Value Realism

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Value realism, roughly speaking, is the thesis that value claims (such as *friendship is good* and *burning baby's feet for fun is bad*) can be literally true or false; that some such claims are indeed true; that their truth is not *simply* a matter of any individual's subjective attitudes or even of the attitudes of some larger collective; and that facts about value enjoy a certain metaphysical independence from other matters of fact. As this first rough characterization might suggest, realism about value is a matter of degree. While the robust value antirealist will reject all four claims, there are a variety of realist positions from weak objective idealist views, to mind-independent naturalist views, and finally robustly non-naturalist views of value.

It is possible to combine different degrees of realism with respect to different domains. For example, a robust realism about the physical can be, and often is, combined with a reductive realism about the mental, or with antirealism about the moral. The purpose of this essay is to characterize *value* or *axiological* realism, rather than either *deontic* realism or *moral* realism (*see* REALISM, MORAL) with which it is sometimes conflated.

The axiological domain embraces the thin evaluative concepts – such as *good*, *bad*, *better*, *worse* – along with their thick entourage including such concepts as *courageous*, *kind*, *beautiful*, *sublime*, *intelligent*, *elegant*, *clumsy*, *petty*, *craven*, *callous*, *cruel*, *outrageous*, *salacious*, *mean*, *sarcastic*, and *ugly* (*see* THICK AND THIN CONCEPTS). The deontic domain embraces the concepts of *permissibility*, *impermissibility*, *obligation*, and so on, along with their thick entourage (e.g., *just*, *fair*, *appropriate*, *desert*, *rights*, *duties*, and so on). That these two domains are conceptually distinct is evidenced, for example, by the ongoing debate about whether the right is reducible to the good, or the good to the right, or neither. We can thus distinguish between *deontic* realism and *axiological* realism, facilitating possibly differential treatments of the two. The *moral* domain is identified narrowly with the deontic domain alone, or broadly, with the union of the deontic and the axiological. These yield a narrow and a broad notion of moral realism, neither of which is identical to value realism.

The putative bearers of value are ontologically varied – states of affairs, people, properties, culinary dishes, works of art, sporting achievements, proofs, scientific discoveries, to name a few. One might nevertheless hold that certain kinds of putative value bearers are *primary*, while the values of the remaining kinds of entities derive from the values of primary bearers. Thus some value theorists take states of affairs or propositions to be the primary value bearers, while others take properties or people for example. We can leave this open here.

Are Value Claims Truth Evaluable?

"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" (Sayre-McCord 1988: 5). This truth requirement is suggestive, but it can be further refined. The first component of the requirement concerns the *possibility* of truth. Are value claims evaluable as true or false? Are they, or do they have, *truth bearers*?

If we call the basic truth bearers *propositions* (without thereby begging any questions about the metaphysical nature of propositions) then the possibility of truths about value implies that value claims are, or express, truth evaluable propositions. So we can call an affirmative answer to this first question *propositionalism*. Propositionalism is fundamental to realism, and its denial constitutes extreme antirealism.

Propositionalism has often been identified with *cognitivism* (*see* COGNITIVISM) and *non-propositionalism* with *non-cognitivism* (*see* NON-COGNITIVISM; EMOTIVISM), but it is useful to distinguish between these. Non-propositionalism is compatible with the thesis that value claims are *meaningless*, because value terms are meaningless – that is, with a radical *nihilism* (*see* NIHILISM). A non-propositionalist may reject nihilism and embrace a *non-propositionalist* semantics of value claims, together with a positive account of the *acceptability* of such claims. Given non-propositionalism, acceptance of a value claim must involve some attitude other than belief in the truth of a value proposition.

Do Value Claims Have Truth Makers?

The second component of the truth requirement concerns the existence of *truth makers*. The value realist requires value facts to make some substantive value claims true.

A proposition may fail to be true through the failure of its presuppositions (Soames 1989). If God does not exist, the apposite answer to the question *Is Sarah Palin God's prophet?* is *Presupposition unfulfilled!* Or consider the claim *S* that *Lying is always sinful.* Suppose an act is sinful if and only if doing that action would cut one off from God's grace. There are possible circumstances which would make *S* true (i.e., God exists and any lie would cut one off from God's grace); and possible circumstances which would make *S* false (i.e., God exists but some lies would not cut one off from God's grace). But if God doesn't exist then there is no such thing as God's grace, and the above description fails to single out any property. In that case, the question *Is lying always sinful?* doesn't arise.

