

Reverence as a Cardinal Ethical Value in the Western Philosophy

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Abstract: *This article explains and defends reverence as a cardinal ethical value in the Western philosophical tradition, which was considered an underpinning value in ancient society, and it then gradually declined over time. Many contemporary Western philosophers embark on respect rather than reverence. Reverence and respect are not the same. Reverence is all-inclusive, while respect is limited. Reverence values the genuine person, while respect may flatter a powerful arrogant person. Reverence is a cardinal moral and political value necessary for decent politics, education, law, economics, and religion. Reverence is not only essential for becoming a perfect human person but also for instituting a good society. To expound the notion of reverence in the Western tradition, I select four significant Western intellectuals: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer, and Paul Woodruff. Goethe posits a tripartite account of reverence: reverence for God, Earth, and human beings. Russell argues for reverence in politics and education. Schweitzer not only developed his account of reverence but also lived his life according to it. Schweitzer declares that his life is his argument, which is reverence for life, life in all its forms. Woodruff intends to revive the notion of reverence in global politics and ethics. So, the article examines the accounts of reverence posited by Goethe, Russell, Schweitzer, and Woodruff and defends its role as a cardinal moral and political value vital for politics, education, and religion for acquiring the common good in the world.*

1. Introduction

This article explains and defends the notion of reverence as a cardinal moral and political value in the Western intellectual tradition. ‘Reverence as a moral and political value’ means reverence for humanity, in particular, and reverence for other things, such as the environment, animals, and nature, in general. ‘Reverence for humanity’ refers to the disinterested recognition of human persons irrespective of their status, position, race, religion, language, colour, or nationality. Reverence is contrary to two vices: vanity and arrogance. Vanity means unlimited pride in one’s self, status, nation, culture, language, religion, or civilization. Ample pride in one’s self is a positive thing that augments one’s human potential. In contrast, unlimited pride creates a kind of individual and collective narcissism that is detrimental to both individuals and nations. Intellectual vanity creates a kind of intellectual despotism that produces a sense in people that their knowledge is certain, always true, and infallible. Due to intellectual vanity, people do not pay attention to the suggestions, opinions, or advice of others. Intellectual narcissists develop blind beliefs in their worldviews, traditions, histories, or personalities. Narcissism, which is either the individual or collective, creates an unrealistic perception among people that they are superior to others and that others are inferior to them. Narcissists believe that they have the best mind, personality, race, culture, language, religion, or nation in the world. The crucial problem is that narcissism keeps people away from reality. If intellectual vanity exists among politicians, businessmen, journalists, scientists, or social scientists, there is undemocratic decision-making that leads to chaos and disorder. Intellectual despotism closes all opportunities for learning new knowledge from others.

Arrogance creates different kinds of despotism – political, economic, racial, or cultural – and each one is dangerous. Political and economic despotism curtails humanistic decision-making when one is in the position of making such decisions. Arrogant leaders do not pay attention to the advice of others, particularly those who hold lower status or less power than them. Arrogant leaders are despotic in the sense that they do not consider the right ideas of others, and they develop an undemocratic attitude. Like political decision-making, economic decision-making requires a sense of reverence. In *Reflections on Human Development*, Mahbub ul Haq argues that the subject of economic decision-making should extend human choices. Haq insists on the development of human beings rather than nations in economic policies and decision-making (Haq, 1995). Haq’s argument of human development supports the welfare of all human beings beyond nationalities, races, or religions – which is, in general, reverence for humanity. Thus, reverence disproves both vanity and arrogance.



‘Reverence’ and ‘respect’ are different values. Reverence is an all-inclusive ethical value that envisages someone or something from a broader perspective. Reverence takes human persons from the point of view of the universe, such as the creative agents, the ultimate ends, and the crown of all creatures. It also takes non-human things, including nature, the environment, and animals, as the essential part of the universe. All forms of respect are not reverence. Reverence gives honor to human persons; respect may be flattery because of one’s social or political status. Reverence teaches us that we are humans, subject to fallibility. No human has absolute perfection, subject to ever success. Reverence is a resource for sympathy, empathy, or altruism. Respecting an evil person is wrong, while reverence encourages one to challenge a wicked person (Woodruff, 2012). Many contemporary moral and political philosophers, including Philip Pettit, Stephen Darwall, Oliver Sensen, and Joseph Raz, embark on respect rather than reverence. This article highlights the significance of reverence in our individual and social life to combat arrogance, vanity, lust for mundane economic success, and different kinds of personal and collective narcissism.

