

## **Do the Ancients See Value in Humanity?**

**Abstract:** The essay considers whether, or to what extent, ancient Greek philosophy includes a conception of the value of humanity. The first section considers conceptions of *value*, focusing especially on the Stoics and Aristotle. The second section considers conceptions of *humanity*, beginning with some widely shared notions of human beings as distinctive in their rational and linguistic capacities, but then focusing on Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. In both cases we can find ideas that look as if they could easily be developed into a picture of human beings as such as having value; but these ideas are always juxtaposed with others that seem to cast doubt on such a picture. The third section considers a cluster of ideas, associated especially with Protagoras and other fifth-century Sophists, that seem to point in a more egalitarian direction than those examined in the previous sections. However, the evidence concerning these thinkers is too slim for us to be able to reconstruct from it any clear conception of the value of humanity. Hence, while the ancients may indeed have inspired such conceptions in later philosophy, it is doubtful that we can attribute any full-fledged conception of this kind to the ancients themselves.

**Keywords:** value, humanity, equality, rationality, Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Sophists

Numerous essays in this volume take off from what seems like a basic thought: that we are subjects of ethical concern. This then leads to the question why this should be so, and one very appealing answer is that there must be something about us that makes us valuable, and hence deserving of such concern. That leads, in turn, to the question what this value-creating feature or features might be, and *why* this feature or these features make us valuable. At this point one

might go in a Kantian direction, and appeal to a notion of absolute value; or one might appeal to the ancient notion of the good as beneficial, and develop an account of the value of humanity on that basis. But either way (and there may be other options as well), the goal is to provide an explanation for what seems a very intuitive starting-point in moral thinking: that there are certain ways people ought to be treated, and certain other ways they ought not to be treated.

I agree that the starting-point of these reflections is a basic thought. But it is not the thought with which ancient Greek ethics typically begins. As has often been noted<sup>1</sup>, the most common basic thought for ancient Greek ethics is an interrogative thought: how should I live my life? This does not mean that Greek ethics is egoistic, as it has sometimes been accused of being – at least, not in any objectionable sense; for one thing, the question can equally well be posed in the third person (“how should *one* live ...?”). But it does mean that the focus is typically on what the *agent* should ideally be like, rather than on what the people *affected* by the agent’s actions or inactions actually are like, such that they warrant certain kinds of treatment and not others. A specification of what the agent should be like will of course have to include an account of what sorts of things the ideal agent will do or not do, and a central aspect of this account will no doubt be the nature of the agent’s interactions with other people. But this does not suffice to shift the focus away from the agent and towards the agent’s beneficiaries or victims and their status. A striking case is this: when Socrates argues in several of Plato’s dialogues – most explicitly in the *Gorgias*, but also in, for example, the *Republic* and the *Crito* – that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it, the central point is always the bad effect of committing injustice on the agent (specifically, on the state of the agent’s soul), rather than the bad effect on those unjustly treated, let alone the fundamental wrongness of such treatment given that the victims are human beings.

So if there is something to be said about ancient conceptions of the value of humanity – and I think there is – it will have to be approached somewhat indirectly, and the ideas that emerge from the inquiry may turn out to be implicit rather than explicit. In what follows, I shall pursue several lines of thought that seem to bear upon the issue. In the first section I focus on ancient Greek philosophers’ notions of value, and in the second, on their notions of humanity. In both cases, we can find what look like promising starting-points for a conception of the value of humanity; but these never seem to get fully developed, in part because of powerful countervailing ideas held by the same philosophers. In the third and final section, I consider egalitarian currents of thought that look as if they might have gone further towards articulating a picture of the value of humanity; however, the evidence is not sufficient for us to conclude with confidence that they did so. In the end, then, this inquiry will not reveal anything approaching an ancient *theory* of the value of humanity.

## I

A natural place to start might seem to be a Greek word that can often be appropriately translated “value”, namely *axia*; “worth” and “desert” are other possible renderings in many contexts. Yet, in the philosophical context in which the word comes closest to being a technical term – that is, in Stoic ethics – it is of very little help for the present project; and this is perhaps illustrative of the difficulties we are up against. The Stoics divide things into good, bad, and indifferent, with only virtue and certain things necessarily connected with virtue (such as virtuous actions, virtuous persons, and so on) counting as good, only vice (with the same supplement, *mutatis mutandis*) counting as bad, and everything else indifferent. However, within the very large category of the indifferent, they notoriously distinguished among (I) indifferents that are “according to nature”, the more important of which are called “preferred” indifferents, (II)

indifferents that are “against nature”, the more important of which are called “dispreferred” indifferents, and (III) indifferents that are neither. For something to be “according to nature” or “preferred” is for it to be such as to contribute, generally speaking and most of the time, to the preservation or enhancement of a desirable natural condition and/or social position; health, wealth, and good reputation are standard examples. And it is the things “according to nature” that are said to have *axia*, “value”, while those “against nature”, which are the negative counterparts of these, are said to have *apaxia*, “disvalue”.

Now, it is clear that “value” in this sense is not going to be of any help in guiding us to an ancient conception of the value of humanity. For, first, “value”, so understood, is something like conduciveness to our well-being, and it is states or commodities that qualify as having “value”. Human beings characteristically *pursue* (or seek to retain) the things that have value, and it is generally worth their while to do so<sup>2</sup>; but it would be a category mistake to think of human beings as themselves having value, in this sense<sup>3</sup>. But second – and this is why I said “*something like* conduciveness to our well-being” – the point of calling all of the things having value “indifferent” is that they are not in any sense components, however small, of one’s true well-being or “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) – that is, the fulfilment of one’s natural end<sup>4</sup>. It is only the virtuous who attain that pinnacle of achievement, and only things that are essential components of this achievement that qualify as genuinely beneficial or good. While the correct *attitude towards* the indifferents, including those that have “value”, is an absolutely crucial element in virtue, no amount of “value” is itself equivalent to having virtue, and no amount of “disvalue” is equivalent to lacking or losing it; we are dealing with two quite different and incommensurable levels. Since the modern notion of the value of humanity is a distinctively ethical one, it would

seem that any ancient analogue would have to be connected to virtue and the good, not with anything on the level of the indifferent, where the Stoic notion of “value” belongs<sup>5</sup>.

Do the Stoics allow another sort of value that applies specifically to virtuous actions and virtuous persons? It looks as if they do. But, first, this leaves only a small trace in the surviving sources; the default sense of “value” in both Diogenes Laertius and Stobaeus, where our two main summaries of Stoic ethics appear, seems to be the one I have just been discussing. And second, this higher value opens up a new problem: rather than pointing us towards a picture in which human beings as such have value, it restricts value to a vanishingly small, perhaps even non-existent, class of human beings. On the first point, both Diogenes Laertius (7.105) and Stobaeus (2.84,4-17) report three senses of *axia* in Stoicism. There is the one we have already considered; there is monetary value (also irrelevant for our purposes); and there is what Diogenes calls “a contribution to the life in agreement<sup>6</sup>, which applies to every good.” Similarly, Stobaeus refers to a sense of “value” “according to which we say that certain things have worthiness (*axiôma*) and value, which does not apply to indifferent things, but only to those that are good” (2.84, 11-13)<sup>7</sup>. While these formulations are hardly self-explanatory – and explaining them fully would take us too far afield – they give us a notion of value in which *good* things, and not merely indifferent things, can possess value; and since persons are among the items that can qualify as virtuous or good, this allows us a way of saying, in Stoic terminology, that human beings have value. The thought is never developed – this higher notion of value is just barely mentioned – but it is at least clearly available. However (and this leads us to the second point), it is certainly not human beings in general who possess value in this higher sense. Indeed, the Stoics notoriously hold that only a very few people in history (not including themselves) have actually achieved virtue; the wise or virtuous person is said to be rarer than the Phoenix, and while possible

exemplars are occasionally mentioned (Socrates, Cato), there is no agreed-upon list of people who did attain the end. All the rest of us are fools and sinners, whose condition is one of vice. So the higher type of value spoken of here is not the value of humanity, but the value of one or two utterly exceptional human beings.

