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Ethics and the Sacred: Can Secular Morality Dispense with Religious Values?

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Abstract: In this paper I explore the role that the concept of the sacred can play in our moral thinking. I accept that the assertion that ‘human life is sacred’ can be one way of articulating the special value of individual human lives as in some sense inviolable. I cautiously allow that the idea of ‘sacred value’ might also apply to other things such as certain kinds of human commitments, uniquely precious art-works, and some other kinds of living things. In conclusion I offer reasons for resisting the claim, made especially by Roger Scruton, that the experience of the sacred, when properly understood, draws us ineluctably into a religious view of the world.

Keywords: Sacred, life, sanctity, irreplaceable, inviolable, Dworkin, Scruton

1 Introduction

Are some things sacred? Is our experience of certain things as inviolable an essential part of our moral experience, is our moral world impoverished if we neglect it, and is the word ‘sacred’ the appropriate word with which to characterise this experience? If so, what does it mean?

In this paper I aim to approach these questions from an experiential perspective—to identify those dimensions of moral experience where the word ‘sacred’ appears to have a role to play, and to consider whether it serves to mark a distinctive kind of moral value, what its relation is to the rest of our moral thinking, and what the implications are of using the word ‘sacred’ in this context.

One obvious consideration to bear in mind when considering the use of the word is that it has strongly religious connotations. That might be seen as a problem, making the term too tendentious to feature in a shared moral vocabulary common to the religious and the non-religious. Alternatively, the religious connotations might be seen as positively significant, revealing that if we take our moral experience seriously, it draws us ineluctably into a religious view of the world. This would indeed be congenial to a certain kind of religious believer. There has

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been a tendency, in some recent writing on religious belief, to understand it not as a set of conclusions from inferential logical arguments, but as the most appropriate way of articulating certain deep features of human experience—and the experience of the sacred may be seen as an instance of this.

Roger Scruton's writing on religion, in particular, focuses strongly on the experience of the sacred as being at the heart of a religious view of the world. His application of this idea is wide-ranging—he draws on anthropological material about the role of sacrifice as a binding social force, and on music (particularly the music of Wagner) as an encounter with the sacred. I agree with John Cottingham's comment on Scruton's writing, that if the concept of the sacred is to be considered as a possible route to a religious perspective, the most appropriate focus would be on "the fundamental primacy of the moral", the idea that "the religious or theistic outlook gets its ultimate force and validation from the irresistible phenomenology of the ethical demand, rather than, say, from the analogue of musical experience" (Cottingham 2016, 42). In this paper, then, I shall explore the role of the concept of the sacred in moral experience. I shall ask: if we neglect the idea of the sacred, do we get a diminished morality? In the light of that discussion, I shall consider whether acknowledging the sacred as a feature of moral experience draws us into the sphere of religious belief.

Even within the moral sphere, the word 'sacred' is used very widely and sometimes very loosely. People may talk about regarding certain moral values as 'sacred' and mean simply that they treat them as unconditional and unquestionable. 'For me', they might say, 'the morality I was brought up with is sacred', and this may simply be a way of expressing a certain kind of uncompromising absolutism. My concern here is not with *how* people may regard their values, but with *what* they value—whether some things have a special kind of value for which the word 'sacred' is appropriate. But again I am looking for something which goes deeper than the vagaries of linguistic usage. People describe all sorts of things as 'sacred' for them in a loose way. 'That photo of my wedding is sacred' may be a way of saying that it is especially precious, something you would never part with and would zealously protect. Historically and across different societies, a great range of places, practices, plants and animals have been treated as 'sacred' in a way which gives them a vitally important role in shared rituals and communal life—literally 'sacred cows', for instance. Is this of purely anthropological interest, or is there, in all this diversity, something which we need to hold on to, a kind of moral value which is rooted in something more fundamental than the contingent customs and practices of this or that society?

2 Is Life Sacred?

I begin with the most familiar case in which the language of ‘the sacred’ enters into contemporary moral discourse: the idea of the ‘sanctity of life’, that *life* is sacred. Consider the following words:

“Today the House of Lords will debate the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill. We are opposed to this Bill and to any measure that seeks to legalise assisted suicide or euthanasia. We believe that all human life is sacred and God-given with a value that is inherent, not conditional. We urge legislators to withhold support for this Bill so as to ensure that British law continues to safeguard the principle that the intention to kill, or assist in the killing, of an innocent human being is wrong.”¹

This was the beginning of a letter sent to *The Times* by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop of Westminster, and Chief Rabbi, in May 2006. It is a classic instance of the bringing together of three claims: that ‘all human life is sacred’, that this is a distinctively religious idea (human life is sacred because it is ‘God-given’), and that a morality which fails to accommodate this idea is seriously lacking.