Unquestionably, reverence has been a vital ethical value in the foundation of Western civilisation. Literature, Philosophy, and History reveal that reverence had been a central value in Western civilisation. In *Prometheus Bound*, an ancient Greek play written by Aeschylus, a Titan by the name of Prometheus requests Zeus, the king of the gods, to provide humans with the basic needs for their existence. Zeus rejects Prometheus’s request, and Prometheus himself provides ‘fire’ and ‘hope’ to human creatures (Aeschylus, 2009, p. 316). Zeus takes vengeance on Prometheus by having him chained to a rock where an eagle – the symbol of Zeus – slowly pecks out his liver for all of eternity. In the play, fire denotes knowledge and rationality. By rebelling against Zeus and providing people with fire, Prometheus can be seen as a metaphor for reverence for humanity in the Western tradition. The theme of *Prometheus Bound* – that those who provide knowledge and fight superstition will be punished by the powerful who fear rebellion – played out in real life when Socrates, the first mentor of the classical Western tradition, accepted that he had a moral obligation to drink a cup of hemlock after being convicted for imparting the knowledge of rationality to the youth of Athens.

Yet, some renowned thinkers, notably Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer, and Paul Woodruff, posit their accounts of reverence. Goethe develops a tripartite standpoint of reverence for humanity, God, and ecology; Russell develops his argument of reverence for humanity based on logic; Schweitzer creates his argument of reverence for life in mystical tradition. Woodruff’s account of reverence is based on psychology

and has moral and political implications. Reverence is required in education, politics, law, economics, and religion. Goethe holds that reverence is essential for becoming a complete human being (Goethe, 1907, p. 70). Goethe is right. Reverence is not only necessary for becoming a good human being but also for a good society. The significance of reverence in the individual, society, and institutions cannot be denied for acquiring the common good.

2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

A wide range of literature has been produced on respect in modern moral and political philosophy. In contrast, a few theorists have explained and defended the idea of reverence. I review the work of a few significant moral and political philosophers to know whether modern philosophers focus on respect or reverence. To create a sketch of respect, I explain the works of Stephen L. Darwall, Philip Pettit, and Oliver Sensen. Most moral and political philosophers use the notion of respect for persons. In contrast, I use the expression reverence for persons, or generally humanity.

In an edited work by Richard Dean and Oliver Sensen, entitled *Respect: Philosophical Essays* (2021), Stephen Darwall, an American moral and political philosopher, explained the notion of respect and distinguished between two forms of respect: recognition respect and appraisal respect. By ‘recognition respect’, Darwall means respect for a person; all persons deserve respect because they are human. Yet, ‘appraisal respect’ refers to respect due to some acquired skill or status. For instance, one might have respect for being an entomologist (Darwall, 2021, p. 193-5). Darwall’s other work on respect includes *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (2006), and *Two Kinds of Respect* (1977). Darwall’s distinction between two kinds of respect provides a foundational work for understanding the notion of respect in contemporary moral and political philosophy.

Philip Pettit, a contemporary Irish-Australian moral and political philosopher, developed an account of respect called the ‘Conversive Theory of Respect’. Pettit argues for respect in which people should ‘respect one another as equals’ in the sense that they should respect one another and treat one another respectfully’ (Pettit, 2021, p. 29). Pettit holds that the reason for respecting others is equality. In an essay, “How to Treat Someone with Respect”, Oliver Sensen states that respect is a basic moral idea that has universal import irrespective of people’s race, gender, religion, or social status. The key notion of respect is that no human beings are subject to inhuman treatment. Criminals should not be treated inhumanely because, as human beings, they deserve respect (Sensen, 2021, p. 99).



There are several other works embarking on the notion of respect. An edited work by Giovanni Giorgini and Elena Irrera, entitled *Roots of Respect: A Historic-Philosophical Itinerary* (2017), presents a comprehensive explanation of respect, covering respect in ancient philosophy, respect in modern philosophy, and from Modern to Contemporary Perspectives on Respect. In *Respect in a World of Inequality* (2003), Richard Sennett argues that lack of respect is human-made. A lack of respect means recognizing only a few and ignoring a large mass of people. Joseph Raz's seminal work, *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (2004), states that respect for people is the core moral duty (Raz, 2004, p. 125).