I will return to the Stoics. For now I want to switch to Aristotle, who is rather more explicit than the Stoics about the possibility of human beings having value, but where, again, value is generally conceived very much in an aristocratic fashion rather than as common to human beings as such. While Aristotle is not as systematic in his use of the term *axia* as the Stoics, he does use it in numerous different contexts in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In one of these it again refers to monetary value, which we can dismiss (1119b26, 1133b24). But several others are more relevant to our concerns.

The first of these is the discussion of the “magnanimous” or “great-souled” (*megalopsuchos*) person, in the course of his treatment of all the different virtues of character. Modern readers have not always found much to admire in the virtue of “great-souledness”; while attempts have been made in recent years to rehabilitate the “great-souled” person in relation to contemporary sensibilities<sup>8</sup>, I must admit that he (and it is definitely a “he”) still comes across to me primarily as a pompous, self-important jerk. But Aristotle thinks very highly of him, even being disposed to regard “great-souledness” as the pinnacle of the virtues of character, carrying with it all the other virtues of character and somehow enhancing them (1123b29-1124a4). The defining mark of this virtue is being such as to deserve great honors and other accolades, knowing this, expecting others to recognize this appropriately, and when this happens, taking it as no more than his due (1123b1-2, 1124a4-7). Aristotle even admits at one point that this attitude may come across as disdainful (1124a20); but he clearly considers this a misguided

reaction, since the person does in fact warrant the encomia he receives. Throughout the chapter on this virtue (4.3), Aristotle characterizes the “great-souled” person’s superior status by saying that he has a great deal of *axia*, value, and is therefore worthy (*axios*) of this admiration. Here, then, we have an implied hierarchy of comparative amounts of value<sup>9</sup>. It is not ruled out that everyone might have some degree of value. But it is not stated, either; another possibility, at least as consistent with the general tenor of Aristotle’s view, is that some people might have positive value and others negative value. In any case, we certainly do not have the notion of a basic and ethically significant kind of value attaching to all humans qua humans. On the contrary, the kind of value Aristotle is talking about is a kind of which some people have much more than others, with corresponding differences in the levels of respect due to each, and of which some people quite possibly have none.

The same conception is evident in Aristotle’s discussion of friendship in books 8 and 9. The account of friendship generally involves a rough equality between the parties. But at book 8, chapter 7 he introduces a different kind of friendship, one that can exist between unequals, where the inequality is integral to the character of the friendship. The examples he lists are the friendship between a father and a son, an older and a younger person, a man and a woman, and in general anyone in a role of ruler and someone in the correlative role of ruled (1158b12-14). Aristotle actually says “for a father *towards* a son”, etc.; but it is clear from the ensuing discussion that the friendship is supposed to go both ways. However, because of the inequality, the expectations on each party are not the same (unlike in the paradigmatic cases of friendship). In particular, the loving must be unequal just as the friendship is, and the better and more beneficial party must be loved more than he or she loves<sup>10</sup>; so, apparently, the parent is supposed to be loved by the child more than vice versa (and so on), because the parent is the better and

more beneficial party (1158b23-6). Whether or not this would be either realistic or desirable by our lights, it is then glossed by another remark about comparative value: Aristotle says that “when the loving occurs according to value, then in a way equality occurs, which in fact seems to be characteristic of friendship” (1158b27-8). The inequality is, as it were, canceled out by the superior degree of love accorded to the superior party. Hence we get a kind of equality, which allows this kind of relationship to be assimilated to regular friendship. But of course, this is only possible given that the inequality in the value of the two parties is recognized and, in a sense, compensated for (cf. 1159a33-b2 for the same point). Again, we have a comparative scale of value in human beings; and again, while this does not exclude the possibility of everyone having a certain baseline level of value, it does not require it, and it certainly does not draw attention to any such idea – quite the reverse.

But perhaps friendship is not a context in which we should expect to find ideas about a value shared by everyone equally. Justice might seem more promising in this respect. Yet even here, one is hard pressed to find Aristotle giving any attention to ideas of this sort. Earlier in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in his discussion of justice in book 5, Aristotle makes another allusion to the value of human beings. Everyone agrees, he says, that justice in distributions must be in terms of value, but they do not think of value in the same way; democrats think of it as the status of a free citizen, oligarchs as the possession of wealth, others as good birth, and aristocrats as virtue (1131a25-9). He is thinking here in particular of the distribution of political power, and the idea is that different people have different conceptions of what makes someone deserve this power, because they have different conceptions of what makes someone a person of value. Here, even the most capacious conception, the democratic one, will exclude a great many people from having value; women were not citizens in this full sense, and neither, of course, were slaves. So



it looks as if the relations of justice, based on actual political arrangements, that Aristotle and his contemporaries were able to conceive, were simply not capable of supporting the idea that human beings as such have value.

Aristotle's remarks on slavery deserve further attention. Given his notorious approval of the practice, one might expect his comments on this subject to do nothing but reinforce the picture we have seen so far. In some respects they certainly do so. In one of the chapters on friendship (8.11), he associates the prospects for friendship in various kinds of political community with the extent to which justice is present in each of them. He points out that relations both of friendship and of justice require at least something in common between the ruler and the ruled. Hence in a tyranny, where the gulf between ruler and ruled is at its most extreme, there is only a minimal degree of either – at least, between the tyrant and his subjects. As examples of relations where both friendship and justice are impossible, he mentions the relations of craftspeople to their tools and of soul to body. But the same is true in some cases where both relata are animate (body being conceived as, all by itself and not including the soul, inanimate), and here the examples Aristotle gives are a person's relation to a horse or cow, or to a slave – “for there is nothing in common” (1161b3). Presumably, although this is not specified, he has especially in mind the relation between the slaveholder and his own slave, since he refers to the slave, using the term also employed in the *Politics*, as an “animate tool”. Now, the language of value is not present in this chapter; but if we put this discussion together with the discussions of friendship and justice in which the language of value does occur, it is hard to see how Aristotle can regard the slave as having any value at all.

At this point, then, any notion of the value of humanity as such in Aristotle may seem to be decisively ruled out. Yet immediately afterwards in the same chapter, we find a surprising

twist. For Aristotle says that one cannot have friendship towards a slave “in so far as he is a slave” (1161b3, 5). However, in so far as he is a human being, friendship with him is possible (5-6). And we then find the following remarkable passage, which seems to open up the possibility of something much closer to a modern conception of the value of humanity: “for there seems to be some justice for every human being towards everyone who is capable of community in law and agreement<sup>11</sup>; friendship too, then, in so far as he is a human being” (1161b6-8). As often in Aristotle, the thought is quite compressed, and the second part, in particular, is generally expanded by translators at least into a complete sentence, often with additional elements to fill out the idea<sup>12</sup>. But whether or not one puts extra elements into the translation (something I prefer to avoid whenever possible), the underlying thought is tolerably clear. There is some level of both justice and friendship that applies between every human being and every other, at least if they are both “capable of community in law and agreement”, and this includes even slaves. What these relations of justice and friendship involve deserves considerable elaboration, but in line with Aristotle’s own discussions of both topics, I take it there is some level of both obligation and entitlement on both sides. It must be a very low level in the present case, given that it apparently leaves the institution of slavery intact. But still, we can draw a distinction between a slaveholder’s relatively humane treatment of slaves and an absolutely oppressive treatment of them<sup>13</sup>, and this is perhaps the kind of thing Aristotle has in mind. It is also not quite clear what he means by the phrase “capable of community in law and agreement”; who, if anyone, is this supposed to exclude – the mentally ill, those with Down’s syndrome or similar disorders, or perhaps (if this is distinct from the mentally ill) the “bestial” person whom he introduces at the beginning of book 7 as occupying a level below regular human vice? Whatever the answer, we are clearly dealing with cases that Aristotle regards as quite exceptional. And even modern ideas

of the value of humanity need not exclude the possibility that in certain exceptional cases people might either forfeit their value as human beings, or lack a sufficient degree of the distinctively human capacities that underpin this value in the first place<sup>14</sup>.

