
Graham Oddie aims to justify a robust realism about value, which involves genuine, mind-independent, causally efficacious facts about value. In setting out his case Oddie presents a wealth of intricate arguments, some of which range well beyond value theory, and the account he ends up with is new and elegant.

After giving a quick taxonomy of value realisms, Oddie begins his account by exploring the puzzle of how value-judgement and desire are linked (Chapter 2). He presents as a solution the conjecture that to desire is to experience value (Chapter 3). Having defended this surprising thesis, he considers in depth but rejects the idealist thought that value might be constructed out of desire (Chapters 4 & 5). There follow detailed accounts of why on his view value properties are supervenient on but not always reducible to natural properties (Chapter 6), and why values can be involved in the best causal explanations of events (Chapter 7). For the former his key argument is that properties are sparse, and that they correspond to ‘nice’ regions of their respective domains. Since the nice regions of the domains of natural and value properties need not coincide, there can be value properties which are not reducible to natural properties. Regarding causation, Oddie argues that natural causation does not exclude causation by values, and that some events are only appropriately contingent on events described in terms of their value properties, which have been seen not to be reducible to natural properties. Thus a causal explanation in evaluative terms cannot always be satisfactorily replaced by one in natural terms. Oddie wraps up by partially biting the bullet of Mackie’s queerness argument (pp. 238-9): value properties are queer in that they are inexplicable from within a naturalistic framework, but they are not wholly distinct from natural properties (the two are sometimes identical), and there is nothing mysterious about how knowledge by acquaintance with values can be intrinsically motivating.

Oddie’s distinctive style and its occasional over-emphasis on technicalities can be seen in his discussion of cognitivist internalism about value-judgement, the view that value-judgements are beliefs which necessitate appropriate desires. Although ultimately Oddie does not fully accept this view, he defends it against the well-known objection that this kind of necessitation between beliefs and desires is implausible. His rebuttal is refreshingly direct: the objection relies on an independence thesis which is demonstrably false.

‘Independence: For any belief B and any desire set D, the possession of belief B is logically compatible with both the possession and the non-possession of desires in D.’ (p. 33)

Oddie points out this thesis is subject to the following refutation: there are at least as many propositions as there are classes of possible worlds, so the cardinality of the
set of propositions is higher than the cardinality of possible worlds; thus there are more belief-desire pairs than there are possible worlds; so some belief-desire pairs are impossible (p. 35). This argument is correct, but Oddie relies on it too much, ignoring the point that a weaker independence thesis may not be vulnerable to a cardinality objection, and may still be both plausible and sufficiently strong to block cognitivist internalism. One possible alternative is the restricted claim that the possession of any logically possible belief set is logically compatible with the possession or non-possession of any logically possible desire set. Another is the claim that the possession of any belief is logically compatible with the non-possession of any desire set. Neither of these faces a problem with cardinality, and they have some intuitive appeal. Thus cardinality considerations are of limited value in the defence of cognitivist internalism, though Oddie’s take on the debate is certainly invigorating.

The central innovation of Oddie’s version of realism is his proposal that desires are experiences of value: that your desire for something is that thing’s seeming good to you. If this claim were defensible it would certainly be a great boon to the realist. Epistemologically, there is a standard problem of finding some mental state which can count as evidence for a value-judgement. Rather than postulating a mysterious faculty of intuition, Oddie is able to point to mental states which we already believe in: desires. There is also a neat explanation here of why there is a connection between value-judgement and motivation: so long as one’s value-judgement is based on one’s experiential evidence, it must be accompanied by a desire, since that desire is the evidence. Whatever its theoretical advantages, the desire-as-seeming-good thesis is counter-intuitive, but Oddie successfully defends it against several weighty objections. The fact that our desires are often biased in our favour, whereas our considered value-judgements are not, is explained by comparing it to the general case where perspective makes a difference to how things seem (pp. 60-3). The sun does not seem bigger than the moon, although we judge that it is, because we are nearer to the moon. Oddie claims that the case where I desire the cessation of my own pain more, although I can judge that the cessation of another’s pain is equally valuable, is similar: my pain is ‘closer’ to me. There are other seemingly serious objections which Oddie does not consider, however. One is that when we acquire some experience of having a particular type of desire for something that we judge to be bad, that thing ceases even to seem to be good when we desire it. Even if once my desire to procrastinate involved procrastination seeming good, now it does not, though the desire remains. Oddie is committed to rejecting such observations about the phenomenology of desire. Another apparent commitment of the thesis is that it is impossible to have desires without also possessing evaluative concepts; but it is counter-intuitive that small children have no desires, or that they have evaluative concepts. Oddie mentions that, because experiences of value are not beliefs, they have non-conceptual content (p. 80), so perhaps he intends that when something seems good to me I need not possess any evaluative concept. That avoids the commitment I mention, but makes his thesis less comprehensible.