

Review: Rational Desire and the Good

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REVIEW ARTICLE

RATIONAL DESIRE AND THE GOOD

Noah Lemos

Value and the Good Life

Thomas L. Carson

Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, xi + 328 pages;
cloth \$45, paper \$22.95

Thomas Carson's *Value and the Good Life* is a clear, well-written, wide-ranging essay on the theory of value. It is among the best defenses of a rational desire/preference theory of the good. Even those not inclined to accept such theories will profit from reading Carson's discussion. Moreover, it would be worthwhile reading for scholars and students in various areas of applied ethics.

The book is divided into two parts. The first half of the book addresses first-order questions about what things are good and bad. The second half discusses various metaethical questions which he takes to be relevant to answering the first order questions. In his first two chapters, Carson presents arguments for and against hedonistic theories of value. This is a thorough and fair discussion of hedonism. He then devotes a chapter each to rational desire theories of value, Nietzsche's views of value and the good life, and Aristotelian theories of value. Each of these is good, but the chapter on rational desire theories is perhaps the most important given the view that Carson ultimately defends. The second half of the book consists of three chapters. Chapter six concerns the concept of goodness. In chapter seven, Carson raises objections to various forms of moral and axiological realism. In the final chapter, entitled "The Concept of Rationality as a Basis for Normative Theories," Carson develops and defends his own views about rational preference and its role in moral and axiological theories. In most of what follows I will focus on Carson's own positive views about value and rational preference.

Theories about what sorts of things are noninstrumentally good are often criticized by appeals to intuitions. Often the criticisms have the following form: (i) Theory A implies that X is noninstrumentally good, but (ii) X is not noninstrumentally good, therefore (iii) Theory A is false. Often the claim that X is noninstrumentally good is said to be an “intuition” or to be known or justified “intuitively.” Carson is not satisfied with such appeals to intuition. This is illustrated in his long, detailed, and fine discussion of the hedonistic theory of value (HTV). Carson reconstructs and criticizes two classic arguments for HTV, one by Mill and the other by Sidgwick. Finding neither argument satisfactory he turns to some main objections to hedonism, many of which are well-known. These include the “satisfied pig,” the “pleasure machine,” and the “pleasures of bad people” objections. Such objections typically point out that HTV has “counter-intuitive” consequences. But Carson thinks that the appeal to such intuitions is inconclusive. He writes, “When we discover that other people have intuitions that are opposed to our own, we are not entitled to assume that ours are correct and those of the other people are mistaken—at least not without being able to give reasons for thinking that this is the case. Most traditional arguments for or against particular theories of value are inconclusive because they are conducted at the intuitive level” (151–152). Again, “Most of these objections appeal to disputed intuitions and, therefore, must be rejected as inconclusive in the absence of a defense of the intuitive judgments being appealed to. Those who attack hedonism by appealing to intuitive judgments about controversial cases need to show why their intuitions are correct and the hedonist’s mistaken” (66). Presumably, for Carson, showing that one’s intuitions are correct would involve appealing to something other than the disputed intuitions in question. One would need to give a non-circular or non-question-begging argument for the reliability of one’s moral intuitions and it is not clear how this would be done. Carson seems to hold that in the absence of such a non-circular argument for the reliability of our ways of forming moral intuitions, we have no reason to count our moral intuitions as good or conclusive reasons for rejecting various axiological theories or claims. (Whether the only way to know that one’s ways of forming beliefs is reliable is on the basis of a non-circular argument is controversial. Some epistemologists, such as Ernest Sosa, think that some circular arguments are not *viciously* circular. If Sosa is right, then Carson is imposing a burden on the appeal to intuitions that they need not bear.)

