

The Philosophy of Devotion:

Nihilism, Fanaticism, and the Longing for Invulnerable Ideals

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Chapter One

The Longing for Devotion

1. Devoted agents

If we read philosophical and psychological literature on human motivation, we are confronted with long lists of things that people want. We want happiness and freedom from pain; acceptance by groups; a sense of achievement; perhaps self-determination or self-actualization; perhaps a sense of power.¹ But there is something that often goes unmentioned in these lists: we seek a form of *devotion*.

Consider a famous excerpt from George Orwell's 1940 review of *Mein Kampf*. Orwell warns that Hitler

has grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude toward life. Nearly all western thought since the last war... has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security, and avoidance of pain.... [but] human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice... Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people 'I offer you a good time,' Hitler has said to them 'I offer you struggle, danger and death,' and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet. (Orwell 1968: 14)

Anyone who considers the rise of nationalist politics, extremism, and jihadist movements in our time can see that these tendencies are not mere historical curiosities. It's certainly true that human beings are moved by considerations of happiness, comfort, and so forth. But we also seek something else, something for which we are at times willing to set aside these other ends, something for which we will undertake toil, struggle, violence, opposition, and self-sacrifice. We seek something to which we can *devote* ourselves.²

Consider three examples.

¹ Representative works from empirical psychology include Maslow (1962), Deci and Ryan (1985), Baumeister and Vohs (2007), Lopez and Snyder (2011), and McClelland et al (1989).

² We might wonder which factor comes first in the order of explanation. I will be suggesting that we seek a form of devotion and that this craving for devotion explains some cases in which we are attracted to toil, struggle, violence, and so on. But an alternative explanation would be that we seek (for example) violence for its own sake, and are attracted to devotion insofar as devotion enables or justifies this violence. The examples I give below won't decide this issue; they are merely suggestive.

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In the summer of 2016, protestors began gathering at Standing Rock, North Dakota. They objected to the federal government's plan to construct a large oil pipeline underneath a section of the Missouri River that lies only a half-mile from the border of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. The protestors feared contamination of the Reservation's water supply as well as destruction of areas of cultural and religious import: as Standing Rock's Historic Preservation Officer Ladonna Bravebull Allard put it, "if we allow an oil company to dig through and destroy our histories, our ancestors, our hearts and souls as a people, is that not genocide?" (Allard 2016).

In October, the protestors found themselves confronted by hundreds of police officers and national guardsmen, marching in columns behind five armored military vehicles. Brandishing clubs and shields, firing rubber bullets and tear gas, armed with concussion grenades and tasers, the officers advanced on the protestors. 142 protestors were arrested, many injured. A month later, the process was repeated: columns of officials once again marched toward the protestors, this time spraying them with water cannons in subzero temperatures, firing rubber bullets, and allegedly using concussion grenades.

As images of peaceful protestors confronted by militarized police forces circulated through the media, many viewers were shocked and appalled. Some of them organized: Michael A Wood Jr and Wes Clark Jr formed a group called Veterans for Standing Rock. Their goal was to join the protestors and provide some measure of protection by using themselves as human shields. Initially expecting relatively minor turnout, Wood and Clark were surprised to find that over 2000 US military veterans turned up at Standing Rock.

What attracted these veterans? "You might as well die for something that means something," said Vincent Emanuele, a 32 year old former Marine (Healy 2016). Emanuele had served in Iraq and had come to regard that war as futile. He sought something more, something that would give his life significance and direction, some weighty cause to which he could sacrifice himself: "A lot of people here are willing to sacrifice their body, willing to give their life," he noted. And his potential sacrifice didn't go unnoticed: the tribal chairman, Dave Archambault II, said "You guys are very symbolic... What you're doing is sacred" (Healy 2016).

Most of the veterans had no direct connection to the area. They were drawn by something else. "You might as well die for something that means something" (Healy 2016).

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Until early 2015, Kadiza Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum had been living ordinary, comfortable lives in London. These fifteen- and sixteen-year old girls had been doing well in school, earning praise from their teachers, and enjoying their popularity: "they were the girls you wanted to be like," said a student from the grade below theirs (Bennhold 2015). By conventional standards they were flourishing. Yet in February 2015, the three students left their homes, flew to Turkey, and made their way across the border into Syria. There, they joined ISIS. They were quickly married off to ISIS fighters and began having children. They were also confronted with all the horrors of life under ISIS. In a 2019 interview with the Times of London, Shamima Begum said, "When I saw my

first severed head in a bin it didn't faze me at all... It was from a captured fighter seized on the battlefield, an enemy of Islam. I thought only of what he would have done to a Muslim woman if he had the chance" (Mueller 2019). Begum reportedly joined al-Hisba, ISIS's female morality police, which was known for inflicting brutal punishments: violations such as using makeup, traveling without a male companion, or wearing the wrong clothing were punished with 40-60 lashes.

What led these teenagers to ISIS? An earlier article offered this account:

Asked by their families during sporadic phone calls and exchanges on social media platforms why they had run away, the girls spoke of leaving behind an immoral society to search for religious virtue and meaning. In one Twitter message, nine days before they left Britain, Amira wrote, "I feel like I don't belong in this era." (Bennhold 2015).

They sought something more, something that would give them purpose and direction, something that the tedium of their ordinary lives in London did not provide. And ISIS appeared to offer just that. A few months before they left, ISIS' online magazine *Dabiq* published this call:

The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect—the time has come for them to rise. The time has come for the ummah of Muhammad (peace be upon him) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew. The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared.³

And the calls continued: the twelfth issue of *Dabiq* refers to its followers as "the brothers who have refused to live a life of humiliation" (Al-Ushan 2015). The ninth issue claims that ISIS has established a true Caliphate, with "honor and pride for the Muslim and humiliation and degradation for the kaffir [apostates]" (Al-Muhajirah 2015).

