

# I REALITY AND VALUE

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THE world presents a sensible being—like you or me—with an astonishing array of objects of every variety of shape, colour, texture, and composition. Mostly we take these objects of experience for granted. We take it for granted that they are part of the world; that they have both sensible features and features which lie below the surface of appearance; that they have both kinds of features independently of our sensing them as such; and that their having these features produces various tangible effects, including our experiences of them. To abandon some of these beliefs is to abandon an aspect of realism. Most of us, however, are reasonably robust realists about the sensible world.

The world also presents a sensitive being—like you or me—with a rich array of values. It is a world replete with goods and evils: pleasure and pain, joy and misery, kindness and callousness, graciousness and greed, the beauty of Bach and the banality of Britney Spears. The value of some of these—like the value of pleasure, or of kindness—forces itself upon us. Their value lies on or near the very surface of appearance. The value of others—like the putative value of forgiving those who have harmed you—may be not so easily discerned. They may lie some distance from the surface, to be discovered only through close attention or the acquisition of specific skills. But whether they lie on the surface of appearance or below it, they are there, whether or not some particular person notices or knows of them. Questioning the reality of the sensible world is largely a philosopher's pastime, but philosophers are by no means alone in questioning the reality of the valuable.

What is at issue between a realist and an antirealist about value? An unflinching realist about value will affirm those same theses of the valuable that we are all naturally disposed to affirm of the sensible. There are genuine claims about value, and these claims are true or false. The true claims—the *facts* about value—have a certain ontological robustness. They are mind-independent—they

are not reducible to desires or other mental states. Nor are they reducible to any other purely non-evaluative facts. Finally, these mind-independent, irreducible value facts are not idle bystanders, but are fully paid-up contributors to the causal network. Values can affect us, causally, and it is through their causal impact on us that we have knowledge of value.

These are not particularly fashionable theses, and taken as a whole they go somewhat against the grain of quite a lot of recent work in the metaphysics and epistemology of value. They constitute a robust realism about value. This book is an extended argument for robust realism about value. There are, of course, troubling arguments against each of the claims made by the realist. In the course of showing how and why these arguments fail, I outline the components of a version of robust value realism which is as coherent, attractive, and every bit as believable as any of its antirealist rivals.

## 1.1 Realism

Wherever there are interesting entities, there realists and antirealists will gather: the physical world, the phenomenal world, minds, universals, particulars, God, the past, the present, the future, theoretical entities, causation, chance, mathematical objects, logical objects, and (last and foremost) the good. In each such case there is an *existence* question, and the posing of this question predictably spawns its realists and antirealists together with a lively debate between them. Do these debates have something in common, or is it rather a case of overlapping family resemblances? What exactly does a realist affirm and her antirealist opponent deny?

It is often suggested that there is no single doctrine of realism, but rather that it comprises a bunch of different strands: truth-aptness, mind-independence, existence of truth-makers, causal or explanatory power, and so on. A realist might pick out one strand, her antirealist opponent another, and with each tightly clutching her own strand, they will almost certainly end up talking past one another. Despite the appearances of chaos and confusion about the commitments of realism, a fairly simple order is discernible in these debates. We can distinguish five realist tenets—concerning, respectively, *propositional*

*content, presuppositional fulfilment, mind-independence, irreducibility, and causal networking*—and in each of these debates these tenets define a series of increasingly realist stances. Realism thus admits of degrees, and the five tenets yield six degrees of realism.

Applying this schema to the case of value, the tenet of propositional content maintains that evaluative judgements involve the expression of genuine propositions about value, propositions which are apt for classification as either true or false descriptions of reality. The tenet of presuppositional fulfilment maintains that not only are such value propositions *apt* for classification as true or false, they do not lack actual truth values through unfulfilled presuppositions. (How a proposition may be apt for classification as true or false, without actually being true or false, we will soon see.) The mind-independence tenet denies that truths about value are simply congeries of facts concerning desires or preferences, or other such attitudes. Irreducibility denies that truths about value are congeries of any other non-evaluative facts. The last of the five tenets—that of causal networking—is the most controversial. It is one thing to claim that facts about value are irreducible, quite another to claim that they play an active role in the causal network. Ever since the Eleatic Stranger's remarks in Plato's *Sophist*, however, *power* has been taken to be a mark of the real. Further, it has also been thought to be essential to the knowability of the associated facts. How could we know anything about good and evil if they never played any role in shaping either the world or our responses to it?

These five tenets give rise to a unified and orderly hierarchy of theses of increasing strength, each successive thesis bringing with it a deeper commitment to realism. At one end of this sequence we have extreme antirealism, and at the other, robust realism. The robust realist is thus committed to the five tenets of propositional content, presuppositional fulfilment, mind-independence, irreducibility, and causal networking.

## 1.2 Propositional Content

That there are connections between reality and truth seems just obvious. So there should be some connection between realism and

truth. In his map of the realism debate in ethics, for example, Sayre-McCord maintains that ‘what marks off some particular terrain as the realist’s remains the same: over and over, it is the view that some of the disputed claims literally construed are literally true’ (1988: 5). *That there is a truth of the matter*—this is surely on the right track, but it needs some refining. There are, in fact, two important connections between realism and truth which need to be distinguished: the first concerns the content of value judgements, and the second concerns the presuppositions of those propositional contents.

The most basic component of realism about some domain is that the judgements about the domain are what they give every appearance of being—they are genuine claims *apt* for evaluation as correct or incorrect, true or false. They possess *truth conditions*. They have, as their contents, propositions about the way things stand. Briefly, they have truth-evaluable propositional content. This claim is fundamental to realism, and its denial constitutes the most extreme antirealism.

It will be instructive throughout this exposition of the five tenets of realism to use illustrations from sundry debates about the real. The scientific realist, for example, thinks that typical scientific judgements (that the earth rotates on its axis, that there are electrons and forces, that the mechanism for the inheritance of traits crucially involves DNA molecules, that electrons are made of quarks, etc.) are truth-evaluable. A prominent alternative to scientific realism is *instrumentalism*: the view that scientific theories are not attempts to describe a hidden reality behind the phenomena, but are simply more or less useful tools for categorizing and systematizing—*saving*—the phenomena.

