

*Value and the Good Life*, by Thomas L. Carson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 328. H/b \$45.00.

In this thorough and wide-ranging book, Thomas Carson argues for a 'desire-satisfaction *criterion of value*' (p. 71) according to which a life is good just to the extent that it would be preferred by a rational agent (p. 216), and a 'divine-

preference theory of rationality' (p. 7). The early chapters of the book present and criticize various substantive theories of the good life: hedonism (Chapters 1 and 2), a Nietzschean theory of value (Chapter 4), and several Aristotelian theories of value (Chapter 5). But the heart of the book is a systematic argument for Carson's positive views.

This argument begins (in Chapter 6) with a familiar idea about the meaning of 'good' in talk about the good life, that 'a good life is a life that is worthy of being chosen' (p. 158). Carson's suggestion is clearest in its comparative form: if life *X* is better than life *Y* then it is *correct* to prefer *X* to *Y*, and *incorrect* not to (p. 159). I am inclined to think that the point is best expressed in terms of *reasons*: a life is good just to the extent that there is reason to choose it.

Having argued for the 'desire-satisfaction criterion of value', Carson goes on to reject what he calls 'axiological realism'. According to the axiological realist, facts about the good life are logically independent of the hypothetical attitudes of rational beings, under any condition whatever (p. 185). Carson argues that there is no reason to accept this view, and some reason to deny it.

It is not always clear in his discussion what 'axiological realism' amounts to. First, there is a risk of trivial refutation: facts about the good life are not logically independent of the attitudes of hypothetical rational beings who satisfy the condition that they love the good. Second, if claims about the good life have *analytic* implications for the correctness of preferences, it follows (once again) that facts about the good life are not logically independent of the attitudes of hypothetical rational beings (ones who satisfy the condition that their preferences are correct). Part of Carson's discussion seems to be aimed at views on which the relevant implications are *not* analytic—for instance, a Moorean view on which goodness is a simple property (p. 188–9). His objections are largely epistemological: how do we detect this sort of property? But there is a quick objection too (cf. p. 189): given his arguments about the *meaning* of 'good', claims about the good life *do* have analytic implications for the correctness of preferences.

Finally, Carson classifies as realist a view he attributes to Ewing, Broad and Ross, according to which the property of 'correctness' or 'fittingness' for preferences is irreducible, rather like the Moorean 'good' (pp. 190–1). (As with Moore, his objections are basically epistemological.) According to Carson's initial definition of axiological realism, I doubt that this view counts as realist, since it understands facts about the good life in terms of the attitudes of hypothetical beings who satisfy the condition that their preferences are fitting or correct. Nor does it imply that facts about the correctness of preferences are modally independent of the hypothetical attitudes of rational beings. It might be that, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, the things that are preferred by rational beings have an additional irreducible property: they are 'fitting' or 'correct'. At most, the view of Ewing, Broad and Ross implies that this further property does not *consist in* facts about hypothetical rational preference. Since Carson counts this view as realist, we can state the distinctive claim of the *non-*

realist as follows: the facts about what is good *and* correct are *constituted* by, or *consist in*, facts about the hypothetical preferences of rational beings (cf. p. 185).

Although Carson argues for non-realism on epistemic grounds, he does not think this argument is decisive (p. 181). The rest of his discussion—his non-realist theory of the correctness of preferences—is conditional or hypothetical: *if we reject axiological realism, what theory of value should we accept?*