Many theories about what sorts of things are noninstrumentally good assume, according to Carson, that moral realism is true. Carson takes moral realism to be, roughly, the view that some things have noninstrumental value independently of the actual or hypothetical desires or preferences of rational beings. If, as seems to be the case, many rational people desire or prefer a certain kind of life that is somewhat less pleasant to one that is more pleasant and think that such a life would be noninstrumentally better, then according to the HTV, these people are *mistaken* in their preference and in their belief about what is better. In taking

this stance, Carson says, the hedonist is assuming that some form of moral realism is true. The hedonist is assuming that there is some other standard of value independent of the actual or hypothetical desires and preferences of rational beings. Carson criticizes many versions of moral realism. These include the views of Moore, Broad, Ewing, the views of the “Cornell” realists, and the views of contemporary British realists such as McDowell and Platts. Carson presents a variety of objections to the different forms of moral realism. He thinks we have no reasons to believe that these forms of realism are true. I agree that *if* we cannot appeal to disputed moral intuitions, then we probably can’t make a case for moral realism. He does not think that he has shown that every form of moral realism is false, but he thinks that we have no reason to believe that moral realism is true.

Holding that we have no reason to believe that any form of moral realism is true and accepting the inconclusiveness of appeals to intuitions about what is noninstrumentally valuable, Carson attempts to develop a theory of value which is non-realist, a theory which takes the informed desires or preferences of rational beings as the standard of value.

Let me turn to describing Carson’s own views about the nature of value. Carson holds that “a necessary condition for something’s being non-instrumentally (non-causally) good is that it would be correct, in a sense that is opposed to incorrect or mistaken, to prefer (desire, choose) that it exist (occur) rather than not, everything else (including all of its causal requirements and consequences) being equal” (158–59). Again, he says, “If X is non-instrumentally better than Y, then it would be correct, in a sense that is opposed to incorrect or mistaken, to prefer that X exist (occur) rather than Y” (159). In taking this view, Carson sees himself as following many other writers, such as Brentano, Chisholm, Brandt, and Ewing, to name but a few, who take the concept of value to be related to the concept of what is worthy of desire or what is worthy of preference. But how shall we understand the relevant notion of “correctness”? Some of those who have sought to understand value in terms of correct desire or preference have not made clear what the relevant sense is, while others have said that the relevant notion is that of ethical “correctness.” In contrast, Carson takes the relevant sense of correctness to be tied to a concept of “rationality,” so that, roughly, something is noninstrumentally good only if it is rationally desired. But what, then, is the relevant notion of rationality?

Carson thoroughly examines “full information” theories of rational desire. A full information theory holds that “Rational or ideally rational desires are those one would have had if one had been fully informed (and free of cognitive mistakes) at all times at which the desires were being formed” (223). Carson thinks that full information theories are unsatisfactory and his critical discussion calls our attention to a variety of objections to such theories made by Rosati, Velleman, and Loeb. One problem Carson sees with full information theories is that the counterfactuals they involve too often have no determinate truth value. “Full

information about those matters relevant to questions about the nature of the good life—knowing in vivid detail what it’s like to live many different lives—greatly outstrips the capacities of human beings. . . . This creates intractable problems for interpreting the sorts of counterfactual statements the theory relies on, e.g., ‘If I were fully informed about the nature of lives A–Z, I would prefer life T to all others.’ The antecedents of such statements don’t pick out determinate states of affairs” (229). Again, Carson writes, “There is no empirically coherent way of conceiving of a human being who is fully informed” (229).

So, if we reject “full information” theories, what shall adopt instead? Carson proposes an “informed desire” theory. An informed desire theory holds that some cognitive and informational perspectives are *better* or *better informed* than others. So, to use Carson’s example, my cognitive standpoint for judging the Holocaust could be considerably improved in the sense that I could have more true beliefs about it. I could have much more information about it than I now have. But even though my standpoint could be considerably improved, “it is extremely unlikely that my overall preferences about the Holocaust (my preference that it not have occurred) would be different if my cognitive perspective had been better. In this case, we have plausible grounds for saying that my preferences are correct” (231). Carson proposes the following standard for the correctness of an individual person’s preferences:

COR. It is correct for S to prefer X to not-X (and incorrect for him not to prefer X to not-X) if, and only if, (1) there is at least one empirically possible cognitive/informational perspective (P_1) from which S would prefer X to not-X and (2) there is not other empirically possible perspective (P_2) which is as good or better than P_1 (for deciding between X and not-X) such that S would not prefer X to not-X from P_2 . (232)

Carson takes COR to be an “informed preference theory of rationality” and he takes it to provide a standard of correctness for assessing claims about what is for X to be non-instrumentally better than Y.