The conditions that these teenagers faced were perhaps not what they expected: confronted with the collapse of the Islamic State and the deaths of all three of her children, Shamima Begum is now trying to return to London. And yet something of that longing for purpose remains in her: "I don't regret coming here," she says (Lloyd 2019).

Kadiza Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum weren't alone. A July 2018 study counted over 41,000 foreigners who travelled to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS. Around 19,000 were from the Middle East, 13,000 were from Europe, and 300 were from the United States.⁴ The attraction was perhaps obvious: the "revival of the Caliphate gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater."⁵ The goals may be abhorrent, the conditions horrific; but the "natural desire" for subordinating oneself to a greater purpose was satisfied.

³ "The Return of Khilafah." *Dabiq*, July 5, 2014, 3.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47286935>

⁵ "The Extinction of the Grayzone," *Dabiq*, February 12, 2015, 57.

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In August 1996, the 22 year old Julia ‘Butterfly’ Hill was struck by a drunk driver. She was severely injured, with the steering wheel of her car penetrating her skull; she spent nearly a year in recovery. And this gave her plenty of time to dwell on the life she’d led:

As I recovered, I realized that my whole life had been out of balance ... I had graduated high school at 16, and had been working nonstop since then, first as a waitress, then as a restaurant manager. I had been obsessed by my career, success, and material things. The crash woke me up to the importance of the moment, and doing whatever I could to make a positive impact on the future. The steering wheel in my head, both figuratively and literally, steered me in a new direction in my life. (Martin 1998)

And she certainly found that new direction. A few months after her recovery, in December 1997, she joined protests against the Pacific Lumber Company’s plan to clear-cut 60,000 acres of ancient redwoods in Humboldt County, California. To prevent logging, she climbed nearly to the top of a 200-foot tall, 1000 year old redwood tree; there, she constructed two rudimentary six foot by six foot platforms out of scrap wood. She spent the next 738 days living on those platforms, 180 feet above the ground, enduring freezing temperatures, harassment by logging company workers (sometimes via helicopter), and other difficulties.

What motivated her? In December 1999, after two years in the tree, Hill spoke to reporters: “There’s no way to be in the presence of these ancient beings and not be affected... There’s something more than profit, and that’s life” (Dundon 2017).

Hill descended only when, after nearly two years, the logging company agreed to spare her redwood as well as any trees within 200 feet of it. But Hill didn’t end there: in following years, she has devoted her life to conversation efforts throughout the world.

Reflecting on her time in the tree many years later, she said:

I really do see so much in people. The desire to have something worthy of giving our lives to; because we give our lives to so much that really is not worthy of it. And I think even if people are not completely conscious of that, their spirits, their hearts, their souls feel it. And that is why we turn to self-medicating and numbing ourselves with shopping, over-consumption, movies, television, drugs, alcohol, and all these things we do. Because there is something deep within us, even if we do not recognize it and cannot name it, that wants to have something worth giving our lives to. So something powerful about that arc of what takes the ordinary and makes it become extraordinary. (Taggart 2014)

Hill focuses on the need to find something worthy of sacrifice and struggle. She claims that the yearning for this is widespread, even when it is not consciously experienced as such; and we see this in the joy that comes from finding a goal worthy of devotion.

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Putting oneself in danger and subjecting oneself to extreme conditions in order to protect those one does not know; fleeing the safety and security of a London suburb to join a violent war in Syria; living in a tree for two years in order to prevent logging. What's remarkable about these events is just how *unsurprising* they are. It's rare, of course, for people to go to these extremes. But it is not incomprehensible, not shocking. We're not stunned by the fact that these people are putting aside conventional values in favor of something that strikes them as more important. We have some sense of what the people are after; we have some sense of what they're seeking. They want something to which they can devote themselves, subordinating their comforts, their happiness, their pleasures. They find different outlets: protecting freedom of speech; enforcing barbaric laws; saving trees. The content is various but the form is the same: they crave something to which they can subordinate their mundane desires and pursuits.

From one perspective these actions look manifestly irrational: why give up two years of your life to save a bit over one acre of trees, while the world experiences 70,000 acres of deforestation *per day*?⁶ Why join a violent and oppressive regime, suffering from abuse and deprivation, instead of pursuing a comfortable life in London? Why put yourself at risk of abuse and imprisonment to prevent a spot of land from development? Why commit to these courses of action when the costs are so grave? And why *stay committed*? Why not give up the commitment when the costs begin to mount?

Those are just three examples, of course. Like any examples, they can be resisted, redescribed, or viewed as mere idiosyncrasies with no larger import. But they are suggestive: they give some support to the idea that human beings—at least in some cases and in some circumstances—crave a form of devotion. My hope is that the remainder of the book will convince the reader that these kinds of cases are ubiquitous.

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But how should we describe this form of devotion? Here is the most obvious possibility: we try to identify the *contents* of the individuals' pursuits. We try to pick out what state of affairs the devoted individuals are trying to achieve. And we say that the individuals value these states of affairs so highly that they're willing to sacrifice lesser goods in order to achieve them. So, the Standing Rock veterans value a form of freedom or defiance of oppressive government agents, and are willing to risk their own lives to achieve this; the British teenagers value the sense of purpose or meaning that ISIS provides, and will endorse violence and risk extreme dangers in order to secure it; Hill values the preservation of certain elements of the natural world, and will forgo conventional comforts in order to promote this goal.

If we can explain the devoted actions in this way, then they would raise no special problems. There's nothing especially mysterious about the fact that people weigh costs and benefits, forgoing some conventional pleasures or comforts in order to achieve things they regard as having greater value. That's routine.

