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Finding Objectively Valid Orientation through Value Plurality

ENGLISH

ABSTRACTS

The central thesis of this article is that the plurality of value beliefs in modern society, which reveals the relativity of culturally learned value beliefs, does not lead to moral relativism or a relativism of orientation. Relativism is understood here as a rejection of the view that normative disagreements can be resolved objectively, and is thus the opposite of moral objectivism. In the beginning, the obvious close relation between value and orientation is discussed. Subsequently, several reasons are given as to why plurality does not imply relativism. In doing so, four important distinctions are made: plurality is distinguished from pluralism, objectivism from monism, objectivity from generality and the idea of epistemic objectivity of normative claims from the idea of independence of values from subjective properties such as preferences. Moreover, it is shown that plurality can be used methodologically to determine which things are objectively valuable. The disorientation one can experience in the face of plurality of value beliefs can therefore be seen as a means for finding out what one should really orient oneself towards. I conclude the argument by pointing out that it is practically necessary for normative ethics to understand the mind and its faculties correctly. Normative truth requires a plausible and scientifically grounded view of the mind.

DEU

Durch Wertpluralität objektiv gültige Orientierung finden

Die zentrale These dieses Artikels lautet, dass die Wertpluralität in der modernen Gesellschaft, die die Relativität kulturell verinnerlichter Wertvorstellungen offenlegt, nicht zu moralischem Relativismus oder einem Orientierungsrelativismus

führt. Relativismus wird hier als Ablehnung der Auffassung verstanden, dass normative Meinungsverschiedenheiten objektiv gelöst werden können, und ist somit das Gegenteil von moralischem Objektivismus. Zunächst wird die offensichtliche enge Beziehung zwischen Wert und Orientierung erörtert. Anschließend werden mehrere Gründe genannt, warum Pluralität Relativismus nicht impliziert. Dabei werden vier wichtige Unterscheidungen getroffen: Pluralität wird von Pluralismus unterschieden, Objektivismus von Monismus, Objektivität von Allgemeinheit und die Idee der epistemischen Objektivität normativer Behauptungen von der Idee der Unabhängigkeit von Werten von subjektiven Eigenschaften wie Präferenzen. Darüber hinaus wird gezeigt, dass Pluralität methodisch genutzt werden kann, um zu bestimmen, welche Dinge objektiv wertvoll sind. Die Desorientierung, die man angesichts einer Pluralität von Wertüberzeugungen erleben kann, kann daher als ein Mittel angesehen werden, um herauszufinden, woran man sich wirklich orientieren sollte. Ich schließe die Argumentation mit dem Hinweis, dass es für die normative Ethik praktisch notwendig ist, den Geist und seine Teilbereiche richtig zu verstehen. Normative Wahrheit erfordert eine plausible und wissenschaftlich fundierte Sichtweise auf den Geist.

| KEY WORDS

moral objectivism; objectivity; value theory; orientation; moral realism; moral relativism; axiology

Wertobjektivismus; Objektivität; Werttheorie; Orientierung; ethischer Realismus, Wertrelativismus; Axiologie

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1 Introduction

The central thesis of this paper is that the undeniable plurality of values (or more precisely, the plurality of value beliefs) that characterizes modern society and uncovers the relativity of culturally learned value beliefs, does not suggest moral (and axiological) relativism. On the contrary, this relativity can help to determine which things are objectively valuable and which are not. The disorientation you may experience when confronted with plurality can be interpreted as a tool for discovering what in fact should orientate you. I begin with an analysis of the relation between value and orientation in order to show their close conceptual connection. I then introduce moral objectivism, the position that normative moral (or value-related) claims can be made free from the influence of personal interests or cultural imprint that defeats their epistemic justification. After that, I make several distinctions that are important for the discussion of moral objectivism: The distinctions between objectivity and generality, between objectivism and monism, and between value pluralism and value belief plurality. I then show that even if moral objectivism is correct, there remain several reasons to expect moral disagreement and plurality in society. Hence, plurality is no evidence for relativism. In the concluding section, I contend that an in-depth analysis of the mind is required to determine what is truly good or bad and that we should move beyond the unreflective adoption of culturally inherited value beliefs. This approach to (moral) decision-making combines the epistemically objective validity of values with their dependence on individual properties of subjects and offers concrete recommendations for dealing with plurality and making ethical decisions.

2 Orientation, Value and Objectivity

The first claim of this paper is that any concern about value or orientation is also a concern about the respecting other. By "value", I refer to the normative and evaluative aspects of monadic or binary thick concepts such as "more cruel than" or "brilliant", or simply to monadic or binary thin concepts such as "being neutral" or "being better than". By "having value" or "being valuable", I refer to both positive and negative values. "Orientation" is understood here in its motivational, not geographical sense and refers to reasons guiding decisions.