That familiar equation of ‘sacred’ with ‘God-given’ needs to be viewed sceptically, I suggest, even within a theistic perspective. If we take the gift analogy seriously, where does it lead us? Does it really imply that it can never be right to dispose of something which was a gift, however much that gift may be treasured and valued as such? Suppose that I have been given a car by my parents, perhaps as a present to mark a special occasion such as my coming of age. As such it has a special value for me, it is not simply a means of transport but has a personal significance as a mark of the loving relationship between my parents and me, a precious reminder of their generosity. But suppose that after many years of good use the car breaks down and becomes a liability, it is dangerous to drive and will work at all only with constant repairs. Am I obliged to continue using it so as not to disrespect its status as a precious gift? Would it not be acceptable for me, without any disrespect to my parents, to dispose of it, recognising that it has reached the end of its natural life? I do not wish to put too much weight on what may look like a trivialising of the ‘gift’ analogy, but if that analogy is doing any work at all, we can reasonably test it against such mundane examples.

We should also consider more carefully why it might be said that human life is God-given, and what might be meant by it. Someone who believes in a divine

¹ See <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/640/assisted-dying-joint-faith-leaders-letter-to-the-times>.

creator will be committed to seeing the whole of the created universe as in some sense God-given, without any implication that all such gifts have the same value and status as human life. What then is special about human life which marks it out for the description 'God-given' in a stronger sense? The standard answer in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is that human beings are made in the image of God. It is not simply that they are a divine creation, but that they are creatures into which God has put something of himself. Such a claim presupposes that there are certain distinctively human qualities in virtue of which we are uniquely said to be made in the image of God. What are those qualities?

The traditional answers all focus on the linked capacities for rational thought and for consciousness in a strong sense. By the latter I mean not just the awareness of their surroundings which is possessed by many animal species, but the awareness of that awareness, the ability to articulate, contemplate and assess our experience of the world, and with this goes also the ability to be conscious of ourselves as the subjects of such experience. We can form conscious purposes for ourselves, we can pursue aims which matter to us because we are conscious of them as our own aims, for which we can take personal responsibility. Whatever the precise formulation, some such conception of what it is to be human must underpin talk of human beings as made in the image of God. However strongly the theist may want to emphasise that the divine attributes of intelligence and purposiveness far surpass those of human beings, the analogy itself is essential.

Clearly the recognition of those distinctively human capacities is common to theistic and secular perspectives, and so also is the ethical significance which those qualities can be seen to have. It is because we are rational conscious beings, who can form purposes which matter to us, that our lives matter to us. Each individual human life has, in a special sense, a value for the person whose life it is, a value which is tied to the subjectivity of that individual. It is in this sense that we can say that to deprive an individual human being of his or her life is to destroy something which is unique and irreplaceable. This is not an assertion about how good or bad someone's life is, judged from an external standpoint. From an impersonal point of view, clearly, some lives are better than others and some are more irreplaceable than others. But each human life is unique and irreplaceable from the perspective of the person whose life it is. This is the ethical import of the truism that my life is the only life I have. If I die, someone may take my place and produce as much or more good in the world—but that will be no replacement from my point of view.

I suggest that we are now in a position to make a link with the concept of the 'sacred'. I find helpful here Ronald Dworkin's classic discussion of the contrast between 'sacred value' and 'incremental value'. If something has incremental value, he says, then the more of it there is, the better. Happiness, understood in the tradi-

tional utilitarian way, has incremental value. Knowledge, to take Dworkin's own example, has incremental value: it is good, other things being equal, to produce more of it, to increase the amount of human knowledge. What has 'sacred value', by contrast, has value only once it already exists.

"The hallmark of the sacred as distinct from the incrementally valuable is that the sacred is intrinsically valuable because—and therefore only once—it exists. It is inviolable because of what it represents or embodies [...]. Something is sacred or inviolable when its deliberate destruction would dishonour what ought to be honoured." (Dworkin 1995, 73–74)

And it is in this sense, as he says, that we can and do talk about human life as sacred.

It is the idea of the irreplaceability of each individual subject of conscious experience which explains, I suggest, why human lives are rightly seen as inviolable, and could perhaps be said to have 'sacred value' in this sense. If things have incremental value, that value can be quantified, however imprecisely. We can weigh different instances of them against one another in our ethical judgments. This is the classic consequentialist way of thinking about the promotion of human happiness or well-being. Trade-offs are permissible and indeed rationally required, foregoing happiness here for the sake of greater happiness there. But the encounter with the otherness of an individual human being, as a world of experience which, once destroyed, can never be replaced and can never be compensated for, elicits our respect and sets limits to the permissible ways in which we can treat that person. And the continuity with traditional connotations of the word 'sacred' is to be found in this idea of inviolability.