As a research methodology, the method of empirically informed philosophical analysis is applied to examine journal papers, scholarly books, and conference proceedings/papers. Recently, a lot of work has been produced on the idea of respect. In contrast, moral and political philosophers do not give attention to the notion of reverence. Reverence as a cardinal ethical value, which existed in the Western civilization, needs re-examination and recovered in the contemporary world.

3. Reverence in the Western Tradition

Reverence is a cardinal ethical value that has existed in the Western mind since ancient times. All kinds of human written works, including poetry, plays, history, and philosophy, show that reverence existed in different forms, that is, reverence for humanity, nature, religion, and animals. Yet, it disappeared over a period of time. In the following section, I explain four standpoints of reverence in the Western tradition.

3.1 Goethe's Standpoint of Reverence

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German polymath, poet, playwright, novelist, scientist, and statesman. Goethe is one of those scholars who has influenced Western and non-Western traditions in many arenas. In his classic novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, Goethe explains a tripartite standpoint of reverence and shows why it matters in human life. In the novel, Wilhelm Meister, the protagonist, is asked a question by three old sages: what is the cardinal value for becoming a complete human being? Meister could not give an answer. The three sages all together articulate "Reverence" (Goethe, 1907, p. 70). They exclaim that everyone needs reverence, including yourself, that is, Meister. Goethe is correct that reverence is vital for becoming a complete human person. The sages then explain three strands of reverence: first, what exists above us deserves reverence. They refer to God; this is a theological strand of reverence. Second, what exists under us deserves reverence. They mean the Earth. This strand refers to the geological (ecological or environmental) standpoint of



reverence. Third, what exists on our level deserves reverence (Goethe, 1907, p. 70). This kind of reverence is for fellow human persons. Thus, Goethe's standpoint of reverence is related to God, the Earth, and human persons.

Goethe's ethical standpoint of reverence for fellow humans comprises two ideals: pro-sociality and equality. By 'equality', Goethe means that everyone has a "relation to his [her] equals, and therefore to the whole human race" (Goethe, 1907, p. 72). This account of equality has two aspects: morality and universality. Speaking in a moral sense, all human persons are equal, while in a universal sense, moral equality is related not to a particular person or a group, but to all of humanity. Moreover, Goethe maintains that pro-sociality is essential in human life because it brings people together and does not set them aside from one another selfishly. This is the pro-sociality that enables people to face the challenges of the world (Goethe, 1907, p. 70-1). I endorse Goethe's idea that pro-sociality acts as a means to face global challenges because it is a prerequisite for creating groups, joint commitments, or common minds. Pro-sociality is consistent with the social holist thesis that human persons depend upon one another. So, Goethe's ideal of pro-sociality is one of the basic ideals of reverence for humanity. Thus, pro-sociality and equality are two main ideals of Goethe's account of reverence. Goethe's ethical standpoint of reverence for fellow human persons is convincing, but I believe that the two values he emphasises – namely, pro-sociality and equality – do not provide a sufficient foundation for the ethics of reverence for humanity by themselves. There is a need to explore more values vital for reverence.

3.2 Russell's Standpoint of Reverence

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was a British philosopher, logician, humanist, peace activist, Nobel laureate, and an ardent advocate of reverence for humanity. Russell's entire life and philosophy confirm his passionate commitment to reverence for humanity. In the "Prologue" of his *Autobiography*, Russell declares that three simple but governing passions have directed his entire life: the desire for love, the quest for knowledge, and an unbearable compassion for human suffering (Russell, 2010, p. 3). Russell's first two passions, *longing for love* and *pursuit of knowledge* are the source of his third passion, which is *reverence for humanity*. Russell writes about the third passion of his life: "Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil" (Russell, 2010, p. 3). These are human



sufferings, and Russell fought to combat them in his life with a strong moral obligation of reverence for humanity.