Or consider theological realism. Take a typical theistic judgement—for example, the eschatological claim that *God repays the virtuous with everlasting happiness and the vicious with everlasting suffering*. According to the theological realist, this expresses a genuine, truth-evaluable proposition. A theological antirealist of the instrumentalist variety notes that language can be used for all sorts of purposes other than fact-stating, and that religion is a particularly rich source of examples of such: praying, exhorting, blessing, forgiving, promising, marrying, and so on. Suppose Simon makes the eschatological claim cited. The theological antirealist

says that Simon should not be construed as expressing a belief in a proposition about the existence of a superior being who takes a lively interest in dispensing just deserts. Rather, he should be construed as engaging in some other kind of speech act—perhaps that of exhorting people to be virtuous and discouraging them from being vicious.

Realism about value, of any variety, endorses the claim that value judgements—judgements about what is good and bad and better than—have propositional content. The realist about value holds, *inter alia*, that a judgement such as *it is better that the virtuous be happy rather than miserable* expresses a proposition, one which can be classified as true or as false. The most extreme antirealist about value denies that value judgements have such propositional content.

Extreme antirealism about value is the position known as non-cognitivism, the two main traditional versions being emotivism and prescriptivism. According to both, value judgements are not really expressions of propositional belief. Rather, they are expressions of quite different attitudes, and the appearance of propositional content is illusory. Thus emotivism (characterized by Iris Murdoch as that ‘puerile attempt to classify moral statements as exclamations or expression of emotion’ (1970: 49)) holds that value judgements function to express attitudes of approval and disapproval, desire and aversion. When Simon says that it is better that the virtuous are happy rather than miserable, he is not, contrary to appearances, expressing a belief in a proposition about betterness, virtue, and happiness. Rather, Simon is simply expressing his desire that the virtuous be happy rather than miserable. Although the desire may involve a proposition (*viz.* that the virtuous are happy and not miserable), and that proposition may be either true or false, what Simon expresses by his value judgement is his desire, and a desire cannot be judged to be true or false in the way a belief can be so judged. Prescriptivism assigns a different force to evaluative judgement. When Simon says that it is better that the virtuous be happy rather than miserable, he is really issuing a command—perhaps *Make it the case that the virtuous are happy!* Again, although this command is associated with a proposition (that *the virtuous are happy*), the command itself cannot be endorsed as true or criticized as false.

Recently, a much more subtle and interesting version of non-cognitivism has gained popularity. It is a halfway house between traditional non-cognitivism and the most antirealist of the cognitivist theories. Non-cognitivism is a sparse theory, unencumbered by embarrassing entities like value propositions, value properties, and value relations. Someone sympathetic to this economy, but desiring the logical benefits conferred by entities that are truth-apt, would welcome entry to the alethic paradise without paying the ontic entry fee. Maybe there is such a way. The new-wave non-cognitivist claims that we can achieve this just by talking. The approach can be articulated and motivated in various ways, and what follows is both highly compressed and something of a hybrid.<sup>1</sup>

New-wave non-cognitivists typically draw inspiration from a disquotational conception of truth. We start with the idea that truth is a feature not of propositions but of syntactic items: sentences. A sentential theory of truth will endorse all instances of Tarski's celebrated T-schema, the hackneyed example of which is:

*'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.*

Suppose that such instances of the T-schema are all that a theory of sentential truth needs to account for the phenomena associated with truth. If so, then the only function of the truth predicate is to 'remove quotation marks'. That, in a nutshell, is *disquotationalism*. Now suppose that propositional truth talk is really just elliptical for sentential truth talk. So *it is true that snow is white* is really elliptical for *'Snow is white' is true*. And *it is true that two plus two is four* is elliptical for *'Two plus two is four' is true*. These considerations apply as much to value talk as to number talk or snow talk.

Suppose one who likes the virtuous being happy expresses this sentiment by endorsing a value judgement: *it is good that the virtuous are happy*. Then he is committed to endorsing a sentential truth claim: *'It is good that the virtuous are happy' is true*. And this is elliptical

<sup>1</sup> The basic idea has received several different articulations, notably in the works of Simon Blackburn (see his (1993) for example), and Allan Gibbard (1990). My exposition is inspired mostly by the very clear account of *quasi-absolutism* given by Gilbert Harman in Harman and Thomson (1996: ch. 3). (Harman does not claim any originality for the idea.)

for the propositional truth claim: *it's true that it's good that the virtuous are happy*. So, by simply expressing likes and dislikes in value judgements, one is *thereby* committed to endorsing the *truth* of those judgements. But instead of concluding that one should *refrain* from expressing likes and dislikes in value judgements, our new-wave non-cognitivist concludes that one is fully entitled to endorse the *truth* of claims about value. Such claims must thus be truth-apt. Since expressing likes and dislikes surely does not commit one to a hefty ontology of propositions about value, truth-aptness by itself carries no ontic freight. Not even endorsing the *truth*—let alone the *truth-aptness*—of the judgement that *it is good that the virtuous are happy* commits one to a genuine talk-independent proposition about *goodness*.

The disquotationalist could also take a different tack here, urging instead that all there is to the existence of propositions, properties, and relations is the appropriateness of making truth-apt utterances. But such a stance is not easily intelligible. Better, then, to construe the disquotationalist as denying the ontic commitment while affirming truth-aptness.

Once we grant truth-aptness, we have all the logical benefits of propositional content: embeddability in truth-functional compounds, validity and invalidity, and so on. So if the new-wave non-cognitivists are right, just by talking *as if* there were such properties as *virtue* and *goodness*, we can have all the logical benefits of postulating such things, minus the ontological costs. Nice work (if you can get it).