This idea of the irreplaceability and inviolability of the person is central to Scruton's defence of the concept of the sacred. 'The experience of sacred things is', he suggests, "[...] a kind of interpersonal encounter" (Scruton 2014, 24). This is why his exploration of the idea starts out from, and is largely built on, an account of the nature of the I-You relation and the irreducibility of the first-person perspective. We relate to another person not just as an object in the world but as a separate, unique and in some sense impenetrable consciousness:

"[...] [O]ur way of understanding the person employs concepts that have no part to play in the explanatory sciences, and situates people—both self and other—in some way on the edge of things. People are objects in a world of objects, certainly. But we address them as subjects, each with its own distinctive perspective on the world, and each addressing the world from its own horizon. There is a mystery that attaches to the subject [...]." (96)

I shall return later to the use which Scruton makes of this reference to 'mystery', and his attempt to link it with what he refers to as 'the transcendental', but for the moment I want to stay with what he says about 'our way of understanding

the person', as the most promising approach to explicating and defending talk of the sacred value of human life. Such talk can plausibly be seen as rooted in our experience at a fundamental level. Our relationship to one another as persons is an experience both of identification and of separation. It is the experience of other human beings as beings with whom we can identify, who have feelings and aspirations as we do, but whose feelings and aspirations are at the same time irretrievably 'other', always to some degree elusive and impenetrable, and in that way uniquely individual. In appealing to this experience of 'the other', Scruton is referring not just to a contingent and specific psychological phenomenon, but to fundamental features of what it is to be a person and to stand in a relation to other persons. This is what leads him to say that "to address the other as you rather than he or she is automatically to see him or her as an individual for whom no substitute exists" (93). It is the basis for what I have been referring to as the irreplaceability of each individual human life, which can find expression in the moral recognition of human lives as sacred and inviolable.

Along these lines, then, it can be argued that the idea of the sacred value of human lives is not merely a social convention or a cultural construct, not merely an accepted moral intuition which just happens to be widely shared in a certain religious culture. If it were simply that, we could properly ask whether it can or should persist. We might have to conclude that its prevalence is a historical legacy, a product of two millennia of the Christian tradition, with the implication that it can no longer have any appeal to those who reject the religious tradition, and that if Christianity is on the wane (at least in European societies), the idea that life is sacred may, for better or worse, disappear with it. The idea can, however, plausibly be seen as rooted in our experience at a fundamental level. It may find expression, as we have seen, in religious talk of life as God-given, but that talk gets its sense from the experience, rather than vice versa. For Scruton, as we shall see, it leads us back into religious language, and I shall give my reasons for not following him there, but I accept the plausibility of his starting point.

For Dworkin, likewise, the paradigm of sacred value is the idea of human life as sacred, and this, he says,

"[...] may be, and often is, interpreted in a secular as well as in a conventionally religious way [...]. [T]he idea of the sacred, so far from being alien or mysterious, is familiar, almost commonplace." (Dworkin 1995, 25)

He goes on to suggest that the same idea is presupposed in many people's opinions about art and nature. I shall move on to those cases shortly, but my initial claim is that, as applied to human life, it is rooted in the irreplaceability of each individual subject of conscious experience. That is what underpins the recogni-

tion of ethical inviolability, and that in turn is what gives an identifiable sense to talk of ‘sacred value’. As I shall later suggest, the word ‘sacred’ is not the only way of articulating that idea, it may not be the best way, but drawing on some of the traditional connotations of the word is one way of marking this important dimension of our moral experience.

3 What Does It Mean to See Life as Sacred?

This is not the place to try to spell out all the ethical implications of this idea, but before moving on to a consideration of whether the concept of ‘the sacred’ has applications to cases other than human life, I want to offer a few comments on the idea that ‘human life is sacred’ understood in the light of the experiential approach I have defended. I have suggested that it offers a corrective to an oversimple consequentialism of a maximising kind. Human lives are not permissibly subject to trade-offs which allow them to be sacrificed for the sake of a greater good. As such, the idea has obvious affinities with the deontological tradition in ethics. In contrast to much writing in that tradition, however, it appeals not to some supposedly self-evident duty or obligation but to something deeper, a fundamental type of response to another human life. It has a greater affinity, perhaps, with the Kantian notion of respect for persons, but whereas Kantian respect appears to be ultimately a respect for the impersonal reason which is exemplified in individual human agents, I want to emphasise the response of respect for the unique individual human life. The stronger affinity is perhaps not with classical Kantianism but with the Kantian strand in much modern political philosophy—the Rawlsian emphasis on the ‘separateness of persons’.

The emphasis on the value of the unique individual life enables us to make links also with the useful distinction between *biological* and *biographical* conceptions of the sanctity of life. The former would imply that what is of fundamental value is the fact of someone’s being alive, of being a functioning biological organism. Notoriously, this conception makes it difficult to explain why there should be anything special about the value of *human* life. If what matters is being alive, then it would seem to follow that preserving the life of every living thing must be equally important. As I have argued, once we focus on the distinctive attributes of human life, we are led also to see that what matters is that each individual human being should be able to live out his or her own individual life. In Rachels’ telling phrase, what has value is not ‘being alive’, but ‘having a life’ (Rachels 1986, 24–27).

