

This project develops ideas from recent work in the philosophy of mind in order to offer a novel argument for value realism. In Chapter 1 ('Arguing for Value Realism'), I offer an analysis of the distinction between realism and anti-realism in terms of the priority each takes to hold between value, on the one hand, and human psychological attitudes (beliefs, desires, value judgments, intentions, and so on) on the other. This approach allows me to address a wide range of different anti-realist positions (including error theories, neo-Humeanism, neo-Kantianism, and non-cognitivism) with one unified line of argument: an argument that turns around an investigation of the first-personal nature of these psychological attitudes.

The narrative arc of my dissertation follows my attempt to answer the question of what you're up to when you are trying to decide, on some occasion, what to do. I argue in Chapter 2 ('Deciding What to Do') that this kind of deliberation involves an attempt to 'get something right'. Unlike other recent attempts to leverage this idea into an argument for realism (such as that offered by David Enoch), my approach takes seriously the possibility of compelling anti-realist interpretations of the phenomenon: couldn't one's desires, for instance, make it the case that one course of action rather than another counts as 'getting it right'? In subsequent chapters, then, I explain why ultimately only a robust form of realism can account for this feature of deliberation.

The cornerstone of my argument in Chapter 3 ('Alienation and Transparency') is an account of what is involved in the distinctively first-personal way that we relate to our own psychological attitudes—our beliefs, desires, intentions, judgments, and so on. Drawing on and reworking key ideas from Richard Moran's work on self-knowledge and David Finkelstein's work on first-personal authority, I argue that from your own point of view, your attitudes are 'transparent' to the world, in the following sense: in the ordinary case of possession of an attitude, you must understand that attitude as itself a response to something out in the world that warrants or calls for such a response.

Building on this insight, I argue (Chapter 4, 'The Transparent First Person and the Value-Laden World') that any particular attitude can play the role it does in allowing us to settle our deliberations about what to do only because and insofar as it is transparent. This means that attitudes cannot play the role in deliberation that the anti-realist had planned for them; either the attitude is understood as transparent, in which case the proposed account of deliberation rests on an underlying realism, or the attitude is understood as alienated, in which case the deliberator cannot understand it as rendering a course of action the 'right' one in the way that the anti-realist had hoped. Anti-realism is revealed to rely on a fundamentally third-personal, and thus alienated, model of a person's attitudes.

In Chapter 5 ('The Idiosyncrasy of the Practical') I show how the resulting realism takes a particularly uncompromising form. I begin with a seeming counter-example to the account developed in the preceding chapters: although some instances of deliberation may appear to be directed towards real value, sometimes—surely—one decides what to do on the basis of a mere personal preference (as when, for instance, you choose a flavor of ice-cream because it's your favorite). On my account, this too is a case of encountering real value—an aspect of my account that separates me not only from anti-realists, but also from the vast majority of realists. I show how this result can be made sense of by conceiving of the relationship between the individual and the value-laden world on a model of 'value expertise', according to which different people have different degrees and forms of expertise when it comes to perceiving and understanding different kinds of value.

In the Conclusion, I detail the significance of my results in relation to various different positions within the metaethics literature. Those prominent anti-realist positions (most notably those of Korsgaard and Street) which claim a basis in the first-person perspective are directly undermined by my argument. In addition, however, the positions held by anti-realists who do not take such an approach are revealed to involve a deep tension: an anti-realist cannot, on pain of incoherence, endorse their own metaethical position while actually trying to decide what to do. In the moment of deliberation, we are all already realists.