New-wave non-cognitivism is an attempt to construct a halfway house between old-wave non-cognitivism and the next stop on the road to realism: the error theory. It fully acknowledges that value talk looks and sounds for all the world like ordinary truth-apt chatter, but claims that we can unabashedly indulge in such chatter to our heart's content while denying any embarrassing ontological commitments to which the chatter might be thought to commit us. For our purposes we can conveniently bundle together both old-wave and new-wave non-cognitivists. What is common to, and important to, both is that they reject genuine propositional content. The most fundamental tenet of realism about value, then, is that value judgements have truth-evaluable propositional content.

### 1.3 Presuppositional Fulfilment

A body of theory is true if it gets everything right, and it is close to the truth if it gets a lot right. Sometimes the truth, or closeness to truth, of current theory has been thought to be an important component of realism—especially of scientific realism. I take this to be a mistake as it stands, but it is on to something important.

Suppose you are inclined to accept scientific realism. One day one of your favourite bits of science is refuted. In fact, it is shown to be badly false. Are you now obliged to abandon scientific realism? Hardly. On the contrary, the fact that our theories occasionally bump up against reality in this way is grist to the realist's mill. Likewise, a theological realist of the Christian persuasion, say, would not be obliged to abandon realism on matters theological if she came to believe, perhaps through a striking and unexpected announcement from the Pope, that Muslims are right, and the doctrine of the Trinity is not just false but blasphemous. So a realist can quite easily countenance the possibility that her views, even the ones dearest to her heart, might turn out to be wrong, perhaps very wrong.

Despite this, there is an important point lying obscured here. Consider two theological realists, one a Muslim and the other a Christian. They have an ongoing and lively dispute about the number of persons that constitute the Deity. This dispute will appear quite different to an out-and-out atheist. The atheist will think that this dispute about the number of persons constituting the Godhead is a complete waste of time. If they turn to her and ask the question, 'So, how many persons do *you* think there are in the Godhead?', she is likely to be most reluctant to proffer any answer. Not even the answer *zero* will express her view of the matter. She thinks that any definitive numerical answer to this question is misguided. For her, the question simply does not arise, because she thinks the question has an unfulfilled existential presupposition—that God exists. To cite *any* number, even zero, in answer to the question would be to endorse that existential presupposition, a presupposition she rejects. For the atheist, typical God talk embodies a presupposition which makes the whole discourse radically defective, despite the fact that it is clearly cognitively significant.

Often a body of discourse contains substantive presuppositions, and in order for a typical claim within that body of discourse to be *either true or false*, those presuppositions have to be true. Call this *presuppositional fulfilment*. Realism about a domain is committed to presuppositional fulfilment. The value realist is thus not committed by his realism to any particular body of substantive value judgements, but he is committed to the presuppositions of value talk, and in particular to its existential presuppositions. Just as typical God talk presupposes the existence of God, typical value talk presupposes the existence of a range of entities—the properties of *goodness* and *badness* and the relation of *better than*, to name a few.

Those who affirm propositional content but deny presuppositional fulfilment are known as *error theorists*. The atheist, for example, is an error theorist about God talk. John Mackie (1946, 1977) is usually cited as the pre-eminent exponent of an error theory in the domain of values. For the error theorist, value judgements express genuine propositions about value, and those propositions presuppose the existence of a range of evaluative entities—value properties, relations, and magnitudes (degrees of goodness). The error theorist thinks that value judgements are systematically defective. Since the existential presuppositions fail, there are no true value judgements. If we identify facts with true propositions, then the error theory about value can be characterized thus: *all value judgements are incorrect, because there are no facts about value*. The error theory of value, broadly construed, has been defended under a number of names. The nihilist can be construed as endorsing an error theory, and recent *fictionalist* accounts of various kinds of discourse also seem to be straightforwardly error theories.

In his earlier days, Mackie was wont to say that all moral propositions are *false*. But this formulation faces a logical difficulty. If the claim that *it is good that the virtuous are happy* is false, then the negation of this—*it is not good that the virtuous are happy*—is true, and it is a claim about goodness. The thesis that all value claims are false thus flies in the face of the elementary logical fact that the negation of a false proposition is true. In his later writings, Mackie was wont to say that value judgements are *not true*. The earlier and later positions would be equivalent if every proposition that is not true is false—that is to say, if we assume the law of excluded

middle. But if there can be truth–value gaps, then the early and late positions are distinct, and the late position would not be subject to this objection. This is where the theory of presuppositions proves useful, for truthvaluelessness is inevitable if some propositions have substantive presuppositions which have to obtain before the question of truth and falsity of the proposition at issue even arises. If value judgements harbour such presuppositions, then such judgements could all fail to be true—in conformity with the later formulation—without any of them being false—contradicting the early formulation.

We still have a related problem though, albeit at a different level. If the error theory entails that there are no true propositions about value at all, then it is apparently self-defeating. For what about *that very claim*? If the error theory is cognitively significant, then, being a *proposition about value, it must be false by the error theorist's own lights.*

Consider the atheist again. She will typically take the following claims to have propositional content and an unfulfilled existential presupposition:

*God will reward the virtuous and punish the wicked.*

*God is three persons. God cares about the fall of every sparrow.*

Not all God-talk, however, needs to be construed like this. Consider:

*The existence of God is incompatible with the existence of evil.*

*A being has to be perfect in order to be God.*

*God cannot be both one person and three persons.*

These are examples of claims about God which the atheist will happily endorse, and may even use in what she takes to be sound arguments for another claim about God that she wants to endorse: that *God does not exist*. Characteristically, these latter kinds of claim about God do not have the irksome existential import. They do not presuppose the existence of God. There are, of course, a number of theories of what God claims are about, but one thing is clear. These latter kinds of claim cannot be about an exalted *individual*, because to assume that they are begs a question which these claims clearly leave open—viz. the very existence of a supreme being. So what are they about? We could construe the term ‘God’ as a disguised description, and adopt something like Russell’s theory

of descriptions. Then God claims would not be about any particular individual, but would rather be about the constellation of properties that define the concept of God. On a closely related view, God claims are about a certain *role*, a role an individual can play, a role defined by that same constellation of properties—the God role (Tichý 1978*b*). The second collection of claims would be true or false regardless of whether or not the God role is actually played by any individual.