The sanctity of life, understood in this way, clearly establishes a very strong presumption against the taking of a human life. That presumption, however, is not exceptionless, for at least three reasons. First, If the core ethical idea is respect for each individual's life as the only life he or she has, which is, as such, unique and irreplaceable, then this is compatible with the recognition that it is for that individual to choose whether and when to end it. This has an obvious relevance to the issues of assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia, addressed in the Faith Leaders' letter from which I quoted. Their invoking of the idea that human lives are sacred, in order to rule out any acceptance of assisted dying, is misplaced. Respect for each individual's unique life requires also respect for the deeply considered decisions about the ending of it which that individual may make. As it is frequently put, it is their life, so it is their choice. That, of course, does not by itself settle the highly contentious issues around possible legalisation of assisted dying or assisted suicide. There are other considerations to take into account, including familiar arguments about 'slippery slopes' and possible pressure on the vulnerable. Nevertheless, accepting that human lives are sacred does not automatically rule out the permissibility of assisted dying.

There are two other reasons why the presumption against taking a human life is not exceptionless. Insofar as respect for each individual life is linked with the individual's responsibility for that life, it is consistent with the idea that the individual may, through the exercise of that responsibility, forfeit their right to life. That, with all its complexities, is the classic route into debates about the permissibility of killing in self-defence and in war.

Finally, as the quotation from Dworkin recognises, what he calls 'sacred value' is not the only kind of value. There *is* such a thing as incremental value—the kind of value for which it is appropriate to aim at producing as great a quantity as possible. I have said that the difference between the two kinds of value is that sacred value is not subject to trade-offs in the way that incremental value is. We cannot simply add up the numbers of lives to be lost or preserved by alternative courses of action (killing one to save ten), nor can we compute the value of different lives with a view to effecting the greatest value overall. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that the two kinds of value may sometimes come into conflict and may sometimes give rise to tragic dilemmas. Recognition of the sacred value of each individual life means that we cannot justify taking a life simply on the grounds that it will promote greater good overall, but the fact remains that the deliberate ending of someone's life may, in exceptional circumstances, be the only way of preventing some terrible catastrophe. For these three reasons, then, talk of human lives as 'inviolable' and in that sense 'sacred' does not necessarily entail an absolute and exceptionless prohibition of the deliberate ending of any human life.

4 Is the Truth Sacred?

It is this fundamental response to the otherness of an individual human being as a unique and irreplaceable subject of consciousness, then, that can plausibly be seen as a paradigm case of a distinctive kind of ethical value for which the word ‘sacred’ is a possible label. In the light of that, I now want to consider whether there are other comparable ethical responses for which the concept of the sacred might be appropriate. Consider the idea, sometimes voiced, that truth is sacred. In a much-quoted formulation by the Editor of *The Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, in 1921, it is the duty of a newspaper to ensure that “the unclouded face of truth” is not wronged. “Comment is free, but facts are sacred.” Or consider the related idea of a ‘sacred promise’ or a ‘sacred trust’. Here we have the same idea of inviolability, but what is its experiential core? I find it implausible to suppose that we might have the relevant response to ‘truth’ in the abstract, considered simply as a quality of true propositions, or to a promise considered simply as a form of words. What elicits the response of reverential respect is the human significance of communication or commitment. A key word here is ‘trust’. When we falsify the truth or are false to our promise, what is violated is the relationship of trust between human beings, and that is what ought to be inviolable.

When we understand it in that way, we can see the close link with the idea of human life as sacred. At the heart of all these ideas is the respect owed to the individual human subject. Again it is respect in the broadly Kantian sense of respect for persons, who are not to be used simply as means to an end. As with the idea of human lives as sacred, we can see how this sets a limit to utilitarian or consequentialist calculations of the greatest good. Of course telling the truth and keeping promises have a utilitarian value, as necessary conditions for the cooperation without which human life would be impoverished or impossible, but at a deeper level the obligation to tell the truth or to keep a promise reflects the wrong done to the particular individual human being whose trust is violated. This, I suggest, is what lies behind talk of truth as sacred or promises as sacred.

5 Is Art Sacred?

What now of other cases, such as Dworkin’s suggestion that “many people’s opinions about art or nature implicitly assume that these phenomena, too, have a kind of sacred value” (Dworkin 1995, 25)? In asking whether art can be sacred, we are not of course talking about ‘sacred art’ in the sense of art which has a religious subject-matter or function—altar-pieces, icons and other devotional works,

masses and motets and so on. We are asking whether there is an identifiable ethical experience of art as ‘sacred’ in the sense of requiring us to respect it as inviolable. As with the idea of life as sacred, I suggest that we have to look not at art in the abstract but at our attitude to individual art-works, and that, again, it is the experience of individual instances as *irreplaceable* that carries the relevant ethical weight. This is most compellingly the case in the visual arts, where the type/token relation has a special significance in contrast to the other arts. *War and Peace* is not identical with an individual copy of the book, Bach’s *B-minor Mass* is not identical with the individual performance or the individual score, but the *Mona Lisa* is the individual painting hanging in the Louvre. Destroying one copy of the novel does not destroy the work, marring one performance does not destroy the *B-minor Mass*, but destroying the *Mona Lisa* would be an irreplaceable loss. The *Mona Lisa*, this unique individual, would no longer exist. Here, perhaps, we may have a case of what could be called ‘sacred value’ comparable to the sacred value of individual human lives.

