What is it for something to be good, to be worthy of desire, or promotion, or pursuit, or other pro-attitudes? And what is it to act rationally, to have sufficient reason for what one chooses to do? In this bold, rich, well-written and closely argued book, Alan Goldman maintains that the combination of value subjectivism and reason internalism gives the simplest, most plausible answer to these fundamental questions.

Chapter 1 lays out the two main options. Starkly put, subjectivists hold that something is good because it satisfies one's desires. Objectivists hold that some things are good independently of desires, and that the good merits desiring regard-less. Internalists hold "that the reasons we have for acting are limited by our pre-existing motivational states, by our desires and concerns." Externalists hold that "reasons determine what we ought to do whether we care to do so ... or not" (p. 9). Subjectivism and internalism seem to go hand in glove, as do objectivism and externalism.

Goldman's analysis of reasons (chapter 2) is clear and nuanced, enabling him to harness intuitions that objectivists regard as their preserve: that not any old desire is reason-generating; that there are reasons beyond those one actually has; and that one need not be aware of all of the reasons one has. His starting point is rationality. To be rational one's desire set must be coherent, and one must be suitably informed, enabling one "to avoid self-defeat on those concerns on which one acts" (p. 45).

The demand for a coherent desire set is analogous to the demand for a consistent belief set. "Coherence in the belief system is required by the aim of having only true beliefs; and practical coherence is required by the aim of satisfying one's informed and prioritized motivations" (p. 72). The constitutive aim of believing is truth, so it would defeat belief's natural aim to believe inconsistent propositions. The constitutive aim of action is the satisfaction of one's desires, and so it would be self-defeating to have desires that could not be jointly satisfied. In fact, the coherence requirement turns out to be somewhat weaker than this, since conflicts in one's desire set are almost inevitable. Even so, coherence demands that where there is a clash, deeper desires and more fundamental concerns trump those that are more superficial.

What makes a desire deep? Since (on pain of regress) not all concerns can be rationalized by being suitably connected to deeper concerns, at the deepest level one must have some concerns that do not require any further grounding. These typically include a concern for one's wellbeing (informing more particular desires to maintain one's health, or to develop an interesting career); or concerns that one's nearest and dearest flourish (informing more particular desires to support them in their pursuits). One's deepest concerns justify one's having and acting on other more specific desires, but one's deepest concerns need no justification. One need have no reasons to be concerned for one's welfare or one's children's
welfare, and in the latter case it would be offensive to ask for or proffer them (a case of “one thought too many”).

There are no substantive concerns, according to Goldman, that rationality demands be included in one’s motivational set. So even though most agents do in fact harbor deep prudential concerns, there is no external reason for them to do so. One who incorporates such concerns is simply “prudentially minded”. Similarly there is no external reason to include amongst one’s deepest desires any moral concerns – like an impartial regard for the wellbeing of sentient creatures. To harbor such concerns is to be “morally minded”, but nothing external to an agent’s desire set can demand that one be morally minded.

Goldman distinguishes between reasons there are and reasons one has (p. 34). There is an F-reason R to do A just in case F-minded subjects, if rational, would be motivated by awareness of R to A. S has a reason R to do A just in case there is an F-reason R to A, and S is F-minded. Among the reasons one has, one is aware of some and unaware of others (p. 42). Rational agents are motivated to act on the reasons of which they are aware.

Since there are no external reasons to be, say, aesthetically minded, aesthetic reasons will only motivate rational agents who are both aesthetically minded and aware of those reasons. Those who are not aesthetically minded are not irrational to ignore aesthetic reasons. Analogously, those who are not morally minded are not irrational to ignore moral reasons, even when they know what they are and are fully aware of them. One might recognize that there are excellent moral reasons to give up eating meat – the infliction of immense pain on sentient creatures for the sake of mere gustatory delights – and yet find oneself unmoved. Only if one is morally minded will one’s awareness of this reason motivate one to stop eating meat.

Just as not all the reasons there are motivate agents who are aware of them, not all desires generate reasons. Certain weird desires, like the desire to turn on every radio I come across, do not generate reasons. The objectivist can explain why these desires lack reason-generating power in terms of their lack of objective value. Goldman also locates their lack of reason-generating power in the fact that their objects lack value. However, the value they lack is subjective – they don’t facilitate satisfaction of the rational agent’s deeper concerns, and would likely just get in the way of them.

How do coherent sets of desires jointly generate reasons and values, whereas one-off weird desires fail to do so? Goldman’s answer turns on his cluster theory of desires, itself modeled on a more familiar cluster theory of emotions. Goldman holds that prototypical desires are similarly complex states, prototypical examples of which involve “dispositional, attentional, sensation, representational and evaluative components” (p. 90). Any particular desire might lack one or other such feature and yet still be a desire, albeit some distance from the prototypes. Somewhat surprisingly, it is the evaluative component of a desire – the implicit judgment that the object of desire is of value – that turns out to be its most important feature as far as its reason-generating power goes. “Such judgments are of most concern to us because they are usually more reflective of deeper concerns, and so of reasons, than are the other components of desires” (p. 96). In the end it is not that desires