So at this place in Aristotle we have at least a glimmer of the idea that human beings as such are valuable. But it is not developed, and it is not easily assimilable to the much more hierarchical picture we find in most of his thinking, where some people have more value and others less. Perhaps we can imagine a composite picture in which everyone (except perhaps for the special cases mentioned just now) has a minimal level of value, and then there is room for higher levels of value for some. But, first, while this does not, as far as I can see, contradict anything in the text, it is not something Aristotle chooses to say anything about. And second, the dominant conception in which people's value is unequal, and some people's at best pretty small, seems to cut against the usual aspiration of those who have advocated notions of the value of humanity – namely, that these notions should have real ethical import, significantly affecting how we view and treat one another. To return to Aristotle's distinction between considering one's slave as a human being and as a slave: if in the latter respect the slave lacks value (except monetary value), which seemed to be an implication of various things he said, then the value the slave possesses in the former respect, along with everyone else, really cannot amount to much.

So far, then, we have not found much to encourage the idea that the ancients had a conception of the value of human beings as such. In Stoicism it looks as if almost no one has the kind of value that could be useful for this conception, while in Aristotle it looks as if some people have a lot of value, others much less, and some quite possibly none at all. One passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to point in a more promising direction, but the promise is not remotely realized. In the remainder of the paper, I will explore whether there are other ideas in

ancient Greek thought akin to that of the value of humanity. In the end, this exploration will not take us much further, but there are several points that may mitigate the generally rather dispiriting picture we have encountered up to now<sup>15</sup>.

## II

So far we have concentrated on the term “value”. What do we learn if we shift our focus to the conception of “humanity”? Of course, the word “humanity” derives from the Latin *humanitas*, and there was at least some tendency among Roman thinkers to associate *humanitas* specifically with the pursuit or attainment of education and learning. The 2<sup>nd</sup>-century essayist Aulus Gellius, whose interests sometimes extend to philosophy, says that those who use the word correctly mean by it *eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*, “education and training in the good arts [generally translated “liberal arts”]” (13.17.1). Gellius goes on to say that this kind of learning is unique to human beings, and that is why it is called *humanitas*; and he refers to Cicero and Varro as authors who use the word in this sense, quoting a passage of Varro and arguing plausibly that this is what he must mean in context (namely, any person of *humanitas* will know about the sculptor Praxiteles). He does not quote Cicero, but it is easy enough to find passages of Cicero to support the claim, where *humanus* is either used alongside *doctus*, “learned”, as a more or less synonymous variant (*De divinatione* 1.2), or *humanitas* appears alone in the sense of “learning” or “culture” (*De oratore* 1.71, 2.72). Obviously there is still a remnant of this usage in our own term “humanities”, as applied to a set of longstanding academic fields that are both cherished and yet frequently under threat for their supposed impracticality<sup>16</sup>.

Now, this usage of *humanus* and *humanitas* may seem to lead us right back to the kind of exclusivity that we found earlier. For clearly the relevant kind of learning is never going to be shared by all human beings, even all adult human beings. However, if we ask more generally

what distinguishes human beings from other animals or other parts of the universe, a range of ancient authors, both Greek and Roman, give an answer that is more accommodating to humans in general, yet not unrelated to the usage of the word *humanitas* that we have been discussing. Returning to Aristotle and the Stoics, our main sources in the first part of the paper, we find a clear and consistent answer expressed in terms of a crucial difference between the souls of humans and those of other animals (or, in the case of Aristotle, plants<sup>17</sup>): unlike that of any other regular natural organism, the human soul has thought, reason or intellect. In his work *On the Soul*, Aristotle simply says that humans differ<sup>18</sup> in having *to dianoêtikon te kai nous* (414b18), “the thinking capacity and intellect;” and his account of the workings of intellect in the same work (3.4-5) are among the most cryptic portions of his entire corpus. But the Stoics clearly associate the rational soul with the occurrence of rational impressions, which have linguistically expressible content (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 8.275-6, Diogenes Laertius 7.49, Aetius 4.21.1). Here, then, is an outward distinguishing mark of the human being: the power of language. And this point is noted, as obvious and needing no support, by numerous ancient authors, including Aristotle in another context (*Politics* 1253a9-10) and also authors concerned with the theory and practice of rhetoric, for whom it has a special relevance (Isocrates, *Nicoles* 5-6; Cicero, *De oratore* 1.32).

Plato, in his dialogue *Protagoras*, has the Sophist of that name express a slightly broader view. In the myth that Protagoras tells here about early human history and the origins of human society, it is *technê* – regularly translated “craft”, “skill”, “expertise” or “art” – that is given to humans and them alone (321d). Fire is mentioned as necessary for the effectiveness of the *technai* in general, and its production is identified just below (321e) as itself a *technê*; but it is the technical wisdom of both Hephaestus (fire) and Athena (the *technai* in general) that are the

gods' special gift to humans. Once they start using their *technê*, language is one of their first products, along with houses, clothes, shoes, bedding and crops (322a). Interestingly, while Protagoras mentions all of these on a par, language simply being the first on the list, one of the authors cited in the previous paragraph, Isocrates (*ibid.*), identifies language as the *source* of the *technai* and of “just about all the things devised by us”, in addition to cities and laws. The *technê* of politics also occurs in Protagoras' speech, but at a subsequent stage (322b-d), brought in by the gods because the *technai* distributed so far were not sufficient to keep people safe from the ravages of the natural world; for that, it was necessary for them to come together into communities. An essential feature of this *politikê technê* is that everyone has some minimal sense of justice, this too being singled out as indispensable for being human (323c). And this too recalls one of the texts cited just above in which language is assumed to be definitive of humanity. When Aristotle alludes to this in the *Politics*, he adds that language is “for<sup>19</sup> showing the beneficial and the harmful, hence also the just and the unjust; for this is peculiar to humans in comparison to other animals – alone having a sense of good and bad, just and unjust, and the rest – and it is community in these things that makes a household and a city” (1253a14-18).

Not everyone I have mentioned in the last few paragraphs proposes exactly the same ideas. But there is a great deal of overlap, and we might sum up a kind of composite view, much of which any one of them would assent to, as follows. Humans are distinctively rational beings. A central facet of their rationality is language, and language in turn is the basis for both the technical achievements of civilization and the ability to form societies, with the ability to grasp ethical and political concepts that this entails. This cluster of related abilities is what makes us special, as compared with the rest of the natural world, and the ethical and political dimension of these abilities is what ensures that we will treat each other differently from the way we treat the

other creatures and objects we encounter. Humanity in its highest manifestations may involve a more refined cultivation of the rational and linguistic capacity than most people have either the time or the ability to pursue. But this capacity itself is shared by humans in general, and that is a very significant fact.

Does this amount to a recognition of the *value* of humanity? Not in so many words; but we are perhaps not far from that point. In the passage where Aulus Gellius explains the elevated notion of *humanitas* that he considers correct, he contrasts this with a generally accepted (but in his view bogus) sense of the term in which it is equivalent to the Greek *philanthrôpia*, that is, “a certain indiscriminate willingness and benevolence towards all human beings” (13.17.1). Gellius may scorn this usage, but he acknowledges that it is widespread; and it may remind us of Aristotle’s mention of the friendship and justice connecting every human being with every other. Now, neither text indicates that this fellow-feeling reflects an appreciation of the rationality, linguistic capacity, etc. of all humans. But if we made that link, we might be getting close to an ancient conception of the value of humanity. We would need to connect the dots in a way that the ancients themselves do not seem to do explicitly. But the resources seem to be there, and it is arguably not much of a stretch.

