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Book Review: Value And The Good Life

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NOTES

1. See Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997), and *Mystical Experience of God, a Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Ashgate Publishers, 2001).

Value and the Good Life by Thomas L. Carson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 328.

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This book is divided into three parts. In the first, Carson subjects several theories of value to critical examination and tries to show that many arguments for or against them rest on answers to metaethical questions. The second part is devoted to discussion of these metaethical questions and concludes with a defense of a preference-satisfaction conception of non-instrumental value. In the third part, Carson argues that the most plausible preference-satisfaction theory is, if a deity of a certain sort exists, a divine-preference theory.

The first part of the book consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 reconstructs and criticizes the arguments in Mill's *Utilitarianism* and Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* for hedonistic theories of value. Chapter 2 discusses several familiar objections to hedonistic theories of value. Carson takes these objections to show that many rational and well-informed people have preferences inconsistent with hedonism. He argues that proponents of hedonism must hold that such preferences are incorrect and so are committed to endorsing axiological realism. Chapter 3 is devoted to preference-satisfaction theories of value. Carson argues that the most plausible versions of such theories hold that what is non-instrumentally good is determined by the preferences we would have if we were rational. He goes on to defend such theories against a variety of objections, including particularly interesting objections by Richard Kraut, Richard Brandt and Charles Taylor. Chapter 4 argues that Nietzsche's *übermensch* ideal constitutes a distinctive theory of value. Carson tries to show that Nietzsche's theory of the will to power would, if true, strongly support this theory of value, but he concludes that Nietzsche has not adequately explained or defended his theory of the will to power. Chapter 5 criticizes Aristotle's theory of the good life, and it also argues against the Aristotelian theories of value proposed by Peter Geach and Thomas Hurka. A brief interlude following Chapter 5, whose purpose is to motivate the move to the next part of the book, reminds readers that arguments previously examined, for example, the defense of hedonism based on the claim that conflicting rational preferences are mistaken, rest on metaethical positions such as axiological realism that have yet to be scrutinized.

There are just two chapters in the second part of the book. Chapter 6 focuses on the concept of non-instrumental value. Carson defends pragmatic criteria for choice of a concept of value according to which it is a con-

ceptual truth that being non-instrumentally good implies being worthy of preference or correctly preferred. Chapter 7 argues against axiological realism, which Carson takes to be the view that judgments about non-instrumental goodness or badness are true or false in virtue of facts independent of actual or hypothetical beliefs, attitudes, emotions or preferences of rational beings. He argues that none of the currently prominent versions of axiological realism is worthy of our acceptance. The chief targets of his criticism are the so-called "Cornell Realists," among whom he includes Richard Boyd, David Brink and Nicholas Sturgeon, and the "British Realists," among whom he includes Susan Hurley, John McDowell and Mark Platts. Another brief interlude builds on material from these two chapters to argue that, if axiological realism is false and some things are non-instrumentally good or bad, then they are good or bad, at least in part, in virtue of the fact that it is rational and hence correct to prefer them.

The third part of the book contains only Chapter 8. In it Carson tries to determine what kind of theory of rationality is best suited for use in a rational-preference-satisfaction theory of value. He argues that full-information theories of human rationality are untenable because of human limitations. He next formulates an informed-preference theory of human rationality that does not require full information and so escapes the main objections to full-information theories, and he then formulates and defends a divine-preference theory of rationality. He argues that his divine-preference theory is the best theory to use in a rational-preference-satisfaction theory of value if a deity of the sort it describes exists. And he also argues that, if such a deity does not exist, his informed-preference theory is a suitable backup.

I think this is a very good book. It deserves praise on account of its many philosophical virtues. Carson has original and stimulating ideas on almost every issue he takes up; he even has something fresh to say about such old chestnuts as Mill's argument for hedonism. His arguments are always carefully crafted, and he seldom claims more for them than they actually deliver. His prose style is plain, simple and clear. He takes bold stands on controversial topics and defends them vigorously. Of course, precisely because he does this, the book presents a large target to critics. There is more in it with which I am inclined to disagree than I can even mention within the confines of a fairly short review. Since I imagine that its divine-preference theory will be of special interest to many readers of this journal, I shall devote the remainder of the space available to me to scrutinizing it.

I need to make explicit some of the details of that theory before I can explain why I am unwilling to accept it. A couple of the principles on which it rests serve as premises of the argument of the book's second interlude. One is this: "A necessary condition of something's being non-instrumentally good (bad) is that it is correct (fitting, appropriate) to prefer that it exist/occur (not exist/occur), other things being equal" (p. 216). It is important to keep in mind that the principle does not assert that correctness is sufficient for goodness. It leaves open, as Carson notes, the possibility that nothing is good. Combining the other two premises of the argument yields the following principle: If axiological realism is false, then "preferences can be said to be correct or incorrect in virtue of being rational

or irrational" and "there is no other way in which preferences can (plausibly) be regarded as correct or incorrect" (p. 216). Let us assume henceforth that axiological realism is false. Given this assumption, Carson's general view is that rationality determines correctness, and correctness is a necessary condition of non-instrumental goodness.