Yet I think this explanation is too easy. It fails to explain a striking feature of the above cases. First, notice that the individuals I've mentioned above are to some extent inarticulate about the contents

⁶ The UN estimates that between 2015-20, the worldwide deforestation rate was approximately 25 million acres per year. See <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8642en>.

of their goals. It's not obvious that they *first* identify something immensely valuable and *then* decide to undertake sacrifices in order to attain it. It looks like things go the other way around: they first seek something to which they can devote themselves, and then happen upon opportunities to express this devotion. *They choose particular ends for the sake of expressing devotion, rather than expressing devotion for the sake of attaining particular ends.* This is completely explicit in Hill and Emanuele and is strongly suggested in Begum's self-descriptions. But again the particular examples don't matter. What matters is this: I will argue that people often adopt ends for the sake of expressing the devotion that these ends require, rather than first identifying valuable ends and then deciding to devote themselves to these ends. Put differently: many people are more interested in finding an opportunity to express devotion than in identifying things of great value.

That's my first claim. It can be understood simply as a claim about the psychological priority of two goals: does the person seek to express devotion, and then go about looking for a way to do so; or, conversely, does the person identify highly valuable things and then decide to devote herself to them? If we understand the question that way, it will look like we have two psychological items, devotion and value, and are merely asking which typically comes first. But I want to suggest that things are more complex: when devotion comes first, we tend to be dealing with a distinctive type of value. Let me explain.

2. A distinction among normative commitments

It is a striking fact that our normative commitments divide into the trivial and the profound. Compare the normative significance that you place upon enjoying a nice cup of coffee with the normative significance that a violent white nationalist places upon establishing a racially "pure" society, or that a committed jihadist places upon establishing a conservative Islamic state, or that a social activist places upon protection of the oppressed, or that a devoted environmentalist places upon preservation of the biome. We use the same term to describe all of these individuals, saying that they value certain ends or take there to be reasons to do certain things. And yet it's obvious that the normative significance that you place upon your morning latte pales in comparison to that which the jihadist or the nationalist sees in his action. This is a perfectly familiar point: the actions that we label valuable or reason-supported vary in their perceived significance.

Philosophers have offered ways of marking this distinction. We can speak of the *weight* or *strength* of our commitments. We can speak of their *import*. We can order them lexically, saying that some always override others. We recognize, then, that some commitments seem to be imbued with a special force. They tend to override competing concerns; they tend to be fixed points in deliberation, which we refuse to compromise; in some cases, they are objects of passionate attachment.

So we all recognize distinctions among our normative commitments. It's not news that some normative commitments are profound and others trivial. But I want to ask a question about this distinction. Does accounting for this distinction require anything more than the familiar philosophical machinery? Does it require anything more than speaking in terms of the weight, intensity, or strength of the commitments? I will argue that it does. Our commitments do not sort exhaustively into the *weighty* and the *unweighty*. There is another dimension: there is an important distinction between ordinary values and what I will call *sacred* values

In moral philosophy, it is commonly assumed that all normative phenomena are roughly on par. They are all weighable, perhaps with a few complications. There may be some incommensurables or incomparables: perhaps we can't compare the value of a Picasso with the value of the Grand Canyon. There may be some normative commitments that are overriding: perhaps there's an absolute prohibition on murdering innocent people. There may be some things with lexical priority over others: perhaps considerations of justice ought always to outweigh considerations of pleasure. But all of our normative commitments can enter into deliberation as potentially weighable items, can be deployed as premises in reasoning, can be defended. Insofar as they can't be, they are problematic. So, considerations that are exempted from deliberation, or that aren't weighed against competing concerns, or that aren't deployed as premises in reasoning, or that aren't critiqued and defended in the usual ways—all of these will be problems.

But there is a striking mismatch between these theoretical claims and the way in which our evaluative lives actually proceed. Let's illustrate this with a valuation that's central to us: the valuation of human life itself. Most of us agree that human life has great value. But there are different ways of understanding this value. The Catholic church holds that "human life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence" (John Paul II 1995: 61). "The absolute inviolability of innocent human life is a moral truth" (John Paul II 1995: 57), so that "the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral" (John Paul II 1995: 57). Peter Singer, by contrast, writes that "during the next 35 years, the traditional view of the sanctity of human life will collapse under pressure from scientific, technological, and demographic developments. By 2040, it may be that only a rump of hard-core, know-nothing religious fundamentalists will defend the view that every human life, from conception to death, is sacrosanct" (Singer 2009). Both Singer and the Catholic church treat human life as immensely valuable. But for Singer, tradeoffs, weighings, and balancings are perfectly fine: to use one of his examples, "We may not want a child to start on life's uncertain voyage if the prospects are clouded" (Singer 2009). For example, Singer thinks it can make sense to decline to preserve the life of a severely disabled child. According to the Catholic doctrine, which treats human life as having an inviolable value, this is perverse.

There is a clear difference between the way in which the Catholic doctrine and Singer's theory treat the value of human life. Can we draw this distinction merely in terms of the weight of the value? Not obviously. Singer and the Catholics *agree* that human life is immensely valuable. Singer thinks that human life outweighs many competing concerns, and indeed that great sacrifices are often required so as to ensure its preservation: in a famous article, he argues that we are morally obligated to sacrifice much of consumer society—nice clothes, restaurants, homes, vacations—in order to preserve human life by alleviating dire poverty (Singer 1972). He believes that almost no sacrifice is too great for this: we ought to give up our incomes, our comforts, our security, up to the point of marginal utility. That is, we ought to give until giving any more would make us as badly off as those suffering from lack of food, basic medical care, and shelter. So there are limits, but Singer does accord human life immense weight. The Catholic doctrine is, in that respect, analogous. While professing belief in the inviolability of human life, the Catholic church does not treat it as infinitely valuable: it does, in fact, accept limitations on the quantities of other goods that must be traded to preserve or protect human life.⁷

⁷ For example, consider these rules, taken from the 2009 edition of *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (which is a guidebook published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). "56. A person has a moral obligation to use ordinary or proportionate means of preserving his or her life. Proportionate means are those that

Nonetheless, there's a difference between the way that Singer and orthodox Catholics are envisioning the value of human life. How should we capture this difference?