Value claims presuppose the existence of value properties and relations, and since the value realist is committed to some first-order value claims being true, she is also committed to the existential presuppositions of those value claims – that is, to the existence of the presupposed value traits. If those presuppositions fail then the first-order value claims cannot be true.

Propositionalism combined with presuppositional failure constitutes the *error theory* of value (Mackie 1946; 1977; Joyce 2001; *see* ERROR THEORY). The error theorist deems value claims systematically flawed, because their common existential

presuppositions are unfulfilled. Whether the error theorist agrees with Mackie (1946) that all first-order moral claims are *false*, or whether she embraces the truth valuelessness of first-order moral claims will depend on which account of pre-suppositions she favors (Soames 1989).

An error theorist who holds that acceptance is a matter of belief must conclude that no value claims are *acceptable*. This is value *eliminativism*. But like non-propositionalists, error theorists may accept some value claims. One cannot rationally *believe* a proposition that one knows to be either false or truth valueless. So for this kind of error theorist, acceptance must be some attitude other than straight belief. This is the core of value *fictionalism* (*see* FICTIONALISM, MORAL). Different fictionalists endorse different non-cognitivist accounts of acceptance. Fictionalists are error theorists who endorse a non-cognitivist account of acceptance (Kalderon 2005).

Are the Value Facts Mind Independent?

Idealism has played a major role in realism–antirealism debates in a range of domains. According to Berkeley, that there is a tree in the quad has propositional content, its existential presuppositions (properly construed) are fulfilled, and it is (let's suppose) true. What Berkeleian idealism denies is the *mind independence* of the tree in the quad: trees in quads are nothing more than congeries of tree and quad perceptions.

Idealism about the physical entails the following determination principle: fix all the mental states of the perceivers of physical objects, and you thereby fix the distribution of physical properties over those objects: no difference in the state of the physical world without some difference in perceptual states. Realism about the phys-ical holds that the total state of the physical world typically transcends the mental states of perceivers. Different distributions of physical properties are compatible with one and the same distribution of mental states.

Suppose, for the moment, that states of affairs are the bearers of value. Then the simplest version of value idealism would be a straightforward analogue of Berkeleian idealism: it would posit experiences of value and hold that the value of a state con-sists in the fact that some suitable collection of valuers experience it as valuable. Candidates for value experiences include various emotions, approval, pleasure, and desire. The mind dependence of value requires only that evaluative properties and relations reduce to congeries of the preferred value experiences. A specific version of mind dependence – like desire dependence – requires that evaluative properties reduce to desires (*see* DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD). However broad the class of value experiences is made, idealism entails that there can be no difference in the distribution of goodness over possible states of affairs without some difference in value experiences. Sameness of value experiences guarantees sameness of the distri-bution of value properties over states of affairs.

Dependence of value on value experience does not entail that all value is *subject dependent* (or *agent relative*). However, some values do seem to be subject depend-ent. What is good for Jill may be bad for Jack, and vice versa. And those values may be subject dependent because they are determined by the value experiences of the

subject in question: that is, what is good for Jill is determined by Jill's value experiences (by Jill's desires, say). A value is subjective if it is both mind dependent and subject dependent. *Subjectivism* about value is the thesis that *all* values are subjective (Goldman 2009). A value is objective just in case it is *not subjective* – that is, it is either mind independent or subject independent or both. The value objectivist holds either that some values are objective or that all values are objective. Objectivism about value is thus compatible with idealism, though not with subjectivism.

Suppose that the value of a state of affairs is determined by the overall level of preference satisfaction. Then that value is objective – since overall preference satisfaction is clearly subject independent. However, this value is also mind dependent (the distribution of preference satisfaction over possible states of affairs is determined by preferences). If all values are a function of overall preference satisfaction then value idealism and value objectivism can both be true. Objectivism is thus a step on the road to robust realism, but, being compatible with value idealism, it by no means exhausts it.

Are the Value Facts Irreducible?

Whatever is reducible is not fundamental. Only the ontologically fundamental is irreducibly real. So reducibility is an indicator of a kind of diminished ontological status. Idealism is a species of reduction – reduction of certain entities to the mental – but because of its special role in the history of the realism debate, it deserves its own niche.