There is an obvious connection between orientation and value: something that provides orientation (in actions and decisions) is what constitutes (factual or good[1]) reasons for acting and deciding in a particular way rather than another. This is a feature that orientation shares with values, as they both concern desirable goals (cf. Schwartz 2012, 3). Since orientation has no content beyond this, it is either identical to value or determined by values depending on whether values are more than a guidance for actions or not. In descriptive value research, values have been described as consistent motives for action that are shared by many (cf. Fiske 1992, 698). Analogously, normative ethics and value theory can interpret values as good or best reasons for deciding and acting in certain ways. This suggests that what you consider valuable is simply what gives you orientation and that what is actually valuable is what should give you orientation.

Some philosophers associate values with ontological existence.

Nevertheless, values are associated with more than that, in particular with the mere evaluation of states (cf. Schwartz 2012, 4) and also with ontological existence. Furthermore, normative ethics must explain why something constitutes a good or justified reason for orientation. If the value of something justifies orienting oneself toward it, then, trivially, it must already have that value. Moreover, obviously nothing but values can justify orientation. Orientation therefore depends on mere evaluation. If a particular evaluation is correct, then it expresses something factual. So if justified orientation exists, there must be facts about values and this in turn at least suggests ontological implications.

"Moral realism" is the epistemological position asserting that moral disagreements can be resolved (cf. Hinman 2008, 365) and is associated with the affirmation of various concerns (cf. Kölbel 2020, 556). One of these is whether there are truths and falsehoods about (moral) values; another is whether these truths are objective; and a third, whether values are ontologically existing things (cf. Kölbel 2020, 556). If so, then values offer more than orientation, namely descriptions of existing things, and moral realism in the third sense clearly understands them that way. This again has been subject of criticism by moral relativism, the epistemological position denying the objectivity and truth of normative claims. Most notably, Mackie's argument from queerness showed that positing ontologically existing values is highly questionable, if not outright im-

1 In normative contexts, the question is what justifies action; in descriptive contexts, what in fact causes action.

plausible. If values are existing things, then they are "queer": they differ from all other entities and their perception and attribution to other things is highly questionable and lack evidence (cf. Mackie 1977, 38–41; 49). Mackie believed that this demonstrated the impossibility of objectivity in ethics. Yet, not every form of moral realism must accept such a problematic ontology. Let's call moral realism that only affirms the first two concerns "moral objectivism" (MO) and that which also affirms the third point "ontological interpretation" (OI). Since MO is not subject to Mackie's criticism, it is more plausible than OI. Still, as shown above, avoiding OI while maintaining MO is not trivial. The central question is thus how MO can be upheld without committing to OI.

Mere evaluation of states and things is not only a precondition for justified orientation, but also a natural aspect of the discourse on values. Values are used to describe phenomena that are not subject to decision and orientation. Abandoning this would come with strange consequences, such as the inability to evaluate unchangeable affairs (such as any event from the past). To avoid this, such cases may be reinterpreted as theoretical decision scenarios: if you had to choose between an unchangeable state evaluated and an alternative (such as its opposite, something probable, the actual state or a state differing in certain respects), you would or should choose the respectively better alternative. Although artificial, this helps to connect value and orientation while preserving ordinary language usage. Such a reinterpretation is not trivial and and changes the understanding of value terms, but if you accept that, evaluation and orientation are inseparable. This is probably necessary to reduce value entirely to orientation (even if this seems hopeless based on my argument above).

Is orientation nothing but the decision-making aspect of value?

This analysis suggests a biconditional relation between value and orientation: every orientation depends on value, every value, at least in theory, offers a reason for orientation and orientation is nothing but the decision-making aspect of value. The coexistence of multiple thin normative concepts (such as being good, providing orientation or being qualitative) may suggest that they refer to distinct phenomena, but this need not be the case. In fact, there are good reasons to believe they all refer to the same or at least overlapping and similar phenomena—and a central aspect of those phenomena is that they provide reasons to realize or to

maximize states, reasons not to realize or to minimize them and reasons to be indifferent regarding their realization and extent. That, in turn, is what orientation is.

3 Objectivity and the Person Affection of Value and Orientation

Without avoiding OI, MO is hardly acceptable. In this section, I offer an interpretation of MO that avoids this problem. To do so, further clarification of MO is required, particularly to avoid common misinterpretations.