We could say that whereas Singer assigns human life a value of weight W_1 , Catholics assign it a value of weight W_2 , where W_2 is somewhat greater than W_1 . This is true, but it misses the point. There is a disagreement between Singer and the Catholics, but it's not well captured by speaking of variances in weight. That would obscure the distinction. Human lives and valuable and apples are valuable. If Singer's weighting of a human life is just somewhat lower than the Catholic doctrine's, then Singer's valuation of a human life *plus* a number of apples should, for some quantity of apples, equal the Catholic's valuation of human life. But this is absurd. Even if we could, in fact, find some point at which these purported weights would be equal, we wouldn't have revealed anything interesting about the disagreement between Singer and the Catholics. (I am not denying that it's *possible* to draw this distinction in terms of weights. I am claiming that it's *inadvisable* to do so; it doesn't illuminate anything. While there is a difference in weights, that difference is explained by something more fundamental.)

So there's not a good way of drawing the distinction between Singer and the Catholics merely in terms of the weights of the relevant values or reasons. We might try to account for the distinction in other ways. For example, the Catholic position involves deontological norms, whereas Singer is a consequentialist. So we might speak of absolute prohibitions on using human lives in certain ways, where these prohibitions would be accepted by Catholics but denied by Singer. And we'll find some differences here. But again, this won't illuminate the difference. After all, there are deontological views that allow human lives to be traded against competing goods: to mention one notorious example, Kant, the paradigmatic deontologist, argues that unwed mothers are permitted to kill their newborn infants in order to avoid "the disgrace of an illegitimate birth" (*Metaphysics of Morals* 336-7). So the mere fact that the Catholic position involves deontological claims doesn't explain the phenomenon in which we're interested. The status that the Catholic doctrine is bestowing upon human life, while it does involve a deontological claim, also involves something more.

We might describe this by saying that the Catholic doctrine treats human life as absolutely inviolable. Or we might focus on the way in which human life has a kind of sanctity, dignity, or meaning for Catholics that it lacks for Singer. This, I think, is getting closer to the real difference, but these phrases are obscure; we need an explanation of what they mean.

So there's something here, some kind of difference between the way that Singer values human life and the way that his Catholic opponents do. The Catholic treats human life as absolutely inviolable, and accords it a form of dignity. It is exempted from material exchanges; it is not a fit object for tradeoffs; it is not to be bartered or weighed. Moreover—and this is a point to which I will return in later chapters—human life is described in a way that is at least somewhat obscure: for what does it mean for something to be sacred, to have dignity, and so forth? It's not obvious. Singer's position,

in the judgment of the patient offer a reasonable hope of benefit and do not entail an excessive burden or impose excessive expense on the family or the community. 57. A person may forgo extraordinary or disproportionate means of preserving life. Disproportionate means are those that in the patient's judgment do not offer a reasonable hope of benefit or entail an excessive burden, or impose excessive expense on the family or the community." Notice that "extraordinary" and "disproportionate" means of preserving life are not required.

by contrast, has the appearance of clear-headed rigor (though I will later argue that this appearance is deceptive).

If this disagreement about the value of human life were a local curiosity, it would be of limited import. But in fact these kinds of commitments are pervasive. Empirical psychology has studied them under the headings of “sacred values” or “protected values”. There are a number of cases in which agents seem to bestow this special status on particular objects of value.

Psychologists typically elicit these judgments by asking people to consider tradeoffs. Ordinarily, for any two valued goods, we can find circumstances in which we would trade one for the other. I value happiness and I value money; but there’s some point at which I would trade an uncompensated night of happiness for a tedious evening accompanied by a quantity of money. Most values operate in this way. But there are exceptions. Some individuals are unwilling to trade certain goods at any cost. Consider cases such as these: buying and selling human body parts for medical transplants; buying votes for political office; prostitution; declining to offer insurance policies to members of certain races; auctioning babies for adoption; giving up part of a nation’s territory in exchange for peace; giving up an object of religious significance in order to end violence.⁸ Significant percentages of subjects refuse to engage in these tradeoffs regardless of the circumstances.

Whereas most values are fungible, these values aren’t. People won’t trade them for other values, regardless of the quantities involved. Psychologists call them *sacred values*.⁹ We will examine the features of these values in more depth in the following chapters, but for now let me give a typical example of the way in which they’re defined: a sacred value is “any value that a moral community explicitly or implicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any other mingling with bounded or secular values” (Tetlock et al. 2000: 853).

I am not entirely happy with the label “sacred”: it obviously has religious connotations, and many of the things that qualify as sacred values have nothing to do with religion. So the label is potentially misleading. Unfortunately, the term “sacred value” is firmly entrenched in empirical psychology. Although I think alternative labels such as “protected value” and “higher value” are better, it’s too late to resist the standard label. So I will use “sacred value,” hoping that the reader bears in mind that sacredness shouldn’t be taken to have religious implications.

Some of the empirical studies on sacred values have the traditional flaws of social psychology: the studies are run on undergraduates, who are disproportionately drawn from predominately white, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic societies.¹⁰ Moreover, these studies often ask students to give quick judgments about cases which may be of little import to them (does an undergraduate in an introductory psychology class really have any stake in whether adoption of children is run by auction? How seriously are they taking these questions?). So we might be skeptical that real attitudes are being uncovered here.¹¹

⁸ These are just a few of the cases studied by Tetlock et. al. (2000) and Tetlock (2003).

⁹ In addition to being nonfungible, psychologists often claim that sacred values have several other features. I will discuss these below.

¹⁰ See Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010), “The Weirdest People in the World?”.

¹¹ Some of the researchers actually share this conviction: Tetlock (2003) thinks that sacred values are merely avowed, rather than actual. People are generally sincere when they claim that a value is sacred; but, when forced to choose, there are always circumstances in which people will compromise the value.

