin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 474–476. For a clear presentation and development of this view of Davidson (to which I am particularly indebted), see Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72–80.

beliefs and concepts, but the emotions themselves, being intentional states, have objects. Some emotions have relatively simple objects—a person can fear an approaching lion or hope for peace—while other emotions have propositional objects, as when a person fears *that* he will be robbed in the dark alley, or hopes *that* she passes her exam.¹⁶ In either case, rationality is permeating the emotion, by way of either applying a concept or providing a propositional content.

Second, human beings, unlike other animals, are able to form and refine their emotions. Human beings are not enslaved to the emotional makeup they have been given by birth or have acquired from their environment or their own actions. They are capable, at least to some extent, of forming new habits of feeling, that is, dispositions that render them sensitive to the world in a new way. Moreover, human beings are able to modify or stimulate occurrent emotions by considering various thoughts or engaging their imagination. To use Aristotle's language, our emotions are able to listen to and follow reason.¹⁷ And hence we see two key ways in which rationality, by virtue of the way it permeates our emotions, accounts for the distinctive richness of human emotional life.

Now given the wide range of capacities I have mentioned, one might question whether these capacities have their source in a *unified*, higher-level *rational* capacity rather than some other source. In regard to artistic or creative capacities in particular, one might think these have their source in an imaginative capacity or something similar, rather than in reason. Using "art" in a broad sense, the following would all count as types of artistic capacity on my account: the capacity to tell stories; to build structures or simpler artifacts; to create works of fine art in a non-linguistic medium, as in painting and sculpture; and to create music through one's voice or an external instrument. What can be said in favor of the claim that a unified *rational* capacity is fundamentally at work in this range of cases?

First, some of these capacities require language use, as is manifest in cases of story telling and the creation of lyrical music. The ability to acquire and use a language is clearly a first-order rational capacity. In the case of artistic capacities that do not involve explicit linguistic expressions, they certainly do require the use of higher-level concepts, and such concept acquisition and use falls under the domain of reason. Suppose an artist wishes to paint a work that includes a human being. The artist must have some understanding of the human form, the meaning of various types of facial expression and bodily posture and the responses these can evoke in viewers, and so forth. All of these involve the use of higher-order concepts.¹⁸ And the know-how involved in, say, translating an idea in

¹⁶See Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 156–157.

¹⁷Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.13.1102b25–1103a4.

¹⁸More specifically, such artistic understanding involves what empirical psychologists in Schema Theory now call *scripts* or *personae*. For an account of these from a philosopher's

one's mind to a canvas by paint requires a sophisticated understanding of spatial relations in order to get the dimensions in the artistic rendering correct. Furthermore, the artist must rely on instrumental rationality or means/end reasoning. She must calculate, for example, what needs to be done to obtain the color or texture desired. Last, the artist must make judgments of fittingness about the colors, expressions, and so forth that are appropriate given what she is striving to convey.

These truths about concept use, instrumental reasoning, and judgment would apply *mutatis mutandis* to other forms of artistic activity that manifest rational capacities. In any of these cases, we can discover a web of concepts, instrumental reasoning, know-how, and judgments required for the art, and all of these are distinctive marks of rationality. Hence, it is appropriate that these artistic capacities be classified as types of (first-order) *rational capacity*.

I should say that I am *not* claiming that such forms of artistic expression involve *only* the use of reason. The use of imagination and certain motor abilities, for instance, are also crucial. But in regard to human beings, the imagination and motor abilities are able to operate in ways that are crucially different from the analogous capacities in lower animals. Consider specifically the case of imagination. The human imagination has at its creative disposal a vast range of concepts and representations that only human beings are capable of forming and retaining. Moreover, the human being is able to stand back and render judgment on these concepts and representations and consider how these can be translated into a different medium. And so we can see that what is key to *human* imagination is its relation to rationality.

Now Adams does claim that social, emotional, and creative capacities are all related to rationality even though they go beyond it.¹⁹ Given that Adams allows that these other capacities are *related* to rationality, one might wonder how the view I am proposing differs from his complex package view. First, on my view, what gives human beings their distinctive value just *is* their rationality. This feature is sufficient for giving human beings their distinctive value, and this fact separates my view from Adams's view. Second, rationality on my view is not conceived as being *on a par* with a cluster of other types of capacity, and then bearing some relation to the other capacities in that cluster. Rationality is a higher-order capacity and as such is what is responsible for the uniqueness and value of *human* social, creative, and emotional capacities. Mere animals have affective states and certain social and creative capacities, but these states and capacities are significantly different in that they are not and cannot be permeated by

perspective, as well as how such scripts provide grounds for a theory-laden view of perception, see John Greco, *Putting Skeptics in Their Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 239–241. Moreover, if Greco's theory-laden view of perception is correct, then there is an even more direct argument for the sort of rational permeation of other capacities I am arguing for.

