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The Purpose of Personal Value

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Abstract: It seems as if there are things that have what we might call *personal value*—special objects, artwork by our children, etc. This term is meant to mark a difference between things whose value seems tied to a particular person, as opposed to things (like the *Mona Lisa*) that are valuable, period. The concept of personal value hasn't received much focused attention, but I believe that it is of not only theoretical, but practical importance. In this paper, I explore the practical angle, arguing that personal value is important to our ability to make sense of ourselves. I give several desiderata for an account of personal value, and use examples to raise questions for Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen's recent analysis of personal value. This practical stance leads me to offer an amendment to this analysis.

It seems as though some things have what we might call *personal value*. That is, their value seems particularly tied to a specific person in a way that other valuable things are not. That is, the value of things like your favorite mug or your child's scribbly drawing seems different from the value of the *Mona Lisa* and social justice. The former don't have much (if any) value in the grand scheme of things, but the latter do. But we wouldn't want to say that your favorite mug isn't valuable; it might have quite a bit of value *to you*. This difference hasn't received much concentrated attention in philosophical literature, but I think it is of not only theoretical, but practical interest. It is the practical angle I wish to explore in this paper. In particular, I want to argue that the purpose of a notion of personal value is to help us sort what is important *to us* from what is not—and that we need this concept in order to make sense of our lives. A sense of the practical significance of the notion should, then, shape an account of it, and at the end of the paper I offer some suggestions toward this end.

To get directly to the point, I claim that the reason we need a notion of personal value is that impersonal value is pervasive and overwhelming and we can't adequately respond to it all. One way to think of the problem that hoarders have is that they have difficulty letting things go because they not only recognize value in the most mundane objects, but also have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility to respond to that value—in particular, by possessing and keeping the objects. But hoarding is just an extreme case of clutter, which is (so I think) the result of a tendency most of us have: the tendency to appreciate value. This is a basic fact of life.

Creatures as sophisticated as we are have cognitive and emotional capacities that are deeply intertwined,¹ and which allow for a great deal of nuance in our perception, recognition, and

¹ Cite Bennett Helm.

appreciation of value. We find value in things beyond those that satisfy our basic needs; we are uplifted by sunsets, we fight for freedom and justice, we care about other people. In this sense, we think that there are things that matter, period. This mattering doesn't have to be grand; things can matter in minor ways, for instance by being useful for everyday life (as, for instance, can openers are). These things that matter have impersonal value, that is, value that is not specifically related to particular valuers, or that we value without reference to anything or anyone else. In addition to the many specific valuing attitudes, we are capable of a great many different actions in response to the recognition of value. For instance, considering just one example, recognition of the value of art can range from believing that art is a good thing, to visiting art museums, to collecting art, to lobbying for legislation to fund the National Endowment for the Arts.

Given the enormous range of objects in the world (including abstract ones like justice), their manifold shades of significance, and the wide range of appropriate responses to this significance, the world should seem overwhelmingly full of value, much the way it is overwhelmingly full of light, color and noise to a newborn baby. But it doesn't. Just as a baby learns to focus attention and differentiate objects from one another, we learn to focus our valuing and concentrate on just some of the value in the world, adopting it as our own. We take out a stake in it, so to speak. This attachment to some valuable things is what makes it possible to operate successfully in the world. So we can think of personal value as a kind of attention: it helps us to pick out of the "blooming, buzzing confusion" the things that matter most *to us*. This serves in contexts as concrete as clearing out the clutter in our living and working spaces, or as broad and abstract as the architecture of our personal lives, and on many levels in between.

To begin to understand the idea of personal value, let's look at a sample of things that seem, at least on the surface, to have it. My favorite example is my raggedy old stuffed pink rabbit Pete. He was my favorite toy when I was a child, and as a result his fur is worn off and his tail is hanging by a thread; surely no one who didn't know me would find him valuable, and the only reason that those who do know me will value him is derived from my valuing him. He is something that has virtually no impersonal value, but a great deal of personal value. He has what we often term "sentimental" value.

