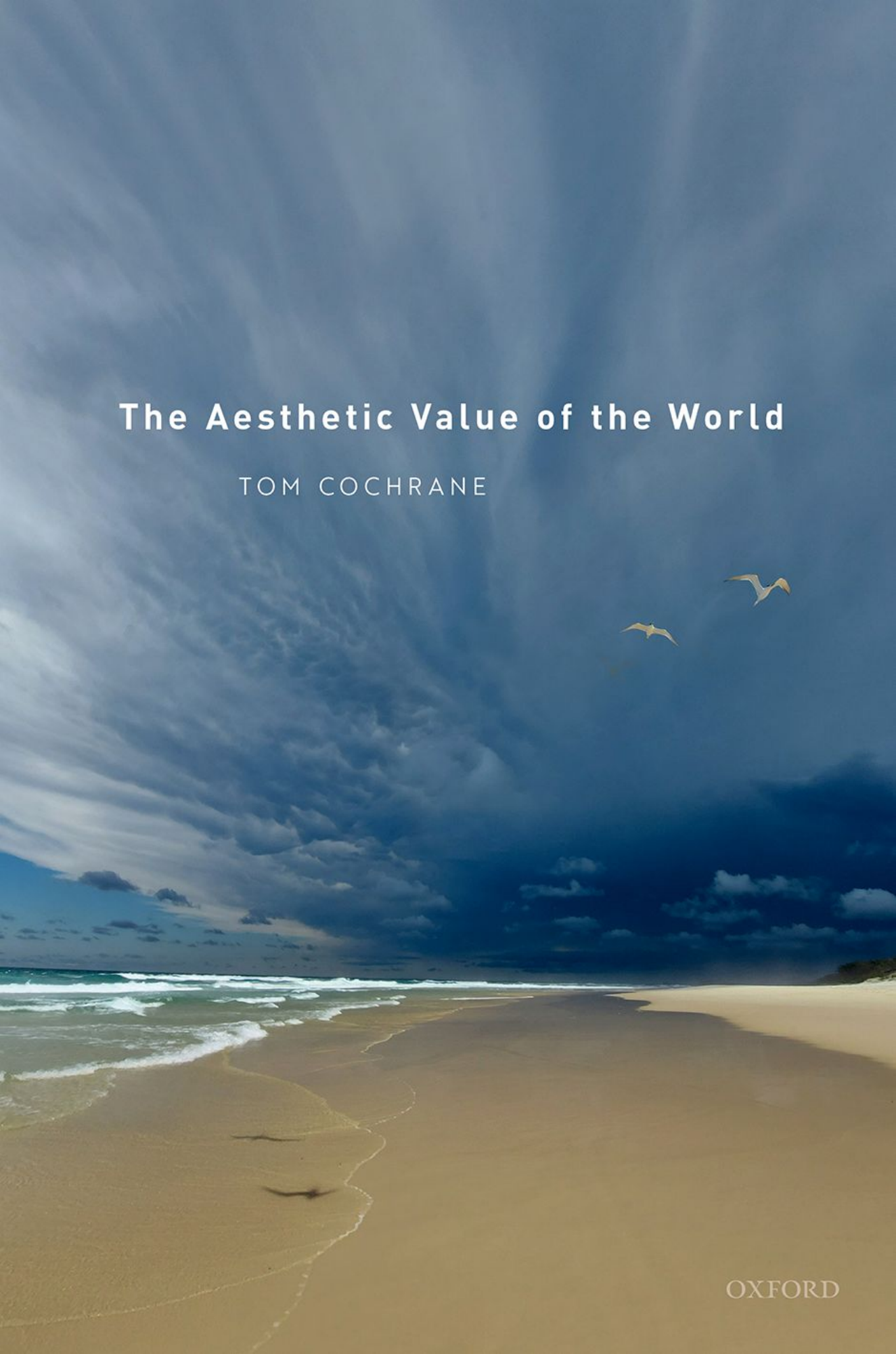
The Aesthetic Value of the World

TOM COCHRANE



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Preface

Aesthetic value makes the world worthwhile. This is because the entire world is aesthetically valuable, while it is fairly wretched in other respects. So without aesthetic value, we cannot properly value the world. And if we cannot value the world, our lives are immeasurably poorer.