¹⁹Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 117.

rationality. A human being is not a specimen of sentient animal life with rationality stacked on top, as it were. Rather, rationality permeates and informs human nature; rationality lifts up and transforms a human being's perceptual, affective, social, creative, and action-oriented capacities such that human beings are able to engage in a uniquely human form of life. To put it another way, rationality enables a human being to be responsive to a world, and not just an environment. Our human experience of a world displays at a phenomenological level how rationality permeates human life.²⁰ Other rational beings such as God, angels, and Martians, assuming they exist, have their special dignity by virtue of their rationality. It may be that in their case, they lack certain first-order capacities that human beings have due to a higher degree of perfection or simply through a different makeup that fits them for their surroundings. My point is that in the case of human beings, lower capacities are given their unique value by their reference to reason and their capacity to be transformed and permeated by reason.²¹

IV. Interlude: Objections and Clarifications

1. Recall that one of Adams's desiderata for an account of human value is that it be egalitarian. In the previous section, I articulated an understanding of rationality such that it is a higher-order capacity that does not admit of degrees, and hence meets this desideratum. But one might now object as follows: It is obvious that some human beings can and do develop more first-order rational capacities than others. And from this fact, it follows that the higher-order capacity of rationality *does* come in degrees. So if, for example, Sue is able to develop more first-order rational capacities than Ellen, then Sue possesses rationality to a greater degree than Ellen.

This objection assumes that if a capacity's extension admits of a more or less, then the capacity possession itself admits of a more or less. This principle is plausible for some first-order capacities or capacities for specific performances: if A can excel at more sports than B, it is reasonable to conclude that A is more athletic than B. But there is no good reason to think that in *all* cases, or for *any* capacity, variation of capacity extension entails variation of capacity possession. Even in the case of first-order

²⁰See Geach, "What is Man?" 29. See also John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 114–119.

²¹It is worth saying that the term "rationality" is perhaps a cumbersome term for the higher-order capacity I have been explicating. In modern usage, it can have connotations limited to discursive, abstract reasoning. In this section and throughout this essay, I explain and give examples of a broadly Aristotelian notion of rationality that is much more expansive. Nevertheless, other terms might better express, or at least help to express, the feature I wish to elucidate. We might say that what distinguishes human beings and gives them their value is *mind*: human beings are minded animals, capable of being present to a world. An even more suggestive term for this capacity, a term that brings out the richness and dynamism of this capacity, and does not have connotations that exclude social, creative and emotional features from its range, is *spirit*.

capacities, this principle need not hold. Suppose a person who has the capacity to form meaningful friendships comes to develop friendships with more people or more types of people. While this could be because she now possesses this capacity to a greater degree, it need not. For she may simply have come into an environment where she now has more opportunities for developing meaningful friendships; and so her capacity now extends to more people or more types of people, but the degree to which she possesses the capacity hasn't varied.

So the aforementioned principle doesn't even hold for all cases of first-order capacities. And when it comes to a higher-order capacity, and specifically to rationality, why should we assume that this principle holds? For as I have been laying out this account, rationality is a rather different *kind* of capacity; it is a capacity for acquiring capacities, and we shouldn't assume that what holds of capacities for specific activities (and only some cases of them at that), holds for this capacity to acquire capacities. What is more, there is a readily available way to explain why rationality varies in extension. To illustrate, assume that Sue can develop more first-order rational capacities than Ellen. This need not be due to their possessing the higher-order capacity of rationality to different degrees, but can plausibly be accounted for by other factors, say, that Sue has a better imagination, memory, or hand-eye coordination (any of which could be the result of more perfect bodily organs). These other capacities in Sue are better fit to be permeated by rationality than in Ellen, and hence Sue can develop more first-order rational capacities than Ellen. Again, this is not because Sue has the higher-order capacity of rationality to a greater degree (for on this account rationality isn't the kind of capacity that admits of degrees), but because of the perfection of other capacities she has which allows rationality to permeate them.

