

2

Value Realism and Idiosyncrasy

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2.1 Idiosyncrasy and the Dotty View

According to the value realist, valuable things are valuable in themselves; value is not a product or projection or construction of human attitudes, but rather something discovered, encountered, out in the world. Realism of this sort is, nowadays, a common enough position within the metaethical literature. Most realists, however, will typically allow that there are at least some arenas of value that should not be understood in realist terms. Here, for instance, is Thomas Nagel:

Most of the things we pursue . . . are optional. Their value to us depends on our individual aims, projects, and concerns, . . . ; they acquire value only because of the interest we develop in them and the place this gives them in our lives, rather than evoking interest because of their value.

(Nagel 1986: 168)

Most realists share Nagel's basic idea here: there are some parts of our lives as agents that are governed by value that is not 'out there', but rather arises from the agent's own particular desires, preferences, or valuings.¹ This point of shared ground with the anti-realist is sometimes used argumentatively to the latter's advantage. Mark Schroeder, for instance, invokes it as the foundation for his defense of a neo-Humean account of reasons.²

¹ Not all realists: several have suggested, for various reasons, that there can be no such thing as value that finds its source in the agent's own evaluative attitudes. However, in some cases these authors then also go on to say things that seem to contradict this claim. (For instance, see David Sobel's discussion (Sobel 2019: 155–6) of some claims made by Derek Parfit (Parfit 2011)). In any case, the sort of 'hybrid' realist position that I discuss here is indeed widely held.

² Schroeder characterizes this position as a form of naturalist reductive realism. For my purposes, it counts as anti-realist, since the account has a person's reasons dependent on her desires, and not on some independent source of value to be found out in the world.

Schroeder has us imagine two people, Ronnie and Bradley. Ronnie loves dancing, and thereby has a reason to go to the party; Bradley hates dancing, and thus has a reason to stay away. And, says Schroeder,

It's largely uncontroversial—even among philosophers—that at least *some* reasons are like Ronnie's and Bradley's, in that whether they are reasons for some particular person depends on some feature of that person's psychology, such as what that person desires, wants, likes, or cares about.

(Schroeder 2007: 1)

This basic idea seems incredibly compelling, and the claim of philosophical consensus seems a plausible one. When it comes to such things as deciding to go to the party because you happen to like dancing, or choosing the peanut-butter-cup flavor of ice cream because it's your favorite, it is natural to suppose that the relevant reasons or value must derive from your own particular desires or preferences, rather than from (for instance) the inherent value possessed by peanut-butter-cup ice cream.

Indeed, the idea that there might be real value *here* has struck many philosophers as bordering on the ridiculous. Don Loeb's ominously titled 'Gastronomic Realism: A Cautionary Tale' aims to reveal worrying parallels between moral realism and realism about gastronomic value (worrying, that is, for the moral realist). The specter is raised of a *reductio ad absurdum* against moral realism, since "[o]n the face of it, [gastronomic realism] seems highly implausible, even silly" (Loeb 2003: 31). Similarly, Paul Boghossian argues against the objectivity of beauty by showing that there is no fundamental difference in kind between judgments of beauty and judgments of gustatory taste, and pointing out that in the latter case we share a "conviction that there can be no facts about what deserves aesthetic appreciation ('being liked')." When we reflect on the matter, says Boghossian, "we find an objectivism about such simple aesthetic judgments absurd" (Boghossian, in preparation: 22).

In general, when it comes to those parts of our practical lives that are "bound up with the idiosyncratic attitudes and aims of the subject" (Nagel 1986: 168)—that are fundamentally personal and particular to us—the natural philosophical response is to suppose that the kind of value that is on the scene here must "stem . . . from the desires, projects, commitments, and personal ties of the individual agent, all of which give him reasons to act in the pursuit of ends that are his own" (165). And, says Nagel, to suppose that the source of these fundamentally personal and idiosyncratic kinds of

value lies in the valued objects, rather in the person's evaluative attitudes, "one would have to be dotty" (170).

What is it about these parts of our lives that makes them seem to be such unacceptable candidates for realism—indeed, to render realism about such not even a live philosophical option but instead 'silly', 'absurd', 'dotty'? One very plausible answer—which will be the focus of my attention in this chapter—is the idea that in certain parts of our lives it seems perfectly acceptable that people should differ from one another in the things that they value and choose to pursue. If you like vanilla ice cream, and I like peanut-butter-cup, it would seem strange to insist that one of us must have gotten something *wrong*. Even when it comes to more serious and important values—the things around which we structure our lives, such as choosing a career to pursue, or a particular person to marry—it again seems natural to suppose that people differing in their opinions and decisions on such matters need not (at least not all on its own) indicate anything's having gone amiss in their respective understandings of, and responses to, the relevant value. There are thus many parts of life in which our relationship to value appears to be, as I shall put it, properly 'idiosyncratic.' It is not just that people *do* differ in these ways, but rather that it seems perfectly right and proper that they *should* do so.

It is not hard to see why this sort of idiosyncrasy seems incompatible with a realist model for these areas of value. On the realist's picture, value is something discovered, encountered, out in the world: a person looks out upon the value-laden world, and what she sees is simply what is really (already) there. But how could the metaphor of seeing-what's-really-there apply in cases like that of Ronnie and Bradley? For if Ronnie's and Bradley's reasons differ, as seems undeniable, then how are we to understand the idea that these two people are both simply looking out onto an already value-laden world? If they are both looking out towards what is simply already there, then *why aren't they seeing the same thing?*

The realist metaphor of value as something encountered seems to point in the direction of universality—if something is 'out there' to be discovered, we can plausibly expect that, barring mistakes, the people discovering it will agree on its nature—but when it comes to at least some parts of our practical lives, we are perfectly comfortable with the thought that there is no such universality to be had, and indeed that it would be fundamentally misguided to expect or to want universality in such areas.

