We live in a time in which we can no longer assume that we all share the same fundamental values about questions that are essential to human life, such as the way in which life begins and ends. Parliaments in the last 20 years, around the world but especially in Western democracies, are experimenting with a profound shift of paradigm (a cultural war, to use the author’s bellicose metaphor) regarding issues such as abortion, euthanasia, artificial fecundation, and the nature of marriage. In some of these assemblies, parliamentarians have already started discussions on transhumanism and on some other manifestations of the advances in technoscience. All this faces us with questions related to the essence of what it means to be human, questions that nobody before us has had to face.

In this specific scenario, Margaret Somerville’s book is a valuable contribution aimed at answering two essential questions: first, how can we identify and then protect and promote the values that will maintain a world in which reasonable people would want to live? Secondly, what are the values we must embrace to maintain respect for human life, human dignity, and the essence of our humanness? (p. 9). In order to answer these questions, the text looks at the current sociological reality and analyses of some controversial cases from Canada, the United States, and Australia (where Somerville usually teaches). The cases vary from court sentences to medical cases; from media debates to the analysis of two Hollywood films and a television documentary. Throughout the book’s 358 pages, the author delineates some ethical principles that might illuminate our conscience in different circumstances. Among these, for example, the following three can be highlighted:

a. The protection of the common good, which today seems to have been silenced by the prevalence of respect for personal autonomy and individual rights.

b. The promotion of freedom of speech and of a high level of democracy, which implies inclusivity in the debates: a key principle, for Somerville, is that every person can and should be involved in the debates about values in our societies. The conflicts about values cannot be solved by excluding voices from the public square. On the contrary, ‘doing so is likely to exacerbate those conflicts’ (p. 44).

c. The preservation of the future. The most important ethical decisions relate not only to the present time, and that’s why ‘everyone should be involved in exercising the enormous privilege and obligation to hold in trust our values for future generations’ (p. 196).

**Freedom of speech, religious freedom, and academic freedom**

In the following paragraphs, we will review eight chapters of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the issue of freedom of expression in debates about values. The first focuses on religious freedom and starts with this question: Should religion be evicted from the public square? This has been the tendency in many Western democracies such as Canada or...
Australia during the last twenty years, where some perspectives and voices are being dismissed from public life because they are considered ‘religious.’ The author analyses some reasons for decline in religious belief and, connected to this, its exclusion from the public square, such as the rise of an intense individualism, or the growing legalism in contemporary societies. She comes to the conclusion that excluding religious voices from the public square is antidemocratic, just as excluding secular voices would be: ‘Both have a right to be heard’ (p. 45).

The revaluation of religion in the public square, independently of the faith or the absence of faith each of us might profess, would give to public debates a store of traditional knowledge and wisdom, and would place and keep social-ethical-values issues in a moral context. Religion might be considered as a crucial holder of our ‘collective moral memory’ (p. 32). That’s why we need both religious and secular voices to ‘be present and heard and to function in continuing and balanced interaction’ (p. 34), without any privilege and without any obstructionism.

The second chapter addresses more specifically the issue of academic freedom. The initial question is: Are our ‘values conversations’ sufficiently open and free? One of the risks is political correctness, whose effects coincide in part with some of the consequences of the spiral of silence as described by Noelle–Newman (The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion, Our Social Skin, 1993). For Somerville, ‘political correctness often operates through fear of being shamed, shunned, excluded, or punished in some way’ (p. 59). Feeling uncomfortable with conflict is itself a danger to freedom in the university (p. 55). The real test cases of academic freedom are those not perceived as politically correct, those which ‘usually involve opinions that are not held by the majority, and that may be outrageous or distasteful to them’ (p. 58), as its happens with moral key issues like abortion or same-sex marriage.

The concern of the author is that some politically correct movements have gone too far, with ‘very harmful impact on freedom of speech, freedom of association, and academic freedom in our universities’ (p. 60). In some cases, says Somerville, academic organizations arrive at a dangerous level of self-censorship: some universities are more in the business of promoting attitudes than liberating young minds, and more concerned with fleeting ‘correctness’ than lasting truth (p. 61).

For our author, the role of a university professor is not to ‘indoctrinate’ but to ‘open [a] student’s mind to the widest range of thought and knowledge’ (p. 53). The mission of the professor is to promote free thinking: ‘if our thoughts are not free, our speech cannot be’ (p. 51). In this sense, ‘freedom of speech in a university is meant to ensure that the conflict necessary to pursuing the truth is not suppressed and can run its course’ (p. 54). The point is that ‘universities must be protected as sites of discussion and discovery if they are to fulfill their overall purpose and justify their continued existence’ (p. 60).