2. One might also wonder whether and why rationality is *valuable*. More specifically, one might object that while rationality is clearly *instrumentally* valuable, as is evidenced by the broad range of activities and experiences it capacitates one for, it isn't clear whether or why the capacity itself is *intrinsically* valuable. And (so the objection goes) any property that confers intrinsic worth or dignity must itself be intrinsically valuable and not merely instrumentally valuable.

In response, we should first note that *any* capacity is going to be instrumentally valuable simply by virtue of the sort of thing it is: a capacity is by nature a power *for* doing or undergoing something. So it is not surprising that the instrumental value of a capacity is especially evident. But why should this fact about the nature of capacities preclude them from also being intrinsically valuable? Let us examine the higher-order capacity of rationality more closely. This capacity enables both the acquiring of first-order rational capacities as well as the manifestation of those capacities. Let us call these first-order capacities and their manifestations the *fruits* of rationality. Now one might be tempted to say that it is really only the

fruits of rationality that are intrinsically valuable and not the capacity that enables them. But this would leave us with a view where the ways of being and doing that rationality enables are intrinsically valuable, but the source of these ways of being and doing is only instrumentally valuable. But that doesn't seem right. It seems more plausible to say that the intrinsic value of rationality is *revealed* or shown by its fruits. When we see the wide range of capacities, activities, and experiences that rationality enables, we are put in a position to *recognize* rationality's intrinsic value. (This is of course compatible with the fruits themselves or some set thereof also being intrinsically valuable.) The intrinsic value of rationality as a capacity is revealed to us precisely when we recognize that *it* is the condition for the possibility of the emotional, social, and intellectual fruits that it capacitates one for.

The above response presupposes that it makes sense to speak of a capacity as being intrinsically or instrumentally valuable. But before moving on, I wish to raise a caveat about this way of speaking since I fear that it is potentially misleading. It is perhaps more appropriate to speak of the whole *person* as being intrinsically valuable, and then to ask by virtue of what this is the case. And when we pick out rationality as endowing the person with intrinsic value, we shouldn't presuppose that the further question of whether this capacity *itself* is intrinsically valuable is coherent. For if it is the person that is the true bearer of intrinsic value, then it is plausible that the question of whether the endowing property is intrinsically valuable or not simply does not arise. In sum, either the talk of the rational capacity's being intrinsically or instrumentally valuable is coherent or it isn't. If it is coherent, then my argument in the previous paragraph suffices to establish its intrinsic value. And if it isn't coherent, then the objection that rationality is merely instrumentally valuable is defused.

3. Someone may ask at this point: "You have said that social, creative, and emotional capacities in human beings get their unique value by being enabled and permeated with rationality. But what are we to say of the social, creative, and emotional capacities of human beings who are not fully developed or who are disabled? Are those capacities without value?" As I stated earlier, I limit this essay to accounting for the unique value or dignity of human beings in the paradigm cases Adams has in mind, and accordingly I do not take up and decisively argue that the individuals in the marginal cases have dignity. Nevertheless, I will indicate some lines of thought relevant to this objection to show that, supposing my view is correct, there are resources for dealing with the marginal cases.

First, I am not claiming that rational activity or being permeated by it is the *only* value in the universe. There is plenty of room both in Adams's Platonic theory and other theories of value for sentient animal life and other forms of life to have value and a relatively high degree of value

in the overall scheme of things.²² So if a human being is in a condition that we would not characterize as being relevantly different from forms of sentient animal life, or if a human being is in an unresponsive state, it does not follow that the actual social, emotional, and creative activities and experiences that that human being *is* capable of are without value. These activities and experiences (and the capacities that enable them), though perhaps not permeated by rationality, still involve a relatively high degree of value.

Moreover, even supposing that these human beings lack the higher-order capacity of rationality, it could still be true that they have dignity or at least should be regarded as having dignity. For it could be that their dignity or how we should regard them derives from the unique *relation* they have to human beings who possess rationality and therefore dignity.

Last, just because these human beings in the marginal cases cannot manifest, or cannot fully manifest rationality, it doesn't follow—without further argument—that they lack this higher-order capacity. For it could be the case that they have the capacity, but simply aren't able to manifest it because of a bodily lack or defect.²³ Geach in fact follows and develops this line of thought:

²²See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 114. Adams here applies the notion of the *sacred* to the human fetus, lower animals, and plants, since in all of these cases there is some likeness to God. Adams does not, however, attribute to these beings the value of persons as persons.