What I shall try to show in what follows is that the sense of tension between these two ideas can be resolved; this sort of 'idiosyncrasy' in the

realm of value is fully compatible with realism. What I shall *not* provide here is any sort of independent argument in support of realism as such: nothing I have to say in this chapter is going to persuade anyone who is not already some sort of realist to switch teams. My goal is simply to show that idiosyncrasy as such need not undermine the possibility of realism in some area. To the extent that the problem of idiosyncrasy is what stands in the way—general worries about realism aside—of a *comprehensive* realism about value, then, my account suggests that such a comprehensive realism ought to be considered a live philosophical option.

2.2 Expertise, and What a Person Sees

My proposal combines a broad pluralism about value (there are many different kinds of value) with an ‘expertise’ model for understanding different people’s relationship to the plurally value-laden world. That is, I shall suggest that different people possess different forms and degrees of ability when it comes to observing, experiencing, understanding, and engaging with different forms of value, and that it is these differences that will allow us to understand even those parts of our lives that are deeply, unavoidably idiosyncratic within a fully realist framework. On this model, value is out there in the world, but we each are—for a range of reasons, explored below—able to access certain pockets of that value and not others.

Let me introduce the notion of ‘value-expertise’ by way of an analogy with more familiar non-evaluative concepts. In general, if a person possesses a particular depth of understanding of, and/or skills regarding, some particular topic or part of the world, we can say that she has a measure of ‘expertise’ in that area. As I am using the term, it does not function primarily to separate out ‘experts’ from ‘non-experts’, but rather to signal something that comes in degrees, and in more or less piecemeal forms.³ In some cases, a

³ I stress this in part to emphasize that although my account clearly draws inspiration from a thread found in Aristotle and neo-Aristotelian work (e.g. McDowell 1979), I do not embrace wholesale the notion of expertise as it appears in these works. Along with a downplaying of the figure of ‘the expert’, my account also emphasizes plurality and difference over the ideas of unity and coherence (of the virtues, for instance) that play a central role within the Aristotelian tradition. While Aristotle seeks to discover what would count as ‘the best kind of life’ for a human being, my goal here is to give some illumination and explanation to the idea, familiar from Susan Wolf and Bernard Williams, among others (see Wolf 1982, Williams 1981b), that there needn’t be just *one* answer to that question—and further, to do so within an unashamedly realist framework.

person's expertise may indeed be suitably comprehensive (and suitably important or useful to society generally) that it is reflected in her official title (Professor of Molecular Biology) or her career (electrical engineer), or for which she may be introduced in a panel discussion as an 'expert' in so-and-so. But one may also have expertise regarding more localized parts of the world which are less interesting to other people (I have expertise regarding my own embarrassingly baroque digital filing system, for instance). And one may have *some* measure of expertise in some topic without thereby having the degree of competency that would incline us to refer to her as 'an expert' (she may have a little more expertise than someone else, while still not having, in the grand scheme of things, very much expertise at all). Let us say, then, that one may have expertise to greater and lesser degrees, and in all sorts of areas, from the minor to the grand.

The expertise a person possesses makes a difference to how she experiences the world that she moves through. It can affect what she notices, what she sees as salient, and even in certain respects what she can see at all. For illustration, consider the following scene: imagine a room containing a desk with piles of books and papers, a chair, a bookcase, a wastepaper basket, plants in pots on the windowsill. We may suppose it is someone's study. If a (sighted, awake, non-hallucinating, etc.) person enters the room, we know where they will find themselves and what they will see: the desk with its piles of books and papers, the chair, the bookcase, the wastepaper basket, the plants. But depending on who the person entering is, we may be able to say more about what they see, and perhaps even *much* more:

- Enter the building's janitor, who sees instantly that the room's occupant has (once again, after countless requests that he not do so) absentmindedly put his banana skin into the wastepaper basket, so that the janitor will have to fish it out himself if he is to be able to put the paper into the recycling.
- Enter the professor whose study it is; he sees no banana skin (though it's not that he would be *unable* to see it if it were pointed out to him—again—by the janitor), but notices that the papers on his desk are askew, for his absentmindedness is, as is often the way with academics, highly selective, and when it comes to keeping his desk organized he is meticulous. The window is closed and locked as always, since the plants don't like drafts, so it's likely, notes the professor, that someone has been into the room since the last time he was here and has (accidentally, or—though the professor himself is unlikely to register

this possibility—in a minor act of banana-related revenge) brushed up against a stack and knocked it over.

- Enter the professor's old friend, who like the professor is a botanist and specialist collector of orchids. Her attention is caught by the windowsill, which stands in the shade of a neighboring building, thus receiving the perfect amount of indirect diffused sunlight bouncing off its pale walls. What the botanist sees is that the windowsill is home to some extremely beautiful examples of *Phalaenopsis corningiana*, a rare orchid species native to Borneo.
- Enter a private detective: he sees first with his nose (they call him 'the bloodhound'), and beneath the heady and tropical scent of hothouse vegetation and overripe banana, there is stale coffee, and, faintly, something sharp and antiseptic. The girl's been missing for a week now, and while the professor himself isn't an obvious suspect, the detective is interested in his mysterious colleague, whose passport (inspected quickly and silently by flashlight two nights ago) showed recent stamps from Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, and who was spotted in a heated argument with the girl's boyfriend the night before she disappeared. The room looks well cleaned, too, and probably not by the janitor, who—if the rest of the offices under his watch are anything to go by—tends to ignore the top of the bookcases and the gaps in the radiators for as long as he can get away with. What the detective sees, narrowing his eyes, is a possible crime scene.