Another thing that Plato’s Protagoras says, in the speech we have already drawn on, is that humans were the only animals to worship the gods (322a); this is said to be “because of their kinship with god”. And this points to another, related way in which we might perhaps be able to identify an ancient vision of the value of humanity. Since we have independent evidence that Protagoras was an agnostic, it is not clear, in his case, what the cashed-out value of “kinship with god” would be. But others took the notion of kinship with god, and the accompanying aspiration to become as much like god as possible, very seriously (and literally).

In the remainder of this section, I shall explore this theme in Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. As we shall see, each of these philosophers has ideas that seem to chime with and reinforce the picture derived from the various reflections on which we were just focusing – reflections concerning what it is to be human – where we seemed to be getting relatively close to a conception of the value of humans as such. Yet in this context too, we never quite reach a fully realized version of that conception, and in this case it is for a familiar reason: namely, that these ideas always appear alongside other ideas pointing to the dominant picture that emerged from our reflections on value, a picture in which value is distributed very unevenly among human beings, and most people’s value is insignificant.

The ideal of becoming like god is explicit, and held out as possible to a considerable degree, in a famous passage of Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Socrates has been examining Theaetetus’ proposal that knowledge is perception, a view that he assimilates to the Protagorean thesis that “a human being is measure of all things.” Examining this thesis has led him to consider the idea that what counts as just and unjust varies from one community to another. In the midst of this long discussion, there is a digression in which Socrates draws attention to the character of the philosopher, as opposed to the person concerned with day-to-day affairs (172c-177c)<sup>20</sup>. The philosopher has the leisure to think beyond these immediate concerns and contemplate eternal verities – including the true nature of justice and injustice, as opposed to what passes for just and unjust in the law-courts and elsewhere. The philosopher may well seem ridiculous if forced to engage in conventional legal proceedings, but it is the philosopher who is in touch with the things that really matter. As has often been noticed, the passage has much in common with the cave image in the *Republic*, although there is no explicit reference to Platonic Forms as the realities the philosopher grasps. In any case, escape from the everyday world into the realm of



pure truth is described as “becoming like god.” This is, we are told, a state of justice as well as wisdom (176b1-3). And, to return to our main theme, the fact that this is a human possibility suggests that humanity has a special status in the order of things.

We might draw a similar lesson from a related theme that occurs in several Platonic dialogues, the idea that “learning is recollection”. According to this view, humans possess all knowledge from before birth, and what we call learning is merely recollection of the knowledge that one already has. The idea is put to different purposes in different dialogues. But in both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, the souls in this out-of-body state are clearly described as akin to the divine, if they maintain their pure state, and in the *Phaedrus*, indeed, in the presence of the divine (*Ph.* 80a-81a, *Phdr.* 246d-e248a-c, 249c), while in the *Meno*, at least the insight into the soul’s immortality and its possession of all knowledge is described as divine (81a10-b2).

The problem, of course, is in the qualification “if they maintain their pure state”. For although the soul’s immortality and pre-birth possession of knowledge is quite general, which suggests that we all have the capacity to achieve kinship with the divine, both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, where (unlike in the *Meno*) the soul’s fate is explored in some detail, make clear that the chances of success are not particularly high. Contamination by the body in the *Phaedo*, and distraction by the non-rational parts of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, are ever-present dangers to which most souls succumb. So actual kinship with the divine is limited to a few; just as in the *Theaetetus* passage with which we began discussing this theme, it is only the philosopher of whom it can be said that he “becomes like god”. In the *Republic*, again, only the philosophers commune with the Forms, while the rest, to switch to the figurative mode, never leave the cave. This is not merely due to lack of opportunity or failure to exercise one’s capacities; in the *Republic* everyone’s place in society is set by their natures (however those are supposed to be

determined)<sup>21</sup>, and only a select few are of a nature to philosophize and rule. If we take this last point seriously, the idea that “learning is recollection”, and more generally, that human beings can assimilate to the divine, does not after all appear to support the supposition that human beings as such have value.

Aristotle is a similar case. He too sees the highest human good as philosophizing, and he too regards this as an activity that expresses something divine in us. This is most fully and clearly discussed at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.7-8), where philosophical contemplation emerges as the most fitting candidate for the highest good for human beings. It is also at least implicit in his remarks about the unmoved mover in *Metaphysics* Λ; this divine being is eternally engaged in intellectual contemplation, and we can to a limited extent imitate this activity (1072b14-15). This ability of course sets us apart from other terrestrial beings. Or perhaps it is better to say that, given our capacity for contemplation, Aristotle is genuinely conflicted as to whether we humans should be considered purely terrestrial beings. This comes out in his struggles with how to accommodate thinking within his generally very biological conception of the soul. Despite having defined the soul as the form of an organic body (412a19-21), he insists that thinking is a non-bodily process, because thought’s ability to direct itself to any object whatever (and hence take on any form whatever) means that it cannot have any inherent or antecedent nature of its own, which involvement with the body would give it (429a18-27). The tension is also apparent in the chapter where the definition of the soul appears. As a consequence of the definition, he says that the soul is not separable from the body (since in Aristotle, unlike Plato, forms are not separable from the things of which they are forms). But even in saying this, he immediately wants to limit it to just some parts of the soul, intellect being clearly the exception he has in mind (413a3-9). Scholars have come to Aristotle’s rescue, arguing

that the contradiction is only apparent<sup>22</sup>. But it is at least clear that he regards thinking as something quite distinct in kind from the various other functions of the soul; and even those who take Aristotle to be consistent tend to give up when it comes to the active, rather than the passive, aspect of the intellect, which is said to be not only separable from the body but also immortal (430a23).

So again, thought, and especially philosophical thought, gives us a special status, and a kinship with the divine; and in the *Ethics* Aristotle insists, against the usual Greek horror of *hubris* (thinking oneself on a level with the gods), that we should cultivate this ability of ours as much as possible (1177b31-4)<sup>23</sup>. Of course, a life of *nothing but* philosophical thinking would be super-human (1177b25-6); but our own limited engagement in this activity far surpasses in its “power and dignity” (*dunamei kai timiotêti* – the latter rendered “value” in Irwin’s 1999 translation) anything else of which we are capable. But as with Plato, there is a real question as to whether we can consider this an endorsement of the value of humanity as such. For even though the *Ethics* is presented as an account of the human good, with no qualifications attached, it is clear, first of all, that given any realistic social arrangements, only a very few will in fact be able to engage in this activity. Of course, one might think that the mere possession of a *capacity* to do so could confer value, whether or not conditions allowed for this capacity to be exercised. But second, it turns out in the *Politics* that human nature itself comes in degrees; in other words, by no means everyone has even the needed capacity. In the final chapter of book 1 Aristotle raises the question whether the virtues are the same for free people as for slaves, and for men as for women (and children) – or whether those other than free men have virtues at all (1259b21-30). The answer (and what is especially appalling about this, from a contemporary perspective, is the matter-of-fact tone in which Aristotle lays it all out) is that they do have virtues, but given

differences in the grade of soul belonging to each group, the virtues are different from those of free men. All have rational elements to their souls, but of different levels, so to speak. Those who are by nature slaves completely lack the deliberative element; women have the deliberative elements, but it is without authority (*akuron*), whatever that means; and in children (that is, I assume, children who are going to grow up to be free men) it is undeveloped (1260a10-15). While philosophic ability is not relevant here, we can hardly doubt that those who do not have fully functioning deliberative abilities also lack any philosophical ability. So Aristotle, like Plato, leaves us in a position where only some humans are even in the running for the human good – and this is a product of nature, not just of social arrangements.<sup>24</sup> Again, what looked like a basis for attributing a special value to humanity turns out not to be adequate for that purpose.