Reductionist accounts of value come in two varieties depending on the breadth of the reductive base. Best known, and most discussed, is *naturalism* – the reduction of value to the purely natural. Less well known, although currently a much more promising and popular program, is the reduction of value to the non-axiological. The distinction is blurred, of course, by theories that don't carefully distinguish between the axiological and the deontic. But if we assume that neither deontic nor axiological concepts are part of the base of purely natural concepts, then a reduction of the axiological to the natural *together with the deontic* is clearly a less demanding exercise than a reduction to the purely natural alone (*see* REDUCTIONISM IN ETHICS).

Naturalism takes the purely natural to be fundamental, and affirms the reducibility of both the axiological and the deontic (*see* NATURALISM, ETHICAL). G. E. Moore famously championed non-naturalism in his 1903 work, supporting it *inter alia* with his famous open question argument (*see* MOORE, G. E.). It is notoriously difficult to delimit the class of purely natural properties or concepts, but a necessary condition is that they be specifiable by means of non-evaluative and non-deontic (non-normative) concepts. It is typically assumed that *being in pain*, *experiencing pleasure*, *being happy*, and perhaps *flourishing* are purely natural properties, picked out by means of purely natural concepts. Since mental states are candidates for the purely natural, idealism is a form of naturalism. But not all versions of naturalism are idealist. It has been argued, for example, that value is reducible to the property of having a high

degree of *unified complexity*. This property can be specified in non-evaluative, non-normative terms, but it is not mental.

There are also non-naturalistic reductions of value. In fact, the currently most popular attempts to reduce the axiological come from *fitting attitude* (or FA) analyses of value. The FA program was launched by Brentano (1889), but the basic idea has resurfaced often (e.g., Broad 1930; Ewing 1947; 1959; McDowell 1985; Chisholm 1986; Lemos 1994; Mulligan 1998; Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000; Tappolet 2000; D'Arms and Jacobson 2000; 2006; Johnston 2001; Zimmerman 2001). All take value attributes to be intimately linked to the fittingness of certain affective or conative responses (like, love, preference, desire, etc; *see* RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES).

Let's assume, for simplicity, that the concept of *favoring* is a determinable that covers all these different pro-attitudes, and that *fittingness* is a determinable that covers properties like *correct*, *appropriate*, *required*, *obligatory*, *permitted*, *rational*. Then the *FA biconditional schema* is this:

(FA) *X* is *good* if and only if *it is fitting to favor X.*

For the FA schema to provide a *reduction* of goodness, neither *favoring* nor *fitting* can be axiological concepts, on pain of circularity. For example, *favoring* cannot be tantamount to *judging to be good*, and *fittingness* certainly cannot be, or presuppose, *goodness*. But fittingness could be both non-naturalistic and non-axiological – namely, irreducibly deontic or normative. While Scanlon introduced the *term* "buck-passing account" (*see* BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNTS) for the reductive use of the fitting attitude schema, Ewing (*see* EWING, A. C.) had already laid out the essentials of the reductive reading. Ewing argued that for an object to be valuable is for it to have certain non-evaluative properties that give us *reasons* to favor it, and he was explicit about the non-naturalistic status of *reasons*, deeming his account "the minimum non-naturalistic theory of ethics, i.e., the theory other than naturalism which admits least in the way of non-natural concepts" (1959: 14; see also 1947: 169).

Even though an FA biconditional may be employed in the service of the reduction of value to the deontic, it need not be. Either *fittingness* or *favoring* may be essentially axiological. But even if neither is, the two sides of the FA equivalence (value on the left, and fittingness of an attitude on the right) might have the same status: either both are irreducible or else both are reducible, while neither has priority (Wedgwood 2009). Among arguments against the FA biconditional are the *partiality* objection (Oddie 2005; Olson 2009; Gert 2010), the *wrong kinds of reason* objection (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004), and the *isolated goods* objection (Bykvist 2007). Several defenses of the FA biconditional against these utilize some combination of *fittingness* and *favoring* that does not easily accommodate a reductive reading (Oddie 2005; Danielsson and Olson 2007; Olson 2009; Gert 2010; Tappolet 2011). In these accounts possession of value by an object is taken to explain the fittingness of the favoring attitude.