We can imagine, then, that even though each of these people enters the same room, their own forms of expertise—in the broad sense in which I am using the term—affect their experience of the space. Their expertise affects what they notice, what they see as salient, how they conceptualize what they observe, what sorts of courses of action they see the space as open to, and even which features of the room are properly visible to them at all. Similarly, in other cases, expertise will affect, for example, whether a person looking out of a window sees *a tree*, or *an oak tree*, or *my mother's beloved old oak tree*, or *an oak tree growing unhappily in what is likely to be overly alkaline soil*; it will affect whether she sees hanging on the wall *a painting of a pastoral landscape* or *an oil painting with some damage from sunlight in the left corner*, or *oh-my-god-surely-not-but-it-really-might-be-that-missing-Turner*.

In these ordinary and familiar ways, then, people's differing expertise can lead to them looking out at the *same*—real, objective—world, and yet

‘seeing’ different things. My proposal, then, is that this same model can be applied in the case of value. This will allow us to account for the fact that different people’s relationship to value can take on idiosyncratic forms without having to abandon the realist idea that the source of the value resides in the valuable things themselves. If we suppose that different people might have different skills and abilities when it comes to perceiving and engaging with values of different kinds, it is not at all surprising that our responses to the value-laden world would be idiosyncratic and personal. As in the ordinary case of expertise, the *value*-expertise a person possesses affects how she experiences the world that she moves through, coloring what she notices, what she sees as salient, and indeed what she can see at all. And so, as in the ordinary case of expertise, the fact of these differences need not imply that there isn’t real value out there to be found.

Some people are especially skilled at experiencing and understanding the value of classical music, while the abilities of others mean they are moved more easily by the blues. Some soccer fans can appreciate the exuberant virtuosity of individual star players such as Neymar or Messi, while others enjoy the style of soccer played by Manchester City under Pep Guardiola, in which the whole team functions together as one harmonious and dangerous well-oiled machine; those whose value-expertise capacities are well honed on questions of global justice may find that their moral objections to this team’s funding sources fill their vision, so that the beauty of the soccer fades from view. Some who, like Bernard Williams’s (“fictional”) Gauguin (Williams 1981a), see the value in creating great art will perhaps decide to leave their family in order to pursue that calling; others who are especially sensitive to the value of personal family relationships would not do so regardless of how certain they were that great art would indeed be the result.⁴

Where does value-expertise come from? I’ll say more about this later, but for now we can observe that, as with ordinary expertise, the factors that contribute to a person’s having some particular form of value-expertise will

⁴ None of this, of course, implies that ‘anything goes’ in the realm of value and its appreciation. The value realism that stands as the foundational assumption for this account means that the facts about value come first and determine what is out there to be seen and appreciated. In the Mysterious Affair of the Professor’s Study, our characters all saw different things, but they all saw things that were really there. A student who, on entering the study for an appointment with the professor, ‘sees’ small pink elephants dancing amid the foliage does not thereby count as possessing special pink-*elephant*-expertise (and should probably have cancelled his appointment to go home and sleep it off).

be many and varied, and a good deal of them are likely to be accidents of that particular person's history or physiological make-up. One may end up with expertise as a result, in whole or part, of being born into a particular class structure, or a particular part of the world, or a particular family; of turning out to be a certain height, or in possession of certain sensory abilities, or having a certain sort of body; or merely happening to be in the right place at the right time. In the case of the person who is good at grasping the value in classical music, part of the explanation for their distinctive form of expertise may be such contingent matters as plentiful exposure to classical music as a child, say, or the happenstance of an especially acute sense of hearing. As with ordinary expertise, the fact that these differences are grounded in such contingent matters of history, biology, and so on, does not undermine the claim of expertise actually to *be* expertise: to be, that is, a special ability to know how things stand in some particular part of the world.

2.3 The Phenomenology of Value-Change

I shall in this section and the next do some work to try to reveal the intuitive appeal of the value-expertise account. In this section I'll discuss how the account fits well with the phenomenology of undergoing changes in one's evaluative or preferential outlook.

When one moves from having one set of values to another, or gains a new value, it doesn't seem—or at any rate not always—as though one's stance merely *shifts*, from being in one particular state to being in another state, a state which is merely *different* from the first. Rather, at least sometimes, the shift is experienced as one of coming to 'get' something that one hadn't 'got' before. When I came to like the paintings of Rothko, it didn't feel like a mere *change* in my preferences (from happening to be bored by big red squares to coming to enjoy big red squares, say). Instead, it seemed to me that Rothko's paintings had always possessed a strange depth and luminosity, but that I had not been able to see this before (in part, perhaps, because the description 'big red square' was getting in the way of my actually being present with the painting itself).