²³Here we could distinguish between a criterion for biological species membership, on the one hand, and an Aristotelian-type definition of *human being*, on the other. So an individual would count as a member of the biological species *human* just in case he or she has a human genetic code. However, even though some individuals who have a human genetic code cannot manifest rationality, and even supposing that some humans lack the higher-order capacity of rationality altogether, the judgment "Human beings are rational animals" (or "The human being is a rational animal") could still be true. How so? Here I would refer to the work of Michael Thompson and Philippa Foot (which draws on a remark of G. E. M. Anscombe) on the notion of an Aristotelian categorical. The basic idea is that certain categorical judgments of the form "S's are F" or "The S is F" are a unique type of judgment that characterize the life-form of a species. But these judgments are not to be understood as universally quantified judgments, which is to say that they do not purport to predicate a feature of every individual member of a species. As such, these Aristotelian categoricals are not falsified by simply pointing to counter-examples. Nor are they to be understood as statistical generalizations. So for example, "The tiger has four legs" would be a true Aristotelian categorical that is not falsified by pointing out the existence of three-legged tigers. So with respect to human beings, the judgment "The human being is a rational animal" could be true while there could nevertheless be individuals who for developmental reasons either cannot manifest rationality or lack the capacity altogether. This account would of course need to be developed and defended, but I consider it to have an intuitive plausibility and moreover it helps clarify my view. For I want to say that rationality is what characterizes human beings and is what is manifested in the features and capacities that reveal our unique value, while at the same time admitting that some human beings don't manifest rationality. But if the "The human being is a rational animal" is understood as an Aristotelian categorical that defines the human life-form, then the existence of counter-examples that are the result of developmental issues need not represent a challenge to this part of my view. For the notion of an Aristotelian categorical, see Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 247–297;

Man alone is a rational animal here below, and all members of the human species are rational animals in the sense I have been explaining. Human disabilities which block the human capacity to acquire capacities do not prove the absence of this higher-order capacity. In many cases that would once have appeared hopeless we have learned how to remove or circumvent the impediment; we have learned how to communicate with children blind and deaf at once or severely spastic; many disabilities can be prevented or cured by medical means, like supplying a missing chemical substance or devising a diet free from something poisonous to an individual. Where no such beneficent devices yet exist, we need not recognize a distinction in principle.²⁴

As we can see, there are a number of ways that this inquiry could go. I highlight the above lines of thought to show that (i) my view doesn't entail that the social, creative, and emotional capacities and activities displayed in the marginal cases lack substantive value, even supposing that these human beings completely lack rationality; and (ii) my view doesn't entail that these human beings lack rationality or dignity. So while I don't take up the project here, I do indicate how one could argue that these human beings have dignity with or without rationality in a way that is perfectly compatible with the view I expound.²⁵

V. *The Value of Human Persons, the Body, and Sexuality*

The above interlude was needed to clarify and defend the broadly Aristotelian view of rationality I am proposing and show how it is able to explain the value of human persons. I now want to examine how this view of rationality can explain the significance of our sexuality and the horror we feel towards sexual violation. I consider in depth this topic for a number of reasons. First, Adams questions whether a rationality view can account for the significance of our sexuality and the horror of sexual violation: "If our reflection of the divine glory is founded in our rationality, we may wonder, why should we feel so violated by things that are done to our sexual organs?"²⁶ Hence, I want to show how this view of rationality can be defended against Adams's implicit objection. Second, I think that Adams's thought in this area touches on something profound, viz., that the horror we feel towards sexual violation reveals to us that the unique value of a human person is bound up with her body and sexuality. And so in a more constructive vein, I want to show that my rationality view can account for these facts. And third, reflecting on sexuality will

and Thompson's book *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 63–82. See also Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25–37.

²⁴Geach, "What is Man?" 23.

²⁵Of course, my view is also compatible with the view that human beings in the marginal cases lack rationality, dignity, or both.

²⁶Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 116.

allow us to see more clearly how rationality can permeate the whole of a human being.