In an effort to counteract these problems, Ginges and Atran conducted “experiments using realistic hypothetical scenarios involving values that were central to the lives of our participants and their communities who were sampled from key populations involved in political disputes” (Ginges and Atran 2012: 278). Consider a few results. Jewish Israeli settlers (defined as people who choose to live in territories that Israel occupied after the 1967 war) were asked whether they would exchange land for peace. Specifically, they were asked “Do you agree that there are some extreme circumstances where it would be permissible for the Jewish people to give away part of the Land of Israel?” In their sample of 601 settlers, roughly half (46%) said no. Ginges and Atran took this as indicative of a sacred value: after all, these individuals claim that there are absolutely no circumstances—in particular, no tally of human lives saved by an end to hostilities—that would motivate them to give away land. And that’s not all: trying to sweeten the deal by offering additional material incentives (e.g., an end to conflict *plus* a donation of 100 billion dollars from the US to Israel) *increases* hostility and decreases the willingness to compromise (Ginges and Atran 2012: 279).

In another experiment, Palestinians were asked whether they would give up the right of return¹² in exchange for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. 80% said no, which Ginges and Atran interpret as indicating that “the right of return [is] a sacred value” (Ginges and Atran 2012: 283). As Atran puts it in a related article:

rational cost-benefit analysis says the Palestinians ought to agree to forgo sovereignty over Jerusalem or the claim of refugees to return to homes in Israel in exchange for an autonomous state encompassing their other pre-1967 lands because they would gain more sovereignty and more land than they would renounce. They should support such an agreement even more if the United States and Europe sweetened the deal by giving every Palestinian family substantial, long-term economic assistance. (Atran 2017: 73)

But again, that isn’t the case: “the financial sweetener makes Palestinians more opposed to the deal and more likely to support violence to oppose it, including suicide bombings” (Atran 2017: 73).

The values implicated in these cases are exceptional: they are uncompromisable and are held despite immense costs. Of course, that alone doesn’t demonstrate that these values are distinctive: it may just be that one thing (such as sovereignty) is valued so highly that the costs of giving it up massively outweigh the gains. But that alone doesn’t explain the second feature: tradeoffs and attempts at mitigation make things worse, rather than better. That’s peculiar.

We could try to explain away these cases by focusing on the particulars. Maybe the “financial sweetener” makes the deal seem like a trick (the opposite side must really be desperate for this!); or maybe there are fears about the stability of the deal (they’re trying to make us more vulnerable!); and so on. While we might question any particular case in these ways, the body of research is by now so large that it seems foolish to deny that this is a real phenomenon. To give a sense of just how extensive sacred values are, I will mention a few disparate cases.

¹² The right of return is typically defined as the idea that both Palestinian refugees—defined as those whose place of residence had been British Palestine, but who were displaced in 1948—and their descendants have a right to return to what is now Israel. Sometimes, the right of return is interpreted as including a right to the property that was abandoned in 1948.

In the United States, a prime candidate is gun rights. Most Americans are happy to accept significant restrictions on freedoms in exchange for safety. Few of us object to laws requiring us to fasten seatbelts and drive at posted speed limits. Few object to prohibitions on purchasing explosives, toxins, and so forth. In these cases, the reasoning appears to be a simple cost/benefit analysis: the dangers are so great that prohibitions are acceptable. In certain segments of the US population, though, gun rights are not given an analogous status. Suppose it could be conclusively established that prohibitions on gun ownership would save a significant number of lives. Australia is often used as an example to support this claim. After a mass shooting in 1996, Australia introduced certain restrictions on gun ownership. Between 1995 and 2006, gun-related homicides dropped 59%. Given that there are somewhere around 34,000 gun homicides per year in the US, we could easily imagine restrictions on gun ownership saving thousands of lives. Nonetheless, some gun rights proponents object that this would not be justified. Here's John McCain after a 2008 Supreme Court ruling that the second amendment protects an individual's right to gun ownership: "Unlike the elitist view that believes Americans cling to guns out of bitterness, today's ruling recognizes that gun ownership is a fundamental right — sacred, just as the right to free speech and assembly." The National Rifle Association routinely promotes the idea that gun ownership is a sacred right; its bylaws state that it will defend the "inalienable right of the individual American citizen guaranteed by such Constitution to acquire, possess, collect, exhibit, transport, carry, transfer ownership of, and enjoy the right to use arms." These rights are treated as unrestricted and independent of the consequences: no costs are too great. Even minor restrictions on these rights are treated as monstrous, as threats to the rights themselves.

Another domain in which sacred values arise is certain environmental movements which oppose not just some, but *all* impacts on the environment. *Earth First!* is often interpreted as committed to this position. Distinctive here is the absolute refusal to compromise the environmental values for other values—"no compromise in the defense of mother earth!" is their slogan, and acts of sabotage and violence are endorsed.

But I don't want these examples to give the impression that sacred values are isolated to fringe populations. There are mainstream examples. Human rights are candidates. Consider the First Article of the German constitution, which begins as follows:

- (1) Human dignity is inviolable. To respect it and protect it is the duty of all state power.
- (2) The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world.

Or take the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" and "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Or John Rawls' widely quoted claim that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override... the loss of freedom for some is not made right by a greater welfare enjoyed by others" (Rawls 1971: 87). Dignity, rights, and justice are taken to have lexical priority over other considerations. Regardless of how great a gain in welfare would be produced by acting unjustly, this is prohibited. Tradeoffs are not to be entertained. And the language of sanctity, dignity, and respect routinely arises in these contexts. So, too, does the inchoate sense of meaningfulness.

