

Axiological Realism, Axiological Objectivism, and Moral Experience: A Reply to Taliaferro*

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Abstract

I argue that 1. moral experience is not evidence for the truth of axiological realism as I define it, 2. because Taliaferro and I give different definitions of axiological realism, he criticizes me for views that I don't hold, and 3. Taliaferro's discussion of moral disagreement can't account for disagreements in which people wield radically different moral concepts.

Key terms: Alternative moral concepts. Axiological realism. Axiological objectivism. Charles Taliaferro. Honor. Moral experience. Moral rights. Slavery.

I thank Taliaferro for his attention to my work and welcome the chance to rethink the important issues that his paper raises.

In my book *Value and the Good Life*, I argue that *if* axiological realism (AR) is false then we can make a strong case for the rational preference satisfaction theory of value (see, Carson 2000, 216). I define AR as the view that there are objective facts about the intrinsic goodness and badness of things (e.g., that pleasure is or is not the only thing that is intrinsically good) in virtue of which judgments about intrinsic goodness and badness are objectively true or false and that those facts are logically independent of the beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and preferences of rational beings (and independent of the beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and preferences that rational beings would have in hypothetical or ideal situations). This is a less convoluted version of the definition I stated on p. 185 of *Value and the Good Life*. It is very similar to the definitions of "moral realism" given in (Arrington, 179), (Hare, 84), and (Brink, 17). My definition is restricted to judgments about intrinsic value. These other philosophers give broader definitions of moral realism. They take moral realism to be a theory about all moral judgments, including judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions. Since Taliaferro appeals to examples of egregiously wrong and

unjust actions in support of realism, he clearly understands (axiological) realism in this broader way. In this paper, I will construe AR broadly to include judgments about right and wrong and justice and injustice, as well as judgments about intrinsic goodness and badness. Taliaferro's definition of axiological realism differs from mine in another more important respect that leads him to misconstrue my views; see below.

Although I am agnostic about the truth of AR, my own instincts are strongly anti-realist. I don't think that there are any compelling reasons to accept AR. There are many different versions of AR. I criticize what I take to be the strongest versions of the theory. I argue that some of them (including Moore's) are false (Carson 2000, 188–190) and that, on balance, there aren't good reasons to accept certain other versions of moral realism. For example, I reject Sturgeon's arguments that attempt to show that the best explanations of certain phenomena presuppose the existence of realist axiological facts (Carson 2000, 193–205).

Some of the versions of axiological realism that I reject appeal to moral experience. My arguments against those theories are the main focus of Taliaferro's criticisms. His paper has two main theses: 1. "axiological realism (there are objective values in ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology) receives *prima facie* evidential support from experience... in the absence of defeaters, phenomenology makes axiological realism more reasonable than its denial," and 2. "moral disagreements do not count as evidence against axiological realism."

In this paper, I argue that 1. at most, moral experience gives *prima facie* evidence for the *objectivity* of axiological judgments; it is not evidence for AR as I define it, 2. because Taliaferro and I give different definitions of axiological realism, he criticizes me for views that I don't hold, and 3. Taliaferro's discussion of moral disagreement can't account for disagreements in which people wield radically different moral concepts.

In support of his claim that experience provides *prima facie* support for AR, Taliaferro appeals to Huemer's view that "it is rational to begin with the assumption that everything is as it appears." We need to distinguish between the view that experience is evidence for the view that axiological judgments are objectively true (axiological objectivism (or AO)) and the view that experience provides evidence for the truth of AR. AO is the view that there are normative facts that hold for everyone that are independent of our actual views and attitudes. Axiological objectivism contrasts with the view that normative judgments have no truth value and the view that normative judgments are true or false but that their truth or falsity is "relative to" different people or groups of people, so that a normative judgment which is

“true for” me might not be “true for” you. AR entails, but is not entailed by, AO. AO is compatible with some well-known non-realist theories, including the view that there are objective axiological facts that are constituted by the will of God and the view that objective axiological facts are constituted by facts about rationality, e.g., facts about what we would desire under ideal conditions. Kant’s moral theory is another example of an objectivist non-realist moral theory.

