Helga Varden on Sidney Axinn's "Sacrifice and Value"

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Critique

SIDNEY AXINN | Sacrifice and Value. A Kantian Interpretation | Rowman & Littlefield 2010

By Helga Varden

Sidney Axinn's project in *Sacrifice and Value* is bold. The aim is to rectify what he considers a serious limitation of most mainstream moral philosophy, namely that it ignores the importance of sacrifice. More specifically, Axinn wants to overcome this problem by putting his "concept of sacrifice […] in the center of analyses of value. The argument will be that inherent value, in every example of it, is created by sacrifice" (p. ix). He wants to justify the claim that "we create […] value for ourselves by our sacrifices" (p. 12), indeed that sacrifice is "a basis for value generally, not moral value alone" (p. 26). Axinn's concept of sacrifice, in turn, is understood as "to intentionally give a gift, without expecting compensation" (p. 9).

Axinn views his conception of sacrifice as a further development of Martin Foss's argument in *Death, Sacrifice, and Tragedy* (p. 9).In addition, throughout the book he emphasizes that (as well as shows how) his account is deeply inspired by the work of Harry Frankfurt on love and Immanuel Kant on ethics and aesthetics, with one chapter devoted to explaining the philosophical connections with each (Chapters 4 and 11, respectively). In addition to engaging these works, Axinn's account of sacrifice draws support from a range of sources—from feminist care ethics to religious texts and practices to historical examples, poetry, and common sense, all of which, Axinn argues, are more sympathetic to the idea of sacrifice he is defending than is mainstream philosophy. It is impossible to cover all the ideas and reflections in Axinn's book. Instead, I shall focus on three main aspects in an effort to engage with it in a productive, even if somewhat critical, manner. After a brief discussion of the methodology of the book, I shall critique Axinn's conception of sacrifice and then finish by raising a few questions about the compatibility of Axinn's views with those of Frankfurt and Kant.

Axinn concludes the book by saying that he hopes to have convinced the reader that "sacrifice is an essential term in the analysis of value", so that he has achieved what Joseph Margolis considers characteristic of the best philosophies, namely that they make "the obvious obvious" (p. 131). I do believe that Axinn succeeds in drawing our attention to the need to pay more attention to the concept of sacrifice and the importance of doing so. Axinn's many reflections and brief engagements with a very wide range of sources make this point effectively, not just to philosophers but to any interested reader. In fact, at one point in the book, I found myself having to reread the Preface to ensure that Axinn meant to address a philosophical rather than a more general audience. Intending the latter would certainly not be a drawback of the text: making philosophical ideas available to non-professional philosophers is something we should do more of. Yet at the same time, I worried that were this Axinn's aim, then one problem would be that his conception of sacrifice is not commonsensical. Axinn uses 'sacrifice' as a technical philosophical concept with a rather specific meaning that would pass by most uninitiated readers.

Upon rereading Axinn's preface, I realised, however, that Axinn's intended audience is philosophers, in which case, my worries are different. One major worry I have about Axinn's methodology is that although he uses many different sources to back up his reflections, he doesn't engage carefully with them. So, most, if not all of his core claims are not supported by careful interpretative and philosophical argument. The problem is not that the many chapters in the

book are very short (typically ten pages or less) while their topics are large (sacrifice in relation to logic, care, love, religion, patriotism, business and loyalties, friendship, gifts, pluralism and fanaticism, Frankfurt and Kant), but that the arguments themselves are very quick. Hence, although Axinn does explicitly mention and draw on the work of many traditions, philosophers, religious books and thinkers, and poetry, etc., there is insufficient depth and care in his exploration and engagement with the philosophical questions and the relevant primary or secondary literature.

