

Meta-Ethics and Phenomenology

Does moral experience support Axiological Realism?

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Abstract

I argue that axiological realism (there are objective values in ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology) receives *prima facie* evidential support from experience. This is routinely overlooked by advocates of the desire-preference account of value. I propose that in the absence of defeaters, phenomenology makes axiological realism more reasonable than its denial. Moreover, I contend that moral disagreements do not count as evidence against axiological realism.

Key terms: Desire. Preference. Axiological realism. E.F. Bond. Thomas Carson.

The Euthyphro dilemma is still with us. Philosophers may not worry about Plato's formulation of the dilemma in terms of gods and piety (Euthyphro 10a), but they do worry about the relationship between our desires or preferences and goodness. In recent decades there have been multiple advocates of the desire-preference model (things are good because we desire / prefer them) from Richard Brandt and Mark Overvold to Harry Frankfurt and Thomas Carson.¹ The key question addressed in this essay is this: Does our moral experience favor axiological realism? I use the term 'axial realism' to cover ethical values -viz. moral realism- as well as aesthetic and epistemic values. According to axiological realism, we desire or prefer values because they are good; their goodness is not a function of what we actually or ideally

¹ While this essay is a critical reply to Carson, it is out of respect for his work, which I regard as erudite and first-rate. I take issue with Frankfurt's projectivism in Taliaferro 2021. For an earlier exchange with Carson, see my "Relativizing the Ideal Observer Theory" and his reply "Could Ideal Observers Disagree? A Reply to Taliaferro."

desire or prefer. My thesis is that there is significant experiential support for axiological realism.

Some philosophers contend that a phenomenological interpretation of our moral experience strongly supports a realist view of values. E.J. Bond claims:

"One reflectively desires what one does, because one has *discovered* their value. One desires *because* of the value; the value does not exist because of the desire." (Bond 1983, 45)

Thomas Carson offers a more cautious formulation of Bond's thesis while still expressing a substantial claim. He objects to Bond's original, sweeping thesis.

"If Bond is claiming that all desires (or all desires that we are willing to endorse on reflection) are desires that we have because we believe that the objects of the desire are good, then he is mistaken. At least some people experience 'simple wants' and endorse those wants (they take themselves to have reasons to satisfy them) regardless of whether those things are good independently of being desired. Perhaps we should take Bond to be claiming something like the following instead: *Sometimes* we desire things because they are good. *Sometimes* we cease to desire things because they are bad. We *sometimes* adjust our preferences in light of normative considerations." (Carson 2000, 83)

While I am inclined to Bond's original thesis, I will not pause to contest the status of 'simple wants' versus 'reflective desires' (in my view, a simple desire such as the desire to breath involves an apprehension of value). In this essay I will work with Carson's qualified version. After all, if Bond is right, then Carson's cautious version is right. If it is true we always desire what we take to be good, we sometimes do.

Carson concedes that many people describe their experiences in such realist terms. But he then distinguishes between these two theses:

1. Some people desire certain things because they *believe* that those things are good. People adjust their preferences in light of their beliefs about value.
 2. Some people desire certain things because those things are good (and good independently of our actual or ideal desires)."
- (Carson 83)

Carson thinks that moral experience strongly supports the first thesis. But he does not think such experiences establishes the second. Here is his analysis:

"Proposition 2 presupposes axiological realism. Do the reports of people like Bond give us compelling reasons for accepting 2? Some people claim that they have direct experience of value. However, we needn't assume the truth of realism in order to account for the sincerity of these reports. 'Projectivist' and other non-realist theories hold that these reports are mistaken in that they claim that normative properties are objective in a way that they aren't. The simple appeal to experience cannot refute projectivism; nor can it establish the truth of realism. Bond's argument must be regarded as question-begging (or at least inconclusive) apart from independent reasons for accepting realism." (Carson 84)