With some historical precedent, we can call this view 'Aestheticism'. Note that it is not to be confused with another view sometimes called Aestheticism which claims that the aesthetic value of an artwork is independent from its ethical value (better called 'aesthetic autonomism'). The views are somewhat related. Both emphasize valuing things for their own sake, sometimes in the teeth of ethical disvalue. But Aestheticism is only partially concerned with artworks; it is more wholly concerned with the world.

Aestheticism should also not be confused with 'positive aesthetics'. Positive aesthetics is the view that all pristine nature is aesthetically good. In so far as both views find aesthetic value in nature, positive aesthetics overlaps with Aestheticism. But Aestheticism is far broader. It is claiming that not just pristine nature, but *everything* is aesthetically valuable, even the polluted, artificial, and disgusting parts.

Thus Aestheticism is quite a strong view. I think that most people, when they understand what aesthetic value is, will acknowledge that it makes a significant contribution to their lives. Yet aesthetic value is hardly ever articulated in the comprehensive way I am aiming for here. I even think that the pursuit of aesthetic value can be a genuine philosophy of life on a par with philosophies such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, or Existentialism.

How do I hope to justify such a view? In an important sense, my strategy is pluralist. There is not just one aesthetic value, but many. In particular, I am not trying to claim that everything is beautiful. Beauty is a major aesthetic value, but if we try to pile too many things into this category, we end up with a thin concept about which very little of substance can be said. Instead, my strategy is to give rich accounts of as many aesthetic values as I can bear, wherever I think that some distinctive psychological receptivity can be identified. It is the sum total of these psychological resources that allows us to aesthetically value everything.

Thus the main body of this work is concerned with understanding the various aesthetic values. This will generally be a matter of analysing the psychological processes that allow us to experience them (i.e. they will be response-based analyses). These analyses are hopefully of independent interest and plausibility. However, the main significance they have for me is that they allow me to flesh out the aesthetic world view. By systematically investigating these different aesthetic values, the reader should gradually come to see how everything can be aesthetically appreciated.

The plan of the book is as follows: In the Introduction, I outline why we need to find value in the world, and why aesthetic value is the best candidate. Basically, when our lives are going badly, the value of the world offers solace and the grounds to rebuild. Meanwhile aesthetic value, unlike moral value, offers a definite positive value.

Chapter 1 then develops a foundational account of aesthetic value in general. I analyse aesthetic value as 'objectified final value'. It's not only that we *can* aesthetically value the world, but that we only really value the world in its own right by means of aesthetic value. I then underwrite this analysis with a key psychological claim; that aesthetic values are 'distal versions' of practical values (section 1.4). Moreover, the intensity of each aesthetic value rests on an 'essential tension' (section 1.5) where a psychological reward is balanced against a challenge. Finally, I argue that my characterization demands a realist, object-focused (rather than experience-focused) model of aesthetic value.

Chapters 2–6 develop detailed accounts of what I take to be the most significant aesthetic values. In the Appendix, I offer brief accounts of some minor aesthetic values (plus erotic value, which is really a major aesthetic value but which I'm too prudish to write an entire chapter about). These accounts are designed to fit with the general characterization of aesthetic value offered in Chapter 1. In particular, I systematically apply the idea that aesthetic values are distal versions of practical values.

I start, in Chapter 2, with beauty. My main idea here is to link the value we take in beauty with our practical drive for knowledge. I develop this as an alternative to the contemporary 'processing fluency' account of aesthetic pleasure. I then consider the nature of ugliness. On the face of it, ugliness presents a significant problem for Aestheticism, for how can everything be aesthetically valuable if some of it is ugly? As an initial (but certainly not final) response, I appeal to the notion of 'difficult beauty'.

In Chapter 3, I move onto the sublime, traditionally classed as the second major source of aesthetic value. Making sense of our appreciation of the

sublime requires that we recognize our psychological capacity to empathize with objects. I argue that by means of our empathic engagements, we are enthralled by the power of sublime objects. In service of Aestheticism, the sublime gives us a way to become reconciled to hostile or indifferent nature.