The Stoics go further than any other ancient Greek philosophical school in articulating what looks like an account of the value of humanity, though their story ultimately follows a similar trajectory. As far as we can tell, this story begins with the second century BCE Stoic Panaetius of Rhodes. Cicero's *De Officiis*, usually translated *On Duties*, gives us a good idea of Panaetius' view<sup>25</sup>. Cicero tells us that we have two *personae* or "roles" (1.107): one is common to all of us and is based on our human nature, while the other is specific to each of us and is based on our individual natures<sup>26</sup>. The universal role reflects the fact that "we are all participants in reason and in that superiority by which we excel over the beasts, from which everything honorable and fitting is derived, and out of which a method of finding our duty is discovered". Similar sentiments are expressed rather more fully by Epictetus in a chapter of the *Discourses* revealingly called "how is it possible to find out what is incumbent on us (*ta kathêkonta*) from our titles (*onomatôn*)", which again distinguishes a variety of roles or "titles", beginning with the role of human being. It is worth quoting from this chapter at some length:

Examine who you are. First, a human being – that is, you have nothing more authoritative than the power of decision<sup>27</sup>, but you hold other things subordinate to this, whereas it is not enslaved or subordinated. Consider then, from what are you separated in virtue of your reason. You are separated from wild animals, you are separated from sheep. In addition to this you are a citizen of the world and a part of it – not one of the menial parts but one of the principal parts; for you are capable of tracing the divine administration and calculating what comes next (*Diss.* 2.10.1-3).

Both passages emphasize our rationality, both cite this as placing us above the beasts, and both connect this with our ability to think ethically. The Epictetus passage goes rather further in introducing the theme of cosmopolitanism, and in ranking us one of the “principal” (*proëgoumena*) parts of the world in virtue of our grasp of the world’s divine organization. This is not quite equivalent to calling us akin to the divine; but since rationality is one of the defining characteristics of the divine (e.g., DL 7.147), calling attention to our rationality, our status as a “principal” part of the cosmos, and our awareness of divinity makes that inference so easy as to be hardly an inference at all. The pre-eminence of rationality in the Stoics’ understanding of god also means that all of this follows very naturally from the more limited Cicero/Panaetius picture, even though nothing about divinity is actually mentioned there. It is no doubt passages such as these that led the influential French scholar Pierre Hadot to conclude that “le Stoïcien croit en la valeur absolue de la personne humaine”<sup>28</sup>.

However, I think this is too quick. For although we may all be rational beings, we still have to contend with the radical difference of level between the sage and everyone else, to which I drew attention near the beginning. With a truly minute number of exceptions, we are all failures; we may *have* rationality, but its condition is severely defective. The sage is the one who

really does understand the divinely providential nature of the world and is therefore fully in harmony with it; and the Stoics do not hesitate to put the sage on the same level as god (Plutarch, *Comm. not.* 1076a-b). In contrast, though the rest of us – that is, for practical purposes, all of us – are “capable of tracing the divine administration”<sup>29</sup>, we do not actually succeed in doing so, and we remain fools and sinners. Again, as with Aristotle, one might wish to appeal to the capacity itself as a bearer of value. But again, on further examination, it is far from clear whether the claim that we even have this capacity can really be borne out. In the Stoic case, this is because our lack of success is itself part of that same providence with which the sage alone is in tune; the defectiveness of our rationality is not a product of accidental circumstance but is built into the nature of things.

I think that this is in fact a major tension in Stoicism. How can we take seriously the providential nature of the world, and our kinship with the divine, when the ideal state that is teleologically ordained for us as part of the divine plan is almost never realized – especially when that too is part of the divine plan? Or, to put it slightly differently, how can we take seriously that humanity is as valuable a part of the world as the Epictetus passage proclaims, when the end that the world itself sets for us is an end that we are also, with almost no exceptions, divinely determined not to achieve? One may object that the later Stoicism of Epictetus, Seneca and others – going back perhaps as far as Panaetius – was not as rigorous as the Stoicism of Zeno and Chrysippus. It is true that there is a lot more emphasis in later Stoic texts on practical guidance for ordinary mortals, and a lot less emphasis on the character of the sage. But, first, this may be in part an artifact of the evidence that has survived; many other Stoics besides Panaetius wrote books *Peri tou Kathêkontos*,<sup>30</sup> and if these had survived, we might have rather less sense of a shift over time. And second, unless the distinctions between the

sage and the fool, virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, and so on, are abandoned or substantially rewritten – which the later Stoics show no sign of doing – the tension does not go away<sup>31</sup>.

### III

What we have found, then, is a number of ideas that look as if they could easily be developed into a robust conception of the value of humanity, with the Stoics, or some Stoics, coming closest to spelling out such a conception. But we have also seen a recurring pattern: these ideas keep coming up against a variety of other ideas that push powerfully in a much more hierarchical – some might say, elitist – direction, where value is shared very unequally, some humans having a great deal of value and others much less, if any. Now, at this point one might reasonably wonder: is there any evidence from antiquity of this hierarchical tendency being actively resisted, in favor of a more egalitarian or universalizing conception of human value? We have seen several facets of the hierarchical tendency in Aristotle and the Stoics; we have also seen it in the Platonic conception of humanity's relation to the divine. The one place where we have not seen it, among the thinkers we have considered so far, is in Protagoras as depicted in Plato. And this will serve as the starting-point for the final element in my story.

Recall that Plato depicts Protagoras as offering an account of human pre-history and the origins of human society. Though couched in mythical terms, it appears to suggest an optimistic picture of human progress over time, in contrast to the common Greek picture, from Hesiod onwards, of a pre-historic Golden Age from which current human life is a depressing decline. Most important for my purposes, it makes no mention of a hierarchy among humans, where a select few make all the inventions and discoveries and the rest are passive beneficiaries; the growth of human competencies and of civilization looks like a collective exercise, with everyone on an equal footing. By the same token, as mentioned earlier, Protagoras stresses that everyone

has a share of justice – otherwise they would not be human (323c). The importance of this element is emphasized by the fact that Zeus makes an explicit choice about it; Hermes asks whether justice should be allocated selectively (like the other forms of expertise) or to everyone alike, and Zeus responds that it should be the latter (322c-d). As we saw in the previous section, all of this seems like fertile ground for the idea that there is a value to all human beings as such; and unlike the comparable ideas that we found in other thinkers, there are no countervailing considerations that place some people on a very different level from others.

Concerning this last point, the same might be said of Protagoras' most famous saying: "a human being is measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not", which is quoted and discussed, as I mentioned, by Plato in the *Theaetetus*, but which also appears in Sextus Empiricus (*M* 7.60-4) and several other authors. We only have the one sentence from Protagoras himself, and a great deal about the view is obscure<sup>32</sup>. But one thing that is clear from Plato's treatment of the view is that he reads it as implying a fundamental equality in human perspectives; however things appear to a person, things *are* that way for that person – whatever specifically that may amount to. The view clearly drives Aristotle crazy, and provokes a sarcastic response: for Aristotle the "measure" of things, including of good and bad, is not any arbitrary human being, but the person who is mentally and physically adjusted to see things as they really are – a state achieved only by few (*NE* 1113a31-3, 1176a17-19). And already in the *Theaetetus*, a major problem for the view is how it can allow for the existence of various types of expertise that Protagoras himself would surely have wanted to accept. There is no clear indication that Protagoras developed his "measure" doctrine in such a way as to spell out a conception of universal human value; but one can see how it looks much more accommodating to such a conception than the hierarchical ideas of the other thinkers we



have examined<sup>33</sup>, and the account of human pre-history that Plato puts in his mouth in the *Protagoras* perhaps gives us a taste of how he might have begun to develop it.