What else can have personal value? The laptop I'm using to write this has a great deal of personal value to me, but it is not at all like Pete's sentimental value. This computer contains files that are important to me for both personal and professional reasons. Although my important files are backed up, the loss of this computer would be quite significant, because it is an important tool that I use nearly all the time. But unlike Pete, nothing hinges on its being this particular computer. I could, with reasonable ease, transfer all of the files that matter to me to another computer. Then that computer would take on the significance that this one has. What matters is that I have *a* computer, not that I have *this* computer.

The photograph of stones under the rippling water of Lake Superior that hangs above our kitchen table also has personal value to me. There are a number of reasons for this, but the one I want to highlight has to do with the fact that I find it visually appealing. Again, unlike Pete, nothing

hangs on its being this particular photograph; I would be just as happy with a copy. It has plenty of impersonal aesthetic merit as well, but surely it wouldn't appeal to everyone as something striking enough to hang on the wall in their homes. Taste is a famously personal thing.

So far I have named *things* as objects of personal value. But personal value can accrue to much more abstract things as well. Personal value is often manifested in the roles by which we identify ourselves, often through relationships, work and hobbies: I am a wife and mother, a friend to some particular people, a teacher, a philosopher, a pianist, a bibliophile, etc. These roles are important to me, and I care about performing them well. They give most of the structure to my life.

Another way to structure our lives is to dedicate time and money to causes that matter to us in a personal way. Some people care in this way about political issues like abortion, gay marriage, or public health care; others about preserving wild habitat; others about curing cancer; the list goes on. Most of us recognize the impersonal value in many different causes, but most of us also only give a place in our lives to a small handful of these causes. We engage in activities to support the ones that are personally valuable to us, and leave the rest to others to whom they matter more.

These examples suggest that the notion of personal value is centrally involved in the way we structure our lives and build our sense of ourselves. This is quite obvious in the big-picture things like roles and causes, and as a result you might think I've made a slide from the idea of personal value as a kind of quality that stuff can have, to personal *values* as principles by which I try to live. But personal values in this latter sense are equally present when thinking about value as a quality that things like Pete, my computer, and my wall décor can have. As Sam Gosling demonstrates in his "snooping" research, we are reflected in our stuff.² What we care about is manifested not only in what we possess, but in the way we arrange it in our living and work spaces. When chosen well, our possessions form extensions of ourselves and help us maintain our sense of who we are, both for ourselves privately and for others publicly.³ Because of this, in other work I have suggested that what goes wrong when we experience our stuff as clutter is largely a matter of being out of sync with what we really care about. Things' having personal value is deeply intertwined with our acting on our personal values.

Furthermore, personal values in the architectural sense are very often⁴ our individual stake in something that is of impersonal value. Similarly, objects with personal value often have it because,

² Sam Gosling, *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You*, New York: Basic, 2008.

³ Russell W. Belk ("Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Sep., 1988), pp. 139-168). In his discussion, Belk surveys an extensive literature on the ways that different objects come to be incorporated in our sense of self. The psychology here is fascinating.

⁴ Perhaps always, though I am not prepared to argue this at present. It is a difficult question whether it is possible to confer positive personal value legitimately on something that does not (and never did) have impersonal value. On a first pass, it seems unlikely. Rawls' example of the grass counter works the way it does because it seems clear that (without some further story) grass counting is a worthless project, and you can't just make it a worthy project by adopting it as

at least initially, they have *some* impersonal value. Even Pete, who at this point has no meaningful impersonal value, did have some when he was new: he was a good plaything for a toddler, and could have been so for any toddler.

So things have personal value when they are related in some important way to someone's personal values. If this is right, then the questions are: *What are personal values?*, and *What way is that?*

I believe that examining a particular account of personal value will guide us toward answers to these questions. Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen ably explicates a notion of personal value in his recent book *Personal Value*. His focus in that book, however, is on the metaethics of the notion; he is interested in defending the idea against those who claim that all value is impersonal, and spends little time on the practical side, explaining the idea or its significance. I find his account attractive, and am glad that someone has undertaken the difficult metaethical work. In what follows, I would like

your project. We also don't want to let people turn sadistic pleasure into something of genuine positive value. And it has to be possible that we can be mistaken in our valuations—that we can value things that aren't actually valuable (even given the fact of our valuing them). Still, if we take seriously the idea of personal value, we must take subjectivity seriously, which creates a question as to how we can eliminate things like sadistic pleasure from having legitimate value.