I have mentioned already that some people seem to be especially good at experiencing and understanding the value of classical music, and that this may be a result of such things as having been exposed to classical music as a child, or happening to possess especially sensitive hearing. But one can also

come to experience the value of classical music—or hip-hop, or Britpop—even if one does not begin with such an appreciation. Often, the way this happens is that someone who can see what you cannot, or what you can as yet glimpse only dimly, guides you in developing your expertise. A friend may invite you round to listen to a particular piece of music, carefully chosen based on what he knows about you and the areas of value-expertise that you already possess. Perhaps, for instance, your friend knows that although you don't typically enjoy classical music, you are a person who is acutely aware of the preciousness and fleetingness of being alive. He suspects you might be able to come to hear and appreciate the beauty of the musical expression of overwhelming gratitude for life that he can hear in Beethoven's *Heiliger Dankgesang* ('sacred song of thanksgiving').⁵ Perhaps, as you listen together, he points out certain moments that he finds particularly expressive or moving. And so, under the expert guidance of your friend, you may begin to see what he can see. Even if only nascently, your vision of the world of value begins to expand and to clarify; the value of classical music comes ever so slightly more clearly into focus for you.⁶

Sometimes no guiding expert is needed, and our expertise develops as a result of other events and experiences. Many of us have probably had the realization, at some point or other, that qualities such as reliability and emotional openness are—despite what we may have thought during teenage love affairs—actually rather valuable and attractive qualities in a romantic partner. Those character traits that struck our teenage selves as dull and bourgeois are now revealed as the basis for a sort of depth of trust and intimacy that we had not previously had in view as a possibility.

In general, then, when one comes to understand some new area of value, the experience is not that of an arbitrary shift in one's preferences, but rather as of coming to see something that one had previously missed. It is not just that one's preferences have *changed*, for the change seems also to be an improvement of a certain kind: an improvement, specifically, in one's abilities to see or experience new sources of value.

Do we always experience a shift in evaluative outlook as an improvement in this sort of way? If so, that very fact might give us reason to be suspicious

⁵ Beethoven, String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132, Third Movement.

⁶ Again, my indebtedness to the modern revival of the virtue ethical tradition should be clear here (in particular, the theme of 'coming to see' something is key to the accounts of value given in, for instance, Murdoch 1970 and McDowell 1998). Compare, here, McDowell's example of getting someone to see what you see in jazz music (McDowell 1998: 85). (Thanks to Debbie Roberts for pointing out this particular point of resonance with McDowell.)

of the phenomenology. Maybe we're just psychologically disposed to be especially impressed by whatever we happen to like *now*, and this gives a sort of illusion of having come to see things aright. But in general expertise is something that can be both gained and lost: it may be true that one never forgets how to ride a bike, but other kinds of expertise (mathematical knowledge, for instance) are notoriously vulnerable to speedy decay if not exercised regularly. And so we might plausibly expect to see the same sort of thing in the case of value-expertise. Is there, then, phenomenological support for the experience of losing one's ability to see what had before been visible?

I think there is. For instance: in my twenties, I enjoyed going to independent cinemas on my own to see odd art-house movies, usually European foreign-language films. My enjoyment of these films was, I believe, a reflection of their genuine value. Nowadays, my knowledge of the value of these works comes as though by testimony from my past self. When I have downtime these days, I tend to choose reruns of crime procedurals and Shonda Rhimes shows. It is not exactly that I take my current preferences to be straightforwardly wrong or confused, for I think there *is* something worthwhile about spending forty minutes watching *CSI: Miami* or *Scandal*. But these preferences reflect a loss of something important in my own abilities—a certain patience and intellectual stamina, perhaps, in short supply due to the demands of the tenure track. The shows I watch nowadays are comforting rather than stimulating; they give me time to shut out the world, rather than offering deeper enrichment. This shift in preferences, then, seems to me a loss of a particular form of value-expertise.

In highlighting these parts of our experience, I am not suggesting that only the realist can account for them. My goal here is not to defend realism itself, recall, but to offer a model that allows us to see idiosyncrasy as comfortably compatible with realism, and this is what the value-expertise account does. The preceding reflections, then, are intended to offer support for that model by showing how neatly it fits with the phenomenology of shifting evaluative stances: these changes are experienced by us as a sort of *learning* about the world (or, in the final case, a sort of *unlearning*), and this is exactly what the value-expertise model says is happening here. My model thus allows us to take at face value the fact that it often seems to us that a change in preference is not *merely* a change, but rather a clearing—or, sometimes, a clouding—of one's vision of something outside of oneself.

2.4 Loving Someone in Particular

In this section I want to show how the value-expertise account can help us in thinking about a puzzle that arises when we consider the love that we have for particular other people.

Here is what Harry Frankfurt says about his love for his children:

It is not fundamentally because I recognize how valuable or important to me my children are that I love them. My love for them is not derivative from their value or their importance to me. On the contrary, the relationship goes essentially the other way. My children are so valuable and important to me just because I do in fact love them.

(Frankfurt 1999: 173)

One of the central thoughts motivating Frankfurt's work is a commitment to 'the importance of what we care about.' This phrase is supposed to highlight not only the significance of the *caring* but also the significance of the particular individuals involved in the 'we.' It matters what 'we' *as individuals* happen to care about—the projects and people that are personally important to each of us, but which need not be taken as similarly important by other people. This concern for the all-pervasiveness of idiosyncrasy within our evaluative lives is a major source of motivation for Frankfurt's anti-realism: we must suppose, thinks Frankfurt, that the world does not come pre-laden with valuable things, but that rather "[i]t is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance" (2004: 23). Thus, one's love for one's children, on Frankfurt's account, is what makes it the case that they are now a normatively significant part of one's world, providing one with various reasons and prohibitions and demands—reasons and prohibitions and demands that don't apply to other people, for the simple reason that those other people do not love these particular children.