Is this irreplaceability a contingent feature of individual works of visual art? Is the *Mona Lisa* irreplaceable simply because there are no technical means of making an exact reproduction? Even in the cases of some of the visual arts the ‘original’ work is not necessarily unique. There can be multiple originals of bronzes, for instance—there are twelve original casts of Rodin’s *The Burghers of Calais*—or of etchings or engravings. Suppose that copies could be made of the *Mona Lisa* with exactly the same physical properties – the same pigments, reproducing the exact colours and the exact contours of the brush-strokes. Would the painting in the Louvre then no longer be unique and irreplaceable, and would it no longer evoke the same sense of having a sacred and inviolable value?

We might well feel that even if the reproductions were physically indistinguishable from the original, they would still lack the special status and value of the original—the fact that it is from the hand of Leonardo himself. Its irreplaceability, we may feel, is a matter of its origin, the fact that it was painted by the master himself, and it is this that gives rise to our sense of what an irreparable loss its destruction would be. The original painting puts us directly in contact with the genius of Leonardo. If this is right, then, as with the idea of truth as sacred, or a sacred promise, it is the human significance of the entity in question, the relation between human beings which it embodies, that evokes the sense of the sacred.

It might be objected that I have put too much emphasis on the uniqueness of individual art-works, and, in consequence, on the visual arts. What about the burning of books, for instance? Do we not experience that as a sacrilege, a violation? Perhaps so, but I think that there is something different going on here. In actions of ritual book-burning such as the events staged by the Nazis in 1933, what is significant is not the destruction of the individual copies of books. There

were of course innumerable other copies of the books which were burned, and the destruction of these particular copies was not in itself an irreparable loss. The significance of such events was their symbolic character, as acts of cultural hostility and repression. The symbolic targets were ethnic, cultural and political groups such as Jews and left-wing radicals, and individual authors representative of such groups. In the prophetic words of Heine, which were subsequently used on a plaque in Berlin as a reminder of the Nazi book-burnings, 'where they burn books, they will also in the end burn people'. Again it is the human significance of the act which makes it an act of sacrilege, though here in a rather different sense.

6 Is Nature Sacred?

I turn finally to the other area of experience where Dworkin says that the idea of the sacred is "familiar, almost commonplace"—that of our attitude to aspects of the natural world (Dworkin 1995, 25, 75–81). I have previously, in a contribution to a collection titled *Is Nothing Sacred?*, adopted a sceptical attitude towards talk of nature as sacred (Norman 2004). What I was especially suspicious of was the suggestion, often encountered in certain versions of environmental ethics, that we are wrong to treat the natural world as something to be used for human purposes, rather than with reverential respect. We should, it is frequently said, respect 'the balance, order and harmony in the natural world', refrain from interfering or encroaching on it, and let nature take its course. The appropriate attitude to the natural world, it is sometimes suggested, has to be firmly anchored in a sense of nature as sacred and inviolable.

There are large issues here in environmental ethics, closely linked of course with similar issues in medical ethics and in bio-ethics generally. But to approach them with a general principle of 'not interfering with nature' is, I think, confused. Everything that we do is an interference in nature. That is a logical truth, if we define 'nature' as the non-human world. More concretely, we cannot reverse the fact that, as a species, our survival has depended on our ability to modify the natural world in fundamental and far-reaching ways. That has been the case since the Neolithic revolution. The introduction of farming fundamentally changed our relationship with the earth and with non-human species. The selective breeding of plants and animals to introduce new strains of cereal crops, livestock and fruit, takes that process further, and is no less an 'interference with nature' than is the controversial use of genetic modification for food-stuffs. And the industrial revolution transformed our relationship with the natural world even more dramatically.

Of course it is important to take very seriously the consequences of our impact on the natural environment. In the past half-century we have become much more aware of the unintended consequences of such impacts. In that sense an awareness of the ‘harmony and balance’ of the natural world is essential. Plants, animals, the soil and the climate are all elements of complex interlocking ecosystems, and human action in one area can have wide-ranging and unanticipated knock-on effects. Pesticides, for instance, do not merely kill pests, they kill the animals that feed on the pests, and we then find that we no longer have songbirds. All this is by now rightly familiar and still too little heeded. But we do not give it its rightful importance by talking of nature as sacred and inviolable. We do it by taking seriously the consequences of human actions. If organic farming is better than the practices of intensive agri-business, it is because it is less short-sighted, it preserves the soil better, is more sustainable, avoids damaging impacts on human health, and protects more effectively the many features of the natural environment which make it a beautiful and enriching world for human beings to enjoy and relate to. It is not because nature is sacred and inviolable.

So far my remarks about the supposed sacredness of nature have paralleled my previous points. Just as it is inappropriate to talk of ‘human life’ in the abstract as sacred, or of ‘truth’ or ‘art’ as sacred, so likewise, if the idea of the sacred has a place in our experience of the natural world, it is not captured by talk of an undifferentiated ‘nature’ as sacred. Suppose, then, that we make the same move as previously, and focus instead on individuals. Do we properly experience individual natural organisms as having a sacred quality, an inviolability which requires us to preserve and protect them?

