Value Realism and Idiosyncrasy

Wordcount: 9656

1. Idiosyncrasy and the Dotty View

As a realist about value, I think that valuable things are valuable in themselves; value is not a product or projection or construction of human attitudes, but rather something one discovers out in the world. Realism of more or less this kind is, nowadays, a common enough position within the metaethical literature. Most realists, however, will typically allow that there are at least some parts of our lives as agents that should not be understood in terms of realist value. Here, for instance, is Thomas Nagel:

> Most of the things we pursue, if not most of the things we avoid, 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).

This idea allows us to characterize a starting-point of shared ground between the typical realist and her anti-realist opponent. For both agree, it seems, that there are *some* cases in which things are valuable only because and insofar as particular people happen to value them.

This consensus is sometimes used argumentatively to the anti-realist's advantage. Mark Schroeder invokes it explicitly as the foundation for his defense of a neo-Humean account of reasons:[1] 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. Further, says Schroeder,

> it's not hard to see *why* Ronnie's and Bradley's reasons differ, at least at a first pass—this is something to do with their respective psychologies. It is because of what they *like*, *care* about, or *want*. […] 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)[2]

Philosophers will differ, of course, in the details of their accounts of these attitude- or agent-dependent values. But broadly speaking, the basic idea seems incredibly compelling, and the claim of philosophical consensus seems eminently reasonable. When it comes to such things as deciding to go to a party because you happen to like dancing, or choosing the peanut-butter-cup flavor of ice cream because it's your favorite, the relevant reasons or value must surely be understood to derive

[1] 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.

[2] Compare Paul Katsafanas, who grounds his constitutivist account on a different, though related, consensus-claim: "if you have an aim, you have a (pro tanto) reason to fulfill it. […T]his claim […] is relatively uncontroversial; even the most minimal accounts of practical reason, including most variants of the Humean account, accept it" (Katsafanas 2013: 184).

from your own particular attitudes, rather than from (for instance) the inherent value possessed by peanut-butter-cup ice cream.

Indeed, the idea that there might be inherent 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).[3] Recently, in a similar sort of move, 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).

In this paper, I shall be defending the dotty view. More precisely, my central aim is to show how a robust realism about value is compatible with (as I shall put it) properly 'idiosyncratic' responses to that value, and to defend the intuitive appeal of my model in relation to various different areas of our lives as agents (Sections 2–4). I extend this conclusion to those realms of value—such as matters of gastronomic taste—commonly thought to be most inhospitable to realism (Section 5), and even to cases where people's responses to value are not merely contingently different but instead irreconcilable in principle (Section 6).

The point here is not to defend realism as such (and certainly nothing in this paper is going to persuade anyone who is not already some sort of realist to switch teams). Rather, the main point is to show that *idiosyncrasy* as such does 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, the argument shows, then, that such a comprehensive realism ought to be considered a live philosophical option.

As a first step, let us try to get the problem that idiosyncrasy poses for realism more clearly into view. The underlying thought, I take it, is something like this: on a (robustly) realist model, value is conceived as something discovered, encountered, out in the world.[4] On this model, a person looks out upon the value-laden world, and what she sees is simply what is really (already) out there. But it is difficult to see how the metaphor of seeing-what's-really-there could 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

[3] Interestingly, Loeb in the end admits to having changed his mind part way through the project, claiming to find gastronomic realism more plausible than he had at the start (Loeb 2003: 47).

[4] The terminology of 'robustness' comes from David Enoch—see for instance his (2011). Of course, many self-described realists (including Nagel) are at pains to distance themselves from this sort of 'in the world' talk (Scanlon 2014). A peripheral aim of this paper is to dissolve at least some of the reasons that realists have found such language unattractive.

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 problem is not that of the so-called 'argument from disagreement' traditionally levelled against realists. The difficulty that idiosyncrasy poses is not (merely) that people *do* differ in their various preferences, values, and choices, nor even that such differences can appear to be especially intractable. The problem is rather that it seems perfectly right and proper that people *should* differ in these ways. If you like vanilla ice cream, and I like peanut-butter-cup ice cream, it would seem strange to insist that one of us must have gotten something *wrong*. Even when it comes to more serious values—the sorts of 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 a person's understanding of, or response to, their reasons.

In short, 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.

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. Note that 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 that allows for people to have expertise in one respect but not another, even in relation to the same subject-matter.[5] In some cases, a 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

[5] 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 the concept of 'expertise' found in these accounts wholesale. Along with a downplaying of the particular 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 isn't likely to be just *one* answer to that question—and further, to do so within an unashamedly realist framework.

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 special knowledge of, and abilities to make use of, 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 often 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, let me set up a scene: imagine a room containing a desk with piles of books and papers, a chair, a bookcase, a waste-paper 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 waste-paper 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) absent-mindedly put his banana-skin into the waste-paper 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 draughts, 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 hot-house vegetation and over-ripe 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 specific forms of expertise affect their experience of the space. It 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, while nonetheless holding firmly to 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 football (soccer) fans can appreciate the exuberant virtuosity of individual star plays such as Neymar or Messi, while others enjoy the style of football 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 football fades from view. Some who, like Bernard Williams' ("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.[6]

Where does value-expertise come from? In the next section, I'll say more about this, 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 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 particular form of expertise may be such contingent matters as plentiful exposure to classical music as a child, say, or the happenstance of a particularly acute sense of hearing. And of course, 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

[6] 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).

actually to *be* expertise: to be, that is, a special ability to know how things stand in some particular part or aspect of the world.