As a prolegomenon to this topic, I want to consider in a general way the human body, the body of a rational animal. Assuming that rationality is the defining characteristic of properly developed human beings, it is plausible and even to be expected that rationality is manifest in a certain sense even in the human body. For the human body is a body fit to be exercised in rational activity. Elucidating this line of thought, Geach notes that “the forelimbs of beasts are specialized, e.g. for walking or clawing, man’s hand alone is *organon organōn*, the tool adapted for making and using tools.”²⁷ In looking at the human hand, we see the hand of a rational animal, whose very structure suits it to be engaged in rational activity in a number of different ways. A human hand can show affection, conduct music, make and use special tools for fixing and creating, and so forth. So there is an important sense in which rationality (as the higher-order capacity that is the defining characteristic of human beings) is manifest even in the body.²⁸ Moreover, when we properly look upon or consider a human being, it is not as if we have a human body on the one hand and a rational person on the other. What we see is an embodied person. As Roger Scruton puts it,

There is a distinction, familiar to all of us, between an interest in a person’s body and an interest in a person *as embodied*. A body is an assemblage of body parts; an embodied person is a free being revealed in the flesh. When we speak of a beautiful human body we are referring to the beautiful embodiment of a person, and not to a body considered merely as such.²⁹

There is a temptation when we consider the human body or its parts to treat them simply as a set of objects that are arranged in a certain way, or to consider the body as an independent object behind which hides a rational self. But to properly see another’s body, I would claim, is to see an embodied person, where her personhood—grounded in her rationality—is permeating what we see.

We can now consider human sexuality and the sexual organs in particular. Because we are rational animals, our sexual organs are not simply there for the sake of pleasure or for the procreation of our species. For animals endowed with rationality, I would claim, sexual organs take on a new significance and ground a capacity to make a unique gift of oneself.³⁰ Human beings who are in love desire to unite with each other, and

²⁷Geach, “What is Man?” 19.

²⁸This fact explains, I think, why we can even see rationality embodied in an infant. The infant cannot manifest a host of first-order rational capacities. But nevertheless her body, while still at an early stage of development, has the structure that displays the body of a rational animal.

²⁹Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 47. Scruton goes on to develop this idea with reference to the human mouth on pages 47–48.

³⁰For development of this idea that sexual intercourse involves a gift of oneself, see Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013), 78–83 and 107–112.

because they are bodily beings they desire that their bodies too be united; or rather, they desire to be united through their bodies. The sexual act enables the bodies of two human beings (who are by nature embodied persons) to be united in a radically intimate way.³¹ Here again, a human being's rationality lifts up and permeates these parts of the body and enables them to play a unique role in personal love, which is indeed a type of rational activity on the view I am proposing.³²

Returning to human sexual organs, again, these are not mere object-parts that we possess and can use and have used at will. Rather, they are highly significant aspects of our embodied person. To see why, suppose that our sexual organs were not such highly significant aspects of our embodied person; suppose that their significance were simply on a par with one's arm or foot. If such were the case, then there would be no good reason why sexual violation would be any worse than certain painful assaults on one's arm or foot, e.g., if one's arm or foot is bruised or broken by a criminal. But we know that sexual violation, even when no physical pain is involved, is more morally horrible than a painful assault on one's arm or foot, and hence, our sexual organs must be highly significant aspects of our embodied person. On the other hand, if our sexual organs ground our capacity to make a unique, intimate, and free gift of our embodied person, then the moral horror we feel

³¹One might object that the value of human sexual union is something that is *recognized* by human reason, and because reason recognizes this value, it doesn't play a role in constituting the value of sexual union. But surely sexual unity can be a value that reason both recognizes and plays a crucial role in constituting, in the way that reason both recognizes the value of a good argument and is used to constitute a good argument, or in the way that a craftsman can both recognize the value of a good desk and, using his practical reason, himself create a good desk. Likewise, an agent can recognize the value of sexual unity, with this fact being perfectly compatible with rationality playing a crucial role in constituting this value. In fact, if my view is correct, when an agent recognizes the value of sexual union, what is implicit in this value is precisely that it is the value of two rational embodied agents, who by virtue of their rationality can give themselves to each other in this unique way.