Taliaferro asks us to consider examples of egregious wrongdoing by the Russian Army in The Ukraine and American slaveowners. Many people think that their experiences in response to these cases point to the objective wrongness and injustice of these acts. But, even granting the truth of Huemer’s maxim, these experiences are, at most, evidence for AO; they are not evidence for a realist account of the nature of those normative facts. Surely our abhorrence for the actions that Taliaferro describes and our empathy for the victims of those actions are not evidence against divine will moral theories or Kant’s non-realist moral theory. AR is a very esoteric view that very few people understand. Ordinary moral experience is not and *cannot be* evidence for or against AR.

Taliaferro overlooks my distinction between AR and AO. He defines axiological realism as the view that “there are objective values in ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology.” His definition doesn’t include anything like the “mind independence requirement” of my definition and the definitions of Hare, Arrington, and Brink. His definition of axiological realism is more similar to my definition of AO than my definition of AR. Because Taliaferro and I define AR differently, he criticizes me for views that I don’t hold. However, for all that I have shown, his arguments for the view that experience provides *prima facie* evidence for axiological realism *as he defines it* might be successful, even though they misfire as criticisms of me.

I turn now to Taliaferro’s discussion of moral disagreement. He is correct that many defenders of Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine and American slavery are mistaken or ignorant about certain facts and that their being mistaken or ignorant about those facts largely explains their moral disagreements with us. This notwithstanding, there are many other kinds of moral disagreements that can’t be addressed in this way.

Moral experiences are mediated by concepts and often involve the ostensible apprehension of properties that are designated by those concepts, e.g., seeing that an action is right or wrong or an egregious violation of someone’s moral rights.¹

¹ Side note. Taliaferro takes me to task for my reply to Firth and Köhler in which I state that:

If we attach evidential weight to our moral experiences we need justify or defend the concepts involved in those experiences. Let me explain and defend this point by elaborating on an argument that I stated only briefly in Value and the Good Life (Carson 2000, 211). There are alternative normative concepts and properties that some claim to perceive. Members of warrior societies, e.g., the Mongols and Vikings, lived by concepts of honor and revenge according to which it is dishonorable not to take revenge for injuries and insults. They sometimes think that it is obvious that they have been slighted and dishonored by the words and deeds of others and that they need to kill those who have dishonored them in order to remove that dishonor.²

Taliaferro's arguments commit him to saying that their experiences are *prima facie* evidence for the view that they should kill those who have offended them. It is possible that people who wield these concepts of honor and revenge are able to make many fine-grained discriminations about the nature of slights and harms one might suffer at the hands of others that most of us (who don't order our lives by their concepts of honor and revenge) can't make. We can sensibly ask why we should accept the evaluations implicit in their concepts of honor and revenge. Similarly, members of warrior societies can ask why they ought to accept the evaluations implicit in our moral concepts, e.g., justice, kindness, generosity, universal and equal human rights to life and liberty, and being non-sexist/non-racist. For any normative concept that we employ, we should be open to criticisms of the evaluations implicit in that concept and consider the possibility that they are mistaken.

My own introspection fails to reveal the existence of distinctive experiences characterized by a 'demand quality' that are specifiable independently of my normative beliefs. Nor do I have any experiences that in virtue of their phenomenological character alone (independently of my normative beliefs) could be called moral approval or disapproval (Carson 2000, 163).

I should have added that my own introspective reports don't carry any special weight. All of our normative experiences are influenced by and interpreted through our own normative beliefs and concepts. It is doubtful that we can report any pure experiences of "demand qualities" that are uninfluenced by our normative beliefs and concepts. Anyone who can reflect on and describe her own experiences yields normative concepts that strongly color her experiences and her interpretation of those experiences.