I propose that what Carson glosses over is whether the reported experiences supporting thesis 1, supports thesis 2. This is a matter of evidence rather than a matter of whether thesis 2 "presupposes" axiological realism. Carson seems to think that people's ostensible experiences of value would need to be "compelling" or that they would need to "refute" projectivism and "establish" axiological realism in a "conclusive" manner, for them to be evidentially interesting or a bona fide challenge. Surely, that is setting the bar too high. Currently, there are few interesting philosophical positions which advocates claim to prove or refute conclusively. I submit that *the experience of what appears to be objective values is some evidence that there are objective values* and that such a claim does not involve the fallacy of begging the question. An ardent defender of the evidential value of appearances, Michael Huemer, writes: "It is rational to begin with the assumption that everything is the way it appears, and it is the burden of the skeptic to provide reasons for doubting this" (Huemer 2020, 34). The appeal to ostensible experiences as *prima facie* evidence is not unusual in contemporary philosophy, as is evident in epistemology, philosophy of mind, action theory, and philosophy of religion (see, for example, Kwan 2011, chapter one).

Carson cites many axiological realist depictions of our experience of value, from the gestalt philosopher Wolfgang Kohler to British philosophers like G.E. Moore, C.D. Broad, A.C. Ewing, and W.D. Ross. In each case Carson engages in his own phenomenological study: he fails to detect objective values. Kohler wrote about experiencing a "demand quality" in value-laden experiences. But Carson reports:

"My own introspection fails to reveal the existence of distinctive experiences characterized by a 'demand quality' that are specifiable independently of my normative beliefs. Nor do I have any experiences that in virtue of their phenomenological character alone (independently of my normative beliefs) could be called moral approval or disapproval." (Carson 163)

In terms of experiencing morally relevant fittingness (we experience that loving or hating, approving or disapproving is fitting under certain circumstances), Carson proposes that he does not apprehend such fittingness.

Perhaps Carson's self-observations are plausible if described at a high level of abstraction. Consider, though, a concrete case. Imagine you observe a healthy, able bodied, Ukrainian who is extracted from his home by four Russian soldiers who blind him, cut off his ears, tongue, arms, and legs, leaving him to bleed to death while his family looks on but are forcefully prevented from interfering. In this case, let us further imagine there are no additional factors that might mitigate our sense of horror --e.g. the Ukrainian was himself a tyrannical tormentor who had mutilated the bodies of countless, unarmed, Russian soldiers and sent their body parts back to their mothers, and so on. I suggest that most people on experiencing this event, or even just reading about it, would perceive (apprehend) that what the Russians did to the man were profound harms. Intentionally blinding a person, ripping off their limbs, and so on are readily seen as bad for the person. One reason for treating this as an objective fact is because we would regard the failure to see these as bad as itself monstrous, perhaps only explainable by an observer thinking they are only watching computer simulated (not real) violence or they are drug-induced zombies.

But what of the claim that we would only experience what we take to be values and disvalues because we desire or prefer bodily integrity to disintegration? Back to Euthyphro: Is the bodily disintegration bad because we disapprove (hate) it or do we disapprove of the bodily disintegration (hate it) because the disintegration is bad?

Even conceding that an appeal to experience is not a proof of axiological realism (or a refutation of projectivism), I think most of us would experience such a scene in terms of what we take to be objective harms (bad or evil). If asked why you see these events as bad, you can explain blindness and so on in vivid terms. I suggest that for most people, this would count as a justification for your condemning the violence (and justification for using the term 'violence' to describe what you observed).

The position I am defending here is in continuity with the many philosophers who oppose the fact/value bifurcation that, in modern European philosophy, goes back to David Hume. The split between "is" and "ought" statements has been so enshrined such that to deny it is to commit a fallacy, the so-called naturalistic fallacy (a term introduced by G.E. Moore).² I am not original for having argued that objective values are embedded in our experience of ourselves and others ("The Virtues of Embodiment"). I submit that such experience is *prima facie* evidence for axiological realism, and in the absence of defeaters affirming axiological realism is more reasonable than its denial.

Since W.V.O. Quine, there have been concerted efforts to exorcise objective normativity in the name of metaphysical or scientific naturalism (perhaps J.L. Mackie was the most bold error theorist of his day), but this has led critics to object that if moral normativity is suspect, so is epistemic normativity and few naturalists have been willing to swallow that pill. Certainly Carson seems committed to epistemic normativity (he offers *reasons* against axiological realism) and in his (excellent) book *Value and the Good Life* he is open to theism (see chapter 8), a worldview quite remote from the average naturalist (and especially distant from Mackie's aggressively anti-theistic naturalism).