So I am suggesting that when we examine social and ethical life, we find widespread commitment to a distinctive sort of value. In the following chapters, I will analyze the structure of this type of value more precisely. But for now, we can say that there seems to be a domain of sacred values. We can initially distinguish these values by focusing on the way in which they are exempted from tradeoffs and held independently of costs. Prospects of massive casualties, staggering environmental destruction, and crippling economic burdens do not sway people from maintaining commitment to their sacred values. In being immunized to tradeoffs, sacred values differ from ordinary values. But not just in terms of this immunization; there's also the fact that an aura of mystery surrounds many of these values. There is an ethos surrounding gun ownership. It is connected, sometimes in inarticulate ways, to a sense of identity. And words such as "dignity" have a whiff of the portentous and ineffable; they are redolent and it's not obvious what they mean. If we substituted "life" into the first article of the German constitution, it wouldn't have the same connotations.

I want to investigate these phenomena. What are these things that psychologists call sacred values? How should they be understood?

Sacred values aren't just things that are taken to be extremely valuable, for things can be extremely valuable without being sacred. Sacred values aren't identical to moral values, for the same reason: many of our moral values are not treated as sacred (though some are). Nor are sacred values identical to commitments that are perceived as meaningful: things that are very meaningful, that are taken to imbue one's life with significance, can nonetheless be non-sacred. (I can view athletic achievement or literary skill as imbuing a person's life with significance, without thinking that sports or books are sacred.) Nor need sacred values be associated with religions, though they often are; environmentalist movements, the second amendment, political stances, and so on can involve sacred values.

The presence of sacred values is most obvious when people maintain them despite great costs, as in the Palestinian/Israeli and gun-rights cases discussed above. But actual costs needn't arise; if we're lucky, the costs will only arise in counterfactual circumstances. Thus, we sometimes need to consider counterfactual scenarios in order to determine whether a given value is sacralized. And once we do this, many more sacred values appear. I will return to this point in Chapter Three.

For now, though, let's just note that sacred values present a puzzle. It's not clear what, exactly, they are. One possibility is that they're nothing, or, more precisely, no *one* thing. Perhaps the things that get labeled "sacred" are just a motley assortment of things that are objects of passionate attachment for some, considered meaningful for others, taken to warrant sacrifice by others, bound up with a sense of identity for some, and so on. Perhaps there's no unified class here.

But I think there is. I think we can single out something essential about sacred values and use that feature to uncover some important features of our thinking about value and the craving for devotion. In the following chapters, I am going to argue that we can distinguish sacred values by their formal features: they prohibit certain kinds of tradeoffs, including merely contemplated tradeoffs; and they are invulnerable to certain forms of rational argumentation. I will explain these points in the next chapter, but for now we can think of sacred values as inviolable, incontestable, and resistant to ordinary modes of rational critique.

3. Sacred values and devoted agents

But why bother? Why should we analyze sacred values? People engage in all sorts of strange, foolish, and irrational behavior. They display quirks, peculiarities. Shouldn't we class sacred values with these phenomena? And if so, aren't they a better topic for empirical psychological investigation than for philosophical study?

I am going to argue that this would be a mistake. In ignoring sacred values, moral philosophy operates with a distorted picture of ethical life.

Although there are exceptions, a great deal of moral philosophy over the past century is concerned with the trivia of everyday life: should I keep my promise? Should I tell a lie? Or it is concerned with artificial dilemmas: suppose there's an avalanche and my child and I are trapped in wreckage. Can I use a stranger's body as a shield to save my child's life, without that person's consent, if doing so would crush one of his little toes? How about if crushing two toes would save two lives? (This is an actual discussion; Parfit 2011, Volume I, pp. 222-31). Left untheorized are the questions that drive many of us to moral philosophy in the first place. Questions about significance, meaning, commitment; questions about the objects of passionate commitment; questions about what drives the jihadi, the nationalist, the committed proponent of human rights, the devoted environmentalist.

And I think there's a reason for this. Philosophers assume that these are just more extreme or more complicated instances of the trivial phenomena. If we can figure out whether we can compel toe-sacrifices to save children, then we can figure out what's going on with the commitments involved in nationalism, terrorism, and so forth. We just have to start small, teasing out the differentiating factors. We don't start with the big questions; we build up to them.

But perhaps not. Perhaps these aren't just more complex, more extreme versions of the same problems. Perhaps the focus on trivial and imaginary cases distorts ethical theorizing. We start formulating our ethical theories and distinctions by considering these trivial cases. We assume that the grave questions that animate our actual ethical lives will be answered in analogous ways: they'll have more variables, they'll involve additional factors, but at root they'll be the same. And I think this makes us incapable of seeing how deliberation and reasoning actually proceed in these cases. It blinds us to the way in which our deepest normative convictions actually function. We assume that these convictions can enter deliberation as rationally assessable, weighable points; that they can be defended in ways that are analogous to the way that the trivial concerns are defended; that they stand in need of the same kind of justification as these trivial concerns do; and that we can typically articulate them with at least some degree of clarity and precision. And all of that, I will argue, is mistaken.

But my conclusions won't just be descriptive. I won't just be arguing that people *do in fact* operate with sacred values. I will argue that there are ways in which they *should*. After all, many philosophers will be tempted to think that whereas people do display the behaviors I've described above, these are pathologies, rational failures, things to be overcome. Not so, I will argue. It's not just that philosophers have failed to notice sacred values and have thus given inaccurate descriptions of ethical life; it's also that, in virtue of the distorted picture of ethical life, their normative claims have gone astray.

So, in part this book will be about philosophical ethic's difficulties in acknowledging the existence of sacred values. When I say that philosophers fail to acknowledge sacred values, I don't mean that philosophers have explicitly denied that there can be any such thing. Rather, I mean that philosophers have operated with assumptions that constrain the deliberative space. As we go on, we'll see that a group of apparently heterogeneous phenomena—incommensurable values, lexical priority rankings, moral remainders, tragic choices, questions about importance and meaning in life—all of these, which seem to be at the edge of ethical theorizing, turn out to be related, to be manifestations of the phenomenon that I am investigating. Moreover, central features of ethical theories—the way in which arguments for the core assumptions proceed, the aspects of the theory that philosophers focus upon—are puzzling until we recognize the role of sacred values in theories that fail to acknowledge them.