It appears that Protagoras was not alone in this respect. Another fifth-century Sophist, Antiphon, seems to have argued explicitly in favor of the equality of Greeks and non-Greeks. We may draw distinctions of value between the laws and practices of different societies, but these distinctions have no basis in nature; all of us, he argues, have a common basic nature, and whether we live in Greek or non-Greek societies is, as far as that nature is concerned, purely accidental<sup>34</sup>. This is one of several themes explored by the Sophists that build upon the distinction between *phusis*, “nature”, and *nomos*, “law” or “convention”; here the suggestion is that *nomos* is a barrier to recognition of our basic equality. What this equality was taken to imply in practical terms is impossible to say from the evidence we have. Plato puts a similar sentiment – that *nomos* stands in the way of our recognizing natural equals – in the mouth of another Sophist, Hippias of Elis, in the *Protagoras* (337c-d). But here the equality seems to be among the distinguished wise company to whom he is speaking; there is no indication that it applies to human beings in general. Still, the idea of natural equality at least seems to open up the possibility that all of us are of value simply as humans.

The presence of such egalitarian ideas in this period (roughly, a few decades before and after 400 BCE) is also indicated by the suspicions cast on them by those who did not share them. Perhaps the most obvious case is Aristotle’s defense of slavery. While, as we noted in the first section, Aristotle argues that slavery – at least, when the right people are enslaved – is both natural and just, he clearly has in mind a set of opponents who believed the opposite. He does not name these opponents of slavery, but he takes it as a question worth discussing whether there are people of such a nature as to be appropriately enslaved; his own answer is that there certainly

are, but he acknowledges that some have thought otherwise, and he admits that they are right to the limited extent that sometimes those who are in fact enslaved are not natural slaves (*Politics* I.4-6).

Another interesting case is the famous choral ode in Sophocles' *Antigone* (332-75), beginning *polla ta deina*, "many are the wonders", which elaborates on human powers and achievements. The text speaks of seafaring, agriculture, hunting, language, laws and society; much of this is reminiscent of Protagoras' account of early human history, and this is surely not accidental. In summary, humanity is described (I translate some difficult poetic language as literally as possible) as "possessing, in the ingeniousness of expertise, something wise beyond expectation" (*sophon ti to machanoen technas huper elpid' echon*, 365-6). This is often read as a celebration of humanity, and in that spirit it might be taken as a central representative of the egalitarian line of thinking I have been pointing to in the last few paragraphs. But in fact I think it expresses a sharp sense of danger in that line of thinking. For one thing, *deina*, which I initially translated "wonders" – of which humanity is singled out as the supreme example – has multiple connotations, by no means all of them positive. It can mean "wonderful" in a positive sense, also "clever"<sup>35</sup>; but it can also mean "terrible" or "awful". In addition, the phrase I quoted just above, about human beings' astonishing ingenuity, is immediately followed by "[humanity] proceeds sometimes towards bad, sometimes towards good" (367). Certainly the dramatic context in which this ode is embedded does not inspire great confidence about what human ingenuity may achieve in the political or social realm; the central conflict of the play, between Antigone and the ruler Creon, leads to the death of most of the main characters, and to Creon being led away a broken man. Finally, one of the prime human achievements, agriculture, is described as "wearing

away ... Earth, oldest of the gods” (337-9) – an activity that (at least under that description) seems to carry with it a whiff of hubris.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, whatever attitude Sophocles wishes the chorus to project in this ode<sup>37</sup>, it at least suggests awareness of the existence at this time of an optimistic mindset in which human beings as such were regarded as admirable for their abilities and achievements. This attitude, as I said, seems to have a good deal in common with the ideas expressed by Protagoras in the speech Plato gives him in the dialogue named after him. And if we take all the points considered in this section together, we seem to have a cluster of views that point in an egalitarian direction, and that can easily be imagined as the starting-point for a conception of the value of humanity not hobbled by the kind of hierarchical tendencies that we have found in the Stoics, Aristotle and Plato. How far those who held these views progressed in this direction, or how widely such views were held in the first place, is impossible to say with any confidence. These egalitarian and perhaps more broadly pro-democratic views are now largely lost to us; indeed, they are often available to us only via the works of those who opposed them. One point that may well give us pause is that in the same papyrus in which Antiphon speaks of the equality of Greeks and non-Greeks, he also speaks of justice as a set of rules (*nomoi*) created by society, rules that prevent us from meeting our natural needs; the most advantageous course of action, he says, is therefore to ignore justice except when the authorities are watching<sup>38</sup>. As before, *nomos* is conceived as an obstacle to nature; but here the natural state of affairs is identified as one in which one looks out for one’s own interests – more specifically, one’s own pleasure and avoidance of pain – at others’ expense if necessary. These two lines of thinking are not incompatible; after all, the natural prerogative to ignore *nomos* and pursue one’s self-interest (so understood) apparently applies equally to everyone. But if one was hoping for the first (that is, the reflections on the

equality of Greeks and non-Greeks) to serve as the basis for a conception of human beings as intrinsically valuable, and hence deserving certain kinds of respectful treatment simply as humans, the appeal to naked self-interest embodied in the second hardly looks encouraging<sup>39</sup>.

And so, while we can find hints of a non-hierarchical view of humanity, perhaps associated especially with the Sophists, we simply lack the evidence to be able to see with any specificity whether this view was ever developed in such a way as to accord a distinctive kind of value to human beings as such. In the end, then, the search for an alternative to the Stoic, Aristotelian and Platonic pictures in which, despite a number of promising suggestions, value turns out to be very unevenly distributed among human beings, has not led to any determinate result. Nor do other ancient Greek thinkers seem to offer anything more helpful in this regard. I have not touched on the Epicureans because their focus on pleasure as the highest good, and their generally instrumentalist approach to questions of value, seem to put them in a different universe of discourse from those who would concern themselves with the value of humans as such. Though they may in practice have been more egalitarian in their treatment of others than the figures on whom I have mostly concentrated – for example, Epicurus is supposed to have included his slaves in his philosophical discussions (DL 10.3, 10) – they do not seem to have had an interest in the kind of theorizing that might have been helpful for current purposes. The skeptics are clearly hopeless: though Sextus Empiricus does at one point describe the skeptics as “philanthropic” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.280), this can only be a matter of what they happen to feel, unconnected with any articulated views concerning the value of humanity. They would have been more interested in undermining such views – supposing there had been some available to consider – than in developing them. And while the late Platonist tradition stemming from Plotinus is certainly far from skeptical – they believe a great many extraordinary things – it is not

obvious why they would be any more likely to endorse “the value of humanity” than Plato himself.

This survey has of course not been exhaustive, and so my answer to the question posed in the title – do the ancients see value in humanity? – is bound to be tentative. But the evidence considered here seems to favor the answer “to a limited degree, but not in any sustained or systematic way”. In our own era, an editorial following one of the recent and all-too-frequent terrorist attacks (London, June 3, 2017) can reflexively say, “Each single human life is infinitely precious in a way that its random destruction only serves to amplify”<sup>40</sup>. While the ancient Greeks and Romans of course honored and mourned their dead, I doubt they would ever have expressed themselves in quite the same way. Indeed, the funeral speech put in Pericles’ mouth by Thucydides, which is one of the most famous ancient Greek encomia to the dead, includes, in a passage explicitly flagged as consolation to the dead soldiers’ parents, the advice to have more children (if they are still young enough to do so) so as to forget those who are gone (2.44). To those of us familiar with the “infinitely precious” conception, this cannot but sound jarring in the extreme<sup>41</sup>. This does not mean that ancient thought can never be seen as inspiration for ideas bearing on the value of humanity; for example, it is not hard to see how the Stoics could have made some contribution to modern notions of human rights. I would simply guard against the suggestion that such conceptions already had a full-fledged presence in ancient thought<sup>42, 43</sup>.