The value-expertise account allows us to respect the importance of the distinctive love one has for one's own children while still capturing the thought, to my mind extremely intuitive, that love is a response to pre-existing value. Realism allows us to begin from the posit that a human being is typically an especially wondrous source of value. And certain accidents of history and nature—namely, coming by whatever means into the relationship of parenthood—turn out typically to give you a distinctive window into the particular wondrousness of those human beings who are your children. Being a parent involves a distinctive form of love in part (it need not be

exhausted by this) because it involves a distinctive ability to see—to see, that is, something that is really there. This does not mean that parents cannot be wrong or deluded about their children, and do not ever mistakenly view as charming a trait that is really rather horrible. But in general the value-expertise account allows us to say that parents find their children to be amazing and fascinating and lovable because their children *are* amazing and fascinating and lovable.

I don't have children myself. But loving someone in particular feels (I think) like having found something genuinely special in the world, rather than my rendering something special to me *by* caring about it. A puzzle appears to arise once we acknowledge that everyone *else* claims to find similarly special certain people (their own snotty children or boring spouses) who strike us as not so special at all, for it can seem like we are now faced with only two options: either I am right and everyone else is deluded (*my* partner is genuinely wonderful; theirs tiresome), or we're all in some sense similarly deluded (we each happen to love certain people, and this either—depending on the nature of one's anti-realism—renders those people special-to-us, or perhaps makes us project an image of value or specialness where in fact there is none). The value-expertise account gives us a third option: my love for specific other people is a result of my having special insight into the particular pocket of value that those people really do possess. The value that the parent sees in the child is really there; it is bright and visible to her because she is especially capable of seeing it.

2.5 Ice Cream, and Associated Worries

So far, I have talked about the appreciation of classical music and love for one's children, and these might be thought especially noble topics. The reader may, then, be willing to grant the basic plausibility of my account in relation to *these* areas of value while still balking at the idea that there is real value to be found in the arena of (say) ice cream. After all, as Loeb says, gastronomic realism strikes us as “highly implausible, even silly” (Loeb 2003: 31); Nagel calls it “dotty” (Nagel 1986: 170); and Boghossian thinks it “absurd” (Boghossian, in preparation: 22).

We should acknowledge how far this already takes us from the comfortable ‘consensus’ we saw at the beginning of this chapter. For Nagel, the need for an anti-realist account of certain values is intimately connected to the idiosyncrasy, the personalness, of these parts of our lives. For Schroeder,

the claim that it is philosophically ‘uncontroversial’ that some reasons are attitude-dependent is grounded on the fact of a *difference* between Ronnie’s and Bradley’s reasons. In establishing the in-principle compatibility of idiosyncrasy and realism, my account already disrupts the connections and assumptions that these philosophers find it so natural to make. And this is so even if we stop short of embracing a comprehensive realism about value.

Nonetheless, I think that with the value-expertise model in hand, we will find that a comprehensive realism—realism even in those arenas that Loeb considers absurd enough to be able to serve as the *absurdum* for a *reductio* of value realism generally—is more plausible than one might at first suppose. My preference for peanut-butter-cup ice cream can be understood, I’ll argue, as an (albeit small and fairly unimportant) instance of gastronomic value-expertise.

To begin with, notice that the basic point about the phenomenology of coming to ‘get’ something that you didn’t ‘get’ before still holds in the arena of gastronomic value. One can come to appreciate good coffee, or develop a taste for dark chocolate or decent wine, and when one does, the experience need not be one of an arbitrary shift in preferences, but can be rather one of coming to grasp something that one hadn’t grasped before. When I learned to appreciate sushi, it seemed that sushi had *always* been interesting and complex and subtle, and that while I hadn’t been able to see that previously, now I got it. With practice, different types of whisky stopped tasting universally like paint stripper, and began to be revealed as a space in which the descriptions of pleasingly smooth, or peaty, or smoky began to make sense, and to indicate the nature of the value to be found in this stuff. So, the phenomenology of coming to see something one hadn’t seen before applies in the gastronomic realm, too.

And yet the idea that this phenomenology might reflect reality, and that there might be real value to be found here, has struck philosophers as ‘dotty’, ‘absurd’, ‘silly.’ Let me offer a couple of defusing explanations for these intuitions.

First, the relative triviality of matters of gastronomic taste and preference is likely to mislead our intuitions about whether or not there might be real value here. When it comes to matters of ice cream, it typically doesn’t matter much whether or not someone ‘sees’ aright, and this can lead us to conclude that there isn’t such a thing as *seeing* here at all. Notice, however, that as we move towards the more ‘serious’ end of the aesthetic spectrum, the *prima facie* implausibility of my view appears to fade accordingly. It may seem

ridiculous to think that a person's taste in ice cream might reflect some source of real value, but it is less obviously odd to suppose that a person's appreciation for a Mozart sonata, and her selecting it over the Peppa Pig theme music, might reflect a grasp of something genuinely valuable in the former. This suggests that the relative unimportance of the value of such things as ice cream flavor may have confused our judgments about whether or not such value can plausibly be understood as real.