In short: I think sacred values play a crucial role in ethical life and that our failure to recognize this distorts ethical theorizing. While the real argument for this point is not shorter than the entire book, let me try to give some indication of how this is so.

A central idea in many religions is that a satisfying human life requires wholehearted commitment to values or ideals that cannot be justified in the ordinary ways, that perhaps cannot even be fully understood. These values cannot be justified by reason alone; nor can they be established by empirical inquiry; instead, they require revelation, or divine insight, or the acceptance of dogmas, or some sort of ability to limn the structure of reality. So we need not just reason, but faith. This is an exceedingly common way of understanding the difference between religious and non-religious approaches to life.

Against this, many philosophers argue—again at a very high level of generality—that we can do without faith. The most optimistic of philosophers believe that we can (or eventually will be able to) justify wholehearted commitment to certain values by reason alone.¹³ Others back off just a small step, claiming that although of course there will be controversies about particular goods, we can get overlapping consensus on a number of shared goods.¹⁴ Others tell us that we can detach our desire for rational justification from our wholeheartedness: we can live as “ironists”, or “free spirits,” or existentialists, who remain wholeheartedly committed to values that we freely admit are not rationally justifiable.¹⁵ And others think we are doomed to vacillation or fragmentation or anomie: we have to choose between wholeheartedness and clear-headed rationality; we can't have both.¹⁶

Depending on which philosophical position seems tempting, sacred values will look different. Sacred values do involve a particular form of wholehearted commitment: we are completely committed to them in the sense that they are treated as uncompromisable. Moreover, they involve a particular form of dogmatism: below I will argue that we treat them as incomparable and as invulnerable to ordinary rational argumentation. Finally, they often invest our lives with a sense of purpose or direction, and thereby give us a way of attaining a form of contentment with life. So they have the features that many of us associate with traditional religious values. But sacred values needn't be religious; they are far more pervasive.

¹³ Parfit 2011 is a good example. But the aspiration is also present in many others: see, for example, Korsgaard 1996, Smith 1994, and Scanlon 1998.

¹⁴ See, for example, Rawls 1993 and Berlin 1990.

¹⁵ Rorty 1989, Kierkegaard 1841/1989, Camus 1955, Sartre 1948, de Beauvoir 1976, perhaps Nietzsche 1974.

¹⁶ Schopenhauer 1844 and 1891, perhaps Nietzsche 2003, Benatar 2017.

In virtue of these features, I will suggest that sacred values enable us to stave off the forms of nihilism, anomie, and vacillation that I've mentioned above. This is why they play a crucial role in ethical life. But the sacralization of a value is typically premised upon the idea that commitment to the value cannot be fully justified by ordinary modes of rational thought. I think this is true and important. More precisely: I will argue that although we have reason to embrace *some* sacred values, we don't have a good justification for picking any *particular* sacred values. And there is where the need for insulation from questioning and critique arises: in order to fulfill their psychological function, sacred values have to be shielded from the effects of certain kinds of inquiry. But this doesn't mean that we need to seek some religious or metaphysical foundation for them. Instead, it can just mean that we delimit the quest for foundations. Nietzsche famously wrote that the ancient "Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity!*" (*The Gay Science*, Preface 4). I will develop a version of that thought. To lay my cards on the table: as you might expect from someone who has spent much of his career writing on Nietzsche, I am an atheist devoid of religious sentiments. So the solution I propose at the end will attempt to preserve a version of the religious form without the religious content.

In particular: I will argue that sacred values answer our demand for devotion. Insofar as we are committed to devotion, we will be committed to sacralizing certain values; for mundane values cannot secure the most robust form of devotion, whereas sacred values can.

Of course, we might respond to this conclusion in different ways. Some will view it as a reason to abandon the quest for robust forms of devotion: if robust devotion requires sacred values, we had better learn to live without devotion! Others will view it as a reason to preserve certain forms of devotion. And others, still, might seek some kind of compromise or balancing of these desires. I will explore these possibilities in the final chapter.

4. Plan of the book

I pointed out that some of our commitments involve sacred values. But, to understand this point, we need to clarify the notion of sacred values. **Chapter Two** reviews the psychological and philosophical work on sacred values and related phenomena. I argue that sacred values are commitments with three distinguishing features: they are overriding, incontestable, and invulnerable to certain forms critique. In particular, we can analyze sacred values as follows.

(Sacred value) Let $V1$ be a value. Then $V1$ counts as sacred iff it meets the following conditions:

1. **Inviolable:** if $V2$ is an ordinary value, then it is prohibited to sacrifice $V1$ for $V2$, regardless of the quantities of $V1$ and $V2$.
2. **Incontestable:** It is prohibited to *contemplate* trading or sacrificing $V1$ for most or all other values.
3. **Dialectically Invulnerable:** The agent insulates her commitment to $V1$ from the effects of justificatory reasoning. That is, while the agent may think about $V1$'s justification, consider objections to $V1$, consider alternatives to $V1$, engage in thought experiments with respect to $V1$, and so on, the agent does not stake

her commitment to V1 on the outcome of this justificatory reasoning. There is no dialectical move that would disrupt the agent's commitment to V1.

Chapter Two explains these features. In addition, I review several other factors that are characteristically but not inevitably associated with sacred values. These include certain types of emotions (such as reverence and awe); a sense of subjective import or meaning; and inarticulacy about one's sacred values.