Whose rationality? One advantage of a divine-preference theory of rationality is that the preferences of an omniscient deity will satisfy the conditions of full-information theories of rationality. It will not do, however, to appeal to the preferences of an omniscient but supremely malicious deity, and so Carson borrows an idea from the twice modified divine command theory of wrongness once proposed by Robert M. Adams in order to formulate a preliminary version of his own theory. It says this: "If there exists a loving and omniscient God who created the universe and human beings for certain purposes/reasons, then God's preferences are the ultimate standard for the correctness/rationality of human preferences" (p. 242). According to Carson, if such a deity does not exist, the correctness of human preferences is to be determined in some other way. And he makes it clear that, if such a deity exists, the correctness of human preferences is determined by the deity's preferences concerning those human preferences by endorsing the following principle: "If a loving and omniscient creator of the universe prefers that person S have a certain preference (p) (or if a loving omniscient creator of the universe would prefer that S have p if such a God existed), then it is rational (correct) for S to have p" (p. 244).

But Carson is not satisfied with the preliminary formulation of his theory. After surveying some accounts of love, including those of Anders Nygren and Gene Outka, he concludes it is likely that any plausible concept of love presupposes independent notions of good and bad. Since he is assuming the falsity of axiological realism, he views it as improper for him to employ the concept of a loving deity in formulating his theory. So he revises it by building into the description of its deity only characteristics he takes to be without axiological presuppositions. We are to assume that the deity cares deeply about human beings. By this, Carson means that the deity "regards us as a very important part of creation" and "has an intrinsic, or non-instrumental, concern for us" (p. 249). We are also to suppose that the deity is kind, sympathetic and unselfish. By this, he means that the deity "is distressed by our suffering and pleased by our pleasure" and "is inclined to remove our suffering" and "ordains suffering for *our sake*, i.e., for the sake of its effect on us" (pp. 249-250). The final version of Carson's theory may thus be stated as follows: "If there is an omniscient God who designed and created the universe and human beings for certain purposes/reasons, cares deeply about human beings, and is kind, sympathetic, and unselfish (in the ways explained above), then God's preferences are the ultimate standard for the correctness/rationality of human preferences and for the goodness or badness of things. (If such a God exists, it is rational (correct) for person S to have a certain preference (p) if, and only if, God prefers that S have p)" (p. 250). Let us henceforth suppose that a deity of the sort described in the antecedent of the theory's first conditional does exist.

As Carson points out, this deity's preferences might conflict with the preferences it prefers some humans to have. Let X be Nixon's ceasing to be

president in 1974 and Y be Nixon's continuing as president through 1976. Carson says: "It is conceivable that God prefers X to Y, but also prefers that Nixon's wife and daughters prefer Y to X" (p. 245). In such a case, there are, so to speak, two routes from divine preferences to the state of affairs of Nixon's ceasing to be president in 1974, one direct and the other indirect. By which of these routes, if either, is the goodness or badness of that state of affairs determined? If determination goes by the direct route, it is good because the deity prefers that it obtain. If determination goes by the indirect route, it is bad because Nixon's wife and daughters prefer that it not obtain and do so correctly in virtue of the deity's preference that they do so. Either route is consistent with Carson's theory, since in either case the deity's preferences are the ultimate standard for its goodness or badness. Is it a good state of affairs or is it bad? Carson does not say. But once we ask this question, we open a Pandora's box of troublesome questions.

Let us explore some of them using an important religious example. Consider the story of the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac, recounted in Genesis 22. Suppose that all along the deity prefers Abraham's not killing Isaac, since eventually the deity sends an angel to tell Abraham to stay his hand. Suppose too that for a while the deity prefers that Abraham prefer Abraham's killing Isaac, because the deity commands Abraham to do so. Focus on the period between the time the command was given and the time it was withdrawn. What does Carson's theory tell us about the goodness or badness of the state of affairs of Abraham's killing Isaac during that period? One possibility is nihilistic. Since the theory does not assert that correct preferences are sufficient for goodness or badness, it might be that Abraham's killing Isaac is neither good nor bad. Another possibility is relativistic. When Carson considers the possibility that his deity might prefer that I prefer that X exists and also prefer that you prefer that X not exist, he allows that proponents of his theory "could say that it's true for me that X is non-instrumentally good and true for you that X is non-instrumentally bad" (p. 258). Similarly, proponents of his theory could say that it is true for the deity that Abraham's killing Isaac is bad and true for Abraham that Abraham's killing Isaac is good. And even if we set these two possibilities aside, there remain the two possibilities already discussed in connection with the Nixon example. Perhaps Abraham's killing Isaac is bad because the deity prefers that Abraham not kill Isaac. Or perhaps Abraham's killing Isaac is good because Abraham prefers it and does so correctly in virtue of the deity's preference for this preference. Can we eliminate either of these possibilities?