To illustrate, consider Axinn's choice of the term 'sacrifice' as the main concept in the book. As we saw above, Axinn understands sacrifice as "intentionally [to] give a gift, without expecting compensation" and he maintains that we create all values by our sacrifices. Why, I would want to ask, is this not simply a definition of generosity? At one point, Axinn does mention that if someone gives with the expectation of reciprocity down the line, then there is a "lack of generosity" (p. 27). But unfortunately there is neither a discussion of any relation between generosity and sacrifice, nor an explanation of why he chose to go with 'sacrifice' rather than 'generosity'. Moreover—and still approaching Axinn's view from the point of view of commonplace intuitions—I didn't find enough help in the text to quieten my worry that a more plausible view of the relation of sacrifice to value was readily available. For example, it would not be, as Axinn claims, that sacrifice creates all value, meaning that until we sacrifice there is no value, but that all valuing also involves a *willingness* to sacrifice. On a related note, Axinn writes that he takes

> *Frankfurt's notion of care to be willingness to sacrifice. Therefore I have helped myself to large parts of his work on love, taking 'care' to be more clearly understood as a synonym for willingness to sacrifice. (p. 38)*

Similarly, he argues that

> *Since to care for someone has the cost of actually or potentially sacrificing for that person, I'll take Frankfurt's verb, to care, as presupposing some degree of sacrifice. (p. 35)*

Even if I were to accept all of this, I'm still left with the question of whether or not being willing to sacrifice has value in itself in the same way that (as Axinn quotes Frankfurt as arguing) care is important or has value in itself (p. 35). Moreover, since Frankfurt's claims about care are made in the context of claiming that when we act in accordance with what we love, we act autonomously, he cannot be taken simply to mean that sacrifice has or creates value. If, for example, our sacrifices do not actually advance the cause of those we care about, we have erred rather than created value.

Relatedly, I couldn't find enough help in the text to respond to my worry that much value does not appear to involve sacrifice at all, and so that it does not necessarily involve a 'cost'. For example, most of the time when I make tea for my wife, I do it with joy and affectionate love. It does not at all feel like a sacrifice. While it may be a minor instance of generosity (and so an instance of what Axinn seems to mean by sacrifice), it need not involve any experience of cost, and so Axinn would be wrong to assume that generosity always involves an experience or expectation of loss or cost. Moreover, much of the time when I do what is right because it is right (act out of duty or what I believe is moralised love for Kant)—such as to use my best judgement to give my students the grades they deserve—I'm not thereby sacrificing anything, and it does not feel like I'm sacrificing anything. In the first case, I believe viewing affectionate love as a kind of non-moralised generosity is plausible, but I don't think that non-moralised generosity can cover the second case any better than an idea of sacrifice can. More generally, I suspect that the creation of value in the different examples cannot be captured by one concept only, let alone Axinn's concept of sacrifice.

This leads me, first, to some of my worries regarding Axinn's reliance on Frankfurt's work. For example, after emphasising that Frankfurt and he agree with the non-realist claim that "[v]alues do not exist independently of us" (p.

36), Axinn continues by quoting Frankfurt:

> *It is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance. (ibid.)*

And then Axinn continues:

> *Replace 'caring' with 'sacrifice,' and 'importance' with 'intrinsic value,' and we have exactly the thesis of this book. It is by sacrifice that we infuse our world with value. (ibid.)*

But I don't understand why we should want to use the concept of sacrifice rather than that of caring here, including because caring seems like a more apt concept in this context. I am also confused because, as we saw above, according to Axinn 'care' should be understood as *willingness* to sacrifice, not sacrifice itself. Similarly, I fail to see why we shouldn't have *love* as a or *the* key general concept; after all, love can encompass care (which is an advantage in itself), but also include more—which, I take it, is why Frankfurt chooses love as a key foundational concept.