Furthermore, an account of personal value must also be able to explain how (for instance) Pete, or a poem written by a young child (to borrow an example from Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen), can be of personal but not impersonal value. I suggest that Pete wouldn't have any personal value without his initially having had some impersonal value as a plaything for a child (assuming playthings for children are good, period, because they are what children need in order to develop well). It could be argued that the child's poem has some impersonal value, for instance by claiming that it's good, period, that children express their creativity as part of growing and developing. But it could also be argued that these suggestions are a stretch, largely because these supposed kernels of impersonal value are not why I value the objects. I value Pete because of my history with him; I value the poem because it's *my child's* work. These things simply don't have the same value to anyone likely to read this sentence. The poem doesn't have the kind of impersonal value that a Shakespearean sonnet has—unlike the sonnet, the thing itself isn't really impersonally valuable—but it has a sliver of impersonal value, which is amplified for me because of my relationship to its author. The claim that the tiny amount of impersonal value that the poem has (e.g. as an example of a child's creativity, which is a good thing, period) is the seed of the great personal value I find in it might just seem to be holding a position at any cost. Taking this sort of position might commit us to nearly anything's having *some* sort of impersonal value.

But is this really so implausible? Consider our relationships with other people. From an impersonal standpoint, we're all equally valuable—we all have a welfare, a dignity, or whatever other quality you want to use to claim that people are valuable. As a matter of fact, however, we don't value all people equally. We have relationships that make some more valuable to us than others in a personal sense. But, at least in what we typically call "voluntary" relationships such as friendship, the foundation lies in the recognition of the impersonal value that the other person has. Personal value is built on this, as a result of relationship. Why not think that all personal value works like this, including what we find in things like stuffed animals and children's poetry? After all, I don't preserve my child's dirty diapers. Not just anything he produces is valuable to me; I don't think it's implausible to claim that something like a poem he writes is valuable to me as his particular instance of something that is of impersonal value. This may not be the causal or phenomenological story—in fact, it probably isn't—but if you ask me why I value it, upon analysis the idea that it's an example of childhood creativity will probably show up somewhere. I don't take this to be a knock-down argument, but it is enough, I think, to make the claim a viable possibility.

to use his theoretical account as a starting point for my more practically-oriented discussion. In the end I will offer an amendment to his account.

Rønnow-Rasmussen claims, rightly I think, that there is more to personal value than simply welfare. Among the things he notes as having personal value are not only certain mental states (such as enjoyment), but also “things like poems, tombstones, and the like, and...obtainings of (abstract) states of affairs such as, say, the fact that my favorite football team wins” (section 2.0; Kindle location 473). We might say that, according to Rønnow-Rasmussen, personal value includes not only what is good⁵ for me, but things that are goods for me—things I find to be particularly good. “The role of values,” he writes in the preface, “is different [from the impact an object has on one’s life]: they function, generally speaking, as reason-grounded incentives or disincentives to action and the formation of attitudes. Objects [with personal value] set more or less negotiable boundaries dictating what we must, should, may, or have reason to, do or not do with them.” This suggests that personal values set volitional boundaries for us, and help to define us as the persons we are. Personal value, then, is different from mere significance or valence.

At the beginning of the book, he describes an object of personal value to him as having “a value that relate[s] in some way to me as a person in a way other valuable things do not” (s. 1.0, K. 196). He glosses “personal value” as “value-for.” “Personal values accrue to objects in virtue of the fact that those objects have *value-for*, or are *valuable to*, someone—not in virtue of the fact that those objects have value *simpliciter*, or are valuable, *period*” (preface, K.122; emphasis original). A poem written by his young daughter has value, he claims, but not the same kind of value that a Shakespearean sonnet has.