In *Political Ideals*, Russell asks whether social and political institutions promote creative potential and *reverence for one another*. This is one of the best criteria to judge the role of social and political institutions. According to Russell, reverence should be used as a criterion to assess the productivity of social and political institutions. He states, “Political and social institutions are to be judged by the good or harm that they do to individuals. Do they encourage creativeness rather than possessiveness? Do they embody or promote a spirit of reverence between human persons”? (Russell, 1977, p. 14). If social and political institutions do not promote or embody a spirit of reverence, they cannot be called good institutions. Thus, Russell argues for the cultivation of creative impulses.

Creativeness depends upon free will and the other way around. Freedom is vital for reverence and creativity. Russell states: “What we shall desire for individuals is now clear: strong creative impulses, overpowering and absorbing the instinct of possession; *reverence for others* [Italics added]; respect for the fundamental creative impulse in ourselves....So far as it lies in a man’s own power, his life will realise its best possibilities if it has three things: creative rather than possessive impulses, reverence for others, and respect for the fundamental impulse in himself” (Russell, 1977, p. 14). Russell is right that reverence helps develop creative impulses. With cognitive development, human persons become creative, critical, and artistic to create a better reality which could increase human well-being and reduce human suffering.

Like politics, Russell also promotes the idea of reverence in education. Significantly, he juxtaposes authority with reverence in his work, *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916). Although justice and liberty are essential for social reconstruction, they are not themselves for education. Justice as equal rights is not applicable for children as it is for adults. Liberty is negative which denounces all avoidable interference with freedom. In contrast to justice and liberty, education is constructive which “requires some positive conception of what constitutes a good life” (Russell, 1916, p. 1). Russell holds that authority may be unavoidable to some extent in education but the teacher must use authority with the spirit of *liberty*. According to Russell, “Where authority is unavoidable, what is needed is *reverence*. A man who is to educate really well, and is to make the young grow and develop into their full stature, must be filled through with the spirit of reverence” (Russell, 1916, p. 103). Russell states that reverence for other human persons does not exist in authoritarian systems, including militarism, capitalism, Fabian scientific organization, and all the other means that force the human spirit (Russell,



1916, p. 103). Russell's juxtaposition of authority and reverence is excellent; reverence in education is vital and helps promote human potential in students.

An educational system in which the government makes codes of rules, supports large classes, fixed curriculums, and overworked teachers produces an unenergetic average-level graduate. In such an educational system, children have no reverence (Russell, 1916, p. 103). Russell states: "Reverence requires imagination and vital warmth; it requires the most imagination in respect of those who have the least actual achievement or power. The child is weak and superficially foolish. The teacher is strong and in an everyday sense, wiser than the child. The teacher without reverence, or the bureaucrats without reverence, easily despises the child for these outward inferiorities" (Russell, 1916, p. 103). Russell compares teacher with pupil. The former has power while the latter is weak. A teacher with a spirit of reverence respects the hidden potential of the pupil. He further writes, "He (teacher) thinks it is his duty to "mould" the child: in imagination, he is the potter with the clay. And so he gives to the child some unnatural shape, which hardens with age, producing strains and spiritual dissatisfactions, out of which grow cruelty and envy, and the belief that others must be compelled to undergo the same distortions" (Russell, 1916, p. 103). Russell's application of reverence for education is promising because student reserves reverence rather than humiliation.

A teacher with a reverence does not "mould" the students. This teacher feels in "all that lives, but especially in human beings, and most of all in children, something sacred, indefinable, unlimited, something individual and strongly precious, the growing principle of life, and embodied fragment of the dumb striving of the world" (Russell, 1916, p. 103). Russell holds that education and politics are not different phenomena. According to Russell, "Almost all education has a political motive: it aims at strengthening some group, national or religious or even social, in competition with other groups. It is this motive, in the main, which determines the subject taught, the knowledge offered and the knowledge withheld, and also decides what mental habits the pupils are expected to acquire" (Russell, 1916, p. 103). Russell is right that any educational policy has some political motives. The best political motive in education should be the promotion of reverence for humanity in society.

To sum up, Russell's ethics of reverence is key for good politics and education. Russell posits a principle of *reverence*: "The life of another has the same importance which we feel in our own life" (Russell, 1916, p. 158). This is a golden principle that provides a foundation for ethics for determining what is right or wrong. Every object containing life is valuable. To sustain life on Earth, Russell contributed his ardent role in the fight against nuclear arms in the

world. Thus, Russell's ethics of reverence strives for an ideal politics and an education for acquiring the common good in society.

