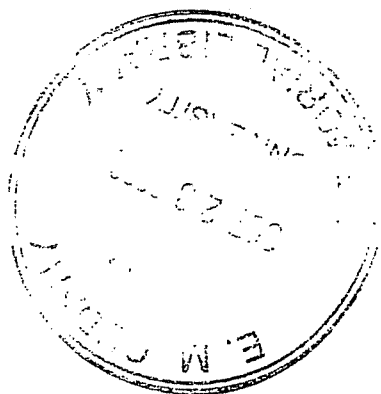


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Thomas L. Carson

Value and the Good Life.

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press
2000. Pp. xi + 328.

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US\$22.95 (paper: ISBN 0-268-04353-1).

This volume is a wide-ranging yet subtle treatment of central issues in axiology. In particular, Carson focuses on the nature of the good-life, and the nature of non-instrumental goods. Carson provides detailed and insightful analyses of the positions of both key historical figures and contemporary figures on these issues, in addition to presenting an innovative position of his own, a 'divine preference theory of value'.

Carson begins with two chapters devoted to the hedonistic theory of value, roughly the view that the only non-instrumental goods and bads are pleasures and pains. In the first chapter he carefully analyses (and finds flawed) several arguments from Mill and Sidgwick intended to defend the theory. In the second chapter he turns to common objections made to the theory, and draws attention to the fact that many of these arguments are driven by highly controversial intuitions. He concludes by noting that even so, the simple fact that many well-informed people have preferences that run contrary to the hedonistic theory will require explanation by the theory's proponents, and this will require appeal to some sort of normative or axiological realism. In a later chapter Carson argues that we lack adequate grounds for embracing any such realism.

Carson next considers desire or preference-satisfaction theories of value. He is sensitive to a number of subtle important distinctions that arise in considering various forms of such theories (for example, summative versus global desire-satisfaction, ideal versus actual desires, and so on). Carson concludes by tentatively endorsing a global version of the rational desire/preference satisfaction theory as a criterion of non-instrumental value (94).

In chapters 4 and 5 Carson turns to the theories of value and the good life held by Nietzsche, Aristotle, and more recent perfectionists. Broadly, Carson concludes that the accounts given by these philosophers tend to be inadequately explained, and that we are not given adequate reason to follow these theories compared to plausible versions of the rational preference satisfaction theory of value. On the other hand, Carson believes that certain aspects of the accounts of the good life given by these authors are appealing, and that our rational preferences for our lives should be shaped by our vivid awareness of what it would be like to lead the proposed types of lives.

The following chapters are devoted to metaethical issues. Carson provides a careful discussion of the concept of 'good', and proposes (roughly) that a necessary condition for something's being good is that it be correct (rational) to prefer that it exist. He also provides an insightful discussion of prominent contemporary forms of moral realism. Among other points, Carson argues that Cornell realism has yet to be developed with sufficient detail to allow for a complete evaluation; and at this point we lack any compelling reason to embrace such realism absent such development. With respect to British realism, Carson argues that its proponents have not yet adequately explained how to distinguish between correct and incorrect moral perception. Carson's arguments in these chapters mark a strong contribution to contemporary debates, particularly with respect to moral realism.

Carson develops his alternative position in the final chapter, the longest of the book. He begins by discussing certain problems that arise for full-information accounts of rational preferences. This discussion is clear, if rather brief relative to the extended discussions of Mill, Nietzsche, and moral realism. (Relatedly, Carson discusses such authors as Darwall, Gibbard, and Korsgaard only very briefly. More discussion of such prominent contemporary non-realists would have been a welcome addition.)

Putting aside certain qualifications, Carson's divine-preference theory holds that *if* there is an omniscient God who created the universe for certain purposes, who cares about human beings, and is kind, sympathetic, and unselfish, then it is correct / rational for a given person to have a certain preference if and only if God prefers that this person have this preference (250). We thus have a standard for the rationality of our preferences. On the other hand, if such a God does not exist, Carson argues that we need to appeal to another standard for the rationality or correctness of preferences. Very roughly, Carson holds that under such circumstances, if all possible ideal observers would prefer that a given person have a certain preference, then it is correct for this person to have this preference. If not all such observers

would agree, then a person's preference for X will be correct insofar as she would prefer X if she were to be in an empirically possible epistemic perspective (for her) concerning that preference such that there is no superior empirically possible perspective (for her) in which she would prefer not-X (256). Carson ably demonstrates how this divine-preference theory avoids certain problems that afflict related divine command and ideal observer theories.

Still, certain questions can be raised for Carson's account; here we can focus on just one issue. Carson attempts to ground all value standards in divine preferences. But consider his qualifications that the God involved must be caring, sympathetic, and kind. Carson attempts to give purely descriptive accounts of these traits (thus avoiding charges that these terms, and the corresponding characterization of an appropriate God, are normatively-loaded). But if Carson has succeeded in giving purely descriptive accounts of these traits, we must ask why these qualifications arise. Why not instead appeal to the judgements of a cruel God (where cruelty is given a similar descriptive characterization)? We seem to be making prior value judgements here (particularly that suffering is bad and that pleasure or happiness is good) — if not, how are we to explain the restrictions and qualifications concerning the nature of the God whose preferences are to set axiological standards?

Value and the Good Life is a very rich work, one that makes significant contributions to several contemporary debates, while also providing insights into the work of key historical figures; it is impossible to fully convey the range and depth of argument in a short review. Further, Carson's divine-preference theory of value is promising and should gain significant attention from a wide range of philosophers. Highly recommended.

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