The two questions that Rønnow-Rasmussen thinks an analysis of personal value has to face are: “In what sense is personal value a kind of value? And (if it is a value) in what sense is this value personal?” (preface, K. 32). He also differentiates between a genuine evaluation of “good-for” (which is objective) and the subjective notion of what is good from someone’s perspective (a perspective that may be mistaken) (preface, K. 41).

So far, the parameters for an account of personal value seem to be the following. The account must:

- (a) differentiate personal from impersonal value (value, period).
- (b) differentiate personal value from mere impact on or significance for a person.

⁵ The term “value” is unfortunately ambiguous between a positive connotation (when we say something is valuable, we mean to praise it) and a neutral one (something has value when it has a certain kind of significance—either good or bad.) For ease of exposition, I typically follow ordinary language and use “value” to mean positive value (unless otherwise noted). But the reader should keep this ambiguity in mind; just as things can have positive (personal) value, they can also have negative (personal) value.

(c) distinguish genuine personal value from mere subjective attraction, or what a person *thinks* is good; I take this to mean that the analysis must account for the possibility that we can make mistakes about our own personal values.

I would add a few more desiderata. The account should also:

(d) provide a way of understanding how others should respond to personal value, and perhaps also the fact of personal valuation (even when it is mistake).

(e) convey a sense of the normativity of (personal) value, i.e., the idea that value has a kind of claim on our responses.

Rønnow-Rasmussen's gloss on personal value is the following:

An object x's value for a person a (i.e. x's personal value) consists in the existence of normative reasons for favoring/ disfavoring x for a's sake—where this favoring/ disfavoring is an Identity For-Someone's-Sake (FSS) attitude. (K. 1370)⁶

The specifying clause means, roughly, that (a) in favoring or disfavoring *x*, we have a person in mind rather than effects or implications, and that (b) this person figures in the intentional content of the attitude, so that a favoring for my sake is different from a favoring for your sake. Furthermore, (c) the specific identity of the person matters; the attitude would change or disappear were the object of the attitude different. Rønnow-Rasmussen spends considerable time discussing the details of “for-someone’s-sake” and related attitudes, but for current purposes I think this sketch will do.

Note at the outset that this account clearly satisfies desiderata (a), (c), (d), and (e). My investigation will bring into question whether it also satisfies (b). In outline, I believe that Rønnow-Rasmussen and I agree on quite a bit. But I believe that the practical stance can bring out some important points of discussion. To this end, let's take a look at how some of my examples fare on this analysis.

On Rønnow-Rasmussen's account, Pete's personal value consists in the existence of reasons for favoring Pete for my sake. I think this works just fine for why *you* should favor Pete. But why should *I* value Pete? Not, surely, because he's pretty or useful (though perhaps when I was little, use could be counted as a reason); rather, it's because of what he means to me—his connection to my childhood memories. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, I made him special by playing with him, taking him everywhere, imagining that he was keeping watch over my room at night and fighting off the coucas (a breed of imaginary monsters). Is loving him for what he means to me a kind of loving him for my own sake? His meaning derives in part from his significance to my identity—for his role in my imaginative life when I was young, which is an aspect of myself that I still value.

⁶ (An Identity FSS attitude is one that would disappear if the identity of the person changed; it is not dependent on universal properties of *a* (K. 1308) (love is a typical identity attitude; admiration a typical non-identity attitude). Rønnow-Rasmussen doesn't think the identity part is strictly necessary, but thinks that the most “interesting” personal values will involve Identity FSS attitudes.)

Although this seems quite plausible, we might worry that this amounts to having reasons to value him because I value him. This seems on the surface, at least, to put the cart before the horse; shouldn't reasons be prior to attitudes? There is a significant literature devoted to arguing that desires (and other attitudes) are transparent to the reasons to have them, so that they never in themselves constitute reasons. Moreover, if valuing created reasons to value, then we could not be mistaken in our valuing. My devotion to grass counting, or to the things I hoard, would be unassailable. And furthermore, this would go against the buck-passing spirit in which Rønnow-Rasmussen offers his account.