In explicating the theory of presuppositions, this role theory turns out to be rather illuminating. Certain claims about the role presuppose that the role is filled—they cannot be true or false if the role is empty. Others do not. The medieval *de re–de dicto* distinction is suggestive here (Tichý 1978*a*). The claims about God which can be true or false only if the God role is filled by some individual, we can call, rather naturally, *de re* claims about the role. Claims about the God role that can be true or false even if the role is not occupied we can dub *de dicto*. *De dicto* claims effectively attribute various *role* features—features which roles may have or lack—to the role itself: for example, that it cannot be occupied in a world full of evil, or that nothing imperfect could occupy the role while remaining imperfect, or that the role is not occupied in fact. *De re* claims also tell us something about the role, but typically they attribute *occupant* features to the presumed but unspecified occupant of the role. That is why they presuppose that the role is filled: for example, the claim that the occupant of the God role (whoever that happens to be) cares about sparrows falling.

According to the atheist, there are *de dicto* theological facts all right—the role has plenty of interesting features—but there are no *de re* theological facts. *De re* talk about God fails, through failure of the role to have an occupant. *De re* God-claims have truth conditions, they express propositions; but those propositions are neither true nor false, because the role is not occupied by anyone. They lack a truth value because of presuppositional failure.

Unlike the non-cognitivist, the error theorist construes value judgements as *de re* value talk with propositional content. Further, he holds that *de re* claims carry various existential commitments. But, I submit, he should think of these commitments as *presuppositions* of first-order, *de re* value talk, presuppositions that he thinks fail.

How might this apply to evaluative claims? The claim that *it is good that the virtuous are happy* presupposes that there is a property of goodness. If there is no such property as goodness, then the claim (although *apt* for bearing a truth value) fails in fact to bear a truth value. The question of its truth or falsity simply does not arise.

That the law of excluded middle has something to do with realism is a natural enough thought. We need to be careful, however, to distinguish different possible sources of truth–value gaps. The possibility of gaps arising from presuppositional failure should not be confused with the possibility of such gaps arising from a positivist identification of *truth* with *provability* or *verifiability*. Recent versions of verificationism have indeed emphasized the connection between antirealism and truth–value gaps, and verificationism bears strong historical and conceptual connections to a familiar version of antirealism: namely *idealism* (Dummett 1978). Idealism, although undoubtedly a species of antirealism, is, however, less radical than nihilism. Idealism has its place, but it is not here. We return to it below.

According to the error theorist, *de re* value claims carry substantive presuppositions to the effect that there really are value properties and relations—like *good*, *bad*, and *better than*. Since these things don't exist, these propositions turn out to be truthvalueless.

It is worthwhile to briefly clear up one possible objection to this view. If there really are no such properties and relations as *goodness*, *badness*, and *better than*, then isn't value talk really just *gibberish*? If these terms don't pick out *anything at all*, then the claims we formulate in those terms fail even to be truth evaluable. If such claims have any force at all, it will thus have to be a non-cognitive one. If this is right, we haven't really carved out a distinctive position.

Here again, however, we can draw an analogy with the role construal of God talk. To push through the analogy with value, 'good' would not single out a particular property, just as 'God' does not single out a particular individual. Rather, both single out a role. In the case of *God*, it is a role for an *individual* to play. In the case of the *good*, however, it is a role for a *property* to play. The term 'God' singles out a genuine role for an individual to occupy, but, according to the atheist, no individual actually occupies the role. Similarly, the term 'good' singles out a genuine role for a property to occupy, but according to the error theorist (the nihilist, the fictionalist), no property actually occupies it.

If 'good' denotes a property role, rather than a particular property, then we should be able to find a description which specifies the role: what it would take for a property to be *the good*, to occupy the *goodness role*. Interestingly, Mackie supplies us with just such a description in the following oft-quoted passage:

Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. (Mackie 1977: 40)

Mackie's claims here suggest the following account: goodness is that property such that apprehension or knowledge of it would engage one's desires in a characteristic way. That is, apprehending that something is good would necessitate one's desiring it, perhaps in direct proportion to its degree of goodness. Suppose we do take this characteristic to be the essence of goodness, and turn it into the following definition:

*goodness* =<sub>df</sub> *that property  $\phi$  such that, necessarily, for any state P whatsoever, if one believes (alternatively: apprehends, judges, knows) that P has  $\phi$ , then one desires that P.*

Thus if there is a (unique) property  $\phi$  such that desiring P just *is* believing that P has  $\phi$ , then  $\phi$  would have what it takes to be *goodness*— $\phi$  would occupy the *goodness role*. According to Mackie, there is no property like this, and so the role goes unoccupied. This account would explain much in Mackie's theory that is otherwise opaque. Consider:

*It is good that the virtuous are happy.*

On Mackie's account, understood according to the role theory, this has a perfectly obvious propositional content, and it is tantamount to the proposition:

That *the virtuous are happy* has that property  $\phi$  such that necessarily, for any state P whatsoever, if one believes (alternatively: apprehends, judges, knows) that P has  $\phi$ , then one desires that P.

If the goodness role is empty, then this proposition has an unfulfilled presupposition, and so fails to have a truth value, as does its negation. Other *de re* value propositions, like those that follow, will suffer the same fate:

*It is not good that the virtuous are miserable.*

*It is bad that the vicious are happy.*

*It is better that the virtuous are happy than miserable.*

On the other hand, consider:

*Goodness does not exist.*

*The apprehension of goodness would immediately engage the will.*

*If it existed goodness would have to be a very queer property indeed.*

These are all *de dicto* judgements which attribute role features to the role itself. The first—to the effect that the role is empty—is, by Mackie's lights, perfectly true. The second—to the effect that for some property to occupy the role, it would have to have a very interesting feature—is, like the first, also true according to Mackie. The third—to the effect that any occupant of the role would have to be what Mackie calls *queer*—Mackie also holds to be true. Indeed, Mackie thinks that goodness is so queer that it follows that the role is *guaranteed* not to have any occupant.