There is one more objection to axiological realism advanced by Carson. The objection is framed in Carson's critique of Ewing. He concedes that Ewing's account of moral experience, in terms of fittingness, e.g. compassion for the dispossessed feels (or appears to be fitting) has some plausibility.

"I agree that particular sorts of attitudes can be described as fitting or not. But it is unclear that this fittingness or unfittingness consists in a simple, unanalyzable relation that we immediately apprehend. The alternative thesis that we are just projecting relations of fittingness onto the world rather than perceiving something that is really there is supported by the phenomenon of moral disagreement. People often disagree about whether a certain attitude is appropriate for a certain object. Ewing is committed to the view that many people incorrectly perceive relations of fittingness. He owes us an explanation of how to distinguish correct and incorrect perceptions of fittingness. If relations of fittingness were features of the world and most humans were able

² It is paradoxical that Moore and Hume would agree that the naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy, whereas Moore drew the conclusion that moral properties are non-natural while Hume advanced a desire-preference account of morality.

to perceive them, then we should expect there to be far more agreement over normative questions than there is." (Carson 191).

Consider the following three replies.

First, given axiological realism, moral experience and evaluations may or may not be immediate or instantaneous. To assess morally complex events may take time to determine fittingness.

Second, I suggest that disagreement about the fittingness of morally relevant attitudes seems more naturally situated in a realist framework rather than projectivist.

Imagine there is disagreement about the status of an event like the one I recounted above from Eastern Europe, but let's change the details for the sake of variety and engaging the current concern with racism in America. Imagine a village scene in Mississippi in the 1950s: a group of white people claiming that whites are superior to Black people extract a Black man from this home and hang him from a tree until he dies. In actual lynching cases at that time and place, it is likely that the ones carrying out the killing believe it to be justified. They probably see it as fitting on the grounds that Blacks are inferior to whites (they may have been reading David Hume's claim that whites are superior to Blacks), that the Black man was a threat to whites (perhaps the Black man is feared as possibly marrying or having sex or a child with a white person).³ Presumably the Black community and advocates of racial justice see the killing as not just unfitting but a horrifying violation of human rights and dignity. *I believe that all parties will see the hanging as an objective harm to the one killed, and that most readers of this journal will have a way to distinguish correct and incorrect ostensible perceptions of fittingness.* The killers were doing something wrong because they were embedded in a profoundly mistaken, racist culture and tradition. This diagnosis is not appealing to metaphysically suspect, unobservable entities. The disagreement seems far more a matter of what is objectively the case rather than a matter of projected attitudes. As Carson concedes (noted earlier) most people believe that they adjust their preferences in light of what they believe to be good or bad (evil),

Third, axiological realism is a thesis about objective values not a thesis about human tendencies to be impartial, fair minded, unselfish, open to

³ While Hume contended that Blacks are inferior to whites, this is not the same as his condoning or encouraging racial violence. See "Of National Characters" in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, vol. 3. For an analysis of Hume's white supremacy, see "Hume's Racism and his case against the Miraculous." Carson has an excellent treatment of different forms of racism in his book *Lincoln's Ethics*.

objections, not prey to jealousy and envy, and accurately informed of the facts that bear on moral disputes. Given the commonplace disagreements about the factual basis for violence (e.g. Hume's assessment of Black inferiority in the last case, and in the earlier case Putin's claim that Ukrainians are genocidal Nazis) universal consensus on moral matters is not highly probable. Sustained disagreements in many domains of philosophy (debate over the existence of God, libertarian free will, Platonism versus nominalism, physicalism versus the alternatives) is sometimes lamented but rarely seen as powerful evidence that there are no objective truths at issue.

Connecting this last point with our starting point, the Euthyphro dilemma, I suggest that sustained disagreement over whether axiological realism or some form of projectivism is true, is not powerful evidence that there is no objective fact of the matter.

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