Nevertheless, it actually seems quite plausible that my reason to value Pete is my valuing him. This is because of an equivocation on "valuing"—in valuing Pete for my own sake I'm valuing him in two different ways. The bottom (first-order) layer is the basic fact of my affection for this floppy-eared, tattered old bunny. We can find plenty of explanatory reasons for this affection, but in this sort of case we don't usually seek justifying reasons, since the explanation is quite ordinary and normal. We just take the attachment as a (perhaps quirky) fact about me. An implication of this fact is that this object is tied to my welfare: if something were to happen to Pete, I would be distressed. Here we come to the next layer: in light of this attachment, how should we treat Pete? You wouldn't drag him through the mud, you wouldn't throw him out, you wouldn't tear his tail off—but not because he's all that great in himself. You wouldn't do these things because of me. Neither would I, and I don't think that the reason for this is limited to my first-order affection for Pete. It is also for my own sake, because I would be upset if any of these things happened to him. I can take a reflective perspective and from there observe my first-order affection, appreciate the implications of it for my own welfare, and take those implications to be reasons to treat him well (and to allow the affection to continue).

Notice that on this analysis, the affection itself is not the reason to treat Pete well; I have not violated the position of the anti-desire-based-reasons camp. Your reasons for favoring Pete (and some of mine) have to do with me as a person, with the fact that (because I care about this pink rabbit) I am such that abusing the pink rabbit would upset me. So, in order not to upset me—i.e. for my sake—you treat the rabbit nicely. In part for this same reason, so do I.

Let's turn next to my computer. It seems to have personal value, but not the sentimental kind of personal value that Pete has. It has personal value as a vital instrument for my career (among other things). Since my career is important to me (it is something by which I nurture and define myself, as well as a way of supporting myself), this computer is important to me. But any computer that would function in the same way will do; unlike Pete, there's nothing specific about *this* computer that attaches me to it. Does its importance fit Rønnow-Rasmussen's analysis of personal value? It seems so: you (and I) have reasons to value the computer for my sake—because of its role in my work, which is central to who I am.

Now, of course, this computer's connection to me is contingent; it happens to be the computer that holds the files I need to do my work. If it didn't, you might value it for other reasons, but not for my sake. Still, there's no reason to think that contingency is a problem for

understanding personal value. Given its great instrumental importance to me, there are reasons to favor it for my sake. Would these reasons disappear if it were someone else's computer? Yes, these particular reasons would, though other reasons for, say, refraining from destroying the computer might remain.

One thing the computer example highlights is that Rønnow-Rasmussen's account of personal value does not explain any difference there may be between sentimental and "ordinary" personal value. Pete has a special kind of value that the computer doesn't have, at least in part because Pete is irreplaceable. This may not be a shortcoming. Like impersonal value, things can have more and less personal value; perhaps the computer has less than Pete does. More likely, it's not a matter of more and less, but simply the difference between instrumental and final value: sentimental value is a kind of final personal value, such that we value the thing itself (rather than its effects or its usefulness) for someone's sake.

A question that the computer example raises, however, is whether Rønnow-Rasmussen's analysis lets too much into the category of personal value. Consider my can opener. It's something I use, and which I wouldn't want to be without, but I don't particularly *care* about it—certainly any functional can opener will do. Can opening doesn't figure in any projects that I would (pre-theoretically) call projects of personal value. I do, of course, value eating. But the "project" of eating isn't really something by which I define myself; it is more like a background condition. Still, given that I do need to eat and that I occasionally need to open cans to do so, the can opener seems like something there are reasons to favor for my sake. (If you were helping me gather supplies to stock the kitchen in my first apartment, a can opener would make the list. This seems like favoring, though of course it's not particularly strong favoring.)

If this is right, then anything that I could find even a little bit of instrumental value in might be something with personal value to me. One alternative here is to simply accept this, and claim that as a matter of fact, an awful lot of stuff has personal value to someone. If we accept the premise that the purpose of personal value has to do with carving out a manageable sphere of value, this doesn't necessarily seem hard to swallow. After all, I do draw the line somewhere. I might have a can opener in my kitchen, because I sometimes want to open cans, but I don't have a cookie press or a Jell-O mold.

