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ETHICS

Value and the Good Life
By THOMAS L. CARSON
University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. xii + 328 pp. $45.00 cloth, $22.95 paper

After a detailed survey of first-order theories of value (hedonism, preferencesatisfaction, Nietzsche’s theory, and Aristotelian theories), Carson comes to an interim conclusion: we cannot decide among competing theories of value before answering two fundamental meta-ethical questions.

The first centres on what makes something good. Carson argues that something is good—in the sense of ‘good life’—if it is correct to prefer it to any realistic alternative. This, of course, favours a preference-satisfaction theory of value. The second meta-ethical question involves moral or axiological realism. If, as realists maintain, intrinsic goodness or badness is independent of our preferences, even our most adequately informed rational preferences could be mistaken. Carson examines different versions of realism and finds them all wanting.

He then returns to theories of value and opts for a rational preference-satisfaction theory. Carson rejects identifying a rational preference with its being fully-informed as placing too much weight on the cognitive capacities of human beings: “Given the laws of human psychology and physiology, the size of my brain limits the amount of information I can represent to myself” (p. 229). Moreover, full information (including vivid awareness and excruciating detail) of, for example, horrendous events like the Holocaust may lead to psychological breakdown or severe depression, neither of which is conducive to the formation of rational preferences.

If the ideal of full information is beyond the capacities of the human mind it would not, Carson argues, be beyond God’s mind. If God exists and if God is omniscient and “cares deeply about human beings, and is kind, sympathetic, and unselfish”, Carson says we should take God’s preferences for what we ought to prefer (insofar as we can ascertain them) as authoritative for us. He calls this ‘The Divine-Preference Theory of Rationality’ and claims that, “It deals very nicely with the main objections to the standard full-information theories and is the basis for a very attractive version of the rational-preference-satisfaction theory of value” (p. 267).

In the event that such a God does not exist, Carson provides a “fall-back” theory of rationality—an “informed” as opposed to “full-information” theory. A preference is informed if it is based on a cognitive perspective that is informationally better than other empirically possible perspectives. For example, I don’t have full information with respect to whether it would be good for me to retire this year. But having read about retirement, talked to retired friends, and reflected on my competence and circumstances (familial, medical, psychological, financial, etc.), I have sufficient information to endorse
with confidence a preference to continue teaching. Full-information, Carson suggests, should be retained as a regulative ideal for criticising our preferences and seeking ever better cognitive perspectives for assessing them.

Carson thinks and writes clearly and has critical command of the classical and contemporary literature. He is also scrupulously fair and temperate. Had I more space, I would question his conception of objectivity and whether he adequately distinguishes value pluralism from meta-ethical relativism. Still this is a fine book.

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