With that, we have an account of a distinctive type of normative commitment, the *sacred value*. But sacred values might seem paradigmatically irrational: isn't it problematic to treat one's values as inviolable, incontestable, and dialectically invulnerable? **Chapter Three** argues that it can be rational to hold sacred values. I start with features (1) and (2), the prohibition of exchanges and comparisons. The commitment to sacred values conflicts with views according to which every normative consideration can be assigned a weight (you are forbidden to weigh or even entertain the idea of weighing sacred values). Moreover, the commitment to sacred values conflicts with views according to which it is always problematic to refuse to compare things which are in fact comparable. I explore how it can be rational to have commitments that exhibit these features.

This still leaves feature (3), dialectical invulnerability. **Chapter Four** examines the peculiar way in which sacred values are insulated from the effects of justificatory reflection. I begin by introducing the concept of *devotion*. I argue that being devoted requires treating one's commitment to the object of devotion as dialectically invulnerable. I further argue that it can be rational to manifest devotion, for the devotion is a precondition for the preservation of central features of ethical life. If it can be rational to devote oneself to things, and if doing so requires treating one's commitment to these things as dialectically invulnerable, then it can be rational to render certain commitments dialectically invulnerable.

The arguments in Chapter Four turn on the idea that we need to treat certain commitments as fixed and immutable. One way of treating commitments as fixed is by immunizing them from critique, in the ways that I've examined. But another way would be by decisively establishing these commitments through rational argumentation. Suppose, for example, that Kant's ethical theory were successful: we begin with some undeniable facts about agency and then show that some analogue of enlightenment values follow from them. If this worked, then we could do away with the dialectical invulnerability component of sacred values: we wouldn't *need* to treat the values as dialectically invulnerable, because dialectic would decisively establish them.

I think this strategy has no hope of success. In **Chapter Five**, I explain why. In essence, I argue that reasonable agents can always find good grounds for questioning their basic commitments. In particular, I argue that there is a sense in which we are unable to justify weightings or lexical orderings of competing basic normative claims. Reaching an all-things-considered ought judgment about what is to be done in a particular case typically requires assigning relative weights to competing normative claims; and yet, according to a view that I call *Normative Weighting Skepticism*, we lack sufficient justification for assigning these relative weights and thus are unable to reach all-things-considered ought judgments. Although Normative Weighting Skepticism rests on certain assumptions about moral uncertainty, I argue that it is a reasonable philosophical position. I further argue that agents who accept Normative Weighting Skepticism will experience a motivational problem that I label Normative Dissipation: roughly, they will find that normative entities (reasons,

values, or principles) formerly treated as overriding cease to function as overriding. Having sacred values is one way—perhaps the only way—of insulating one’s values from these effects and thereby preventing the relevant form of skepticism.

Chapters Two through Five thus jointly show that it can be rational to have sacred values. But sacred values are not wholly positive; they have their costs. In the remaining chapters, I examine pathologies that can arise from defective relations to sacred values. In being immunized from rational critiques, sacred values can foster and promote oppositional tendencies in individuals and groups. In particular, sacred values can easily give rise to a form of fanaticism.

Chapter Six examines individual fanaticism. Several philosophers in the early modern period, including Kant, Locke, and Shaftesbury, argue that fanaticism consists in a certain type of dogmatism: one takes oneself to have an incontrovertible justification for some ideal but simultaneously insists that this justification outstrips ordinary rational standards, being based instead on personal experiences of divine communication, insight into the nature of reality, or some such. I call this the Enlightenment account of fanaticism. I argue that it is inadequate: while the Enlightenment account does identify one type of epistemic failing, this failing is not correlated with fanaticism. So we need a new account.

Chapter Seven offers that new account of fanaticism. I argue that fanaticism is based upon a constellation of psychological traits including a form of personal fragility, group orientation, and a view about the status of values. I argue that the fanatic is distinguished by four features: the adoption of one or more sacred values; the need to treat these values as unconditional in order to preserve one’s identity; the sense that the status of these values is threatened by lack of widespread acceptance; and the identification with a group, where the group is defined by shared commitment to the sacred value. I explain how these features are mutually reinforcing and tend to lead towards the types of violent intolerance that we typically associate with fanaticism.

In **Chapter Eight**, I ask how individual fanaticism relates to group fanaticism. The simplest view would be that fanatical groups are groups all or most of whose members are fanatics. But I argue that there is a more promising view. According to my *generative* view of group fanaticism, a group qualifies as fanatical iff it promotes individual fanaticism. But how, exactly, might a group promote individual fanaticism? I explore the way in which certain kinds of group narratives can promote resentment. Analyzing this notion of resentment, I explain how the production of resentment encourages individual fanaticism. Thus, my account runs as follows: a group counts as fanatical iff it promotes individual fanaticism; a common (though not necessary) way of promoting individual fanaticism is by promoting resentment; thus, a common characteristic of fanatical groups is their tendency to promote resentment. I argue that this account helps us to identify a disturbing feature of certain contemporary groups, movements, and political ideologies.

Chapter Nine draws these points together. We have seen that devotion plays an important role in ethical life; that devotion involves accepting sacred values, which are inviolable, incontestable, and dialectically invulnerable; that close examination reveals that sacred values pervade ethical and social life; and that sacred values stave off normative dissipation. More worryingly, we have seen that the person who holds sacred values risks meeting the Enlightenment conditions for fanaticism; that, when the person with sacred values displays certain additional features, he does indeed become fanatical; and that fanatical groups encourage individuals to display these additional features and thereby lapse into fanaticism. So we now need to ask: is there a way of holding sacred values

without risking fanaticism? I suggest that there might be. There are ways of rendering values dialectically invulnerable, and thereby enabling devotion, without lapsing into the most problematic forms of life that can be associated with sacred values. For I suggest that there are non-fanatical ways of expressing devotion, ways that differ from fanaticism in that they enable the agent to recognize a form of contingency or optionality in her basic commitments. I investigate whether you can be devoted through irony; through affirmation; and through what I call the deepening move. Each of these stances preserves a degree of flexibility and openness in the objects of devotion; each one tries to preserve a wholehearted form of devotion despite this openness.