As before, some of the cases where we are likely to apply the idea of the sacred to individual cases may reflect their human significance. Think of the example of ancient trees. The phrase ‘heritage trees’ is significant. Some individual trees are special, and it would be sacrilegious to destroy them, because they embody a human history. Think of the Tolpuddle Martyrs Tree in Dorset, for instance, beneath which agricultural labourers met to form the first trade union in Britain, or Sir Isaac Newton’s apple tree which is supposed to have inspired his formulation of the theory of gravity, or the Ankerwycke Yew at Runnymede which is linked with the signing of Magna Charta. In other cases the relationship with human history may be less direct or specific. We may think of ancient trees simply as encapsulating the passage of time, as though the trees themselves have experienced it, have seen human generations come and go. For such reasons we rightly think that cutting them down would be an act of desecration.

Can this attitude be extended to all individual non-human living things, not just to those whose sacrosanctity is tied to their human significance? Not straightforwardly, I think. Blake says that “every thing that lives is Holy”—albeit in *The*

Marriage of Heaven and Hell, a work which delights in paradox (Blake 1969, 160). In more sober terms, Albert Schweitzer famously put forward the principle of ‘reverence for life’—all life—as the fundamental ethical imperative. One of the considerations which may be at work here is our sense of the mysterious otherness of non-human life forms. The world of a bird, or the world of a fox or a badger, is something which we can recognise to be a distinctive form of experience but one which tantalisingly eludes us. As Blake puts it,

“How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way
Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (Blake 1969, 150)

This sense of ‘otherness’ is on a different level from the elusiveness of another human consciousness which I invoked earlier when discussing the separateness and irreplaceability of persons. We are talking here about a whole mode of experience which is opaque to us. Again, however, the idea of uniqueness and hence of irreplaceability might be thought to carry the same sort of ethical weight. The loss of a species, of a life form, it might be said, would be the disappearance of a distinctive world of experience.

That, of course, is a thought which we can have only about species to which it makes sense to ascribe the having of experiences. It cannot be generalized to all life forms, and other considerations will have to do the work if the idea of ‘reverence for (all) life’ is to make sense. Here is what Schweitzer says:

“A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to help all life which he is able to succour, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves sympathy as valuable in itself, nor how far it is capable of feeling. To him life as such is sacred. He shatters no ice crystal that sparkles in the sun, tears no leaf from its tree, breaks off no flower, and is careful not to crush any insect as he walks. If he works by lamplight on a summer evening, he prefers to keep the window shut and to breathe stifling air, rather than to see insect after insect fall on his table with singed and sinking wings.”²

This passage is a good example of the attempt to root an ethics of the sacred in a certain kind of experience, but I suspect that more than one kind of experience is being implicitly invoked here. It appears to trade partly on an appeal to our sense of natural beauty—that, presumably, is how the reference to the “ice crystal that sparkles in the sun” finds its way into the passage—but that is different from a sense of the sacred, and though it may apply to some life-forms it is singularly inapplicable to others. The concept of ‘reverence’ itself covers a range of attitudes

² Schweitzer 1961, 214; see <http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-c/schweitzer01.pdf>.

and experiences. Sometimes it refers to a sense of awe and wonder, but this is not confined to our attitudes to living things. People frequently speak of the sense of awe evoked by the immensity of the night sky, or by the great age of fossils which have been miraculously preserved. It is an important form of experience, reminding us of our place in the universe and prompting an appropriate humility, but it is not really a specifically ethical attitude. Different again are passages where Schweitzer bolsters talk of ‘reverence’ with some kind of religious belief, sometimes Christian but sometimes also a kind of pantheism, as in this passage:

“Only by serving every kind of life do I enter the service of that Creative Will whence all life emanates [...]. In the universal ethic of reverence for life, mystical union with the Universal Spirit is actually and fully achieved.” (Schweitzer 2002, 132–133)

If we are to identify a basic ethical experience, prior to any belief, which roots the response to living things as sacred and inviolable, then the most plausible candidate is that sense of another world of experience separate from our own, distinctive of a species and in that respect irreplaceable—Blake’s ‘immense world of delight’. In that case we should note not only the similarity to the idea of the sacrosanctity of human lives, but also the significant difference. I argued that the irreplaceability of an individual human life is a matter of the uniqueness of a self-conscious subject of experience. Others may have lives which are qualitatively similar to mine, but this life is uniquely mine and it matters to me because it is the only life I have. But if there is something special about, say, the world of a robin, or the world of a tiger, that is because it is a certain *kind* of experience, distinctive of a particular species, not because it is the life of this individual robin or this individual tiger. The non-human case does not, I suggest, precisely replicate the irreplaceability and inviolability of individual human lives.