Richard Bett

Johns Hopkins University

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Williams 1985; Annas 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Buss raised the question whether the term “pursue” might be too narrow; might one not *admire* or *appreciate* things of value – works of art, for example – without having any



inclination to make them one's own? But in the ancient sources, things with value are classified in a way that tracks a standard classification of goods: of the soul, of the body, and external (for example, good memory, health, and wealth respectively – see Diogenes Laertius 7.106-7, Stobaeus 2.79,18-81,10). Both goods and things with value are thus conceived in close relation to persons; they are all things that might in some sense belong to one. Even the external category is comprised of various kinds of possessions – either material ones, such as wealth, or such things as one's social standing. And so, while it would not be simply mistaken to think of works of art as indifferents that have value, I think the Stoics would find it a more accurate formulation to speak of *art appreciation* as what has value (presumably in the category “of the soul”). And if so, pursuit – not of (ownership of) the art works themselves, but of the conditions in which one can appreciate them – would indeed be an appropriate attitude.

<sup>3</sup> One more qualification: among the examples of external things that have value are parents and children. But here, of course, the value is value *to* the person whose parents or children they are, and they have value to this person because of their particular relation to him or her (see again the previous note). Human beings as such could not possibly have value in this sense.

<sup>4</sup> It is of course possible that one's possession of certain valuable indifferents, such as mental agility or physical health, could affect one's chances of achieving well-being or happiness, in the sense of creating the conditions in which one is best placed to make the moral progress necessary for the transition to true wisdom and virtue. But nothing indifferent figures as an *element in* well-being. Thanks to Sarah Buss for pushing me to make this clarification.

<sup>5</sup> Nandi Theunissen pointed out that not everyone makes a sharp distinction between ethical and non-ethical values; on some views, there is simply a continuum of valuable things – from a glass of water, for example, to a work of art, to a person. But I take it that any view (or at least, any non-theological view) dealing with the value of humanity would place this value at the top end of the scale. Hence, if we are looking for hints of such a view in the Stoics, we would expect to find them at the top end of their evaluative hierarchy – in other words, in connection with their notions of virtue and the good, not the indifferent.

<sup>6</sup> “The life in agreement” is one of many Stoic characterizations of our natural end. This is a complicated topic. A good account is Brennan 2005, ch.10; in partial disagreement is Bett 2006.

<sup>7</sup> This threefold classification in Stobaeus is attributed to Diogenes of Babylon (2.84,4). Another threefold classification, attributed at least in part to Antipater, appears just before in Stobaeus (2.83,11-84,3); the order is different, but the sense of *axia* apparently marking out something higher is *tên dosin kai timen kath'hauto* (2.83,12). This is very difficult to translate, but some attempts are “a thing's contribution and merit per se” (Long & Sedley 1987, passage 58D), “the estimation and honor [for something] in itself” (Inwood & Gerson 1997, passage II-95, 7f), and “its contribution and esteem in itself” (Pomeroy 1999, p.49); whether this too applies only to good things and not to indifferents is not entirely clear, but it at least seems possible.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Pakaluk 2004; Crisp 2006; Sarch 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Talk of comparative *amounts* of value possessed by different people (as opposed to one person being in some way qualitatively superior to another) may sound odd to modern ears. But for Aristotle the quantitative assessment is just as natural for human value as it would be for monetary value. He describes the great-souled person as being worthy of great things – specifically, of great amounts of honor – and as having a correct assessment of this; the latter point is expressed by saying that “he values himself according to his value” (1123b14-15), whereas (following the usual threefold pattern for Aristotle's virtues of character) the

corresponding vices of vanity and “small-souledness” (*mikropsuchia*) consist in claiming *too much* and *too little* honor respectively, and therefore being excessive and deficient, respectively, in the self-assignment of value (1123b15). The actual honor merited comes in different amounts for different people – amounts that one might or might not judge correctly in one’s own case – and this is a function of equivalent differences of amount in these people’s value. Taylor’s commentary on this chapter is very helpful; see Taylor 2006, 217-26.

<sup>10</sup> I say “he or she” this time because although Aristotle does not mention them, one could see a friendship between an older and a younger woman, and perhaps between a mother and a daughter, as instances of this type.

<sup>11</sup> “Capable of community in law and agreement” is borrowed verbatim from the translations of both Terence Irwin (Irwin 1999) and Roger Crisp (Crisp 2000); I cannot see a better way to put it. This idea of a human capacity to form a “community in law and agreement” is shared by the Stoics (Arius Didymus in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 15.15.3-5 – passage 67L in Long & Sedley 1987), who stress that it *distinguishes* humans from other animals; I return to this theme in my treatment of the Stoics in the next section. The Epicureans also restrict justice to those capable of making agreements; but it is not clear that this even includes all humans – see Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai* 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> Irwin 1999 surely takes the cake here, as often – though, to be fair, he does include brackets to make clear what is in the actual text and what is added: “hence [every human being seems] also [to have] friendship [with every human being], to the extent that [every human being] is a human being”.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Douglass, for example (Douglass 2001), has no trouble distinguishing markedly different levels of ill-treatment among the various slaveholders or their subordinates to whom he was subject, even while abhorring the immorality of slavery as a whole and the dehumanizing effect it has on slaveholders as well as slaves.

<sup>14</sup> Such cases may admittedly be a source of discomfort among those concerned to defend the value of humanity as such; they can also be a motivation for skepticism about the whole idea. John Rawls identifies “the capacity for moral personality” as the basis for humans’ entitlement to just treatment – which is surely not so different from being “capable of community in law and agreement”, the feature identified by Aristotle. But Rawls admits that those who permanently lack moral personality (such as the severely mentally defective, or psychopaths) “may present a difficulty” – one that he does not attempt to resolve; see Rawls 1999, section 77 (p.446 for the words just quoted). Still, if Rawls allows, however uneasily, that some humans may fall outside the scope of justice, we need not be too hard on Aristotle for suggesting something similar. A classic case of skepticism is Peter Singer, who, in part because of the difficulty posed by such cases, rejects any attempt to rest our status as subjects of ethical concern on distinctively human capacities, and for this reason refuses to make a sharp divide between the ethical concern owed to humans and to other animals; see Singer 1979 (and later editions), chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>15</sup> My language here and elsewhere may seem to presuppose that finding a notion of the value of humanity in ancient Greek ethics would be a good thing. In part this is a function of the way I have posed the central question: can we find such a notion in ancient thought? In these terms, “yes” naturally sounds like success and “no” like failure. Now, I do not in fact mean to take a decisive stand on this matter; there may be respectable ethical theories that deny that people are bearers of value (and the title of this volume, *Rethinking the Value of Humanity*, is meant to leave open that possibility). However, to the extent that the ancients’ lack of any fully developed

conception of the value of humanity shows up precisely in their acceptance of slavery and of other forms of elitism that few would tolerate today – and there will be more to say about this as we continue – I think it is hard for us not to regard this as a deficiency in their ethical thinking. (Of course, if they had had such a conception, ancient Greek ethics would have been quite different, and features that are often now admired about it might have been absent. You cannot have everything.)

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Christopher Celenza for the reference to Aulus Gellius, for several of the other references in this paragraph and the next, and for drawing my attention to this theme. For a fascinating history of broadly this conception of humanity, from the ancient world to the present, see Celenza 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle ascribes to plants a rudimentary kind of soul, which regulates their life functions (nutrition and reproduction). The Stoics, on the other hand, give plants a lower capacity than soul, which they call *phusis*, “nature”. But since soul and “nature” are different grades of the same divine “breath” (*pneuma*) that holds things together and endows them with their qualities (with a still lower grade, *hexis* or “holding”, being responsible for the same function in inanimate objects like rocks), it is not clear that much turns on this terminological difference.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle says that this faculty of soul is possessed by humans and “anything else of this kind or more honorable” (414b18-19); presumably this is designed to accommodate divine beings (although these, at least in Aristotle’s conception of the divine, will not have the lower parts we humans share with animals and plants).