Still, Carson is not quite satisfied with COR. What makes one informational perspective better than another for assessing X and Y? Carson notes some of the difficulties with answering this question. One difficulty concerns the notion of relevant information. It seems plausible that whether one perspective is better than another has something to do with whether one contains relevant information that the other lacks. But what is it for information to be relevant? Carson writes:

Information I is relevant to S’s assessment of X, provided that (A) having I alters or would alter S’s reactions to X (or having I would alter S’s reactions to X if S possessed other information that he now lacks), and (B) I’s altering S’s reactions about X in any of the ways described in (A) is not the result of false beliefs, or desires that result from false beliefs, or any deficiencies of cognitive functioning, e.g., S’s making incorrect inferences. (235)

I think that there are several difficulties with this account of relevant information and with COR. First, recall what Carson says about his preference that the Holocaust not occur. He thinks it is extremely unlikely that any additional information could cause him to change his preference that the Holocaust not occur. Suppose, then, that additional information would *not* alter his reaction to the Holocaust. It follows from the preceding account that any further information is *not* relevant to his assessment of the Holocaust. But it seems *false* that there is no further relevant information available to him. It seems plausible that there is information about the Holocaust that is relevant to his preference even if it would not alter his preference. Indeed, it seems plausible that Carson might have a better perspective because he had that additional relevant information.

Second, I think there is a problem with COR. COR tells us that it is correct to prefer X to not-X just in case (1) there is an empirically possible informational perspective P_1 from which S would prefer X to not-X, and (2) there is no other empirically possible informational perspective, P_2 , which is as good or better than P_1 (for deciding between X and not-X) such that S would not prefer X to not-X from P_2 . Consider the following. Suppose that I do not know Tom's phone number and I am trying to decide whether to look up his number in the phone book. Let X = looking up Tom's number in the phone book and not-X = not looking Tom's number up in the phone book. Given my present informational perspective, P_1 , in which I do not know his number, it seems correct or rational for me to prefer X to not-X. But the problem is that there *is* another empirically possible perspective, P_2 , which is as good as my present one (for deciding between X and not-X) where I would not prefer X to not-X, namely, where P_2 includes my knowing Tom's phone number. COR implies that it is not correct or rational for me in my present state to prefer X to not-X. But surely it is correct and rational. Similarly, suppose you invite me to join a discussion of the mystery novel I am presently reading. Let X = not joining the discussion and not-X = joining the discussion. Given my present informational perspective in which I do not know who the villain is, I would prefer X to not-X. Still, there is another empirically possible information perspective, as good as the one I am now in, from which I would not prefer X to not-X, namely one in which I had read the book and knew who the villain was. Again, it seems to me that COR implies falsely that my preference not to join in the discussion is not correct or rational. Now, perhaps Carson might hold that the perspective in which I have the additional information, about the phone number or who the villain is, is not as good for deciding between X and not-X. But why should that be? Given his account of relevant information, roughly information that would affect one's reaction, such information surely seems relevant to one's preference.

Third, sometimes certain information affects one's reactions to something when we think it should not. As Carson notes, it seems possible, for example, that knowing someone's ethnicity causes a person to judge her more harshly or leniently than one should (235). Having this information about her ethnicity

might affect one's judgment or preference, but not because of any *false* beliefs or incorrect inferences. But Carson's account implies that in this case the information about the person's ethnicity is relevant information when it seems to many that it is not. Conversely, we sometimes think that certain information *should* affect someone's reaction when it does not. For example, we might think that the fact that one's doing A would cause another person extreme pain is information relevant to one's doing A. But if one is utterly unmoved by such information, then, according to his account, it is not relevant. Carson is aware of these sorts of objections. Indeed he concedes that his view conflicts with some strong intuitions, but he stands by his view about relevant information. He writes, "If we reject realism, then we should also reject the strong intuitions about the relevance or irrelevance of certain information that underlie [this] objection" (235). Others, including myself, would find it more reasonable to accept those strong intuitions and to reject instead Carson's anti-realism and his account of relevant information.