At one point, Axinn argues that an important advantage of his position is its ability to answer this question of Frankfurt's:

> *Why is it that we find ourselves to be most fully realized, and consider that we are at our best, when —through reason or through love—we have lost or escaped from ourselves? (p. 37)*

Axinn continues:

> *My answer and Frankfurt's is: Because our sacrifices of something of 'ourselves' produced* ***value for us****. (ibid.)*

But this seems incorrect. I take it that according to Frankfurt, acting on reasons and/or as motivated by affectionate love creates value in the sense of a meaningful life for us—but not because it involves sacrifices on our part. There is no further or deeper reason explaining it all, according to Frankfurt; this is the end of the story. Hence, he would not, I believe, agree with Axinn that ultimately it is sacrifice that creates value. So, rather than simply replacing the words in Frankfurt's sentences, Axinn would need to explain *why* only sacrifice creates, creates more, or creates inherent value than either caring or love in order to make his case. More generally, in my view, he also needs to explain in virtue of what we can and should replace key philosophical concepts in Frankfurt's theory with others and why we should agree with Axinn that all key concepts can be seen as derivative of one concept, namely sacrifice. In my view, the way in which Axinn quickly replaces key concepts in various theories with his chosen one—sacrifice (or concepts understood by an internal link to sacrifice)—adds a layer of confusion rather than clarity to Axinn's account.

Another puzzle arising internally to Axinn's conception of sacrifice as the source of all value is whether or not the account can critique self-love. After all, if sacrifice is described as "A sacrifices C, for the sake of B" (p. 4), then in the case of self-love, it seems that we get 'A sacrifices C, for the sake of A,' which doesn't seem much like a sacrifice. This *is* a problem that Axinn takes on, even if he does so in the book's characteristically very brief way and although he does it within Frankfurt's conceptual scheme. More specifically, Axinn argues that this problem is solved if we

introduce the concept of self-care and two selves, a present and a future self, to cover this case. Axinn argues:

> *[I]f we can distinguish between two selves, the present self sacrifices for the future self. Since the present self disappears, there can be no expectation of compensation to it. This situation, of the present self not being valuable for future compensation, is so tautological that it is essentially meaningless. Therefore,* ***self-love should be weakened to self-care****, short of love, in most situations. (p. 41)*

But why does a change of terms—from self-love to self-care—solve the problem? I suspect that Axinn will answer by pointing to how he continues by arguing that the problem of self-reference simply "stops us from being literal about self-love […]. [I]t must be [treated] as a special case without the features of disinterest" (p. 41). But even so, I cannot figure out why this ultimately solves the problem of self-love. Saying that the present self A now sacrifices for the sake of the future self A*, where A* is an altered A, does solve the logical worry above, but it doesn't seem to help much in our efforts to understand self-love. That is to say, it doesn't seem to get us a nuanced and robust enough account of self-love, one that can deal with the phenomena such an account wants to critique. Also, since, as we saw above, Axinn understand Frankfurt's care in terms of sacrifice and as by it involving merely a 'willingness' to sacrifice (rather than actually sacrificing), I can't figure out how this argument is supposed to work.

To illustrate some of my worries here, let me give an example that captures some of the relevant kinds of problem encountered in much writing on moral repair and healing that appears important given the issue of self-love or self-care. Moreover, since understanding the complexities facing veterans is of particular importance to Axinn (being a veteran himself), let me tailor the example in this way. Hence, let us try to use Axinn's account of value creation to understand why veterans (and other survivors) revisit old emotional wounds incurred in traumatic moments of war so as to better live with what they have experienced. In light of the above, I believe Axinn would argue that what we want here is a concept of self-care, not self-love, and that this is supposed to deal with how self-care is interested (not disinterested).

But, again, I do not see how that will help much. On the one hand, care, as we have seen above, is also supposed to be understood in terms of *willingness* (rather than actually doing) and this appears to make it harder (not easier) to see how this works. Also I just don't see why we want to use care *rather than* love as I don't see why such processes of healing cannot be seen as *also* involving affectionate love of oneself. Indeed, intuitively, it seems as if they do involve such affectionate self-love as well as moralised notions of self-care (assuming responsibility for one's emotional wounds). More generally, it seems central to clarify the relationship between moralised and non-moralised aspects of self-love in complicated cases like this one, including by answering the question of whether caring for myself well in these situations involves processes of affectionate self-love.