3. The Phenomenology of Value-Change

Having now laid out the basic position, I shall in this section and the next offer some further considerations that should help to reveal the intuitive appeal of the view. In this section, I'll discuss how the value-expertise account fits well with the phenomenology of undergoing changes in one's evaluative or preferential outlook.

In general, when one moves from having one particular 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). And something like this sort of experience is, I take it, common enough.

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, 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, perhaps 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 deeply 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 gratitude').[7] And so when he invites you over to listen to this piece of music, he will arrange things such that there are no distractions, allowing you to listen carefully to the music, and as it plays he points out certain moments that he finds particularly expressive or moving. And perhaps under these conditions, and 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.

One way that a person may come to develop a new mode of value-expertise, then, is under the guidance of another, who acts as a teacher. But sometimes no teacher 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 perhaps 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.

[7] Beethoven, String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132, Third Movement.

In general, then, when one comes to understand some new area of value, the experience is not one 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 of the phenomenology. Perhaps, say, 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 expertise is, in general, 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, and I was especially keen on the works of Jean-Luc Godard and Pedro Almodóvar. My enjoyment of these films was sincere, and I believe a reflection of their genuine value. Nowadays, my knowledge of the value of these kinds of artworks comes as though by testimony from my past self. When I have down-time these days, I tend to choose re-runs 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 I also think that these preferences reflect a loss of something important in my own abilities—a certain patience and intellectual stamina, perhaps, which is in short supply due to the various demands of teaching and research. The shows I currently like to watch are comforting rather than stimulating; they give me time to shut out the world, rather than enriching my life more generally. This particular shift in preferences, then, seems to me a loss of a particular form of value-expertise. And, again, I take it that some such experience might be common enough.

In highlighting these parts of our experience, I am of course not suggesting that only the realist can account for them. My goal here is not to defend realism itself, recall, but rather 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 I discussed, a sort of un-learning), and this is exactly what the value-expertise model says is indeed 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.

4. Loving Someone in Particular

It is probably fair to say that philosophers—with perhaps a few notable exceptions—have historically done a bad job when it comes to capturing and comprehending the nature of love.[8] While I have no illusions about bucking this particular trend, I would like in this section to show

[8] This may now be changing—the topic is, at least, a lively and growing one within the literature.

how the value-expertise account can help us in thinking about one 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 the determinedly anti-realist account that Frankfurt offers here: the world does not come pre-laden with valuable things; 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.

By contrast with Frankfurt's approach, the value-expertise account allows us to respect the importance of the distinctive love one has for one's own particular 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. We can add, then, that 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. Of course 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.

Loving someone in particular feels (I think) more like having found something genuinely special in the world, rather than like 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, however, opens up 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. Being a parent, for example, tends to give you special expertise regarding the value possessed by your own particular children; their value is bright and visible to you because you are especially capable of seeing it.

5. Ice Cream, and Associated Worries

So far, my instances of idiosyncratic value-expertise have involved such matters as the appreciation of classical music, and the special depth of value that one is able to see in one's children, and these might be thought especially noble topics. Perhaps, however, one may 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" (2003: 31); Nagel calls it "dotty" (1986: 170); and Boghossian thinks it "absurd"(in preparation: 22).

This is, I think, a legitimate response to my arguments so far. However, it is important to note how far this already takes us from the comfortable 'consensus' we saw referenced by several authors at the beginning of this paper. 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. In the case of Schroeder, the claim that it is philosophically 'uncontroversial' that some reasons are attitude-dependent (a claim that plays a foundational role in the argument as a whole) is itself presented as 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.[9] 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 potentially absurd enough to serve as the *absurdum* for a *reductio* of value realism generally—is much more plausible than one might at first suppose. My preference for peanut-butter-cup ice cream can be understood, I'll argue, as exemplifying a particular form of gastronomic value-expertise (albeit a localized, small, and fairly unimportant one). My defense of this claim rests on a combination of positive arguments and defusing explanations for the sense of absurdity, as well as some clarifications concerning what the (comprehensive) realist is—and is not—committed to saying about such value.

Notice first 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, and under the guidance of a patient friend, 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', 'ridiculous', 'silly'. Let me offer a couple of defusing explanations for these intuitions.