This, I submit, is how we should understand the error theory of value. Provided we understand value-talk according to the role theory, Mackie can state his error theory without endorsing claims which that very theory deems false. The error theory is not a false, or truth-valueless, *de re* claim about something that does not exist. Rather, it is a *de dicto* claim about the goodness role itself—a claim which, if Mackie is right, is a truth about goodness.

#### 1.4 Mind-Independence

Traditionally, the main rival to realism has been idealism, and the hallmark of idealism is *mind-dependence*. Certain entities are claimed to be nothing over and above the mental. Idealism is thus a species of reductionism, but it is such an important species in the history of realism–antirealism debates that it deserves its own privileged niche.

First, exactly what is reduction? Take two kinds of entities, type-A entities and type-B entities. Although reduction is a contested notion, here is an undeniably *sufficient* condition for the reducibility of type-A entities to type-B entities: every type-A entity is *identical* to some type-B entity. This is the paradigm exemplified by the Russell–Frege reduction of numbers to classes. It is also what the early identity theorists wanted for the reduction of the mental to the physical.

Idealism is a species of reduction—reduction of the physical to the mental. According to Bishop Berkeley, the claim that *there is a tree in the quad* has a genuine propositional content, and the proposition in question may well be true. What is characteristic of Berkeleian idealism is that it denies the mind-independence of trees and quads. Trees and quads just *are* congeries of mind-dependent sense perceptions, as are their physical relations (like *being in*), as well as the physical facts consisting of physical objects standing in physical relations.

There is, of course, an alternative interpretation of Berkeley, according to which he is an error theorist about the physical. Berkeley himself went to some pains to repudiate that interpretation, insisting that his theory accords with the ordinary, everyday chatter of the folk. He insists that it is his opponents, physical substance theorists, who espouse an error theory of sensible trees and quads.

Outside certain interpretations of quantum mechanics, Berkeleian idealism about the physical world does not currently enjoy much of a following. Idealism in a variety of other fields is, however, a perennial temptation to philosophers. Idealism about mathematical objects has been something of a favourite, as has idealism about causal connections, and while idealism about God is not rated highly by philosophers, it is rather popular amongst theologians struggling with the ontological burden of their claims realistically construed. Of course, varieties of idealism about value are rife.

Strict idealism about physical objects entails the following determination principle: fix all the mental states of the observers of physical objects, and you thereby fix the distribution of physical properties of those objects. That is, there can be no difference in the state of the physical world without some difference in the state

of at least one observer. The mental determines the physical. This determination principle may not be sufficient to characterize idealism, but it is certainly necessary. Realism about the physical world, by contrast, holds that the total state of the physical world could transcend the perceptual states of observers. That is to say, different distributions of physical properties are compatible with one and the same total mental state of observers. For example, even if there were no observers at all, there would be a myriad of different distinct possible distributions of physical properties. But clearly there is only one possible total perceptual state for an empty class of observers (viz. a null state) and consequently, for the idealist, just one physical state for physical objects (some corresponding null state) compatible with that.

The idealist may well find this consequence unpalatable, and, to block it, might extend the class of states that count in the determination of the physical states. Berkeley extended the class by adding an omni-observer, someone who can keep an eye on things: God. A different expansion moves beyond actual, categorical perceptual states to various potential perceptual states. Some physical differences which go undetected would be *detectable* by observers under suitable conditions. So the idealist could include those *counterfactual* perceptual states in the reduction base—what observers *would* perceive if they were suitably placed. This is the move from Berkeleyan idealism to phenomenalism. Also, faced with the fact that observers have various cognitive shortcomings which should not be allowed to determine what is really there, together with the fact that sometimes observers are in error, the idealist will want to tidy up actual and potential perceptual states in various ways. Hence the physical state of the universe is determined not so much by what is actually perceived by actual observers, or even what *they* would perceive if they were suitably placed, but by what *would* be perceived or thought by various idealized observers. A physical object is a congeries not so much of actual perceptions, but of perceptions which ideal observers would have if ideally placed. Hence, amongst the variations on the basic idealist theme of mind-dependence we have various versions of positivism, certain *response-dependence* theories, *ideal limit* theories, and variations on these like so-called *internal realism*.

Application of idealism to the case of value seems straightforward. The sort of properties which are claimed, by the value

idealist, to be mind-dependent will be the normal evaluative properties (like *goodness*), relations (like *better than*), and magnitudes (*degrees* of goodness). Let's settle on some objects as the bearers of value—say they are states of affairs. Then the simplest version of value idealism would be a straightforward analogue of standard idealism. It would posit perceptions or experiences of value (or some analogue of experience) and maintain that the goodness of a state consists in the fact that some suitable collection of valuers experience (or, under suitable conditions, would experience) it as valuable. Candidates for the value analogues of percepts might be any of a number of different mental states: love, approval, or desire, for example. The mind-dependence of value requires only that evaluative properties and relations reduce to congeries of such attitudes. A specific version of mind-dependence—like *desire-dependence*—requires that evaluative properties reduce to congeries of desires. However it is to be cashed out, we will have the result that there can be no difference in the distribution of goodness over states of affairs without a difference in perceptions of value. Sameness of perception of value guarantees sameness of the distribution of value properties over states of affairs.

### 1.5 Irreducibility

The term *reduction* is more than a little suggestive of diminished ontological status. A complete but succinct inventory of the universe need not make reference to them at all. Reduced entities lack ontological independence. It is often said of reduced entities that they are *nothing over and above* the entities to which they reduce. But reduction is not elimination. Reduction is the *débutante's* ball for aspiring entities, allowing them an *entrée* into respectable society. Reduced entities are genuine entities all right—their reduction gives them a pass into the realm of the real—but *something* is lost. Like the *débutante* who makes a successful match, they forfeit their names, they have an adjunct status, their identity is absorbed, and thereafter they are rendered virtually invisible.