To illustrate the ethical implications of the difference, consider the example of culling. In the Highlands of Scotland, the culling of deer regularly takes place to tackle the problem of over-grazing, which would otherwise put at risk the habitats not only of the deer themselves but also of other species.³ It may be controversial but it is widely accepted that this is necessary and justifiable, provided the culling is done ‘humanely’. Clearly the primary ethical consideration is the protection of the deer population, and other species populations, rather than the lives of individual animals. In essence, the lives of individuals can legitimately be sacrificed for the good of the group.

³ See for instance http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB_13-74.pdf and [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fcpn6.pdf/\\$FILE/fcpn6.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fcpn6.pdf/$FILE/fcpn6.pdf)

There is a clear contrast with the ethical application of the idea that human lives are sacred. No one, I think, would propose that culling of human beings would be an ethically acceptable solution to the problem of human overpopulation. What underpins this ethical position, I have suggested, is the recognition of each individual human being as a conscious being the loss of whose life would be irreparable. That is the force of the idea that human lives are sacred, and it differs from our sense of the way in which non-human nature might be sacred.

7 The Face of God?

I have been looking at various important elements of our moral experience which can plausibly be described as a sense that some things are sacred. There are some things—most obviously, individual human lives, but also certain kinds of human commitments, uniquely precious art-works, and some other kinds of living things—which we experience as having a special value, requiring us to treat them as inviolable. I return now to the further question which I posed at the beginning. Does this mean that our moral experience presupposes a religious perspective, or at least makes best sense in the light of such a perspective? Can religious belief be defended by showing that it is built into our moral responses when these are properly explored and understood?

First a preliminary point: I take the question of ‘belief’ to be inescapable. There is a tendency in contemporary religious apologetics to play down the role of belief—to present religious commitment as a commitment to a self-contained set of practices and rituals, or to a community of identity, with its own self-contained discourse which makes no independently assessable truth-claims. I do not think that such a view of religion is sustainable. This is not the place to explore the issue, but I do not see how the practices and rituals, central though they may be to a religious community, can make sense without some context of distinctive beliefs. If practices of prayer and worship, for instance, are re-interpreted simply as self-authenticating activities, or as expressions of hopes and fears, of awe and wonder, detached from any beliefs which make claims to objective truth, such as a belief in an independently existing being to whom they are directed, it becomes difficult to see how they could have the importance they do in people’s lives.⁴

What can be conceded is that the relevant beliefs may not be best understood as the product of logical arguments, as inferences from empirical premises or the

⁴ I discuss some of these questions in Norman 2011, 105–124.

conclusions of proofs. Hence the appeal of the suggestion that they should be viewed, rather, as ways of articulating certain kinds of experiences—such as the experience of the sacred. So if we allow, as I have done, that talk of ‘the sacred’ can be one way of capturing an important dimension of moral experience, does that draw us into a larger religious perspective?

I want to resist that suggestion. I do not think that the moral phenomenology warrants it. I note first that, although talk of some things as sacred can be seen as a possible description of aspects of our moral experience, the word ‘sacred’ is not indispensable here. Someone who fought shy of the word, precisely because of its religious connotations, could use other terms without loss. I have suggested that the word ‘inviolable’ typically does the same work.⁵

I want to emphasise also the diversity of the cases in which we can talk of experiencing things as sacred. There are links between them, but there is no one unifying phenomenon at their core which stands out as ‘a sense of the sacred’. The connections between the different kinds of experience which I have surveyed could best be seen as Wittgensteinian family resemblances. A more strongly unifying interpretation of them would have to be an explicitly religious one—perhaps the theistic view that these various things which we can experience as sacred are all signs of a divine presence, and that it is this which confers on them their sacred character. But the phenomena do not of themselves demand such an interpretation. Further reasons are needed for making that additional move.

This returns me to a consideration of Roger Scruton’s writing on this subject, for he does indeed want to take that further step. Are there good reasons to follow him?

As we have seen, in *The Face of God* and in *The Soul of the World*, Scruton’s exploration of the experience of the sacred is rooted in the response to the subjectivity of the individual human consciousness. He argues extensively and impressively for the irreducibility of first-person experience, and the inability of the natural sciences or a physicalist perspective to capture the world of human meanings. This is, for him, the basis for the ethical attitude of respect for human persons as sacrosanct. The extension of the experience of the sacred to art-works and artefacts, and to the natural world, depends on seeing them as the embodiment of human meanings and human connections.

5 Cf. Dworkin 1995, 25: “But ‘sacred’ does have ineliminable religious connotations for many people, and so I will sometimes use ‘inviolable’ instead to mean the same thing, in order to emphasize the availability of that secular interpretation.”

“In the experience of the beautiful we take the world into consciousness [...]: it involves a reflective study of meanings, and an attempt to find the human significance of the things that appear before us [...].” (Scruton 2012, 131)

And in the case of our relationship to the natural world,

“Sacred places are protected from spoliation; they are steeped in the hopes and the sufferings of those who have fought for them. And they belong to others who are yet to be. This [...] is a paradigm of environmental protection.” (117)

Hence art-works, and features of the natural world, may merit the same ethical response as human persons, the requirement to treat them as sacrosanct.