First, note that 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

[9] Of course, as Schroeder's framing of the case of Ronnie and Bradley makes clear, much will still have to be said about how the concept of 'value' that I've made use of connects to and interacts with concepts like 'reasons'. We shall want to say, I think, that a person's particular value-expertise may affect what reasons she has—but the story about how, exactly, these two concepts map onto one another may turn out to be a complicated one.

matters of ice cream flavor, it typically doesn't matter very 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 (allegedly) 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 an ice cream preference might reflect some source of real value, but it is less obviously odd to suppose that a person's preference for a Mozart sonata over the Peppa Pig theme music might reflect their 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. If 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 really just a sort of brute psychological fact, rather than any sort of warranted response to a source of value in the world. However, notice that 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 relation to other areas of taste and preference—including in the gastronomic realm. (Consider again my example of coming to 'get' whisky under the guidance of my patient friend.) Often, the development of some particular 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,[10] and where it is not, our inarticulacy may mislead us into interpreting the experience of some particular kind 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, of course, I haven't attempted to provide here), this intuition might be thought powerful enough on its own to settle the matter; 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 might seem natural enough 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 in fact it is precisely this sort of assumption that the value-expertise account is designed to undermine. To understand my own preference for peanut-butter-cup ice cream to be a response to a source of real value need not imply the claim that everyone ought to share my preference. Peanut-butter-cup ice cream 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

[10] Another example from the world of fictional detectives: Jonathan Creek (eponymous duffle-coated hero of the 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 baffled and inarticulate form. The idea that one might have expertise without being able to 'give an account' of oneself and one's understanding is another way in which my account stands apart from the Ancient tradition of thought about expertise in matters of value (cf footnote 5).

vanilla, then you will likely prefer vanilla, and that is fine. Notice, here, that a preference for some particular flavor needn't be understood as a commitment to a particular 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.[11] This is how we can make sense of a difference in preference within a realist framework without having to say that one party must be wrong; this is how we can make sense, that is, of the phenomenon of idiosyncrasy.

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 judgements 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 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 colorblind 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 sure, the realist will want to say that there are *some* kinds of value to which concepts of wrongness, mistake, and ought, and blame, properly apply in this sort of way (in fact, I think this is a good way of marking out that particular realm of value that we call 'moral' value). But—as the expertise model helps us to see—the application of these terms can come apart from the question of value's reality, and so the undeniable 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.[12]

6. Values in Tension

So far, I have painted a picture of a plurally value-laden world, a world filled with values both large and small, and populated by individuals who move through that world each equipped with special areas of expertise that allow them to experience some parts of that world and not others. Faced with such a picture, 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. Given infinite time and resources, perhaps a person could learn to appreciate the value in both classical music *and* the blues;

[11] In general, 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.

[12] In seeking to separate out these various concepts, and also the concept of a 'reason' (see footnote 9), from the question of value's reality, I take myself to be working in the spirit of Bernard Williams' 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).

perhaps she could even come to see the specialness of everyone else's children, and not just her own.

This take on the 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 paper, I mentioned Williams' 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 the idea of individual people actually being the particular people that they are. And it may seem that the picture I've offered doesn't fully respect *this* idea.

In this section, I want to show how my model can in fact account for 'deep' idiosyncrasy, for differences between people that are not merely a matter of contingent limitations. This is because, I shall suggest, it is possible for forms of real value to stand in active tension with one another, and thus for the possession of particular forms of value-expertise to exclude the possibility of possessing others. In many cases, such tensions are 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' 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' 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 structure of the family and of the scope for self-realization within that structure, 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 may be, however, that not all cases of tension between values and forms of value-expertise are open to resolution in this sort of way. If so, this too can be made sense of within my framework. 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 (and very funny) take-down 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 is opera's dramatic *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 here is driven by his having seen the huge machinery of time and 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 it seems that 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 to develop 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 a 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. (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 quite different social order, and perhaps in this case the similar value would be fully compatible with my socialist ideas. But such a thing would not, it seems to me, quite be *opera*, and those who love opera now would not necessarily be wrong in thinking that something of genuine value had been lost in this new world order—although they may, of course, be wrong in the significance they accord to this loss, considered in light of other gains.

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 other, 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 deeply fundamental conflict with, my own areas of expertise.

The ideas I've been developing 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.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, 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 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 pockets 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, further, 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.

Bibliography

Boghossian, Paul. "A Challenge to An Objectivist Conception of Beauty." In preparation.

Christie, Agatha. 1974. *Poirot's Early Cases* (Collins: London).

Conan Doyle, Arthur. 2001. *A Study in Scarlet* (Penguin Books: London).

Enoch, David. 2011. *Taking Morality Seriously : a defense of robust realism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

Frankfurt, Harry. 1999. 'On Caring.' in, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

———. 2004. *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford).

Katsafanas, Paul. 2013. *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

Loeb, Don. 2003. 'Gastronomic Realism - A Cautionary Tale', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 23: 30–49.

McDowell, John. 1979. 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist*, 62: 331–50.

Nagel, Thomas. 1986. *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford).

Scanlon, T. M. 2014. *Being Realistic About Reasons* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

Schroeder, Mark. 2007. *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

Tolstoy, Leo. 1979. *What is Art?* (International Translations and Publishing Company: Detroit).

Williams, Bernard. 1981a. 'Moral Luck.' in, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

———. 1981b. 'Persons, Character and Morality.' in, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

———. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA).

Wolf, Susan. 1982. 'Moral Saints', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79: 419-39.