In Chapter 4, I discuss dramatic value. Here the major issue, particularly when we focus on real life cases, is whether drama counts as an aesthetic value in its own right or is at best a conduit for other values. I argue that the value of drama is to be found in the excitement of stretching an agent's capacities. Experiencing dramatic value, especially with respect to our own lives, is an important way to embrace struggle.

In Chapter 5, I examine the value of tragedy. Here is where I most directly address the problem of suffering, particularly the suffering of other people. I suggest that tragic works of art are attempts to tackle this very problem. While there are several things going on in these works, I argue that their key function is to make vivid the aesthetic value we take in other living beings: what I call sympathetic value.

In Chapter 6, I turn to comedy, often under-recognized as a major source of aesthetic value. I argue that comic value lies in the appreciation of 'non-serious norm-violations' and moreover that it has the power to reconcile us with our vulnerability. When all else fails, when our lives seem hopelessly insignificant, we at least have comic value.

Chapter 7, draws together the various sources of aesthetic value presented in earlier chapters and articulates how together they allow us to experience the entire world as aesthetically valuable. This chapter is intended as a consolidated defence of the core aestheticist position, and can be read relatively independently of the rest of the book. Various criticisms of Aestheticism that have come up over the course of the book are addressed. In addition to the intrinsic benefits of Aestheticism, I also note that it has practical benefits. Most of all, it motivates us to understand the world better. In this way, Aestheticism is an important stimulus to science and philosophy.

Chapter 8 is where I consider Aestheticism as a general approach to life. I argue that a dedicated aestheticist will be inspired to create works of art, and that the way an artist creatively responds to the value of the world is an ideal of living well. Though there are other such ideals, the artistic paradigm can apply to a variety of human activities, including the pursuit and expression of one's understanding (as in philosophy). In the latter part of the chapter, I then argue that, in distilling aesthetic values, the artist has an

important social role to play. Artworks help us to discern value ideals, and our capacity to discern values is a critical component of virtue.

Overall, this book defends Aestheticism as a robust sense of the value of the world and consequently as playing a necessary role in the good life. Moreover, while a basic sense of aesthetic value is necessary for a good life, a thoroughgoing dedication to aesthetic value can characterize some of the best lives. This is a significant conclusion. Aesthetic value is often regarded as the most useless of all values, and the dedication towards aesthetic value as practically a vice, resulting in the most useless, self-indulgent of all human beings. Yet there is a strong case to be made that a society dedicated to the pursuit of aesthetic value would be happier and more resilient than most.

Related to this, I must acknowledge that there is another motivation underlying this work: a desire to defend aesthetics. It is no secret that aesthetics has low status within the philosophical profession. Yet it is a great mistake to regard aesthetics as peripheral, particularly in value theory. No other study focuses so deeply on final value, and final value is the very heart of value itself. Indeed, Aestheticism allows us to articulate the final value of philosophy. So I believe that all philosophers have something to gain from engaging with these issues. It is perhaps the consequence of being made so conscious of the charge that aesthetics is useless, and so forced to defend its worth at every turn, that I now offer such a resolute defence of its importance.

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Introduction

0.1 The problem of evil

It does not take an unusually sensitive soul to notice that the world is full of suffering and strife. Every single day the newspapers show people maiming and killing each other. Little children die of cancer with clockwork regularity. Sometimes they are raped and murdered. Natural disasters wipe out thousands of innocents in seconds. Even where we avoid such calamities, life is full of humiliations. We hurt ourselves; we fall ill; we get into raging arguments about trivialities. We grind away at meaningless tasks imposed on us by indifferent paymasters. There is very little justice in this world.

I assume that the above is all very familiar and there is no need for me to go on about it. It is often taken to be a special problem for theism. How can we reconcile the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God with such pervasive suffering? When this problem is pushed hard enough—when we emphasize that many cases of suffering lead to no greater good and are completely pointless—many people find it sufficient to undermine theism (Gleeson 2012 has an excellent, balanced discussion). But I want to emphasize that natural and moral evil is not just a problem for theists. It is one of those truly democratic problems that everyone can enjoy! Anyone can wonder what, if anything, makes this universe a good one when it contains so much suffering.[1]

Now for many of us, life is reasonably comfortable. We have little cause to trouble ourselves with deep questions about the value of the universe when we can absorb ourselves with our own satisfactions. But this attitude requires a studious ignorance of the horrors inflicted upon other people. It is also rather precarious. We imagine that our lives are secure; that disaster only happens to people who make bad choices, or who live in unfortunate lands

[1] Cf. Nagasawa (2018) who argues that theists and atheists alike must contend with the systemic evil of biological life and natural selection: 'Why should we think that the world is overall good and that we should be happy and grateful to be alive in it if our existence depends fundamentally on a violent, cruel and unfair biological system which guarantees pain and suffering for uncountably many sentient animals?'.