3.3 Schweitzer's Standpoint of Reverence

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) was a European philosopher, theologian, humanist, musician, physician, philanthropist, and a Nobel laureate who developed a different account of reverence, which he calls "reverence for life" (*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*). Like Russell, Schweitzer's life and thoughts demonstrate his reverence for life. Schweitzer claims, "my life is my argument" (Schweitzer, 2009, p. 229). This nexus between life and argument, in Schweitzer's works, refer to theory and practice. Schweitzer's account of reverence refers to human life and all forms of life in this universe, including animals and plants. In *Out of my Life and Thought: An Autobiography* (1933), Schweitzer writes:

Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal concept of the ethical that I had not discovered in any philosophy. I covered sheet after sheet with disconnected sentences merely to concentrate on the problem. Two days passed. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, here flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase "reverence for life". The iron door had yielded. The path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the principle in which affirmation of the world and ethics are joined together (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 155).

Schweitzer's account of reverence for life means a basic and universal ethical notion that develops a relationship between a conscious self and the world. He holds that 'reverence' is something that one acquires by reflecting on one's own "consciousness, the elemental, the most immediate reality" (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 156). This attitude toward one's own conscience connects one's self with the world. Schweitzer argues, "Elemental thinking starts from fundamental questions about the relationship of man to the universe, about the meaning of life, and about the nature of what is good." (Schweitzer, 2009, p. 232). Schweitzer's account of reverence is all-inclusive and places human beings in the context of humankind. According to Schweitzer, "Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live thoughtlessly and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence in order to give it true value. To affirm life is to deepen, to make more inward, and to exalt the will to live" (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 157). Schweitzer's standpoint of reverence emphasises the importance of living a thoughtful life.

Thus, Schweitzer's ethical principle, which creates an empathetic relationship with the living world, is promising.

Schweitzer particularly emphasises that the lives of plants and animals are equally significant. Schweitzer argues, "The great fault of all ethics hitherto has been that they believed themselves to have to deal only with the relations of [hu]man to [hu]man. In reality, however, the question is what is his attitude to the world and all life that comes within his reach. A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as much as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help" (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 158). Thus, he holds that life is significant not only for human persons but also for plants and animals. According to Schweitzer, 'reverence to life' is a criterion of morality that determines right and wrong conduct (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 157-8). Schweitzer's account of reverence for life as a criterion of morality is a promising way to give an idea that it can be applied to ethics and politics.

Schweitzer and Woodruff are far from being the only philosophers to have offered accounts of reverence, but I focus on their three accounts because it seems to me that between them they identify the significant points that are critical. In this era, we need reverence for nature to save our environment and our well-being. To establish and sustain a peaceful coexistence and for the cultivation of human potential, we need an ethics of reverence which guides how people should treat one another.

In the post-Russell epoch, Schweitzer is a significant scholar whose notion of reverence for life is worthwhile. Schweitzer conceives reverence for life as a basic and universal ethical notion which is the bedrock of human civilisation (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 155-6). One central point of divergence between Russell and Schweitzer is the ethics of reverence for human beings and the ethics of reverence for life. Schweitzer robustly blames ethics for concerning human beings only. Schweitzer writes: "The great fault of all ethics hitherto has been that they believed themselves to have to deal only with the relations of man to man. In reality, however, the question is what is his attitude to the world and all life that comes within his reach. A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, and that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help" (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 158). Unlike Russell, Schweitzer's notion of reverence is broader because it applies to all living sentient, including human beings. However, Russell applied the idea to human beings only. In the context of ethics and politics, Russell's position seems more promising because human beings first should concentrate on their human relationships.

Schweitzer's premise of reverence for life is more transcendental or mystical than philosophical. Schweitzer states, "If man wishes to have a clear idea about himself and his relation to the world, he must turn away from the various concepts created by his reason and knowledge and reflect upon his own consciousness, the elemental, the most immediate reality (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 155-6). This sense of reverence for life entails that reflections on one's own consciousness create an empathetic element in human beings, and they treat one another with reverence. However, some carriers of life, including plants or animals, do not have empathic respect. Schweitzer states, "Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live thoughtlessly and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence in order to give it true value. To affirm life is to deepen, to make more inward, and to exalt the will to live" (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 157). Schweitzer's account of reverence for life is broad enough to respect human life and all forms of life.