In any event, Carson proposes another standard of correct preferences, one that he thinks will avoid some of the difficulties surrounding COR and the notion of relevant information. This is a "divine-preference theory of rationality/preference." Here is Carson's version of this criterion:

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.) If such a God does not exist, then the correctness or rationality of human preferences (and the goodness or badness of things) is determined in some other way. (250)

One reason, according to Carson, for thinking that the divine preference view is superior to COR is that the cognitive standpoint of God is superior to that which any human being is capable of occupying. Carson writes, "To the extent that our actual preferences (or the preferences that it is correct for us to have according to COR) are contrary to God's, we should regard our own preferences as mistaken and less rational than God's" (240). If there is no such God, then Carson suggests, we might adopt COR as our "fall back" position concerning the correctness/rationality of preferences.

There are several objections that one might make to this view. First, suppose that the sort of God Carson describes actually exists. It is not obvious to me that God wants S to have a certain preference if and only if it is rational (correct) for S to have that preference. Could it not be that God might want some people to have preferences that are incorrect or irrational? Suppose that God decides to harden Pharaoh's heart and make him stubborn (cf. Exodus 7:3), so that Pharaoh decides not to let Moses' people go. Or suppose, to paraphrase the old saying, those whom God would destroy, He first makes mad. If

is not obvious to me that God would not *want* some people to have irrational or incorrect preferences.

Second, as Carson notes, it seems possible that what is a rational preference according to COR is not a rational preference according to the divine preference theory. Suppose S's preference of X to not-X is rational or correct according to COR, but not rational or correct according to the divine preference theory. But if we do not know whether there is a God of the sort required by the divine preference theory, then we do not know whether S's preference for X to not-X is rational or correct. We do not know whether to use the standard of divine preference or the "fall back" standard of COR to evaluate the rationality of S's preference. Suppose, for example, that S's preference that people of a certain race suffer fails to meet the standard of the divine preference theory for being a rational or correct preference. It might nonetheless meet the standard of COR. Given that we do not know whether there is a God of the kind required by the divine preference theory, then it seems that we do not know whether such a preference is rational or correct. This will surely seem to many people an undesirable degree of uncertainty in the evaluation of preferences.

Finally, Carson's divine preference theory requires that God be kind, sympathetic, and unselfish. But *why* require that God have *these* attributes in addition to his being omniscient? Carson considers the possibilities that (i) God might be simply indifferent to us, having no preferences about what we prefer, and (ii) that God might be malicious. These alternative characterizations of God would provide alternative standards of rational or correct preference. Let us call the first the "indifferent God theory of rationality/preference" (IGT) and the second the "malicious God theory of rationality/preference" (MGT). Carson rejects both IGT and MGT. Concerning the first possibility, he writes, "One might conclude that if God is indifferent to us, then we should be indifferent to ourselves and each other; nothing that happens to us can be good or bad. I'm inclined to think that even if God were indifferent to us for the kinds of reasons in question, it would still make sense for us to employ standards of good and bad in order to make the best of our lives; it still would make sense that some lives are better than others" (249). Concerning the second possibility he writes, "There is no reason for us to take God's preferences to be authoritative for us if God is cruel and delights in our suffering and frustration" (249).

Carson's responses to IGT and MGT seem very much like the familiar sorts of objections to other theories of value such as hedonism. He seems to argue, for example, (i) if IGT is true, then no life is better than any other, (ii) but some lives are better than others, therefore, (iii) IGT is false. He seems also to argue that (i) if MGT is true, then we have reason to prefer that things happen as a malicious God prefers, (ii) but we do not have reason to prefer that things happen as a malicious God prefer, therefore (iii) MGT is false. I have no qualms about the second premise of either of these arguments. They both seem true to me. Indeed, they seem intuitively true. But they might not seem true to a nihilist

or a sadist. Now, given *his* view about the inconclusiveness of appeals to intuitions, it seems that Carson himself should regard both of his objections as inconclusive unless and until he gives non-circular reasons for thinking that his intuitions are more likely to be correct. But I think this is a mistake. I do not think the appeal to intuition needs to meet that burden. I think the intuitions to which Carson appeals in rejecting IGT and MGT *are* epistemically justified and instances of knowledge. I think we should rather reject Carson's negative appraisal of the appeal to intuitions.

In any case, this is a fine book, rich and rigorously argued. As I noted above, Carson gives one of the best defenses of rational desire theories of value. I think readers interested in the realism/anti-realism debate in ethics or in the value theories of Nietzsche or Aristotle will also learn much from it.