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far away. But of course, life has a way of going very wrong, very quickly. Indeed, I originally wrote these lines in 2019. After a year in which a pandemic has torn through the world's population, the precarity of life is all the more plain to see. It was ever thus.

My impression is that a lot of people are seriously under-prepared, psychologically speaking, to deal with such challenges. It is hard to avoid such an impression when, according to the World Health Organization, around 800,000 people kill themselves every year (setting aside the slow suicides of alcoholism and drug addiction; WHO 2014). It seems that when we look for some kind of support, some solid sense of what makes it worthwhile to keep on struggling in the face of desperate hardship, we are frequently at a loss. Many of us turn to religion at this point. But many of us (more than ever these days) do not. So what can we appeal to instead? What can prevent us from falling into nihilism and despair?

This is the problem driving this book. It's a big one. No doubt I will not be able to offer a comprehensive solution, but I aim to knock a big chunk out of it.

0.2 Pleasure

I take the following proposition to be foundational: Any account of what makes things worthwhile must appeal to something of positive final value. Something has final value if it is valued for its own sake, and not (merely) as a means towards something else. Final values must lie at the end of all our strivings if our strivings are not to be vain and futile.

People sometimes regard pleasure as the only thing that is valuable for its own sake. This is a mistake. It confuses final value with the intrinsic value of pleasure.[2] The intrinsic value of pleasure is that special sensation which feels good independent of any context, or cause, or relation to anything else. But we value for their own sake all sorts of things beyond our feelings. In fact, final values are often very sensitive to the wider context. For instance, if we find final value in a birthday card, it may have little to do with the physical card and a lot to do with who sent it.

[2] See Lopes (2018) for a helpful discussion of the difference between intrinsic value (valuable apart from any relationships or context) and final value (valuable for its own sake). I agree with Lopes when he claims that 'the final value of most pleasures is extrinsic' (2018: 56).

Indeed, sensitivity to context is part of pleasure's nature. Pleasure is not merely a nice sensation. It has an important psychological function. This function is to line us up with whatever it is that is generating the pleasure, such that we maintain our relationship with it. This function is achieved in virtue of our taking pleasure *in* this or that thing or activity. That is, pleasure is an intentionally directed mental state. Another way to put this point is that pleasure is not itself a good that we acquire. Rather pleasure is part of the *psychological activity* of taking value from various objects, properties, or events (cf. Levinson 2016: 37; Chappell 2014: 175).[3]

Understanding the directed nature of pleasure is an important corrective to a simplistic hedonist notion that we should seek only to maximize the amount of pleasure we experience. The problem isn't that maximizing pleasure is bad. The problem is that pursuing the pleasurable feeling risks confusing the valuing with the thing that is valued. Such a confusion may be behind the so-called 'paradox of hedonism', roughly the observation that the self-conscious drive to be happy can make a person unhappy (e.g. Mill 1873/1981; see Dietz 2019 for a contemporary formulation).

Yet even if pleasure is part of an intentional activity, there is clearly a neural mechanism that realizes an intrinsically pleasant state. This is demonstrated by our capacity to chemically stimulate feelings of pleasure. If this mechanism is triggered, we will feel pleasure, regardless of the state of our lives. So why not self-consciously stimulate this feeling, if we can do this with destroying our health? Why not cultivate a nice, moderate, heroin habit?

The reason we don't, recognized by most adults, is that pleasure without justification is hollow. It offers temporary satisfaction, then disappears like a dream. The point here is not that the sensation of pleasure is too temporary. We can easily imagine more long-term ways to stimulate our pleasure mechanisms. The point is that we seek meaningful engagements with the world and with each other. The mere sensation of pleasure may certainly be welcome, but we hunger to find value in actual things.