Philosophers are fond of reducing things, and I have to confess that I share that fondness (Oddie 2001*d*). There is no shortage of

reductionist accounts of this or that. As we have seen, idealism about the physical world is a species of reductionism—the reduction of the physical to the mental. This once popular doctrine has recently been usurped by its opposite—the reduction of the mental to the physical. The paradigm of this version of reductionism is the mental–physical identity theory—that all mental items (properties, events, states, etc.) are identical to some physical items (properties, events, states, etc.). Other examples of reductionism abound. Behaviourists claim that mental states reduce to dispositions to behave. Regularity theorists claim that the causal relation reduces to regularity, or to a species of regularity. Logicians claim that numbers reduce to sets of sets of particulars. Nominalists claim that properties reduce to particulars, and so on.

The idea that what is fully real enjoys an irreducible and independent ontological status is a deep and compelling one. (For example, it motivates Spinoza's doctrine that there is only one genuine being, one substance—God-or-Nature—because only God-or-Nature enjoys a totally independent existence.) That which is reducible is less real than that to which it reduces. The irreducibility doctrine maintains that for an entity to be fully real, it must not be reducible to anything ontologically more basic.

Naturalism about value I take to be the broad claim that value is nothing over and above the natural, that the value realm reduces to the natural realm. Old-style moral naturalism, which claims that moral properties are identical to non-moral properties, is clearly a species of reduction of the moral. And many of the candidates for identification with the good (happiness, pleasure, desire satisfaction, and so on) look very much as though they are, in addition, versions of the mind-dependence of value. The naturalist about value, however, can happily repudiate idealism. The non-value properties to which value properties reduce may turn out not to be congeries of mental states. The core of value naturalism is that the natural world just *is* the world. There are no properties, relations, and magnitudes *over and above* the natural properties, relations, and magnitudes. A complete, accurate, and succinct conceptualization of the universe thus need not trouble itself with propositions, properties, relations, and magnitudes other than the natural ones. A robust realist about value will thus deny naturalism.

There is a special problem for any version of non-naturalism about value. Value supervenes on nature. There can be no difference in value features without some difference in natural features. This is the well-known feature of the universalizability of value, a species of determination of value by nature. The universalizability of value amounts simply to this: any two objects with the very same natural properties must have the very same value properties. There can be no difference in value without some difference in nature. Articulating a notion of determination which does not entail reducibility has turned out to be rather difficult. There are proofs that any notion strong enough to yield the kind of determination required by universalizability entails reducibility (starting with Kim 1978). If these proofs are correct, then the non-naturalist is faced with a deep problem. An essential feature of value (universalizability with respect to the natural) entails the reduction of value to nature. It appears, then, that any realist (notoriously, G. E. Moore) who wants to eschew naturalism will have also to eschew universalizability (Moore 1960; Dreier 1992). That's a tall order.

Not many philosophers have had the courage to deny universalizability. Some have argued for a doctrine of particularism which appears to deny universalizability, and which would thereby be incompatible with supervenience.<sup>2</sup> That is a path that I, for one, would hesitate to take. Naturalism would be preferable to robust realism if one could accept robust realism only at the cost of jettisoning universalizability. The most plausible defence of non-naturalism, then, will show how and why universalizability does not entail the reducibility of value to nature.

## 1.6 Causal Networking

In Plato's *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger makes an intriguing suggestion:

My notion would be, that anything which possesses any sort of power to affect another, or to be affected by another, if only for a single moment,

<sup>2</sup> Dancy (1993) may be a case in point. See also Hooker and Little (2000).

however trifling the cause and however slight the effect, has real existence; and I hold that the definition of being is simply power. (Plato 1953: 246–7)

Call the claim that the Stranger seems to be suggesting—namely, that causal power is the hallmark of existence—the *Eleatic Principle* (Oddie 1982). It is the Eleatic Principle which will guide us in elaborating the final tenet of full-bodied realism.

What principle is the Stranger adverting to here? Let's say that something is *causally networked* if and only if it participates in a causal network—it has the power either to affect something else or to be affected by something else. The first part of the Stranger's claim suggests that he takes being causally networked to be sufficient for real existence. The second, however, suggests that he takes it to be necessary as well as sufficient. We could call these the *weak* and *strong* Eleatic Principles respectively.

If we adopt the weak Eleatic Principle then showing something to be causally networked is to show that it has 'real existence', that it is fully real. But showing that it is not causally networked, so far as the weak principle is concerned, does not tell us that it is not fully real. On the strong principle, however, showing that something is not causally networked is sufficient to banish it from the realm of the fully real. (Note that on either principle the power to be affected without the power to affect is sufficient for being causally networked, and hence sufficient for robust reality.)

The Stranger's suggestion has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent metaphysics, either explicitly—notably in the work of David Armstrong—or else implicitly—in all those 'causal theories' of this or that. Armstrong (1978) has wielded the strong principle against numerous abstract entities from ontology: numbers, sets, possible worlds, to name a few. Given the strong principle, if values fail to be causally networked, then they will have to be consigned to the realm of shadows and fictions.

There is a link between the strong Eleatic Principle and recent arguments for the mental–physical identity theory based on the causal exclusion principle. These attempt to show that we are committed, by certain well-regarded principles, to a dilemma: either mental states are identical to physical states, or else the

mental is not causally networked with the physical. One problem with the second horn of the dilemma is not just that it would conflict with the apparent truism that the mental *is* causally networked with the physical—philosophers have been prepared to jettison that. Rather, it would condemn the mental to the shadowy realm of the not fully real.

Robust realism about value is, finally, committed to value bearing the Stranger's mark of being. Value is robustly real if and only if it participates in the causal network.