Every non-reductionist must face the problem of supervenience (*see* SUPERVENI-ENCE, MORAL). Most value theorists hold that value *supervenes* either on nature, or more broadly, on the non-evaluative. That is to say, in the former case, there can be

no difference in value features without some difference in purely natural features; in the latter, no difference in value without some difference in the non-axiological. There are putative proofs (Kim 1978) that any suitably strong notion of supervenience will entail the reducibility of the supervenient to its subvenient base. If these proofs are sound, then the non-reductionist is faced with a deep problem. Not many philosophers have had the courage (or foolhardiness) to deny the supervenience of the axiological on the natural, let alone of the axiological on the non-axiological. So any plausible defense of the irreducibility of value will have to show how supervenience is compatible with irreducibility.

Are the Value Facts Causally Networked?

In Plato's *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger makes the following 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, however trifling the cause and however slight the effect, has real existence; and I hold that the definition of being is simply power. (1953: 246–7)

Let's call something *causally networked* if and only if it has the power either to affect something else or to be affected by something else. The Stranger's notion (now called the *Eleatic Principle*) is that causal networking is necessary and sufficient for being robustly real.

One can affirm irreducibility without endorsing causal networking. A realist about numbers, for example, might well hold that numbers are irreducible, and also hold that numbers lie outside the causal network. According to the robust realist, however, an irreducible entity is not *fully* real unless it is causally networked. There is no commonly accepted label for the position which combines irreducibility with causal isolation, so I will co-opt the term *transcendentism*.

Transcendentism makes it somewhat mysterious how the existence of value facts could make any difference, either to the world itself or to our response to the world or to our knowledge of value. If knowledge of value has an impact on how valuers behave, then there would be a chain of *influence* from value facts to certain behavioral facts. Some links in that chain would be causal, but given transcendentism a crucial link in that chain (namely the knowledge relation) would not itself involve causation. To explain the acquisition of value knowledge, transcendentists typically appeal to some kind of acausal intuition (Huemer 2005; *see* INTUITIONISM, MORAL).

Value realists are not always terribly explicit about their commitment to, or rejection of, causal networking. Partly because of this, examples of extreme realists who unequivocally endorse both irreducibility and causal networking are rare (but see Leslie 1979; Oddie 2005). This is unsurprising. Suppose that the natural world is causally closed – that for any natural fact F^N there is a true and complete causal explanation of F^N in terms of some other natural fact C^N. Call C^N a *cause* of F^N. That C^N causes F^N does not rule out the possibility that there is a distinct *value* fact C^V that

also causes F^N. But we could rule it out with a plausible sounding *causal exclusion principle*: that there cannot be two complete and distinct causes of any given fact. Given this causal exclusion principle, for a value fact C^V to be a cause of F^N, C^V would have to be *identical* to the natural cause of F^N, namely C^N. Hence value facts could be causes only at the cost of being identical (and hence reducible) to natural facts. So, given the exclusion principle, we cannot combine the irreducibility of value, the causal closure of the natural, and the causal efficacy of value (Oddie 2005).

In order to combine irreducibility with causal networking, the extreme value realist must either reject the causal closure of the subvenient base or else explain how supervenient value facts might nevertheless be causally networked even though the subvenient base is causally closed after all (Bedke 2009).