One example of the lack of freedom is the attempt of some organizations to banish the debate about abortion in either a direct or in a subtle way: the author analyses the case of the public health institutions in Ontario, where all information related to abortion is now secret and hidden from the public. This lack of transparency, according to Somerville, is ultimately an impediment to open debate. For that reason, she says, ‘abortion today is more than a prolife versus prochoice conflict; it is also a prodemocracy versus antidemocracy one. It manifests a clash between prodemocracy values (profreedom of speech, protransparency, proaccountability, and so on) and antidemocracy values (denial of these rights)’ (p. 63).

Avoiding discussion is not the way to overcome the cultural battles about values. The more conflict there is in society, the more important it is to create some safe spaces for
the exploration of divisive ideas and knowledge: places where it is possible for people to engage in ‘nurturing the art of attentive listening and insightful questioning and rigorous thought process, in a milieu of mutual respect’ (p. 86).

**The ambivalence of the concept ‘human dignity’**

Is the concept of human dignity useful, useless, or dangerous? This is the main question of chapter three. The author analyses four main international statements, extracts of which are included in the appendices of the volume: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Despite the extensive use of the concept of human dignity in these statements – 37 times in those four universal declarations – nowhere is it defined. In speaking about ‘dignity’ we should proceed with care. As happens with the concept of ‘justice,’ sometimes it is easier to identify what constitutes a violation of it than to define what it really is. In the euthanasia debates, for instance, the two groups in discussion are using two different concepts of ‘dignity.’

Somerville relies on the intuitions of authors such as Kant, who saw respect for ‘human dignity as a separate requirement and more important than respect for individual autonomy when the two were in conflict’ (p. 101). In the search of some shared ethics, a starting point would be to agree that we have a human spirit: there is a kind of assumption that ‘we are not products to be checked out of the supermarket of life, and the values of materialism and consumerism are not the ones that should govern our dying’ (p. 96). The special respect for human dignity (and therefore for the human body) requires that we preclude its sale: ‘To do otherwise is to implement a twenty-first-century version of slavery in which instead of selling whole persons we sell their parts’ (p. 105). Another important right connected with the respect of human dignity is to know one’s biological identity and biological family: the right to identity.

**The conflict between human life and individual autonomy**

The chapters 4–6 explore some situations in which the value of respect for life is in conflict with the value of respect for the individual autonomy: euthanasia (chapter 4), sex-selective abortion (chapter 5), and crisis pregnancy (chapter 6).

Somerville presents the debate on euthanasia as ‘a momentous one, involving issues ranging from the nature and meaning of human life to the most fundamental principles on which societies are based’ (p. 42). The value of ‘choice’ or individual autonomy and self-determination is central to the pro-euthanasia argument. But ‘choice’ in itself is a neutral concept. As Somerville states, ‘it is what we choose that makes a choice ethical or unethical, not just the presence of choice itself’ (p. 147). The debate on euthanasia has much to do with the ability to provide meaning to pain and suffering. For many people, both abortion and euthanasia are appropriate responses to ‘eliminating the ugliness of suffering and the distress and fear it engenders’ (p. 174). When the ability to give meaning to the pain disappears, ‘it is very difficult to convince pro-euthanasia advocates that legalizing euthanasia is a bad idea’ (p. 118). This debate also has to do with the effective development of pain management: many patients who ask for euthanasia change their minds when given good palliative care. From this perspective, the potential for improvement is high: Somerville uses the example of Canada, where only 16 to 30 percent of the population who need palliative care have access to it.
The historical, social, ethical, and medical consequences about sex-selective abortion (chapter 5) reveal that some of the most sensitive bioethical decisions are not just a private matter. As the author points out: ‘History teaches us that the use of science in the search for human perfection has been at the root of some of the greatest atrocities in terms of respect for human life, individual humans, and human rights’ (p. 178). And she underlines, ‘technology can eliminate many human imperfections, but we risk losing that messy quality that is the essence of our humanness’ (p. 186).

The capacity for finding meaning is also essential in the debate about the selection of embryos (or of human beings already developed). In a society that is fully human, ‘people with disabilities can offer us lessons in hope, optimism, kindness, empathy, compassion, generosity, and hospitality, a sense of humor (balance), trust, and courage’ (p. 198). As the author points out, ‘the ethical tone of a society is not set by how it treats its strongest, most privileged, most powerful members, but by how it treats those who are weakest, most vulnerable, and in need’ (p. 198).

Chapter 6 begins with the assertion that we are all ex-embryos. A serious and honest discussion about abortion and pregnancy crises should begin as well from points where we agree, not where we disagree. For example: keeping in mind that the vast majority of us, whether we are prolife or prochoice, agree that we want to have the fewest number of abortions possible (p. 228), because it is clear to everyone that ‘abortion is not the simple quick-fix solution to an unplanned pregnancy (…) It is a life-affecting decision in more ways than one’ (p. 206). In these crises, ‘women do not have a free choice unless there are easily accessible, adequate support systems for continuing a pregnancy’ (p. 204). Making women who suffer these crises feel accompanied and fully informed about their choices means that we ‘require readily available facilities for crisis pregnancy counseling that are not abortion clinics, which are in a conflict of interest position as they profit financially from carrying out abortions’ (p. 223).