I struggle to articulate the justification for this preference. One reasonably straightforward advantage of taking pleasure in external things is in knowing that the final value of external things can endure, and can be built upon, even while we are not currently taking pleasure in them. We can still intellectually judge the object of pleasure as a good thing. In the midst of

[3] For a full account of the psychology of pleasure, including its simultaneously evaluative and motivational components, see my (2018: ch.2).

suffering, this may be an important reconciling thought, helping to stave off despair.

But more than this, there is a kind of rightness, a sense of security or being-at-home-ness that comes from grasping the goodness of things around us. We are not self-sufficient creatures. We feel our contingency deep in our bones. We rely on being part of, or connecting to, or resting on something beyond ourselves. It is this which I think makes a merely intrinsic pleasure seem fragile or hollow.

Thus the hedonist should be properly oriented. An attitude oriented towards final value need not be self-consciously oriented towards the feelings of pleasure. We can be engaged with or attentive towards valuing things, without really being concerned with having pleasant experiences. We can say all this while maintaining that when we do finally value something, we will typically experience some variety of pleasure. We can say this even if negative feelings or emotions are involved in the process of coming to that final value. Overall, I think we should treat pleasure, in a broad sense, as *the experience of final value*.

0.3 Valuing the world

So far I have insisted that any account of what makes life worthwhile must appeal to something of final value. The hedonist recognizes the centrality of pleasure in experiencing final value, yet we are still left wondering what actual things these pleasures should be directed at.

Here we must also raise our original problem once again. Recall that the underlying problem of this book is to give a defence of the value of life that is compatible with the existence of pervasive suffering. Here I mean not just the suffering of others, but one's own suffering. I want an account where one is able to have a sense of final value even where one's life is going very badly indeed.

Note that the hedonist regards pain or suffering as unequivocally bad, or only justified in so far as it will instrumentally bring about greater pleasure in the long-run. Thus any hedonist undergoing suffering that cannot be construed as the means to greater pleasure is apt to totally condemn their existence.

This may seem an insurmountable problem for the hedonist. Indeed it is the reason that I cannot count myself as a hedonist in any straightforward sense. This is because I think we must recognize final values that do not rely narrowly upon one's own well-being. Specifically, we should recognize the

value of the wider world. This value can offer both a solace when life is harsh, and a ground upon which we can rebuild the value of our individual lives, if we can contribute in some way to the positive value of the world.

For much of life, the value of the world is a background upon which our personal projects operate. Sometimes we have only an implicit sense of this value. But, particularly when times are hard, it is important that we can feel its solid ground. The complement to this claim is that one's sense of well-being can never be complete if one disvalues the wider world. If one is sensitive to the value of the world at all, this value must be satisfied. A grip on the value of the world is a necessary component of a fully good life.

The main reason for this necessity claim is that the value of personal projects is undermined if one disvalues the world in which these projects are embedded. Such a broad disvalue would always threaten to render one's personal projects futile. For instance, we may see no point in raising a child if their life would merely perpetuate the disvalue of the world. Even a life filled with pleasures would be undermined if it occurred in a world of shit, and the lives of everyone around you were miserable and pointless. We can imagine a version of Nozick's (1974) famous experience machine like this: Imagine that you are given the choice to enter a machine that will give you a lifetime of pleasurable experiences, but you also remain aware that the world outside the machine is entirely wretched (something like the situation depicted in Stanislaw Lem's *The Futurological Congress*, 1974). I suppose some people might say to themselves, 'well, at least there's some pleasure in this case'. That is true, but the point is that one's pleasures would be a hollow recompense.

Overall, the claims that (i) the value of the world remains when our lives are going badly and (ii) a sense of the world's positive value is a component of well-being, are supposed to apply universally, or at least to all creatures capable of evaluating the world. These claims are fairly minimal, but less universal claims can be stronger. Specifically, many people's lives are thoroughly concerned with the value of the world. Many of our personal projects are specifically aimed at making the world a better place or maintaining what value it has. Naturally in such cases, the value of the world plays a much larger role in well-being.

0.4 The grand moral mission

When we start thinking about the value of the world, we often turn to moral value. Perhaps the moral value of humanity or the world is something we