A realist might well affirm the irreducibility of his favoured entities without thereby being committed to their participation in the causal network. A realist about numbers, for example, might hold that numbers aren't reducible to anything ontologically more basic, but hold that they lie beyond the causal network. Kant may well have held something like this position about noumena. (As is usually the case with Kant, it isn't easy to tell.) David Lewis held such a position on possible but non-actual worlds: they are real, but each is causally isolated from every other. (He did not hold this on non-actual *possibilia* generally, since they may well interact causally with other *possibilia* within their own worlds.) An apt label for the position which combines non-reductionism with a denial of participation in a causal network is not in common usage. Because such entities are held to transcend the causal network, I will co-opt the term *transcendentism*.

Examples of non-reductionist realism about value which subscribe to the participation of value in the causal network are rare, but they do exist. Plato sometimes seems to be a robust realist on this score, although the Neoplatonists developed the idea more explicitly. Variations on Neoplatonism have emerged quite recently. For example, Iris Murdoch (1993) appears to ascribe some kind of active power to the Form of the Good, although it has to be confessed that, as marvellous as her prose is, she does not make it quite clear what she is arguing for. Even more radically, albeit more perspicuously, John Leslie (1979) has defended a new kind of cosmological argument—that the only way to explain the existence of the world is in terms of its goodness. That which is good has, *ipso facto*, not just a claim to exist, but also a primitive *tendency* to exist, a tendency proportional in strength to its goodness. This tendency to exist is not something endowed externally by a contingent causal or probabilistic connection between goodness and existence. For the

goodness of the causal structure itself is what explains the existence of a world with that causal structure. The tendency is thus supposed to be a purely internal, primitive feature of goodness.

As interesting as these claims may be, they will strike many as a bit outlandish. If the thesis that value is causally networked requires apparently extravagant theses of this sort, then it seems just plain implausible. It becomes even less plausible once we concede the supervenience of value on the natural. For surely (one might argue) the natural features of objects are all causally explicable in terms of other natural features of objects. And since the valuable supervenes on the natural, on pain of causal overdetermination, it must be the natural features which do all the real causal work. Hence not only is there no need for us to postulate value properties over and above natural properties, there is a positive reason for us *not* to do so. The principle of inference to the best explanation, together with principles of simplicity and parsimony, will force us to forgo value in our deepest understanding of the world.

### 1.7 A Schema for Degrees of Realism

We now have a set of five questions we can ask about a domain of discourse which gives the appearance of being about some range of entities.

- 1 *Propositional content*: Do the statements of the discourse really express genuine propositional content?
- 2 *Presuppositional fulfilment*: Are the existential presuppositions of typical *de re* statements in the domain actually fulfilled?
- 3 *Mind-independence*: Are the entities which satisfy these existential presuppositions (call these the *characteristic entities*) mind-independent?
- 4 *Irreducibility*: Are the characteristic entities irreducible to any more basic category of entities?
- 5 *Causal networking*: Are the characteristic entities appropriately causally networked?

These five questions, asked and answered in sequence, generate a hierarchy of six degrees of realism about value, depicted in

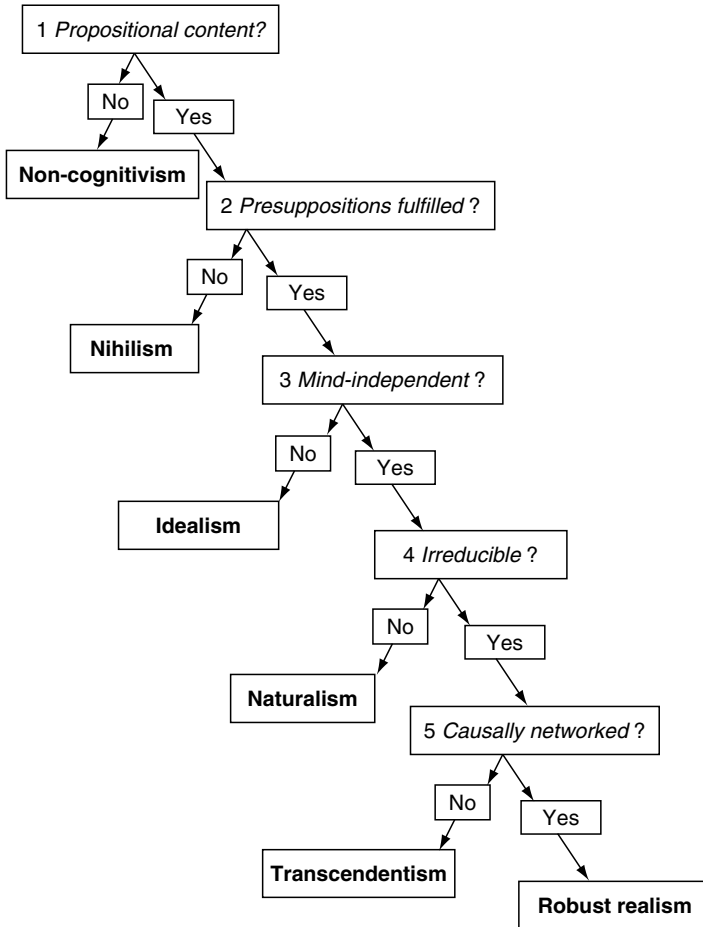


FIG. 1.1 *A schema for degrees of realism*

figure 1.1. At the top of the figure we have extreme antirealism, and at the bottom we have extreme realism.

### 1.8 An Overview of the Book

The rest of this book is a stroll down the chart.

In Chapter 2, I outline two problems of knowledge which any cognitivist about value faces. One is the familiar problem of the motivational inertness of bare facts, and the knowledge of such facts. Evaluative facts, on the other hand, would be queer because they would violate this general inertness. The other is the much less familiar problem of value data. A realist who does not want to embrace scepticism will have to posit some kind of value data. But what, exactly, are the value data? Where do they come from? The inertness problem can be approached through a puzzling asymmetry in value judgements, an asymmetry which can easily be explained by the internalist thesis that value judgements are special in being intrinsically or necessarily motivating. Internalism and non-cognitivism dovetail very nicely—they seem almost made for each other—and so the non-cognitivist has a ready explanation for the puzzling asymmetry. The cognitivist can also embrace internalism, but then he is in danger of also embracing something apparently rather queer: that certain beliefs—beliefs about value—would necessitate certain desires. I argue that there is a natural way for the cognitivist to explain the puzzling asymmetry, and it is one which simultaneously solves the problem of the missing data. The explanation appeals to two rather radical ideas. First, experiences of value are necessary, though not sufficient, for us to have knowledge of value. Second, desires are experiences of value. I call the conjunction of these two theses *the experience conjecture*, and I show how it explains, *inter alia*, the puzzling asymmetry.

