

Ontology and Axiology

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# Ontology and Axiology

ANTHONY HATZIMOYSIS

Philosophical discourse about value often begins with an exploration of our experience of value in its various manifestations. Attention to the phenomenology of value experience may certainly enrich our understanding of the values inhabiting our *Lebenswelt*. However, an exclusive concern with the phenomenology of values might also mislead one into precipitate conclusions about the nature of value itself. One important point here is that the way one articulates one's argumentation about the ontology of values should be different from—and its outcomes should not be determined by—the way one narrates the pre-reflective experience of values. The appreciation of this point may help us resolve what appears problematic in Professor Kupperman's discussion of Axiological Realism.<sup>1</sup>

A first problem arises with Kupperman's conception of axiological realism. The best we are offered as a definition of his position is that 'if one accepts axiological realism, a judgment that X has high value counts as correct if and only if X really (in an opinion-independent way) has high value'.<sup>2</sup> Kupperman's phrasing of this 'adverbial definition' indicates what axiological realism *entails* about judgments of high value; it does not reveal, though, *in virtue of what* this entailment holds.

We may receive some help from the parenthetical analysis of 'really' in terms of opinion-independence. Kupperman claims that the position he upholds counts as realist because it entails that value judgments are correct 'in an opinion-independent way'. The question is how we should understand the latter clause. Unfortunately, no particular answer is provided in his article. Indeed Kupperman's interesting analysis of value experience implies that there is no way to identify the value of a thing other than by working through a subject's view of that thing.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps then, we need to distinguish among such views, those which are mere opinions from those which deserve the title of belief proper or cognition. Armed with this distinction we may then say that judgments of 'unreflective people' that 'echo what others have said' are expressive of opinions; whereas judgments revealing 'what seems implicit in certain experiences'

<sup>1</sup> Joel J. Kupperman, 'Axiological Realism', *Philosophy* 71, No. 276 (April 1996), pp. 185–203.

<sup>2</sup> 'Axiological Realism', p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> See *op. cit.*, pp. 190–194.

## Discussion

or 'reporting the value ... that seems to be implicit in new experiences' express the subject's cognition of the relevant values.<sup>4</sup>

Even if this reconstruction were correct, it would fall short of showing why the position supported by the above-mentioned distinctions deserves the title of axiological *realism*. A realist position ought to state, or at least imply, something about, the ontological status of certain properties or entities. However, a division of judgments in terms of the mental states that they express points to a psychological or at most an epistemological distinction, with no clear implications concerning the ontology of values. Kupperman has to illuminate the link between his *epistemological* claim about the correctness of certain value judgments with the *ontological* thesis figuring in any version of *axiological* realism worthy of its name, *to wit* that values are real.

One way in which someone might respond on behalf of Kupperman's approach is to elaborate on an idea which lies at the heart of Kupperman's commitment to axiological realism. To quote:

the value of something one finds one really likes may seem to be an aspect of the experience. It is in these cases that a realistic account of values can look most plausible.<sup>5</sup>

The plausibility of an ontological doctrine affirming the reality of values is derived from the accuracy of a phenomenological claim about how values *appear* to be. However, we might wish to ask what justifies this move from appearances to reality? Kupperman's answer is that attending closely to our experience of value provides all the justification we may ever need:

[the] analysis of ... such emotional states as delight and boredom shows that values exert a pull on some people in such a way that it seems to them that they are, as it were, witnesses to the value (or disvalue) of certain things. Is this a significant claim? To turn the question around: what more might be wanted?<sup>6</sup>

The rhetorical tone of the question might be cancelled with the offering of a literal answer: what is wanted is an *explanation* of the fact that values appear as something to be 'experienced' or 'witnessed'. An axiological realist has to show that values play an indispensable role in the best explanation of the relevant phenomena. However, an explanatory story can be told which involves no refer-

<sup>4</sup> See *op. cit.*, p. 192 for the distinction between the two groups of value judgements.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 198.

ence to *sui generis* value properties, while accounting both for the phenomenology of value experience, and also for our ways of communicating the relevant experience in evaluative discourse. In its simplest form the story goes roughly as follows.<sup>7</sup>

A subject's awareness of the natural properties of an object (action, character, or state of affairs) gives rise to a positive or negative attitude toward that object. The subject may then express this attitude by employing evaluative predicates answering to her stance toward that object, so as to form judgments concerning its desirability, etc. The propositional form of value judgments allows us to argue about the value properties of an object as if they were among its real properties. According to this picture, value properties are abstractions from the evaluative predicates we employ in communicating our attitudes. For this account, there is no error involved in the ordinary practice of talking about the value or disvalue of an object. What is mistaken, though, is to attempt to explain this talk as allegedly describing or stating something about value properties which exist independently of human attitudes.

Closer to our concerns, this approach accounts for the phenomenological claim that values are part and parcel of the universe of human experience. Recall that an object has value in virtue of two things. On the one hand, it depends on the natural properties of that object and, on the other hand, on the sentiments that the awareness of those properties produce in us. In expressing our sentiments we form judgments about the positive or negative characteristics of that object. The more we reflect on those characteristics the deeper our understanding of them (and of our psychological landscape) becomes; deeper understanding may lead to subtler ways of expressing our sentiments or emotions in propositional discourse. Value properties are the revealing shadows of the predicates we employ in expressing our attitudes.

Axiological realists may counter that the above explanation is unnecessarily complicated. Instead of trying to analyse value properties away from our ontology, it might be wiser, and certainly much simpler, to maintain that our experience that an object has a certain value may serve as the epistemic ground of our belief that the object does have that value, and hence that our experience by itself can confer epistemic *prima facie* justification on our belief in the presence of value in that object. Kupperman's remarks about the justification of evaluative beliefs may prove illuminating in this context.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A detailed discussion of the metaphysical and methodological aspects of this type of explanation is offered in Nick Zangwill, 'Quasi-Realist Explanations' *Synthese* 97, pp. 287–296.

<sup>8</sup> 'Axiological Realism', p. 198; cf. pp. 187, 191.

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He argues that neither the fact that only some people may have the experience of the value of an object, nor the fact that people's experience points in very different directions about what is valuable and what is not, licenses a sceptical conclusion about the justifiability of one's belief in the value of, say, an act of love, or in the disvalue of submitting someone to pointless physical or psychological pain.

Kupperman's argument is quite plausible, as is the assertion of a *prima facie* epistemic link between our experience of something as having a certain value, to our belief that it does have that value. The problem is that this argumentation misses the point of my objection to Kupperman's approach. We may gladly accept the phenomenological claim about how we experience various objects and we may rightly endorse the epistemological claim about the connection between what we experience and what we have *prima facie* reason to believe.

However, neither of those claims provides the required explanation. The issue is not whether we experience something as valuable, or whether we are justified in believing that that thing is valuable, or whether we know that it is valuable, but what it is for something to be valuable. The explanatory story recited earlier indicates how one can explain the relevant phenomena, without appealing to the existence of anything more than the natural features of ordinary things and patterns of positive or negative reactions towards them. It provides a justification of our evaluative practices, without postulating the reality of any further, non-natural properties. In that sense, it has the distinctive advantage of being economical at the level of ontology, without compromising the moral and aesthetic phenomenology.

More importantly, though, it respects the important distinction between the phenomenology of value experience and the ontology of value itself—it thus provides a secure and non-question begging ground on which our philosophical discourse about value might begin.

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