One possible objection to Schweitzer's idea of reverence for life is that whether dangerous animals or poisonous plants are to be sustained. In principle, Schweitzer's argument has a sense that all life should be the object of reverence, but venomous creatures should be carefully handled. Being the greatest philanthropist, Schweitzer did not want to harm human life, and he did not want to kill non-human living creatures. To sum up, Schweitzer's account of reverence for life is a significant theory that provides foundations for several approaches to protecting human rights, animal rights, and the sustainability of the clean environment.

3.4 Woodruff's Standpoint of Reverence

Paul Woodruff (1943-2023) was an American classicist and philosopher who defended robustly the notion of reverence in contemporary Western philosophy. In his work *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (2014), Woodruff revitalizes the idea of reverence in ethics and politics. Woodruff states, "What we are losing is not reverence, but the idea of reverence. We go on unconsciously doing reverent things, and this is fortunate because the complete loss of reverence would be too grievous to bear" (Woodruff, 2014, p. 136). Reverence, according to Woodruff exists in our practical life, but it has disappeared in theory. Woodruff claims that reverence is an ancient virtue that endures in our contemporary epoch in terms of civility. Reverence equates with civility. Although "reverence" survives in our language, people do not know how to use it. Contemporary moral and political theorists do not give priority to reverence in their discourse (Woodruff, 2014, p. 1). Woodruff thinks that reverence is "lost in modern times. This virtue, so important to the ancients, has fallen beneath the horizons of our intellectual vision. And yet reverence is all around us, even in the most ordinary ceremonies of



our lives” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 8). This is not true that reverence does not exist in the contemporary epoch. There is reverence, but most moral and political philosophers do not recognize it. Reverence fosters friendship in human life, and certainly, in the absence of reverence, “things fall apart” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 10). In the absence of reverence, arrogance disintegrates the centre of society.

Drawing on Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian and humanist, Woodruff posits his account of reverence. Woodruff remarks that Thucydides’ account of reverence is for human beings. Woodruff states Thucydides’ claim: “[G]ods do not intervene in human affairs. He believed that purely human currents in history would bring about most of the results that traditional thinkers expected from the gods” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 7). This is perhaps the first purely humanistic understanding of the human world independent of the Divine’s intervention. Significantly, Thucydides has no fear of gods but human arrogance. Contrary to arrogance, Thucydides considers reverence a cardinal virtue in human life (Woodruff, 2014, p. 7). Reverence and arrogance stand at opposite poles. Woodruff rejects arrogance and defends reverence. In the ancient Greek epoch, tyranny was considered the opposite of irreverence. The crimes of tyrants were called *hubris*. Is reverence humility? The converse of reverence is hubris, while the converse of humility is pride. Hubris is a bad thing, while pride is a good thing. A reverent person should not have hubris but pride. A reverent leader is proud of one’s team and goals (Woodruff, 2014, p. 61). In addition, one who is an irreverent person is arrogant and shameless. An irreverent person cannot respect others, particularly those with lower social status, including prisoners and children (Woodruff, 2014, p. 1-2). Instead, a reverent person respects all human persons without any distinction.

The ancient Greek poets and philosophers believed that virtue depends on knowing what it is to be human (Woodruff, 2014, p. 84). Reverence is an integral thing to be human. Like Goethe’s thesis that reverence is necessary for becoming a complete human being (Goethe, 1907, p. 70), Woodruff argues that reverence is essential for human beings to function better in society (Woodruff, 2014). Woodruff uses an example of a knife to explain the idea of reverence. He states that the function of a knife is to cut. A good knife is sharp. A bad knife is dull and does not cut well. If one is a knife, one must know that one should be sharp to do one’s function properly. This analogy of a knife with a human being shows that a human being lives in society with reverence. As sharpness is the essential property of a knife, reverence is the essential property of human beings to function in the right way in society (Woodruff, 2014, p. 85). In society, “Reverence is the virtue that protects the helpless. That means it is also the



virtue that protects me, when I am powerful, from abusing those who are helpless” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 255). This role of reverence that protects weak people from the powerful and powerful from making wrong decisions is promising (Woodruff, 2014, p. 259). Both aspects of reverence are vital for a well-functioning society. Wrong decision-making and abuse of the weak by the powerful are equally bad.