<sup>19</sup> The Greek preposition is *epi* with the dative. This can have a variety of different nuances, but “for the purpose of” seems the most suitable here. At any rate, *epi* indicates some kind of correlation between the possession of language and the grasp of ethical and political notions.

<sup>20</sup> The purpose and function of the digression has often been regarded as puzzling. A reading of the passage that neatly integrates it in the dialogue as a whole is Sedley 2004, 65-81.

<sup>21</sup> One important consideration here is how the “noble lie” passage at the end of book III (414b-415d) is to be interpreted. An excellent recent treatment of this is Rowett 2016.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Irwin 1991, at 72-3; Caston 2006, esp. 336-41; Shields 2007, ch.7.

<sup>23</sup> A good account of Aristotle’s views on this subject is Burnyeat 2008.

<sup>24</sup> It looks as if the position of the craftsmen is different; their status in society is apparently not naturally ordained. The brief glossary entry “Vulgar Craftsmen” in C.D.C. Reeve’s translation of the *Politics* (Reeve 1998) puts it very well.

<sup>25</sup> He tells us he is closely following Panaetius (3.7), and in a letter to Atticus (16.11.4) he makes clear that the work of Panaetius was *Peri tou Kathékontos*, *On what is Incumbent*, of which his own title *De Officiis* is a translation (cf. *Off.* 1.8). Virtually every Stoic back to the school’s founder, Zeno of Citium, wrote works of this title, although very little is known about their contents; see Sedley 1999, esp. 137.

<sup>26</sup> Later (1.115) a third and fourth role are added: that deriving from chance circumstances and that deriving from our own decisions.

<sup>27</sup> “Power of decision” is my rendering of *prohairesis*; on the importance of this term in Epictetus, see Long 2002, 210-220. (Long’s favored translation is “volition”.)

<sup>28</sup> Hadot 1992, 331.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek is *parakolouthêtikos* ... *têi theiai dioikêsei*. Adjectives ending in *-ikos* mark an ability or tendency to do something, without commitment as to whether or not this is in fact fulfilled, on any given occasion or indeed ever.

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<sup>30</sup> See again n.25.

<sup>31</sup> Since the Stoics are often thought of as the most Kantian of ancient Greek philosophers, it is interesting that a comparable tension can be found in Kant. On this, see Darwall 2008.

<sup>32</sup> For detailed discussion, see Lee 2005.

<sup>33</sup> I say “accommodating”; I do not say that it gets us all the way. Hierarchy could of course be introduced by people’s judgements; what if some humans were generally judged more valuable than others – just as other things are judged more or less valuable in various respects? On the other hand, judgements of this kind would have no monopoly on the truth; those who made opposite comparative valuations, or who explicitly proposed that everyone was equally valuable, would be just as correct, since in a very real sense everyone would be right about everything. And none of the evidence on Protagoras himself suggests that he was interested in making hierarchical rankings among human beings.

<sup>34</sup> The text is a fragmentary papyrus. It can be found with facing English translation in Laks & Most 2016, vol. IX, passage 37 D38b.

<sup>35</sup> And note that “clever” itself need not always be positive. The “clever” (*deinos*) person is contrasted in Aristotle’s ethics with the person who has ethical insight (the *phronimos*) (*NE* VI.12-13); whereas the latter by definition is oriented towards what is genuinely good, the “clever” person is simply effective in achieving goals, be they good or bad.

<sup>36</sup> The cautionary spirit projected by Sophocles may reflect another strand of thinking about humanity in Greek culture, very different from the one on which I have concentrated in this section and the last. Here humanity is thought of as feeble and limited, in sharp contrast with the immortal gods; a good example in philosophy is Socrates’ claim in Plato’s *Apology* to possess a characteristically human form of wisdom (20d), a wisdom that turns out to consist precisely in the understanding that he *lacks* knowledge of anything truly worthwhile or valuable. On this view the “wonders” that this ode starts by celebrating would turn out to be largely illusory. I have not focused on this conception of humanity because it seems much less helpful to notions of the value of humanity than the one introduced in the previous section. (Indeed, as we saw, Aristotle explicitly rejects it in his account of philosophical thought as bringing us close to the divine.) However, it is undeniably an important aspect of popular Greek thought. Thanks to Eckart Förster and Nandi Theunissen for reminding me of this.

<sup>37</sup> Sophocles is of course not writing a philosophical treatise; but this ode might invite reflection on whether capacities themselves may be worthy of respect. (Compare the remarks in the previous section on capacities in Aristotle and the Stoics.) Is Sophocles suggesting that we need to be very careful to use well the powers that we have – and that there is a serious risk of our not doing so – or is he suggesting that the powers themselves have an inherently self-destructive aspect? The line of thought mentioned in the previous note would suggest the latter, but I am not sure; while there would be a cautionary message either way, in the former case there would be room for a measure of optimism. Thanks to Sarah Buss for pressing this whole issue of capacities as possible bearers of value.

<sup>38</sup> This line of thinking appears in passage 37 D38a in Laks & Most 2016, vol. IX.

<sup>39</sup> This is true even if (contrary to initial appearances) one does not think that Antiphon means to *advocate* the pursuit of self-interest, regardless of *nomos*, whenever one can get away with it; for an example of this kind of interpretation, see Gagarin 2002, chapter 3. Whatever Antiphon is doing with the *phusis/nomos* contrast in this section, it seems to be contributing to a very different project from that of explaining a conception of the value of humanity. However, his

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distance from that project seems especially stark if the pursuit of self-interest is in fact something he is recommending; I have argued for this reading (and against some alternatives, although Gagarin's was not yet published at the time) in Bett 2002, section II.

<sup>40</sup> Zoe Williams, *The Guardian Weekly*, June 9, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> For the notion of children as replaceable, see also Sophocles, *Antigone* 909-10.

<sup>42</sup> I have discussed this with respect to human rights in Bett 2012. Fred D. Miller has also made the case that Aristotle's political theory can be understood in terms of human rights: Miller 1995. A complete issue of the journal *Review of Metaphysics* was devoted to discussion of this book. Of particular relevance to the theme of this paper, the essay by John Cooper (Cooper 1996) argues that there can very well be room for talk of rights – even natural or human rights, rather than merely legal rights – in interpreting Aristotle's political theory, but not if human rights are conceived in the modern way, represented paradigmatically by Hegel. To quote Cooper: "This thing that Aristotle according to Hegel cannot envisage is what Hegel calls the 'principle of subjective freedom' – the idea that in possessing this power of arbitrary self-determination we have something of infinite worth in each of us individually that must be honored and respected in any acceptable political regime" (863). In other words, an idea of the value of humanity as such. Cooper endorses Hegel's historical claim that the principle of subjective freedom is post-classical. I find Cooper's reading sufficiently plausible that I decided not to include a discussion of human rights in the main body of the paper, despite having originally planned to do so. Another paper pointing in a similar direction is Burnyeat 1994/2012.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to the original Johns Hopkins workshop in April 2016, I discussed this paper at the History of Philosophy Roundtable at UC San Diego. I would like to thank the participants on both occasions for valuable feedback that has improved the final result, especially Yitzhak Melamed at Hopkins and Monte Johnson and Casey Perin at UCSD. I also thank Sarah Buss and Nandi Theunissen for comments that prompted a great many improvements at several different stages – including, but by no means only, in the places where they are mentioned in footnotes; and Sara Magrin for some helpful comments at the final stage