Second, there is the fact that in matters of gastronomic taste we may find that there is not much that we are able to say if someone asks us *why* we like something. Asked why you prefer one particular flavor of ice cream, it seems perfectly reasonable to respond with a shrug, or "I just do," and such responses seem to indicate a model on which one's preference is just a sort of brute psychological fact, rather than a warranted response to something valuable in the world. However, although we do not have a widespread cultural practice of talking about and sharing our thoughts on ice cream flavor, we *do* have such practices in other areas of taste and preference—including in the gastronomic realm. (Consider again my example of coming to 'get' whisky.) Often, the development of a form of value-expertise goes hand in hand with the development of a vocabulary for, and an explicit and articulable understanding of, the part of the world that one is learning about. But this needn't of necessity be the case,⁷ and where it is not, our inarticulacy may mislead us into interpreting the experience of a source of value out in the world—something that *could* in principle be pointed out to and talked about with others—as being instead an experience merely of one's own 'brute preference.'

These considerations may seem not to get to the heart of the matter. The issue, really (my opponent may say), is that it surely *cannot* be right to say that someone who doesn't like peanut-butter-cup ice cream, or who prefers vanilla, or indeed who just doesn't like ice cream at all, has gotten something wrong, or has made some sort of mistake, or should somehow be considered blameworthy in her preference. To say these sorts of things would just seem bizarre, and absent some very powerful argument in favor of comprehensive realism (which I haven't attempted to provide here) this intuition might be thought powerful enough on its own to settle the matter;

⁷ Detectives again: Jonathan Creek (duffle-coated hero of the eponymous BBC TV series) often spots key details without being able to say what it is that he has spotted, nor what significance it has for the case. Creek's expertise (unlike that of, say, Sherlock Holmes (Conan Doyle 2001), or Hercule Poirot (Christie 1974)) takes a charmingly inarticulate form.

none of my defusing explanations are adequate to explain away an intuition this strong.

I agree that we have a strong intuition against the plausibility of such claims. I do not think, however, that the realist is forced to say this sort of thing. The value-expertise account gives us the materials we need to avoid such claims while still talking meaningfully of value that has its source in the world.

It is tempting to assume that realism about the value of peanut-butter-cup ice cream must entail the judgment that someone who doesn't share my preference is therefore wrong. But it is precisely this sort of assumption that the value-expertise account aims to undermine. Peanut-butter-cup ice cream, I would like to say, is genuinely good, and it is *my* favorite. But I think that vanilla ice cream is also genuinely good, good in a different way, and if *your* special skills lie in the appreciation of vanilla, then you will likely prefer vanilla, and that is fine. A preference for some particular flavor needn't be understood as a commitment to a comparative evaluative judgment: to like peanut-butter-cup ice cream (to be able to see its real value) needn't amount to an endorsement of the judgment that this flavor is objectively *better than* all the others. (Indeed, I think that a genuinely pluralist account of value, such as I am assuming here, will have to reject the idea that every comparative evaluative question must have a determinate answer.)⁸ Within such a framework, we can make room for the possibility of a difference in preference without being forced to say that one party must be wrong.

What about the person who not only doesn't prefer but in fact actively dislikes peanut-butter-cup ice cream, or indeed ice cream in general? Must the realist say at least that *this* person is wrong or has made a mistake? I do not think so. There is something that such a person is missing, certainly (and something that she is missing out on), but in general we do not say of someone who is unable to experience some particular part of the world that she is wrong or has made a mistake. A person who is colorblind may not be able to see certain things, but she is not thereby *wrong* or *mistaken* about color (though she may, of course, go on to make certain mistaken judgments as a result of her inability to see). In a similar manner, we can also see how the realist need not say that a person 'ought' to enjoy some source of real

⁸ I do not have space to explore the interesting implications of this point. See Raz (1986), especially chapters 13–15, for illuminating discussion and defense of a deep value pluralism. (Thanks to David Enoch for pointing me towards this part of Raz's work.)

value that she in fact does not enjoy (that she ‘ought’, say, to like ice cream). To the extent that the concept ‘ought’ makes sense in relation to the color-blind person and the things she cannot see, it is certainly not an ought that is properly *addressed* to that person, and it is not an ought that corresponds to questions of blameworthiness. We need not suppose, then, that realism about the value of ice cream entails the judgment that the person who lacks a sweet tooth is therefore wrong, or making some kind of mistake, or ought to like what she does not like, or is blameworthy in her preferences.

To be clear, my point is not that we should abandon such concepts in our attempts to understand the nature of value and our relationship to it.⁹ We will want to say, I think, that there are indeed some kinds of value to which concepts of wrongness, mistake, ought, and blame rightly apply. (Perhaps the application of such concepts offers us a useful way of marking out the particular realm of value that we want to call *moral* value.) It will also turn out, I think, that many comparative evaluative questions *do* have determinate answers, such that someone may well be wrong to prioritize one thing over another (personal loyalty over justice, for instance) in a particular situation, and may indeed be blameworthy for having gotten this wrong. There is lots more to say on this, and I cannot do justice to these very interesting questions here. My central point is just that the applicability of concepts of wrongness, mistake, ought, blame, and so on is separate from the question of value’s reality. And so the fact that these concepts seem strikingly out of place in the gastronomic arena need not undermine the idea that the value we find here really is something to be discovered in the world.

2.6 Values in Tension

In this section I want to explore how far my model can allow us to account for what I’ll call ‘deep’ idiosyncrasy. The idea is that although *some* differences in value-expertise may be a matter of merely contingent limitations, others may rest on more fundamental tensions between the underlying values themselves. There may thus be certain forms of value-expertise

⁹ Indeed, in seeking to separate out these various concepts from the question of value’s reality, I take myself to be working in the spirit of Bernard Williams’s remark, “why is there any expectation that [the truth about ethics] should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer” (1985: 17).

such that possessing the one kind precludes one, even *in principle*, from possessing the other.