³²This idea of sexual activity being a type of rational activity can also be made intelligible and supported by appeal to the work of John McDowell on the notion of an *intention in action*. See John McDowell, "Some Remarks on Intention in Action," *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 6 (2011): 1–18. Available at: www.amherstlecture.org/mcdowell2011/. An intention in action is contrasted with an intention directed towards a future action. To give an example, I could intend in the future to ride my bike to campus. When the time for my bike ride has come and I engage in the bike riding, my intention is now in action. McDowell develops this thought so as to make intelligible the idea that in such cases, rationality is not *behind* bodily behavior, but *in* it, a conception that he speaks of as *rationality in action*. McDowell concludes his essay on this topic with the following: "If rationality can be *in* bodily activity as opposed to behind it, we have a vivid contrast with a familiar picture according to which a person's mind occupies a more or less mysterious inner realm, concealed from the view of others. If physical activity can be rationality in action, as opposed to a mere result of exercises of rationality, we have a vivid contrast with the tendency to distance a person's body from the mind that is the seat of her rationality" (18). We can apply this line of thought to sexual activity, which is a type of physical activity. When a person engages in sexual activity, an intention is in action, and if McDowell is correct, we should not see rationality as being behind the physical activity, but rather as being manifest *in* it.

towards sexual violation, in contrast to other types of assault, is easily explained.³³ I would say we intuitively, albeit implicitly, recognize the connection between our sexual organs and this capacity to make a unique, intimate, and free gift of our embodied person; and it is *this* intuition that is behind our moral horror towards sexual violation. For in an act of sexual violation such as rape, the capacity of the victim to exercise her sexual nature as a gift of her embodied person is taken away. Her sexual organs are being used without her consent, and moreover, they are not being respected as the highly significant aspects of her embodied person which they are, meant to be used freely in a gift of self. So it is reasonable to conclude that the horror we feel towards sexual violation can be accounted for in terms of the view of rationality I am proposing. For (i) rationality permeates the human body and so gives our sexual organs new, highly significant meaning and purpose; and (ii) rationality is the ground for our capacity to freely give ourselves in a sexual way.³⁴

VI. *Satisfying, Explaining, and Unifying Adams's Desiderata*

Now that I have fleshed out this view of rationality that Adams does not consider, I can encapsulate how it meets his desiderata.

First, on the account I develop, rationality is a higher-order capacity that characterizes human beings; it as a capacity to acquire rational capacities and not a first-order capacity that admits of degrees. Every human being who possesses this capacity possesses unique value or dignity. And because this higher-order capacity isn't degreed, neither is the value or dignity it bestows. Thus, this view of rationality allows for

³³One could object that given what I have said about the hand being the tool of tools and how it is manifestly an organ of rationality, that we should expect an assault on one's hand to be just as bad or worse than sexual assault. I respond that an assault on one's hand is certainly a bad thing, and in some cases, say if one's hand or a part of it is cut off or permanently mutilated by an assault, the horror we feel may be on a par with the horror of sexual violation, and this precisely because of the way the human hand is permeated with rationality. The same could be said *mutatis mutandis* about a dramatic assault on one's mouth. But in the case of sexual violation, no permanent mutilation, or even scars or bruises are needed for us to be horrified; in fact, sexual violation need not even be physically painful. Yet even in such cases we feel it morally horrible. My point is that if sexual violation were not linked to a free gift of self which itself is enabled and permeated by rationality, then we wouldn't be able to explain our horror towards sexual violation. Moreover, because our sexual organs have a natural link to human procreative power, a violation of them takes on a special horror. (I elaborate this last point in note 34 below.)

³⁴It is also worth noting that sexual activity is capable of bringing into being a new rational animal, a new human being that bears the image of God. The advent of a new rational being that has such dignity is an extremely significant event. And I think the significance of this event transfers to the sexual act and to the organs by which that act is achieved. True, people as a matter of fact use their sexual organs in all sorts of different ways. But however people choose to use them, the fact remains that sexual organs have potential for producing new rational animals who have inherent dignity. So I would also connect our horror towards sexual violation with how it meddles intrusively with organs that we implicitly associate with the capacity to bring into existence new rational creatures. Here again, the horror of sexual violation is connected with rationality.

egalitarianism, i.e., equal regard for human persons as persons, as possessors of dignity.

Second, I have shown that this account of rationality isn't limited to abstract or complex thinking, but permeates the whole of human life, including moral agency, religious practice, social interaction, art and other forms of creative activity, and even our emotional and sexual life.