In addition, even if we accept the complicated notion of different selves in different times invoked in the account above (especially for a Kantian), it seems that my present self doesn't go away as I revisit bad things that happened to me at an earlier time. It also doesn't seem that my aim is not to sacrifice, but rather to heal my present self. Finally, I suspect that Axinn might answer that what we did at the earlier point—when we survived—was to make a sacrifice. But if this is the answer, then why do we need to go back and heal, according to Axinn? If, in Axinn's view, war heroes are heroes exactly because they are better at sacrificing than the rest of us, doesn't that make them exemplars of moral perfectionism? Would the need to heal, then, be as a result of having not been even more perfect? More generally, is emotionally healthy, moral repair and healing about dealing with one's own, earlier shortcomings at sacrificing? If not (which seems more plausible), why not, on Axinn's account?

Many of my worries above can also be spelled out in Kantian terms, meaning as an explicitly Kantian response to Axinn's account. It would also address the question of whether and in what sense Axinn's account is a Kantian account. Since, for Axinn it is sacrifice that creates value, it is not terribly surprising to learn that Axinn aligns himself

with those interpretations, according to which value-creation on Kant's account is the creation of *moral* value understood quintessentially as involving acting on universalisable maxims from duty. Here is one of Axinn's arguments to support the claim:

> *[T]he proposal of this book that inherent value is not in the outer world, to be discovered; rather that it is created and imposed on entities by the individual, by the sacrifice made by the individual […] Kant's response [is] 'virtue is here worth so much only because it costs so much, not because it brings any advantage' […] One can think of Kant's view this way: If an act requires no sacrifice, then it can produce no value, and therefore no moral value. (p. 109)*

To further support this interpretative approach to Kant, on the next page, Axinn adds another, rather lengthy passage from Kant, where he says that:

> *If the value that life has for us is assessed merely in terms of what we enjoy (i.e. happiness, the natural purpose of the sum of all our inclinations), then the answer is easy: the value falls below zero. For who indeed would want to start life over again under the same conditions or even under a plan that he had devised himself (though in conformity with the course of nature) but that also aimed merely at enjoyment? So presumably* ***the only value that remains is the value that we ourselves give our lives through what we not only do, but do purposively*** *and do so independently of nature that even the existence of nature can be a purpose only under this condition of our acting this way. (KU, AA 5:434n, quoted from the Pluhar on p. 110; Axinn's emphasis)*

Axinn then clarifies his reading of this by saying:

> *The position of this book (and of Kant) is that when what we do is to sacrifice, we create value for ourselves. This is what I understand to be the activity referred to by Kant's phrase 'what we do'. (p. 110)*

This way of reading Kant is further developed by an interpretation of the good will. Axinn argues that the

> *moral law tells us what we should sacrifice for. To give the moral law value, we must sacrifice for it. […] Kant's concept of a good will is good because (among other things) it requires sacrifice of the individual's personal desires. (p. 112)*

Finally, it is important to mention two further passages Axinn quotes from Kant where the term sacrifice is used: one from the *Critique of Judgement*—"[The might of … the moral law] […] actually *reveals itself only through sacrifice (which is a deprivation)* [KU, AA 5:271]" (Axinn's emphasis)—and one from the *Critique of Practical Reason* —"[O]vercoming such a desire always costs the subject some sacrifice […] to do that which one does not quite like to do… [KpV, AA 4:84]" (p. 112–13). Hence, unsurprisingly, Axinn correspondingly argues that "[a] rule, a maxim, has no value by itself: it can lead to value when, and only when it is acted upon […]. A rule has no value unless it is obeyed, unless one sacrifices to obey it" (p. 114).

There is a long-standing tradition of reading Kant as maintaining that unless one acts from duty—where this is

experienced as acting contrary to what one wants to do—there is no value, no morality, and no virtue. It is a way of reading Kant that has received much scorn in the history of philosophy, but that fact itself is not, of course, a strike against it. If it is the correct reading of Kant and also true, then there are no good reasons why Axinn shouldn't hold onto his interpretation of Kant. But I think there are some reasons to resist this interpretation of Kant as well as some reasons to think that it may not capture the truth about value.