Given my account so far, it may seem that the idiosyncrasy that pervades our ordinary relationship to value is really just a matter of the finitude of human existence, for it is this (it might seem) that limits our ability to develop all of the different capacities for value appreciation. If she had infinite time and resources, perhaps a person could learn to appreciate the value in both classical music *and* the blues; perhaps she could come to see the specialness of everyone else's children, not just her own.

This picture strikes me, however, as not quite in keeping with the true spirit of the original idea of idiosyncrasy, at least as it has moved some philosophers. Earlier in the chapter I mentioned Williams's example of Gauguin, who has to make a choice between two different lives: a life in which he pursues his artistic calling, in the hope of producing great art, and a life in which he abandons that calling out of respect for his familial obligations. I suspect that Williams would think that to see this conflict as *merely* a problem of limited time and resources would be to miss the deeper point, which is that these are really two different *lives*—lives which, in being lived, would give rise to two different Gauguins. For Williams, at least, the idiosyncrasy of our relationship to value runs very deep, and connects in intimate ways to individual people actually being the particular people that they are. And it may seem that the picture I've offered doesn't yet fully respect *this* idea.

I'll try to show, then, how my model can indeed account for deep idiosyncrasy—for incompatible forms of value-expertise, and for real values that stand in irresolvable tension with one another. In many putative cases, such tensions will turn out to be the result of external social structures—structures which are themselves contingent, and can be overcome and replaced by better arrangements that would allow us to resolve these tensions. (The case of Gauguin may, in fact, be of this kind, despite Williams's own intentions in setting up the case.) But not all cases need necessarily take this form; some tensions between values—real values—I'll suggest, may be *fundamentally* irresolvable.

Within our current way of life, the distinctive value-expertise involved in bringing up children stands in some tension with the value-expertise involved in creating great art. This is illustrated by Williams's story of Gauguin, and surely evidenced by the experiences of countless women artists throughout the centuries whose stories have not been similarly dramatized. But it is not clear that these two forms of expertise, these two

ways of life, are really *in principle* not co-realizable; there might well be social structures and political arrangements, reimaginings of the family and of the scope for self-realization within that setting, that would help us to conceive of a life in which one might genuinely be able to do both—where, indeed, the two might even complement each other.

It is not clear, however, that all tensions between values and forms of value-expertise are amenable to resolution in this sort of way. Here is an example: I have it on good authority that there is a distinctive value to be found in opera. Further, I was once taken by a generous friend to see *Turandot* at Covent Garden, and he helped me to glimpse some of what he saw in the performance. With the right sort of practice and inculcation, I believe I could grow to develop some measure of expertise in the value of opera, and if I were to do so my experiences while attending a performance would be much enriched. However, it seems likely to me that developing such expertise would mean that certain other parts of the world of value would fade from my view. In particular, there is a certain sort of political consciousness that I suspect is at least somewhat incompatible with the sort of immersion in a distinctively bourgeois aesthetic world that the proper appreciation of opera would require. Opera really is valuable, but to develop the expertise that would allow me a full and fluent experience of that value would mean lessening my grip on those socialist commitments which are, themselves, a particular form of value-expertise.

I believe that there is genuine value to be found in opera. But not everyone who lacks value-expertise in this arena as a result of their political commitments agrees with me here. At the beginning of *What is Art?*, Leo Tolstoy offers a vehement takedown of the genre. Opera, says Tolstoy, is “one of the most gigantic absurdities that could possibly be devised”:

An Indian king wants to marry; they bring him a bride; he disguises himself as a minstrel; the bride falls in love with the minstrel and is in despair, but afterwards discovers that the minstrel is the king, and everyone is highly delighted.

That there never were, or could be, such Indians, and that they were not only unlike Indians, but that what they were doing was unlike anything on earth except other operas, was beyond all manner of doubt; that people do not converse in such a way . . . , and do not place themselves at fixed distances, in a quartet, waving their arms to express their emotions; . . . that no one ever gets angry in such a way, or is affected in such a way, or

laughs in such a way, or cries in such a way; and that no one on earth can be moved by such performances; all this is beyond the possibility of doubt.
(Tolstoy 1979: 6)

What Tolstoy is highlighting here is opera's *ridiculousness*, its lack of truth-to-life. But the broader context of the text within which this passage is situated makes clear that Tolstoy's aesthetic objection is driven by his having seen the huge machinery of time, money, and human suffering that has gone into the creation of this absurdity. It is the human cost of the production—so many bodies tired out, all the angry demands shouted at underlings, the money spent on the dancing master, "whose salary per month exceeded what ten laborers earn in a year" (Tolstoy 1979: 3)—that renders the opera, as seen through Tolstoy's eyes, not *merely* silly or unrealistic but instead a "repulsive sight" (Tolstoy 1979: 5).

Is Tolstoy wrong here? I have said that I think opera *is* valuable, and clearly Tolstoy disagrees on this point. In this sense, then, I think that he is wrong. Still, it seems to me that there are things about opera that Tolstoy is seeing correctly—things that must perhaps fade from one's view if one is to become a lover of opera. For opera *is* absurd, and furthermore this is in some respects a dark and not an innocent absurdity. The truth of the matter, it seems to me, is that opera is good and it is bad; it is a locus of distinctive forms both of value and of disvalue. And the development of one's expertise in relation to one side of this equation will be, at the same time, a lessening of one's grip on the other side.