The foundation of Woodruff’s account of reverence is psychology, which has moral and political implications. Woodruff’s definition explains: “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 6). Woodruff states, “Reverence is the capacity for a related set of feelings and emotions. Each has a different object: respect is for other people, shame is over one’s own shortcomings, and awe is usually felt toward something transcendent. Respect and shame are clear cases of emotions” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 59). Reverence fosters the best angels of our nature while it condemns the worst devils of our nature. He holds, “Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human persons, flaws and all. This, in turn, advances the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 1). Woodruff’s account of reverence contains four values: humility, awe, respect, and shame. By humility, one realises one’s human limitations, fallibility, and imperfection. Humility creates the capacity for awe and, eventually, for respecting other human persons. Finally, the recognition of one’s own moral flaws gives a sense of shame.

Reverence is inevitable in politics. Politics uses power; power without reverence is evil. Political leaders must have reverence for organising a good society. Woodruff posits his argument that reverence is essential in politics, drawing on the historical evidence of ancient Greek and Chinese cultures (Woodruff, 2014, p. 1). Woodruff writes:

Reverence has more to do with politics than with religion. We can easily imagine religion without reverence; we see it, for example, wherever religion leads people into aggressive war or violence. But power without reverence—that is a catastrophe for all concerned. Power without reverence is aflame with arrogance, while service without reverence is smoldering toward rebellion. Politics without reverence is blind to the general good and deaf to advice from people who are powerless. And

life without reverence? Entirely without reverence? That would be brutish and selfish, and it had best be lived alone (Woodruff, 2014, p. 2).

There exists abundant empirical evidence available that supports Woodruff's argument that reverence must underpin politics.

Woodruff also holds that reverence teaches people that they ought to act like human beings, who are subject to error, fallibility, and weakness, not like gods, who are perfect, omniscient, and powerful (Woodruff, 2014, p. 1). The main thrust in the ancient Greek and ancient Chinese traditions is 'knowing one's place' as a human being (Woodruff, 2014, p. 60). Reverence is a necessary virtue of leadership. Woodruff cites different examples to support his claim from the ancient Greek and Chinese traditions. He states, "If leaders do not show reverence, then their followers will need to act crudely in order to be heard. A boss who is arrogant will come to a bad end because he will not hear other people's opinions, and so he will have no check on his natural human tendency to err – unless someone breaks through his barriers of contempt. Breaking barriers leads to habits that are fatal to reverence. But around a reverent leader, there are no thick walls to crash through, and habits of mutual respect can flourish" (Woodruff, 2014, p. 223). Hence, reverence is necessary for leadership.

Good leadership depends upon reverence. "Reverence gives leaders the power to treat their followers with respect, and their followers return the respect they give. Tyrants who abuse their followers rapidly lose their respect. Mutual respect – a concept ... springs from shared reverence" (Woodruff, 2014, p. 175). Reverence and respect differ, but people often confuse them (Woodruff, 2014, p. 6). Reverence is the right kind of respect. Respect may be good, bad, wise, or silly. For instance, respecting a fool is bad, while respecting an intelligent student is good. Respecting a tyrant is not reverence, while reverence is to mock the tyrant. So, reverence is a virtue that produces a capacity to do the right and avoid the bad in the given cases (Woodruff, 2014, p. 3). Reverence creates a sense of empathy among human beings. As mentioned earlier, reverence teaches humans that they are not omnipotent, omniscient, and perfect by all means. If one suffers, others may suffer too (Woodruff, 2014, p. 62). If heroes and leaders do not realise their human limitations, they cause disastrous results (Woodruff, 2014, p. 80). Woodruff asserts, "Reverence calls us to be conscious of bare humanity, the humanity of our species. The ancient Greeks were very clear about this: reverence is about just being human, and *not* about a distinctly Greek or Persian way of being human" (Woodruff, 2014, p. 80). Reverence is vital to be human.