Quasi-Realism and Creeping Minimalism

In recent years the role of the truth requirement in realism has been apparently undermined by the minimalist theory of truth, threatening to send certain popular positions on the reality of value into limbo.
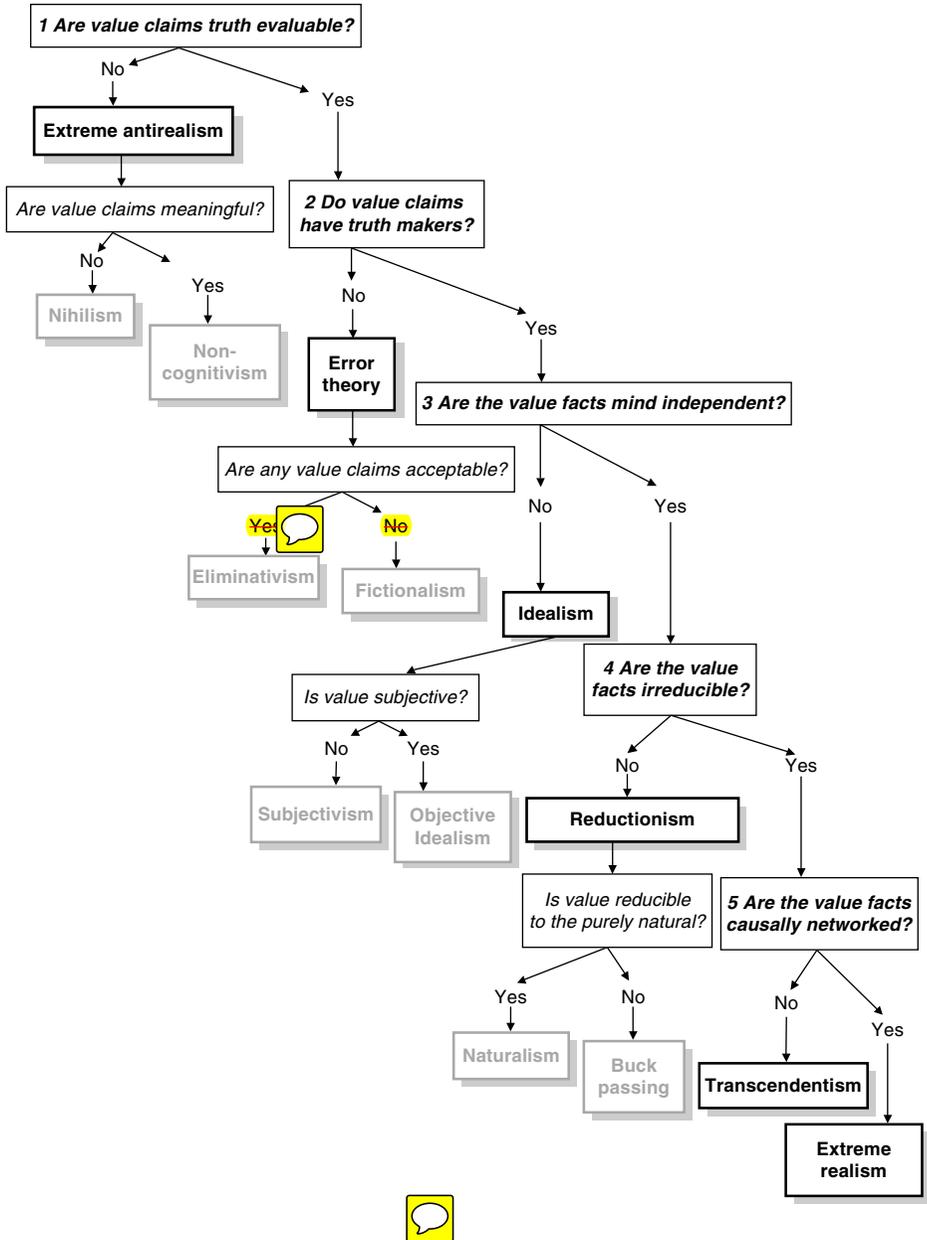
The minimalist begins with the *T*-schema (where *T* stands for *truth*):

For any claim *C*, it is true that *C* if and only if *C*.

If the *T*-schema is accepted then, the minimalist argues, a value claim like *burning baby's feet for fun is bad* (briefly, *B*) is equivalent to *it is true that B*. So *B* is truth evaluable! Since a non-cognitivist can embrace minimalism, it seems she can also affirm that value claims are truth evaluable. Minimalism thus yields a positive answer to the first question and so the non-cognitivist is not stuck on first base after all.

Minimalism and non-cognitivism are the basic ingredients of *quasi-realism* (Blackburn 1993; *see* QUASI-REALISM). Both the non-cognitivist minimalist and the quasi-realist *accept* certain value claims, for example, *B*. So, by minimalism and a modicum of rationality, they should also accept that *it is true that B*, along with *B*'s existential presuppositions, including the existence of the value property *badness*. Our non-cognitivist minimalist (and quasi-realist) have now answered the first *two* questions in the affirmative, and are headed firmly down the realist track. As Dreier (2004) has argued, minimalism is hard to stop, and may creep all the way down our list of questions, rendering non-cognitivist minimalism and quasi-realism *indistinguishable* from realism. This is problematic for both realists and non-cognitivists alike. Where do non-cognitivist minimalists and quasi-realists fit in the schema?