Mightn't there be, in a better world, the possibility once again of resolution? Mightn't fully automated luxury communism involve, as one of its luxuries, free-range and cruelty-free performances of *Turandot*? The difficulty here, I think, is that opera is itself such a culturally and historically specific phenomenon that it is very unclear that it could survive as the sort of thing it is, bearing the distinctive form of value that it bears, without its particular cultural and historic context.¹⁰ (Above, I mentioned the 'immersion in a distinctively bourgeois aesthetic world' that would be needed to appreciate opera fully.) Perhaps something *similar* to the value of opera might be realizable under a different social order, and perhaps in this case the similar value would be compatible with my socialist ideals. But such a thing would not, it seems to me, quite be *opera*, and those who love opera

¹⁰ Cf. Raz (2003).

now would not necessarily be wrong in thinking that something of genuine value had been lost in this new world—although they may indeed be wrong in the significance they accord to this loss, considered in light of other gains.¹¹

I think it is possible, then, that values can stand in tension with one another, that possessing certain forms of expertise can of necessity preclude possessing others, and that these tensions can run so deep as to be in principle irresolvable. In such cases, the realist can say something like what I said about opera: there *is* value here, just not value with which I am directly acquainted. And I could not come to such direct acquaintance without losing the direct acquaintance I currently have with other kinds of value. The value of opera remains out there in the world, and I am genuinely missing out by not developing my expertise in this area. But I would be missing out on something *else* if I did develop this expertise, and the importance of this something-else is vividly luminous to me right now, and is thus not something I can give up on. Acknowledging the reality of values that stand in tension with one another thus does not require one to assent to two outright contradictory statements. I can speak coherently about the reality of values that lie beyond, or even stand in fundamental conflict with, my own areas of expertise.

The ideas in this section are independent of the broader argument of the paper, so that one could reject them while still accepting the rest of my account. But they help, I think, to illuminate ways in which my account speaks to some of the deeper concerns that motivate philosophers (Williams and Frankfurt, for instance) who are keen to do justice to the significance and the depth of idiosyncrasy within our practical lives. My account allows us to respect these concerns—concerns that push Williams and Frankfurt, in different ways, in anti-realist directions—within what is nonetheless a fully realist framework.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have not attempted to defend value realism as such. Instead, my central goal has been to show how it is possible to make sense of

¹¹ Another example: Jay-Z's "99 Problems" is, I contend, a total banger. It is also not the most feminist song ever written. And I cannot see how those aspects of the song that might be thought somewhat misogynistic could have been excised without thereby making it *at least a bit less of a banger*. Perhaps I am wrong about this, and certainly the full story of rap's relationship to feminism will need to be a complex and nuanced one. But the general point—that one does, as one moves through the world of value, come across such seemingly irresolvable tensions—seems to me sound.

idiosyncrasy in the realm of practical life within what is nonetheless a fully realist framework. The value-expertise model allows us to understand how and why it is that people differ in their relationships to different kinds of value in the world without having to abandon the idea that what we have here really is *value in the world*. I have suggested that the value-expertise model helps to alleviate at least some of the concerns that might seem to rule out the possibility of a comprehensive realism about value, so that such a comprehensive realism ought to be considered a live philosophical option. And I have shown how the value-expertise model is compatible with the idea that idiosyncrasy in our relationships to value can run very deep, giving rise to differences that are in principle irreconcilable.

There is plenty that remains to be said. To conclude, let me mention far too briefly one pressing issue: that of how what I've been calling 'value' relates to a person's reasons. We shall want to say, I think, that the nature of a person's value-expertise affects her reasons. But the nature of the relationship here will be complex. My ability to appreciate the distinctive value of peanut-butter-cup ice cream surely gives me reason to choose it over vanilla, while for you the opposite may be true. This cannot be the end of the story, however. It seems that I could also have reasons that derive from values regarding which I have no expertise: for instance, reasons to preserve or protect the value of things that I know about only through testimony (the ticket to the opera that would be wasted on me ought not to be tossed in the trash, but given to someone else who would appreciate it), or reasons to develop my expertise in new directions.¹²

Nonetheless, it remains the case that on my account a person's expertise can affect her reasons. And this means that at least some of a person's reasons do turn out to be in an important sense agent-dependent—indeed, attitude-dependent, since I have suggested that the person's attitudes are themselves instantiations of her particular forms of value-expertise—even if *value* is not.¹³ Isn't this to give the game up in the final round? Don't we just end up more or less where we started, with some normative stuff being fundamentally a function of the person's attitudes? I don't think so. Consider, again, the case of Ronnie, who likes to dance, and Bradley, who hates it. If we agree (as seems very plausible) that their reasons differ, then

¹² See Callard (2018) for an interesting account of how reasons might work in this sort of case.

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous member of the Marc Sanders Prize committee for pressing me on this point.

the explanation for this difference *must*, somehow, rest on the difference in their preferences (after all, this is literally the only information that we have about them). But to agree that the fact of *difference* in their reasons depends on the difference in preferences is not yet to say that the *reasons themselves* (or their normative force) must be grounded in these preferences in the manner that the anti-realist supposes. Ronnie's reasons differ from Bradley's in some sense *because* of the difference in their preferences, but on my account the full normative story does not end here. For these preferences are themselves abilities to see, to have a certain form of acquaintance with, distinctive forms of value (and perhaps also disvalue), and it is these values that provide the ultimate normative foundation for the different reasons that each ends up with. On this account, then, although (some) reasons turn out to be 'attitude-dependent' in a certain sense, it is a sense that remains grounded in an uncompromising realism.

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