Still, it's not unreasonable to feel slightly uncomfortable with this. The can opener is not something I'd rescue in a fire; the computer might be. Personal value seems to be something more special than ordinary instrumental value captures. Can we eliminate the can opener by invoking the clause about identity in Rønnow-Rasmussen's analysis? Would your attitude toward the can opener change if it were not I for whose sake you favored it? There is nothing particular about *me* such that I specially need a can opener for my kitchen; anyone who at least sometimes eats at home does. The computer, however, might make this cut. Being the person I am with the projects I have, a computer is a vital tool for me. But this might not be the case for someone else who is a painter, or

an Olympic skater, or a gardener.⁷ Thus, it looks as though the account can meet criterion (b) above, that it distinguish between personal value and mere significance or impact on a person.

The identity clause might resolve the worry about the analysis' being too broad with respect to including things that don't seem "special" enough to have personal value, but it points to another kind of worry about broadness. Here the idea is that there may be things that would fit well with some self-defining project of mine, but which I don't have space to own or energy to devote to appreciating. You might be in a bookstore and see a novel that you think I would love, given my taste in reading. It's so me, in fact, that you have a strong urge to buy it and give it to me. But then you remember that I'm trying to downsize my living space, and I'm working really hard at paring down my library. Or you might hear on the radio about a museum in Denver that I would absolutely love to visit if I knew about it and had the means to get to Denver. But I don't know about it and I'm strapped for cash (and vacation time) anyway. The book and the museum both seem like things there are reasons to favor for my sake, and in particular because I'm me. But should we say that they have personal value for me?

I'm inclined to think not. If the purpose of personal value is to carve out a manageable space in the world of value, then not everything that there is *some* reason to favor for my (particular) sake can fit. There are only so many things I can read, own, use, preserve, enjoy, etc. This suggests that we should understand the reasons in the analysis to be not just *pro tanto* reasons or reasons all else held equal, but reasons that are still in force all things considered.⁸ This would keep open the possibility that I could be mistaken in my (first-order) valuations—I might in fact favor things I have no (or not enough) reason, all things considered, to favor. And the fact of my (first-order) valuing would not itself be a reason to favor it. But it preserves the possibility that I might have reasons to favor things I don't in fact (yet) favor, and also preserves the difference between something's having significance for or impact on me and its having personal value (criterion (b) above). Things I have *pro tanto* reason to favor are things that are significant for me, like the novel and the museum, whether I know it or not. Things with personal value are things I have reason, all things considered, to favor, again whether I know it or not.

⁷ Well, these days pretty much everyone "needs" a computer. The point here is that the computer doesn't have the same sort of place in the life of a painter, skater, or gardener that it does in the life of an academic.

⁸ Reasons can interact in complicated ways, and it is beyond the scope of this work to take a position on whether a reason that is outweighed, overridden, cancelled, etc. by some other reason is still a reason or not. I am inclined to think it is. For present purposes, I wish to remain neutral on the question of whether an "all-things-considered" reason is a different thing from a *pro tanto* reason, so I will skip over the process by which we go from *pro tanto* reasons to our final judgment as to what we have sufficient reason to do and how that process affects the reasons we have. I will also avoid talk of "what we have *most* reason to do" because, it seems to me, all that matters for personal value is whether we have *sufficient* reason to favor an object, given the other reasons we have and their relative strength; since we have room to favor many things, but some more than others, "most" could be misleading.

But we need to be careful as to which things are “all” the things to be considered. Consider Pete again, and the personal value he has for me. Because of my attachment to him, you (and everyone else) have reason to favor him to some extent for my sake. But in the grand scheme of things in *your* life, this reason may not be very strong, and if you have to decide between preserving my rabbit and your own teddy bear, all things considered *you* might have more reason to favor your bear. But this shouldn’t destroy Pete’s personal value for me. So the personal value has to consist in *pro tanto* (or “all else held equal”) reasons for you, but all-things-considered reasons for me. Thus, perhaps the analysis of personal value should go something more like this:

An object x 's value for a person a (i.e. x 's personal value) consists in the existence of normative reasons for favoring/ disfavoring x for a 's “all-things-considered” sake—where this favoring/ disfavoring is an Identity For-Someone’s-Sake (FSS) attitude.