Merely *applying* the truth schema to a claim cannot settle the issue of whether it is a genuine truth bearer. With respect to a set of putative truth bearers, the minimalist must *first* answer *yes* to the first question, *before* applying the *T*-schema to them, since there can be no question of a claim being *true* if the claim isn't *truth evaluable*. Consider: *the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe*. Whether this is truth evaluable cannot be settled by *assuming* that, since it has the sentential form of a claim, the *T*-schema applies. To be justified in applying the *T*-schema one must

1 Are value claims truth evaluable?

No / Yes

Extreme antirealism

Are value claims meaningful?

No — Nihilism

Yes — Non-cognitivism

2 Do value claims have truth makers?

No — **Error theory**

Yes — **3 Are the value facts mind independent?**

Are any value claims acceptable?

Yes — Eliminativism

No — Fictionalism

No — **Idealism**

Yes — **4 Are the value facts irreducible?**

Is value subjective?

No — Subjectivism

Yes — Objective Idealism

No — **Reductionism**

Yes — **5 Are the value facts causally networked?**

Is value reducible to the purely natural?

Yes — Naturalism

No — Buck passing

No — **Transcendentism**

Yes — **Extreme realism**

first argue that the claim expresses truth evaluable propositional content (see Glanzberg 2003). By uncritically applying the *T*-schema to *B*, the non-cognitivist minimalist has thus taken the first step down the road of value realism.

Of course, *B*'s being truth evaluable does not imply that *B* actually possesses one of the two truth values, since *B*'s existential presuppositions might well fail, which on some accounts of presuppositions entails truth valuelessness (Soames 1989). So the second step

is not inevitable. However, our non-cognitivist minimalist *accepts B*, and to be consistent she must also accept *that B is true* (that there is at least one genuine value fact), along with *B*'s existential presuppositions including the existence of the property of *badness*. Still, she bridles at the suggestion that she has thereby accepted any ontological commitments to value. In fact she *rejects* the ontology of value. At first blush this just seems flat-out inconsistent, and if *rejection* here were the complement of *acceptance* it would be.

Kalderon (2005) has shown how non-cognitivist minimalists and quasi-realists can avoid an inconsistency. First, distinguish between *cognitive acceptance/rejection* (or *C-acceptance*) of a claim – which is a matter of belief in the associated value proposition – and *non-cognitive acceptance/rejection* (*N-acceptance*) – which is not. (Kalderon himself suggests that accepting a value proposition is deciding to have the affective responses that would be appropriate were the proposition true.) The non-cognitivist minimalist can C-reject the thesis that there are any value properties or value facts, while N-accepting value propositions like *B*. She will of course *N-accept* the truth of propositions she N-accepts, and she will N-accept that sundry value properties and value facts exist. This is quite consistent with C-rejecting the whole value ontology. So the non-cognitivist minimalist and the quasi-realist turn out to be *fictionalists* about value, and that seems exactly the right niche in the hierarchy for them to inhabit.

Projectivism (*see* PROJECTIVISM), which is sometimes identified with quasi-realism, is the thesis that value exists by virtue of our "projecting" emotional responses or other pro-attitudes onto the world. This basic idea, which comes from Hume (*see* HUME, DAVID), can be developed either in a fictionalist vein, in a subjectivist vein, or in a more realist vein within the fitting attitude program.

Value Realism by Degrees: a Flow Chart

Value realism comes in degrees, and the degree of realism of a particular position on value is mirrored by how far down it occurs in the accompanying flow chart.

At what point, one might ask, does value antirealism end and value realism begin? *Subjectivism*, and every position above it, would be judged by most to fall within the antirealist camp. Likewise, *naturalism*, and all the positions below it, would be placed firmly within the realist camp. The remaining position, as a version of idealism, lies partly inside the antirealist camp. But given its affirmation of the objectivity of some or possibly all values, it lies partly inside the realist camp. Objective idealism, with a foot in each camp, straddles the divide between realism and antirealism. Perhaps this feature helps to explain its perennial appeal.

See also: BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNTS; COGNITIVISM; DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; EMOTIVISM; ERROR THEORY; EWING, A. C.; FICTIONALISM, MORAL; HUME, DAVID; INTUITIONISM, MORAL; MOORE, G. E.; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NIHILISM; NON-COGNITIVISM; PROJECTIVISM; QUASI-REALISM; REALISM, MORAL; REDUCTIONISM IN ETHICS; RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES; SUPERVENIENCE, MORAL; THICK AND THIN CONCEPTS

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