“The sense of the sacred puts a brake upon [the] instrumental attitude. Before a sacred place or artefact I stand back in a posture of respect. This bit of the world, I believe, is inviolable.” (127)

All of this I accept as a convincing account of why we might want to talk of human lives and perhaps some other things as ‘sacred’. I think we can do so without needing to draw on the religious connotations of the word. For Scruton, however, this is not enough. For him, the experience of the sacred is not merely a response to human lives and human meanings. It is also an awareness of the presence of the divine.

“Sacred objects, words, animals, ceremonies, places, all seem to stand at the horizon of our world, looking out to that which is not of this world, because it belongs in the sphere of the divine, and looking also *into* our world, so as to meet us face-to-face. Through sacred things we can influence and be influenced by the transcendental.” (Scruton 2014, 15)

The face-to-face encounter with another human being, and with a world of human meanings, draws us, he claims, towards an awareness of the face of God.

Why should we make that further move? Scruton, as I see it, offers two reasons for doing so. The first takes us by the route of *mystery*, and the second takes us by the route of *longing*. Neither of these invitations to take the further step seems to me to be persuasive.

Here is an example of the appeal to mystery.

“The search for God often seems hopeless; but the usual grounds for thinking this imply that the search for the other person is hopeless too. Why not say, rather, that we stand here on the edge of a mystery?” (Scruton 2014, 185)

This suggestion trades on a conflation of two different kinds of mystery. Of the alleged ‘mystery’ inherent in ‘the search for the other person’ he says:

“The embodied form of the other, as this comes before us in love, anger, and desire, is understood as a revelation. The other haunts his body, and is revealed in it, not as something seen in a window, but as something that flits out of sight.” (140)

And again:

“[...] [T]he overreaching intentionality of interpersonal responses presents us with meanings that transcend the domain of any natural science [...] the I-You intentionality projects itself beyond the boundary of the natural world, and [...] in doing so it uncovers our religious need.” (175)

This is surely to over-dramatise the nature of human relationships. The ‘mystery’ inherent in the I-you encounter, if that is what we want to call it, is of a familiar kind. It is what I referred to previously when talking about the uniqueness and irreplaceability of each human consciousness. The fact of human subjectivity makes it a truism that we cannot know another person’s life and experience from within, from that person’s perspective. There is a legitimate contrast with our knowledge of physical objects. Whilst we can, if we wish, study a thing exhaustively, manipulate it, take it apart, and analyse it scientifically, the lives of others always to some degree elude us. This is the familiar stuff of everyday life and of literary fiction—the human world of misunderstandings and concealed emotions and hidden depths and surprises. It is not the supposed opacity asserted by philosophical scepticism about other minds, but the everyday difficulty of knowing what others are thinking and doing. If this is a ‘mystery’, it is a mundane mystery, firmly rooted in the natural world, the world of human life and human encounters. There is no reason to suppose that it points us to some transcendental realm, to a different order of being which is that of the divine.

The second path down which Scruton invites us is the path of *longing*. It is a longing to be at home in the world as though in the company of a loving friend or a caring protector.

“There is a human loneliness that stems from some other source than the lack of companionship [...]. The separation between the self-conscious being and his world is not to be overcome by any natural process. It is a supernatural defect, which can be remedied only by grace [...]. The existential loneliness of man [...] [is] a longing to be dissolved in the subjectivity of God.” (Scruton 2012, 153)

This ‘longing to be dissolved in the subjectivity of God’ is ‘an attempt to see our relation to the world as we see our relation to each other’, and thus to see the world as the face of God (156).

Maybe our ‘existential loneliness’ does sometimes take the form of a desire to feel at home in the world as though that world were the presence of another per-

son. But if there is such a longing, it does not follow that there is anything which can satisfy that longing. Some Christian apologists have claimed that it does follow, and Scruton's appeal to the fact of human longing appears to put him in the same company. They sometimes invoke Augustine's experience of "the restless heart", his prayer to God that "our hearts find no peace until they rest in you" (Augustine 1961, 21). C. S. Lewis argued:

"Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." (Lewis 2012, 136–137)

The appeal to the analogies here gets us nowhere; it shows only that some desires, though not necessarily all, can be satisfied. Granted, perhaps, we could not have desires unless there were something in our experience to give us the idea of a possible satisfaction of them. Scruton's longing can meet that condition. We can know what it would be like to feel at home in the world, because sometimes we have that experience, but it does not follow that, if that longing is redescribed as a longing for the divine presence, there must be a God to satisfy it. Lewis's argument could also be read as the claim that God would not have created us as beings with this innate longing unless it was a longing which could be satisfied. If that is how we are to understand his argument, its circularity is patent. The inescapable fact is that no experience describable as a longing for the presence of the divine can be any evidence for the existence of a God who could satisfy the longing.

The idea of the sacred can, I conclude, have a role to play as one way of talking about a significant dimension of our ethical experience. There is, however, no need for it to take us beyond that experience or transport us to a transcendental world.

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