The communication of our societal values in formal and informal contexts

Finally, chapters 7 and 8 look at how ‘we establish, uphold, or eliminate our societal values and communicate them’ (p. 11), in the institutional settings of courts and legislatures (chapter 7) and in the informal cultural contexts (chapter 8).

Chapter 7 is about the relation of law to morality. It presents Ethics as a ‘first aid’ for law, not only necessary but also beneficial to law. The approach is focused on the effects that some medical and scientific advances have had on law and practice. As the author points out, ‘the more a charter of constitutional rights is seen by judges as intended to ensure that state actions are ethical, not just legal, the more likely it is that its provisions will be interpreted by courts in a way that incorporates ethics into their judgments in the interest of ensuring justice’ (p. 241).

Finally, chapter 8 is also related to the way in which we establish or eliminate our societal values, not in courts or legislatures but in cultural contexts. Especially interesting are the analyses of the film ‘Amour’ (employed to show the different interpretations people make about the value of ‘compassion’), the documentary ‘End Credits’ (about the way we see euthanasia) and the film ‘Never Let Me Go’ (used to study the harms and risks of the unethical use of avant-garde technoscience). Some conclusions that emerge from this chapter are that ‘people are not isolated beings but exist in a context that influences their decisions’ (p. 286) and that, in matters of language, ‘questions are not neutral; they structure our answers. And questions communicate messages, particularly messages about values’ (p. 261).
Most of the content of the book comes from lectures that the author has given in the last five years. The shortcoming of this kind of compilatory book is usually reiteration of concepts and disparity between chapters. It is fair to say that this is hardly perceptible in Margaret Somerville’s work, probably thanks to the intense editing work carried out before the publication, as she explains in the introductory pages of the volume.

### 10 Words for the communication of values

An added value of Somerville’s book is the tactful communication methodology it offers in between the lines: suggestions that are not presented in a summary way but are dispersed in various parts of the text. Those are guidelines that can inspire people interested in the promotion of human values in politics as well as in professional, social, and religious organizations. As an illustration, we identify 10 of these intuitions with the following summary-words:

1. **Persuasion.** In any debate about values it is persuasion, not imposition, which is the approach most likely to convince others. We cannot share values through a coercive or, often even through a direct approach. We need to create emotional spaces.

2. **Metaphors.** In order to avoid a coercive approach, ‘we need to prepare the metaphorical soil in which the values we want to flourish can take root and grow’ (p. 10).

3. **Amazement.** Reason and rationality are very important, but in discussions about values they are sometimes insufficient. One way to explore new approaches to argument is to rely on experiences of wonder, amazement, and awe. Experiencing amazement ‘enriches our lives and can help us to find meaning, which is of the essence of being human, in a way that traditional philosophy alone cannot’ (p. 10).

4. **Reason.** In these public discussions on values we should use reason ‘as a “secondary verification process” to ensure that our decisions about values are wise and ethical.’ The author uses the word ‘secondary’ in a chronological sense, not as indicating that reason is of secondary importance (p. 10).

5. **Respect.** A ‘sine qua non’ requirement of any debate is mutual respect. Frequent demonstrations of respect give a different tone to our discussions about values and, very importantly, to our disagreements.

6. **Agreements.** The more serious a conflict is, the more we should strive to agree on something. ‘We need to be able to cross our traditional divides if we are to find some shared ethics in relation to issues related with key values (p. 17).

7. **Clarity.** As Somerville notes, ‘if you can’t make it clear to others, you are not clear to yourself’ (p. 13). Another consequence of clarity is to ask to be judged on the basis of the arguments and the ethical values I put forward, and not on the basis of what other people may think I believe. Any debate about what our values should be is too important ‘to be obscured by assumptions that limit debate before it begins’ (p. 12).

8. **Words.** It is crucial to pay attention to the words chosen for a discussion, as ‘words affect our intuitions, including our moral intuitions, and our emotions, which both play a role in our decisions about ethics’ (p. 5).

9. **Democratic spirit.** Whenever we take part in a public debate ‘we should be grateful that we live in a democratic society where we can engage in battles about values with openness and largely without fear of reprisals’ (p. 12).
10. Empathy. The author uses the following example: ‘While I believe that from an ethical perspective I must stand by my views on same-sex marriage I genuinely regret the hurt that inflicts’ to the people who live or think differently (p. 251).

As a University colleague said to me, the twentieth century was the one of the world wars and the twenty-first century is the one of the global cultural battles. Margaret Somerville’s recommendations seem to be a good basis for engaging in these ‘cultural battles’ without wounding or destroying anyone, with the deep conviction that each and every voice involved in a discussion is important and must be considered.

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