Obviously, this is an awkward way to phrase it. To clean it up a little and to connect the analysis more clearly to the purpose of the concept of personal value which I have been advocating, I suggest the following:

An object x 's value for a person a (i.e. x 's personal value) consists in the existence of normative reasons for favoring/ disfavoring a 's giving x a place in a 's life for a 's sake—where this favoring/ disfavoring is an Identity For-Someone’s-Sake (FSS) attitude.

“Giving something a place in one’s life” can be literal, in terms of space, or figurative, in terms of time or devotion. Using the phrase “giving x an place in a 's life” helps to put the “all-things-considered-ness” of the reason into the right place in the analysis. It also (I hope!) builds this quality into the account, since as a matter of fact there is only so much we can work into our lives.

This friendly amendment may help alleviate another type of “too broad” worry, which has to do with individuals’ ability to recognize and appreciate impersonal value. If I recognize that the Mona Lisa, untamed wilderness, and (the search for) a cure for cancer have impersonal value, aren’t I in some sense adopting them as my own? It might seem quite obvious that the “for someone’s sake” clause in Rønnow-Rasmussen’s analysis takes care of this; the appreciation of value that I have when (say) I am glad that there are people working on cancer research has no particular connection to myself; I just think it’s a good thing, period. And I can think so without wanting to “join the fight” myself by giving or raising money, or assisting in the research. Right?

The problem (if it is one) is that having *any* attitude toward something seems to relate it to me in at least a minimal way. Here’s how the thought goes: if impersonal value has a normative element, one that not only warrants but perhaps requires at least some minimal attitudinal response from anyone, then in particular it requires it from *me*. If this is so, doesn’t the value now relate to me specifically, making it personal in some way? And this might make a space for the attitude to be “for someone’s sake”; for at the very least, if I am not to go wrong with respect to value, I ought to recognize it. This “ought” could be construed as being connected to my “sake”, even if we don’t read it as a matter of welfare (but, e.g., as a matter of duty). The worry, if it holds up, threatens to turn everything into personal value.

I'm not certain that this worry is legitimate, but it might be. If it is, then either we reject at least one of the premises *that impersonal value exists* and *that personal value is different from it*, or we find a way to delineate the “personal” attitudes—the ones that give us a particular stake in something—from the impersonal ones. I don't think it's plausible to give up the second premise and believe that there is no such thing as personal value. The possibility that we bite the bullet and accept that there may not be *impersonal* value is intriguing,⁹ but an argument for this would be an uphill battle and it is beyond the scope of this paper. So what we need is a way of distinguishing the attitudes that give us a personal stake in something from those that do not.

One way to do this may be to invoke Rønnow-Rasmussen's identity clause. Perhaps, when I'm appreciating value, it may not be for my or any *particular* others' sake, but just some unspecified others (such as “future generations”). This might work, but Rønnow-Rasmussen himself recognizes the possibility that I refrain from desecrating a cathedral for the sake of the believers, who are not specific from my perspective.¹⁰

Perhaps a surer way to delineate the difference is to invoke the “place in the life” clause that I offer as an amendment to Rønnow-Rasmussen's definition. Cancer research is not a *personal* value for me because, as a practical matter, other things matter more to me and given the limitations on my money, time and energy I have no room to give that cause a place in my life. But I may still be glad that cancer research takes place, and value the efforts of those who do the work of raising money and performing the research. In being glad, I still value it in an impersonal way. Thus, the difference is tied in part to the strength and type of attitude (because if I didn't care about other things more, there *would* be room for me to dedicate myself to the cause of curing cancer), but also to the concrete practical question of what I have space in my life to pay attention to.