Let me begin by revisiting core aspects of the passages above, starting with the first. Now, as we saw, Axinn argues that when Kant says that virtue is "worth so much only because it costs so much" and not because of any "advantage" it brings, one can read Kant as saying that "if an act requires no sacrifice, then it can produce no value, and therefore [is of] no moral value" (p. 109). But this doesn't seem to be the most obvious reading of what Kant says here. Instead, Kant seems simply to say that to capture why virtue is so very valuable, one cannot appeal to advantages since it often costs a lot to act virtuously. This is neither to say that the *only* thing that has value is virtue, nor that all value is *moral* value, nor that *unless* one sacrifices there is no moral value.

In my view, Axinn's interpretation fares no better with the second passage quoted from Kant above. There, as we saw, Kant says that "the value that life has for us" cannot be "assessed merely in terms of what we enjoy […]", concluding:

> *So presumably* ***the only value that remains is the value that we ourselves give our lives through what we not only do, but do purposively*** *and do so independently of nature that even the existence of nature can be a purpose only under this condition of our acting this way.*

Axinn reads this, as we also saw, as meaning that by sacrificing, we "create value for ourselves" and "[t]his is the activity […] referred to by Kant's phrase 'what we do'". This, to me, is a problematic interpretation of what Kant says. For Kant doesn't say that enjoyment doesn't create any value. Rather he is saying that the value of *life* cannot be summed up in terms of such enjoyment.

Indeed, Kant thinks that this point is made evident to us when we think about whether or not we would like to relive our lives with the guarantee of a specific set of enjoyments set by nature. In ways that appear similar to Nozick's conclusions after his experience-machine reflection in *State, Utopia, and Anarchy*, Kant thinks that what makes life so valuable is that we can set ends of our own; we can not only act, but act 'independently of nature'. In fact, Kant thinks, any account of human nature has to understand it in part by means of our capacity for freedom. To act freely—to set ends of our own—is at the heart of why life has meaning for us: we create meaning in our lives by living in such free ways. It seems very difficult to argue that what Kant really means here is what Axinn says he means, namely that this quote and "what we do" in particular is about sacrifice, about how we create value through sacrifice. Kant's conception of the value of freedom appears much more joyous than that: being free is at the heart of a meaningful life for human beings. It is not all about self-sacrifice, but about the way in which we go about realising ourselves as the kind of beings we are, which, when things go well, is deeply pleasant.

Finally, I believe that Axinn's way of reading Kant's account of the good will is also problematic. As we saw above, Axinn argues that

> *The moral law tells us what we should sacrifice for. To give the moral law value, we must sacrifice for it […]. Kant's concept of a good will is good because (among other things) it requires sacrifice of the individual's personal desires.*

We also saw that he also uses these two quotes from Kant to support his claim:

> *[The might of … the moral law] […] actually* ***reveals itself only through sacrifice*** *(****which is a deprivation****) [and] overcoming such a desire always costs the subject some sacrifice […] to do that which one does not quite like to do. (pp. 112–13)*

Hence, Axinn argues, "[a] rule, a maxim, has no value by itself: it can lead to value when, and only when it is acted upon […]. A rule has no value unless it is obeyed, unless one sacrifices to obey it" (p. 114).

To start, I don't see that Kant here is arguing that the only thing valuable is acting as motivated by duty. Instead, he is saying that the "might" of the moral law is revealed by the fact that it can motivate us under any circumstances, including when doing what we *must* or morally ought to do will involve real sacrifices. We can act as motivated by practical reason and consequently we can act not because we want to do it, but because it is the right thing to do. And there is no reason why one should think that the only things that have value are maxims that involve sacrificing (actually or potentially); indeed, such an interpretation is a tortured reading of what Kant is saying here.