² In 1258 Ghengis Khan's grandson, Higlū, reeked unspeakable vengeance on Mesopotamia (Iraq) because the Caliph refused to surrender Baghdad to him. He killed 800,000 people in Baghdad and destroyed the learning of centuries by burning the libraries of Baghdad (Durant, 340). He killed millions of Iraqis and utterly destroyed the infrastructure and irrigation systems of Iraq the population of Iraq didn't recover until the twentieth century (more than 600 years later)! (Dyer, 193).

One can't justify first-order evaluations simply by pointing out that certain people wield normative concepts that support those evaluations. Many people, including me, now reject the evaluations implicit in the traditional concept of chastity.

American slavery was discussed and debated in terms of the concept of moral rights. In the US, there was a strong consensus that many (most) human beings had a right to liberty and that it would be very wrong to enslave them. Those who defended the enslavement of Africans claimed that there were morally relevant differences between enslaving Africans and enslaving others. Tali Ferro (and I) regard American slavery as a "horrifying violation of human rights and dignity." However, the great majority of people in human history who practiced and defended the institution of slavery didn't have the concept of a moral right and did not, and *could not*, have regarded slavery in this way. Throughout much of human history slavery has been a common practice. Most people who defended slavery in the past didn't think that all human beings have a right to liberty and, therefore, didn't feel the need to deny the full humanity of the people whose enslavement they justified. This is so because the concept of moral rights was developed relatively late in human history. This concept was created (or identified) by western philosophers and was not fully developed or widely understood before the work of John Locke (1632–1704). The Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabs, sub-Saharan Africans, and others who practiced slavery before the time of Locke did not have the concept of moral rights or a moral right to liberty that the law should respect. Many British, French, and American defenders of slavery believed that all full-fledged adult human beings had a right to liberty. They felt the need to denigrate the humanity and the capacities of the Africans whose enslavement they claimed was justified in order to rationalize their views about slavery.³ In order to effectively argue with defenders of the other, earlier and historically more common forms of slavery, we need to give very different sorts of arguments than those that were given against American slavery. Those arguments would have to include explanations and defenses of *our* concept of a universal right to liberty.

I now return to Heumer and Tali Ferro's general theses. Moral experiences involving a particular normative concept can't be evidence for the truth of normative judgments using that concept unless one can defend

³ It is doubtful that this attempt to justify American slavery worked on its own terms. Lincoln gave powerful moral arguments against American slavery that neither rejected nor endorsed the racist views that were advanced to try to justify the enslavement of Africans (see Carson 2015, 353–354).

that concept or defend conceptual schemes which employ it over schemes that don't. I am unwilling to attach any evidential weight to someone's perception that he is disgraced and dishonored by another person's insult or disrespectful action and that he must challenge the other person to a duel to the death in order to remove that dishonor. My disagreements with members of these warrior societies are not only first-order moral/normative disagreements⁴, they are also disagreements about which concepts to wield.

We cannot choose which normative concepts are current in our society. But, for any particular normative concept, we can choose whether or not to guide our lives by it. It is a central task of moral philosophy to give us reasons to internalize and live by certain normative concepts and reject others. This task has not been taken up by very many philosophers. This is evident in the literature on moral relativism and moral diversity which tends to focus on first-order moral disagreements and overlook conceptual diversity and incommensurability. Allan Gibbard and Carl Wellman are notable exceptions to this (see (Wellman, 114, 118) and Gibbard (41–43, 53–54, 67–68, 136, 140, 293–300)). Gibbard takes seriously Nietzsche's criticisms of moral codes that include the concepts of right and wrong, guilt, and moral obligation and gives a very lengthy and powerful defense of these concepts. He stresses the benefits of wielding them.

I conjecture that, in the future, people will develop new normative concepts and jettison other normative concepts and that this will help to create important moral progress, in just the same way that humanity has made great moral progress because of the widespread adoption of the concept of a moral right and the widespread rejection of traditional views of chastity. This thought gives us grounds for hope and optimism.

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⁴ They are first-order normative disagreements insofar as I disapprove of actions that they approve of.

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