Above I suggested that things have personal value when they are related in some important way to someone's personal values. This gave rise to two questions: *What are personal values?*, and *What way is that?* I think we have arrived at an analysis that gives a unified answer to both of these questions. Personal values are the objects (both concrete and abstract) I care about enough to give a place in my life to, for my own sake; objects have personal value when I have sufficient reason to give them such a place. The way those objects are related to personal values is in an instrumental or contributory sense: they are the things that enable or support my defining my biographical self. Now, in claiming that objects of personal value are instrumental or contributory, I am not claiming that I cannot value them intrinsically or finally. Indeed, most of the truly important things in our lives are things we value for their own sakes. But we can value things for their own sakes *and* for our sakes, as we quite often do when things have personal value. In fact, as Harry Frankfurt has

⁹ Rønnow-Rasmussen argues that all reasons are agent-relative, a position which strikes me as appealing. If he is right about this, it wouldn't necessarily be a radical step from there to the idea that all value is personal.

¹⁰ Citation.

argued, most things couldn't be personally valuable if it weren't for our valuing them intrinsically or finally.¹¹

Now, there are two more test cases I wish to consider before accepting this account as satisfying, which have to do with the ways we might go wrong with respect to personal value. The first has to do with whether the account is sufficiently objective. Does it let in some things we like but which we shouldn't like? The second has to do with whether we may be unaware of things that actually do have personal value for us. Does it account for the fact that we sometimes ignore or try to shut out things that are actually important to us?

To address the first question, consider the following. What if I like something I really shouldn't like—such as smoking? I can't pretend to know the psychology of a smoker, but surely anyone who smokes today is aware of the dangers and chooses to assume or ignore the risks associated with smoking. If I am a smoker, what should we say about smoking's personal value for me? I *think* we should probably say that smoking isn't a personal value, because of its grave risks to health. And what does the (amended) account say? The account asks us to consider whether there are normative reasons to favor my giving smoking a place in my life for my sake. There are considerable reasons for you (and me) *not* to favor this. The question is whether smoking is subjectively so important to me that, as in the case of Pete, my first-order attitude toward smoking or desire to smoke is a fact about me that is strong enough to outweigh these reasons, so that all things considered, it might actually be the case that smoking ought to be part of my life.

In Pete's case, my first-order valuing him ties him to my emotional welfare in a way that, particularly given that there are no reasons against favoring him, we should favor him for my sake. But the reasons for disfavoring smoking are extremely weighty. And given that people who get smoking-related diseases often take them to be reason to quit, I would think that in general, most people value their health over the indulgence in their habit, so that their emotional welfare isn't tied to smoking so deeply as to outweigh the reasons not to. Thus the account suggests that the answer for something like smoking is not *necessarily* pre-given for every person, but it would take quite a bit to outweigh the reasons not to favor it for my sake.

If we run the same analysis for objects with a clear moral element, such as pedophilia, it seems quite clear that no one, including pedophiles, could have reasons—certainly not all-things-considered, and probably not even *pro tanto*—to favor giving it a place in their lives, even for their own sakes. Thus, it seems as though the account of personal value functions as we would wish in the cases of valuing that are objectively mistaken.

The second question is the reverse of this: What if I haven't given a place in my life to something I should? This might be the case with a workaholic parent, who spends so much time at work that she never gives her children the attention they need? Or C.S. Lewis in *Shadowlands*, who

¹¹ Citation. It's probably in *The Reasons of Love*.

considers himself a confirmed old bachelor and only realizes the depth of his love for Joy when she is stricken with cancer.² Here I think the issue has to do with full awareness or appreciation of the object's true significance for us. In Lewis's case, Joy in fact already had the place in his life; the reasons to favor his recognizing this and according her this place officially were there but unrecognized. In the case of a workaholic parent, the relationship between parent and child provides reasons for the parent to not only give lip service to love for her children, but to perform actions that constitute *actually* giving them their due place in her life. A best friend might see her friend going wrong in this respect and point out the problem. "You really ought to spend more time with your kids and less time at the office; I see how much they miss you." Thus, the account functions as we would wish in this situation as well.

Overall, then, I contend that the amended version of Rønnow-Rasmussen's account captures the desiderata for an account of personal value that I sketched above. It explains why some things that don't seem to matter in the grand scheme of things do still have a recognizable kind of value. It also captures the practical reasons why we are (or should be) interested in personal value, namely that adopting some values as our own reflects the ways we value ourselves and helps us to carve a manageable sphere of value in which to live our lives.