According to Carson, 'correctness' is a matter of *rationality* (pp. 215–6). He goes on to defend a 'divine-preference theory of rationality': assuming that there is a kind, sympathetic, unselfish, omniscient god, an agent's preference is correct or rational if and only if God prefers that the agent have that preference (p. 250). Carson concedes that this account mistakes the ordinary meaning of 'rational' (p. 240), but he has a quick response: 'This ... is not an objection to using the divine-preference theory as a theory about the *correctness* of attitudes which, in turn, is used as the basis for a normative theory' (p. 240). I am not so sure about this. The divine-preference theory is not a credible account of the ordinary meaning of 'correct' as it figures in the analysis of 'good'. Nor is it offered just as a theory about which things *are* correct, which things have the further property of correctness—so that this property itself might be construed along the lines of Ewing, Broad and Ross. If it is to be a kind of *non-realism*, it has to be read as a pragmatic proposal about how to re-construe the concept of *correctness* that figures in the meaning of 'good'—how to replace the ordinary concept of *correctness* with a non-realist substitute. This is problematic in two ways. First, it undermines the claim that Carson's account of *good* is not revisionary (cf. pp. 170–2). And second, it leaves this view open to a challenge that Carson himself deploys. He argues that our concept of *good* should 'allow for genuine disagreement ... between people who know the non-normative facts' (p. 173; cf. pp. 170–1). Since 'being in accordance with the will of God [is a] reductive descriptive [property]' (p. 173), the divine-preference theory of rationality apparently does *not* allow for disagreement of this kind—at least not between those who share the concept of *good* that Carson recommends.

One distinctive feature of this book is Carson's conception of philosophical analysis. For Carson, the central question is not what 'good' means in ordinary language:

Even if 'good' in the sense of 'good life' has a determinate meaning in English, it might still be advisable for us to wield an alternative concept of value. We have a *choice* between alternative concepts of value. (p. 5; cf. pp. 165–6)

On this pragmatic approach, the question is which concept of *good* it would be *best* for us to employ. But we are bound to ask: what does 'best' mean in 'best for us to employ'? I suppose it means what it means in ordinary language; after all, this is where we begin. So, the pragmatic argument is that it is *best* (in the ordinary language sense) to drop the ordinary concept of *good*, and to adopt Carson's account. This is quite puzzling. It seems to assume that determining

the right way to think about *good* is a matter of choosing to guide one's life by a particular concept of *good*. But, on the face of it, we can distinguish the epistemic or theoretical project of figuring out the analysis of 'good' (and the metaphysics of goodness), from the practical question, 'Is it best to stick with the policy of using "good" in its ordinary sense?' Compare the position of the utilitarian who concludes (as some do) that we ought to believe in common-sense morality. This utilitarian might add that we should drop the ordinary concept of *rightness* (the concept he employs in stating utilitarianism) and use the word 'right' to *mean*: prescribed by common-sense morality. But it would be misleading to say that this further claim is a contribution to the philosophical analysis of 'right'. I think Carson's account of his pragmatic approach as a method of philosophical analysis is misleading in just the same way. I found it helpful to distinguish theoretical questions in philosophical ethics from Carson's equally significant practical question.

Even if we make this distinction, it is not clear that the pragmatic strategy can apply to the case that Carson has in mind. Suppose, for instance, that the ordinary concept of *good* is the one described by Ewing, Broad and Ross. And suppose that Carson is right to find this view problematic, on epistemic grounds. Having dropped the ordinary language concept of *good*, we are faced with a choice of replacements, and we want to know which replacement is *best*? The problem is that, before we pick a replacement, our question does not make sense. We can't appeal to ordinary language—we found an epistemic problem there—so we don't know what to mean by 'best' in asking for the 'best replacement'. Even for Carson's practical question, it seems to matter whether the 'non-reductive realist' is right about the ordinary meaning of 'good'. If he is, and if Carson is right to object to non-reductive realism, on epistemic grounds, then we face an *aporia*, not a practical argument that it is best to replace the ordinary concept of *good*.

Much of Carson's discussion—even in his central argument—can be detached from his pragmatic interpretation of questions in philosophical ethics. And alongside this central argument, there are many subsidiary arguments of independent interest—in particular, a constructive account of the 'full-information theory' of practical rationality (pp. 222–39). Partly through this account, and through its other arguments, Carson's book should be a useful guide to those who share his interest in developing a non-realist theory of value.

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