Woodruff uses a historical story based on Herodotus's *History* to explain the idea of reverence in the ancient Greek epoch. The Greek view is that the life of a human is fallible, limited, and mortal. A wise human cannot forget the reality of human life. A rich, powerful, or successful person does not think of one's failures, mistakes, madness, or death. Yet, a human person commits mistakes, does crazy things, even with a sound mind, and, at last, dies at a certain point in time. In one's human life, one has numerous chances of rise and fall; whatever height one reaches, one falls harder if one does not realise the significance of reverence. For instance, Croesus, a king of Lydia in antiquity, had wealth and power. Croesus forgot that he is a human being. He claimed himself to be the happiest and most fortunate person of the human race, living or dead. Croesus, a godly-minded person, asked Solon, a Greek sage, whether his claim was correct. Solon was a wise person who understood the hubris of Croesus. Solon's answer is the epitome of Greek wisdom: "Call no man happy until his life is over." Solon means that any particular part of one's life cannot judge happiness and success because the future has numerous possibilities. Later, Croesus had a war with Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia. Cyrus conquered Croesus and ordered his army to execute him with fire. When the wooden pile caught fire, Croesus recalled Solon's answer. Croesus started groaning and calling Solon. Cyrus inquired what Croesus was speaking about. Croesus talked about Solon and his answer. Meanwhile, the wooden pile caught fire from the edges. Knowing Solon's answer, Cyrus realised he was a human being. Like him, Croesus was a fortunate person. By understanding the reality of human affairs and the common humanity between Cyrus and Croesus, the king ordered to save him (Woodruff, 2014, p. 73).

The story reveals the Greek account of reverence, which could be universally applied across cultural boundaries (Woodruff, 2014, p. 77-8). Hence, listening to others, even if they belong to an inferior class, is a reverent person's central characteristic. Cyrus, the king of Persia, showed his reverence by listening to Croesus; Croesus showed his lack of reverence by not listening to Solon (Woodruff, 2014, p. 80). The question arises whether irreverence is a virtue. Irreverence cannot be a virtue. However, rude behaviour is sometimes successful in irreverent societies. Crudeness is irreverence. To protest a bad leader is not irreverence (Woodruff, 2014, p. 73).

Does reverence and religion are consistent? In Latin, 'religion' means uniting people together. Religion is for people, and people are not for religion. Religion has moral and political imports for acquiring the common good. Sometimes, religious beliefs centred on particular religious traditions create conflicts with other religions. It may be onerous to accept faith in



other religions, but it is comfortable to give reverence to other religious beliefs. Some theorists call this idea religious tolerance or religious pluralism. Woodruff maintains that “Religious wars are endemic in our time, which is a time with little care for reverence” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 10). The argument is that if there are several religions, and there is no reverence among believers for one another, the religion is detrimental to human beings. Reverence is essential in religion; it bridges different religious traditions for peaceful coexistence. Woodruff reiterates, “It is reverence that moderates war in all times and cultures, irreverence that urges it on to brutality” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 10). The core idea is that irreverence causes conflicts and violence among people. He states, “Reverence runs across religions and even outside them through the fabric of any community, however secular. We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone shares your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 11). Woodruff’s argument for the application of reverence in religion is commendable. To sum up, Woodruff holds that reverence is vital for religion, politics, and education.

4. Conclusion

This article explains and defends reverence as a cardinal moral and political value in contemporary Western philosophy. I argued that reverence as a cardinal moral and political value is inevitable for the development of both the individual and the society. Reverence is essential for politics, education, religion, law, and economics, and it brings about the common good, such as human rights, social justice, human unity, and global peace. I drew on four substantial arguments developed by Goethe, Russell, Schweitzer, and Woodruff to defend the central argument that reverence is a cardinal moral and political value; Goethe claims that reverence is vital for becoming a complete human person. Russell defended the idea of reverence for humanity for achieving peace and prosperity in the world. He implies his idea of reverence in politics and education.

The main thrust of Russell’s argument is that civil society and state institutions should promote reverence in society. Russell holds that reverence determines the legitimacy of state institutions in measuring whether they treat their citizens with reverence. Like politics, reverence is also inevitable in education. Schweitzer defended reverence as a cardinal ethical value in the Western tradition. Schweitzer’s idea of reverence for life is a foundational value for human civilisation and environmental ethics. Woodruff is a contemporary philosopher who argues that reverence is a perennial virtue that needs to be rediscovered in the present-day world. Woodruff asserts that politics should not be independent of reverence for peaceful

coexistence. Hence, reverence is a cardinal ethical value in Western civilisation, which should be extended worldwide to acquire social justice, prosperity, human rights, and global peace.

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