In order to see why Axinn's reading has not captured Kant's view it is, in my view, particularly helpful to look to Kant's account of human nature. I cannot go into much detail here—I give my interpretation of Kant's account of human nature in a series of recent papers (see Varden 2015, forthcoming and MS), but central to Kant's theory of human nature is an account of the threefold predisposition to the good in human nature consisting of our "animality", "humanity", and "personality" (RGV, AA 6:26). Kant argues that that the threefold predisposition to the good is "original" and "good" in that it is constitutive of human being and "do[es] not resist the moral law […] but […] demand[s] compliance with it" (RGV, AA 6:28). Animality comprises three natural, conscious drives in us, namely to self-preservation, to sex, and to basic sociality; humanity involves both an ability to set ends of one's own rationally as well as having a social sense of worth; and finally, personality involves moral feeling and is ultimately that in virtue of which we are able to be responsible for our actions (to act as motivated by our practical reason or the moral law).

There are many things to say about this, but some of my worries regarding both Axinn's interpretation of Kant and his own philosophical position can be summed up by drawing attention to how, for Kant, what we take pleasure and pain in—what we desire—is not something inherently in conflict with what morality requires of us. As we see above, what we desire "naturally" is supposed to be not only original, but good—our desires, if realised well, align with what morality requires. This is not to say that Kant denies that everyone is tempted and will do bad things. Our liability to do bad things is what Kant calls our "propensity to evil" in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*. However, although we all will do bad things, this doesn't mean that our desires are necessarily at odds with what morality requires, meaning, among other things, that it doesn't seem like 'sacrifice' is necessary in order for our actions to have value or moral value. The predisposition to good is original and good, and hence we can feel fully at ease when we do something just because it is the right thing to do. To return to the example above: when I give my students the grades they deserve (rather than give everyone A's), at least as a general rule, I don't feel an internal conflict at all in so doing even though it is the case that I do this because it is the right thing to do. This is not to deny that I may deceive myself in thinking that this is why I act in this way. After all, maybe I do act in this way out of, for example, self-interest. It is merely to say that it does not feel like a sacrifice, and yet giving my students the correct grade does seem to be valuable, indeed morally valuable.

What about, say, smiling to one's child out of joy—does this action have value for Kant? It seems to me that not only does this have value for Kant, but also on any plausible philosophical position. According to Kant, smiling out of joy to one's child can fruitfully be understood as revealing both the predisposition to animality and to humanity in our being. Basic sociality concerns how we are affectionately oriented towards the people we love—here our children—whereas humanity involves how we affirm others socially as worthy of attention. So, for Kant, when I smile out of joy for my child, I do so because I love my child and because it gives me joy to be oriented towards my child's projects as valuable. And such kinds of affectionately loving orientation, in this kind of example, does not involve sacrifice, but simply deep pleasure, and this is valuable because it is what it is to realise one's own animality and humanity. In

addition, being so oriented makes it subjectively easier to do what is right when this is required—to act out of duty—but this doesn't mean that it is only because it makes it easier also to do the right thing if one's desires are somewhat out of kilter in a particular situation. And it certainly doesn't mean that only if we sacrifice for our children do our interactions with them have value, including moral value. Rather, being so oriented is valuable, although the specific kind of value that our capacity to assume responsibility for our actions can add to our actions—namely moral value or "moral worth"—is not added unless we do what we do because it is the right thing to do (act out of duty).

In sum, after having read *Sacrifice and Value* I am neither certain I have understood Axinn's account given its underdeveloped presentation, nor am I convinced that it is the right one insofar as I do understand what it is. As we have seen, I could not understand how Axinn thinks that his theory can either be seen as developing or combining the most important philosophical insights of Frankfurt and Kant or as fusing their theories into a new, third one grounded on the concept of sacrifice. There simply isn't enough careful development of the theory itself for me to be able to follow Axinn's train of thought, let alone enough careful engagement with Frankfurt's or Kant's works. Nevertheless, I believe Sidney Axinn achieves one of the major aims he sets himself in this book, namely to make us aware of the need to pay more attention to the concept of sacrifice (and/or generosity) when developing our moral theories. And for this, I'm very grateful.

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