It might be thought that the latter should be dismissed because the deity's direct preferences trump in such cases of conflict. However, Carson's theory by itself fails to secure for us this easy way out. I have so far said nothing about the correctness of the deity's preferences. According to the parenthetical sentence in the final formulation of Carson's theory, the deity's preferences are correct just in case the deity prefers having or reflectively endorses them. So suppose the deity prefers having the preference for Abraham to prefer killing Isaac. It follows that the deity's preference for Abraham's preference is correct. But Carson allows that the deity may not reflectively endorse all its own preferences. He says: "God might

suffer from weakness of will; God may have desires God prefers not to have and is unable to control" (p. 253). So suppose the deity, believing it can resurrect Isaac, prefers not to have its preference for Abraham's not killing Isaac. It follows that the deity's preference for Abraham's not killing Isaac is incorrect. And it is very implausible at best to imagine that an incorrect divine preference trumps a human preference whose correctness is grounded in a correct divine preference.

Carson does not rule out the possibility of an infinite regress of divine preferences. As he sees it, "the possibility of an infinite regress of higher-order preferences cannot be dismissed in the case of an omniscient being" (pp. 253-254). So suppose there is an infinite regress of divine preferences that starts with the deity's preference for Abraham's preference for killing Isaac and is such that each preference in the regress endorses its predecessor. And suppose too there is an infinite regress of divine preferences that starts with the deity's preference for not having its own preference for Abraham's not killing Isaac and is such that each preference in the regress endorses its predecessor. It remains highly implausible to imagine that the deity's first-order preference for Abraham's not killing Isaac trumps.

It is worth noting in passing that the deity's higher-order preference may have an impact on the relativistic possibility that was set aside earlier. Given that the deity's second-order preference not to have it renders its first-order preference for Abraham's not killing Isaac incorrect, it is also implausible to imagine that it is true for the deity that Abraham's not killing Isaac is good.

It might be objected that puzzles about the *akedah* should not be regarded as a serious problem for Carson's theory because it is very special case and has perplexed commentators for millennia. But Carson's theory does not guarantee that cases of this sort are rare. Maybe Carson's deity, being non-instrumentally concerned for human beings, prefers that they have any preferences they form as a result of reasonably conscientious inquiry and yet, being omniscient, often has conflicting direct preferences. In other words, it may turn out that conflicting divine and human preferences of the sort I have pointed to in my treatment of the case of the *akedah* are very numerous. It may therefore be that there are ever so many cases in which Carson's theory, even when its nihilistic and relativistic possibilities are ignored, does not give us a determinate answer about what is good or bad unless we have fairly elaborate knowledge of the psychology of its deity and, in particular, of its higher-order preferences.

Where does that leave Carson? I think he is hoist with his own petard. His criticism of Cornell realism focuses on Sturgeon's claim that independent moral facts enter into the best explanations we can give of certain human beliefs and behaviors. Carson's response is that at present we know so little about human psychology that claims about the form best explanations will take are merely conjectural. He concludes that "the work of Cornell realists justifies a research program to try to construct a (moral realist) theory of human psychology, but we cannot assume in advance that this research program will succeed" (p. 202). If we grant him this point, surely we are entitled to press a similar point about his proposal for a divine-preference theory of rationality. At best it justifies a research pro-

gram to try to work out an account of the psychology of the sort of deity whose existence it depends on, including all its higher-order preferences, but we cannot assume in advance that this research program will succeed. And there is a salient difference between the two cases. We do understand how a research program in human psychology with moral realist ideas in its hardcore might progress or degenerate. It is, however, difficult to imagine how a research program in divine psychology that would deliver the goods Carson needs could ever be anything more than sheer speculation.

Nature, Design and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science by Del Ratzsch, State University of New York Press, 2001, x + 220, \$40.00.

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This book aims, not to address the question of whether the natural world is designed, but rather whether science is in principle able to accommodate the concept of supernatural design.

Ratzsch develops the definition of design and relates it to anthropology and the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, before analysing the concept of supernatural design. He then investigates where the true boundaries of scientific legitimacy lie. He concludes that standard attempts to rule out design in principle fail and that there might be potential scientific pay-offs in allowing the possibility of supernatural design.

Ratzsch takes design to be the result of deliberate agent activity intentionally aimed at generating particular patterns. Pattern is to be understood in terms of structures that have special affinities to cognition. Design results in artefacts that can usually be recognised because they exhibit 'counterflow,' marks of agent activity, features which mindless natural processes would not produce. Ratzsch argues that science is quite capable of recognising artefacts. For example, the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI) is the search for energy artefacts. Thus science could legitimately investigate the theory that aliens intentionally produced life on earth.

Ratzsch then investigates supernatural design. He notes that a supernatural being could intentionally produce artefacts identical to those produced by finite, natural agents. Additionally, supernatural beings could act in ways that break natural laws. They could affect quantum probabilities, as well as create things from nothing, including natural laws, constants and primordial initial conditions. A complicating factor is that if an agent creates an element of nature itself then there is no possibility of comparison with what nature does unaffected by intentional agency. Supernatural creation may therefore not show the primary marks of agent activity and counterflow usually associated with the artefacts of finite agency and so may be harder to identify.

Ratzsch argues that complexity and improbability alone are not strong evidence of design (a random set of craters on the Moon might be highly complex and improbable but not suggest design). However, complexity