

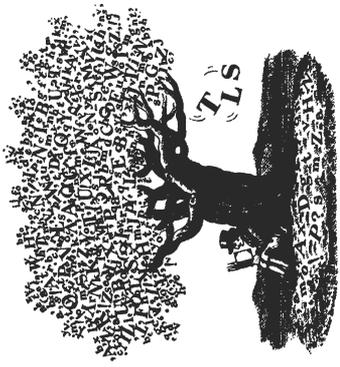
Review of Graham Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire*

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I and others

Received opinion has it that values, unlike mountains or planets, are in individuals' heads or hearts and nowhere else. Words like "good" and "evil", according to Thomas Hobbes, are always "used with relation to the person that useth them", there being no goodness in "the nature of the objects themselves". Eighty years ago, F. P. Ramsey took it for granted that ethics and aesthetics deal with "psychological questions", and that "most of us would agree that the objectivity of good was a thing we had settled and dismissed with the existence of God".

Graham Oddie disagrees. Value, he says, in *Value, Reality, and Desire*, is more "real" than many people believe, including many of his fellow philosophers. In particular, it exists independently of minds – it does not reduce to the way in which people respond, or would respond, to things. The plea for looking beyond such responses, however, is not an invitation to make light of them. Oddie assigns to one class of our responses – to our desires – the important task of acquainting us with value. Roughly speaking, in desiring something we do not make the object good, but experience it as good.

Should it disturb us that these "value data" tend to differ from person to person? They are only appearances of value, Oddie reminds us, and not every diversity in appearance undermines the reality of the thing that appears. If you are closer both to some mountain and to your dog than I am, your closeness explains why the mountain seems bigger to you than to me, and the dog more important. But the differences are only apparent. The mountain has only one height, and you and I have reason to correct for perspective when trying to figure out what that height is. The same applies to the value of your dog. Oddie concedes that, over and above that uniform value, there may be a specific value of your dog *for you*, but that is a different matter.

Graham Oddie

VALUE, REALITY, AND DESIRE
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0 19 927341 3

If value does not reduce to desire, does it reduce to something else? Reductionism thrives on the observation that we tend to call something good if and because it has certain properties that are not in themselves value properties – for example, if and because it is pleasant or truthful or yellow. Reductionists infer from this correlation that the property of being good is the property of being (if we continue the example) pleasant-or-truthful-or-yellow. Oddie blocks the inference with a remarkable theory of properties as "convex conditions". The theory succeeds in granting the honorary title "property" to "good" while withholding it from many constructs like "pleasant-or-truthful-or-yellow". It thus guarantees some species of the irreducibility of value: goodness cannot be identical to the corresponding complex because goodness is a property, whereas the complex is not.

From this kind of irreducibility, aided by various rulings about causal discourse in general, Oddie fights his way to the claim that values have causal power. This is essential to his project, for if we had no reason to believe that values cause anything, we would have no reason to believe that they cause our value-experiences, which would risk depriving these experiences of their authority and leaving us with no knowledge of value.

Value, Reality, and Desire is a masterful book. The writing is clear and crisp and vivid, and more than once the innovative use of formal models, explained in drawings and tables, opens our eyes to a delightful scene of structures and options. Most of all, the book has that rare quality of abounding with new ideas worth

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hearing: on degrees of realism; on harmonizing people's desires; on the nature of perspective and properties. Some of these ideas are excellent, and, by acknowledging that some sound peculiar, the author gives additional proof of good judgement.

Oddie employs most of his skill devising and explaining ways in which we can be value realists of one variety or another, but the question *why* we should join the realist camp is not always treated in the greatest possible depth. Not, for example, in the chapters that discuss and reject the claim that value amounts to some "congeries" of either raw or refined desire. Here Oddie thinks up and tries out one procedure by which we might want to take into account everybody's desires when determining value, and concludes, from the fact that his procedure has a number of bizarre implications, that "there is a desire-independent value residue, . . . which it seems necessary to invoke". This diagnosis is rather hasty. For one thing, if Oddie's attempt at forging value from people's desires fails, why should we infer that every such attempt does? One place where a decent selection of such attempts can be found is the literature on social choice and welfare. Many of these proposals escape many of Oddie's bizarre implications; for example, they do not entail that in groups that contain exactly one egoist the good thing is whatever the egoist wants. Perhaps Oddie feels excused from mentioning these proposals because they are not concerned with the *converging* of individual desires. But why we would have to think of his opponents' project to construct value from all desires as a proposal to construct or establish converging desires remains unexplained.

More conspicuously, who says that reducers of value to desires are reducers of value to everybody's desires? The vast majority of Oddie's opponents endorse an individualist

programme that directly links a value judgement only to those desires that the individual who makes the judgement harbours, or would harbour, at the time of making the judgement. Value is seen as relative to the different valuers. As Ramsey put it, a dialogue in which one person says "This is good" and the other replies "No, it isn't" resembles a dialogue in which one person says "I went to Grantchester this afternoon" and the other replies "No, I didn't". This kind of relativism is a mainstream theory, brushed aside by Oddie with the remark that it would not give us "real value". But the only true reading of that remark that comes to mind is that value, thus understood, would fail to qualify as "real" in some of Oddie's more exalted senses of the word. That observation can bear no weight in an argument designed precisely to establish that value is real in the exalted senses.

As far as I see, Oddie's only candidate for a general reason why the reduction of value to desire will fail concerns "perverse desires". Here his main example is a person's desire to have a perfectly healthy limb amputated – just like that. Oddie worries that a purely desire-based approach to value would have to take on board such desires. But let us put on the record how effortlessly and plausibly a subjectivist, relativist, individualist account of value as desire processes this case. On such an account, what the desirer means by calling the amputation a good thing is that he or she wants the amputation. Since this is true, the desirer may as well say it. At the same time, such an account does not commit you or me to saying that amputating the person's leg is good (for that would mean that we want it to happen), nor that it is good for the person (for that would mean that we want it to happen for his or her sake), nor even that it is good given that the person desires it (for that would mean that *we* want it to happen given that it is desired). So all is well.