In Chapter 3 I argue more extensively for the experience conjecture, and tackle some of the fairly obvious objections to it. Other objections have to wait for aspects of realism to be developed before they receive adequate treatment.

The realist thinks that the world enjoys a certain independence from experience which the idealist denies. She thinks that our experiences do not, all by themselves, determine the shape of reality. The value realist, likewise, thinks that value enjoys a certain independence from our experiences of value—our desires, if the experience conjecture is correct. And the value idealist denies this. Something about value idealism has proved perennially attractive. There is something compelling about the idea that value is, at least in part, the product of our experiences of value. I like skiing, and

you like swimming. That seems to make it more valuable for me to go skiing while you go swimming, than for me to go swimming while you go skiing. The value idealist thinks that this is the essence of the relationship between value and desire—that desires, taken collectively, fully determine the shape of value.

In Chapter 4 I do a considerable amount of spadework on behalf of value idealism, by developing a promising reduction of value to desire. The guiding idea is a fairly familiar and popular one. It is not the simple idea that the valuable is what we *happen* to desire in fact (that is, perhaps, a value analogue of Berkeleian idealism), but the more sophisticated and plausible idea that the valuable is what we *would* desire were we to *refine* our actual desires into a completely coherent set (a value analogue of phenomenalism). I develop a novel way of articulating such a refinement theory with some precision, and show how it provides a map of value that is remarkably close to that of the realist—much closer, I think, than either idealists had hoped for, or their realist opponents had realized possible.

The refinement theory that I develop embodies important lessons which a realist can happily appropriate. And it helps to clear up some of the outstanding objections to the experience conjecture left over from Chapter 3. But the thoroughgoing idealist cannot deliver a totally satisfactory account of the valuable. The map, while surprisingly accurate, is not quite accurate enough. In Chapter 5 I show where a refinement theory and a realist theory have to part company. The idealist cannot explain every truism about our experiences of value. To get an adequate explanation, we are compelled to postulate a desire-independent value residue.

Of course, one could be a reductionist about value without being an idealist. One might be a naturalist. The reduction of value to nature is also an attractive programme, one that has an enormously powerful line of argument going for it. The universalizability of value with respect to the natural seems undeniable: no difference in distribution of value without a difference in distribution of purely natural (or non-evaluative) features. Now, there are a number of well-known arguments that this kind of determination of one domain by another entails reduction of the one to the other, and the reduction of the valuable to the natural is precisely what the naturalist demands. Naturalism is a kind of realism—it is closer

to the bottom of figure 1.1 than to the top. But it is a modest kind of realism. In Chapter 6 I present a general theory of properties, based on the notion of convexity. This general theory, together with some facts about additivity and organic unity, yields the irreducibility of the valuable to the natural.

The irreducibility of value saddles the realist with a compulsory question, one that she has to answer adequately in order to complete and pass the final exam: *Where does value fit into the causal network?* This question is not just an optional extra. It matters how the realist answers this one, because the answer is relevant to the issue of scepticism. It is difficult to see how irreducible entities that are also transcendent—that is to say, entities that do not participate in the causal network of which we, and our experiences, are a part—could be *reliably* connected with our experiences of them. We can certainly *have* experiences of entities that do not cause those experiences (we can dream, we can hallucinate), and such experiences may even end up being veridical. But their being so might be just a matter of luck. If there is good reason to think that our experiences of irreducible values are not causally networked with the values themselves, then that will be a reason for being a value sceptic. Briefly, if values were completely transcendent entities, they would not be causally connected with our experiences of value, and so (barring some version of idealism) those experiences would not yield knowledge. For experiences of value to be reliable indicators of value, the experiences have to be appropriately causally networked with the values themselves. I argue for the causal networking of value in Chapter 7.

In this first chapter I have given a map of the territory in which the varieties of realism and antirealism are located. I hope it is a good guide to the terrain; but even if it is, it is clearly not the only way of drawing the map. In the final chapter I offer a different and complementary take on the nature of realism and antirealism, one which has a clearer application to value when our journey is almost over than it would have here just as we embark.

Briefly, realism can be characterized as the affirmation of three important logical gaps, each gap being associated with what is often regarded as a kind of shortcoming, a defect. But they can also be viewed as inevitable consequences of our being the kinds of beings we are. First, there is the gap between appearance and reality—the

logical gap which constitutes the possibility of illusion or distortion. Second, there is the gap between reality and belief—the logical gap which constitutes the possibility of error. And third, there is the gap between appearance and belief—the logical gap which constitutes the possibility of incoherence between percept and concept. Various versions of antirealism try to close these gaps, thereby handily blocking the possibility of a certain kind of short-coming.

Given the experience conjecture—that desires are experiences of value—we can see how value realism also affirms three gaps that various versions of antirealism deny. First, corresponding to the appearance–reality gap, there is the *desire–value gap*—the possibility that our experiences of value (our desires) may be out of kilter with actual value. Second, there is the *value–judgement gap*—the possibility that our judgements about value, perhaps even those that seem most thoroughly justified, might be out of kilter with the value facts. Third, corresponding to the gap between appearance and belief there is the *desire–judgement gap*—the possibility of our value judgements being out of kilter with our desires. The realist affirms the existence of all these gaps—the associated limitations are, after all, genuine. But if it is content with simply affirming the gaps, realism courts scepticism. Reasonable realists would like to bridge the gaps (not close them), and I attempt to do so by drawing together the connections between value, desire, and judgement which are laid bare in the course of this inquiry.