Even if Adams were to couple a rational agency account with a view of how such agency permeates other capacities, the view would still, I think, be too narrow. Recall that for Adams, rational agency is the ability to act on reasons, and he claims that the faculty of rational agency is the will.³⁵ Now certainly perceptual and emotional capacities do not have their seat in the will, and it is a strain to describe perception and emotion as acting on a reason. Certainly I can for a reason choose to look at something or undergo some experience, and this would be an exercise of rational agency; but I do not think it right to describe the actual perceiving and emotional experiencing as acting on a reason.³⁶ But on my account, rationality transforms these emotional and perceptual capacities and allows them to be sensitive to the world in ways that rational agency never could. As I said earlier, by virtue of rationality, human beings are present to a world. As such, they are able to enjoy perceptual and emotional experiences that lower animals cannot. Think of the experience of gazing at a sunset in wonder, both in regards to what is seen and what is experienced. Such an experience is explained on my view by appeal to how rationality permeates both perception and emotion. Therefore, though one could broaden the rational agency account by coupling it with permeation of other capacities, such an account would still be narrow and hence unsatisfactory compared to the rationality account I am proposing. On this account, rational agency is just one way of actualizing rationality, albeit a significant one.

Recall that Adams also says that a satisfactory view of the value of persons should account for the enjoyment of our vegetative and animal being. Can my account of rationality allow for this? Certainly *enjoying* our physical and animal being seems to be an expression of rationality, even if the things enjoyed are not rational. But obviously it cannot be required that the things enjoyed (e.g., vegetative functions that are not in our control) must be rational, for if this were true then one could not enjoy a work of art, much less a rose in one's garden. Moreover, on a broadly Aristotelian understanding of the human being, the animal and vegetative

³⁵Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 116. Elsewhere Adams says that he adheres to the typical medieval conception of the will as an intellectual appetitive faculty. See his work, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being For the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17.

³⁶My point here is that the actual perceptual or emotional experience is not an exercise of the will, at least typically. This is *consistent* with the view that emotions can be reasons for action, in that my emotion of fear towards a threat can be a reason for me to do something, such as flee. Indeed this view that emotions can be reasons for action harmonizes well with the view I propose, since on my view rationality permeates emotions.

aspects are parts of a rational animal; and the function of these parts is to enable the flourishing of the whole human being, and as we have seen, such flourishing involves manifesting the human being's broad range of rational capacities.

Furthermore, I have elucidated at length how the human body and sexuality are connected with rationality, and how this implicitly grounds the horror we feel towards sexual violation.

We have seen how my account of rationality meets these desiderata and hence is able to account for what Adams's view accounts for. But my account goes beyond Adams's and is able to explain what his does not, since it is able to explain *why* the features Adams identifies and includes in the package are excellent, and moreover is able to provide a *unified* explanation. For Adams does not provide a rationale for why some human features make it into the package while others do not. He seems to rely on intuition; he recognizes that certain perceptual, emotional, and creative capacities, as well as human sexuality, manifest the distinct excellence of human beings as persons, and so includes them in the package. This is fine as a methodological starting point, but intuition alone leaves us with two significant questions: First, what is it about these features that makes them excellent and so worthy to be included in the package? And second, what makes these features excellent in human beings as opposed to analogous capacities in lower animals, such that they manifest the value of persons in the former but not in the latter?

On my account, these capacities and the human body manifest the human being's unique value precisely because they are permeated by rationality. They are unified with reference to rationality, and it is this relation to rationality that explains why the features Adams points us towards show themselves as being excellent and so are included in his package. Lower animals possess capacities analogous to humans' perceptual, emotional, and creative capacities. But these capacities clearly operate in a different mode, and on my account this phenomenon can be readily explained: the lower animals' capacities and their exercise are not permeated by rationality. And the bodies of lower animals, while they certainly suit them for their environment, do not possess the organs and structure fit to manifest rationality. Hence, my account is able to explain in a unified way why the features found in Adams's package are regarded as excellent, and is also able to explain why these features show forth dignity while analogous features in lower animals do not.

VII. Conclusion

Adams does well to bring to the fore how the unique value of persons is manifest in a rich, broad range of human capacities and features. I have accepted the phenomena Adams points us towards as well as his desiderata, but in response have developed and defended a broadly Aristotelian understanding of rationality. I have argued that this view of rationality not only can account for Adams's phenomena and desiderata, but goes

beyond his package of features view since it is able to provide a unified explanation of facts that his view does not explain. Rationality thus understood is neither inegalitarian nor one-dimensional, but permeates the whole of human being and life.³⁷

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