To recognize what is good and what is bad without being misled by one's own interests

The term "objectivity" is ambiguous in this debate, which may be a key reason why moral relativism is attractive to many. MO is the epistemological position according to which you can recognize what is good and what is bad without being misled by your own interests (such as desires and feelings) or cultural imprint. Rutte (1958, 73) defined objectivity as the attitude whereby, in the pursuit of truth, one is guided by one's "theoretical" interest in the truth, such that no other interests can override it. So, objectivity is an epistemic attitude. Of course, your interests can play a role in what is good or bad in a given situation and must therefore be considered, but if you are objective, they do not distort your deliberative process and you do not treat them differently just because they are your own ones and not those of any other subject. Objectivity therefore does not mean that moral considerations are independent of the interests of the subjects involved. In ethics (and in other disciplines that study subjects), objectivity denotes the independence from epistemically distorting subjective interests on the part of the investigator and not independence from the objects of study themselves, which are subjects. To assume the latter would be absurd. As Moore (1922, §50) already observed, value is inseparable from consciousness or feeling; nothing can be good or bad without being good or bad for someone. In contemporary value theory, this seemingly trivial point is captured by the Person-Affecting Restriction (PAR), which states that an outcome can be better than another only if it is better for someone (cf. Arrhenius/Rabinowicz 2015, 424). Trivially, the same applies to the relation of being worse, to monadic concepts such as "good", and to thick concepts. To clarify the

difference between the two notions of value mentioned, it is helpful to use different terms for them. Heathwood (2015, 137) referred to "being good" and "being bad" as "values simpliciter" (VS) and "being good for" and "being bad for" as "welfare values" (WV)[2]. Since VS is determined by WV, an objective ethicist must consider subjects and their subjective characteristics to arrive at true moral judgments.

MO is not a rejection of PAR. Instead, it simply maintains that you can determine what is good simpliciter or good for someone without allowing your interests to corrupt the epistemic process. This claim is less strong or controversial as it might appear, since there already are disciplines that deal with subjects and describe their individual differences. It would be absurd to assert that psychologists and social scientists are chronically subjective in their research on subjects in a way that invalidates their findings. Anyone claiming otherwise would need to explain why these disciplines should be magically different from all others, given that their research subjects are nothing but special biological objects, which in turn are nothing more than certain chemical objects, which in turn are physical objects. Furthermore, such a claim would itself be psychological or sociological and therefore contradictory in a manner typical of relativism.[3]

Like value, orientation necessarily pertains to subjects. This is trivial for the descriptive and normative concept of orientation: things associated with orientation are either factually orienting for subjects or should be so. Nothing can be orienting unless it is or should be orienting for someone. Nonetheless, orientation and value differ in their person affection. While orientation is inherently connected to action, describing how an individual acts or should act, values also or rather describe states relating to individuals.

PAR provides opportunities to protect MO from problems related to OI: The reduction of VS to WV was already inspired by doubts about the independence of the former (cf. Heathwood 2015, 139; Olson 2015). This reduction makes values less metaphysically suspect, as they are no longer interpreted as simply being there. Accepting this, a further reduction follows: if something is valuable for someone, it has to be so in a certain way. Since things can only be valuable for living beings, WVs depend on something connected to life. The most obvious candidates for that are the faculties of consciousness. Prima facie, each of these faculties can be value-generating. Interpreting values as contents of consciousness

2 WV has been called "prudential value" on several occasions, for example by Tiberius (2015).

3 Rutte also demonstrated that the principled denial of objectivity has a fundamental problem of self-application (cf. Rutte 1958, 364–367).

might make them less queer, since consciousness obviously exists but differs profoundly from everything else existing.

Valuable things can be divided into those that are valuable in themselves and those that are valuable as means to obtain other valuable things. The former can be referred to as "intrinsic" values and the latter as "instrumental" values. Intrinsic values are either basic or derivative. Derivative values consist of basic values that have no further components.[4] The simplest way to interpret basic values (which make everything else good or bad) with PAR is to regard them as states of consciousness that are somehow perceived by the respective subject as inherently positive. This approach avoids an obviously queer ontology, though it does not eliminate ontology altogether. Another interpretation is to conceive value as an affirmative relation between mind and reality. As Lotze (1989, 511–518) analyzed, existence is the form of affirmation that things have, but not the form of affirmation that relations have. Things exist like relations obtain, propositions are valid and events occur. Relations are not mythical, asserting their affirmation is uncontroversial and has no ontological implications. Perhaps, then, values are best understood as particular relations of correspondence between mind and world.

Particular relations of correspondence between mind and world

A connection between value and mind is already addressed by Ross (2002, 140), who identifies four things as basic goods: namely pleasure, knowledge, virtue and justice. He links the first three directly to faculties of the mind: knowledge to cognition, virtue to conation and pleasure to emotion. Note that Ross understands justice as the appropriate distribution of pleasure and pain in accordance with virtue and vice. According to this, VS cannot be reduced to mere numbers of WV, but also to their distribution. This is not implausible and does not require additional ontological commitments, since it again concerns relations. Even if Ross's specific understanding of justice may raise doubts, it remains plausible to treat distributive factors as basic values. Of course, also his axiological system is not necessarily sound and complete. For example, there is an obvious connection between value and desire (cf. Oddie 2015), which has led to desire-based value theories, which are among the most relevant groups of value theories (cf. Parfit 1984, 4). So desires could also be value-generating, as could other faculties of the mind.

4 These terms were used in this way by Heathwood (2015).

4 Distinctions of Objectivism and Plurality

Matters of desire fulfillment and the attainment of pleasure can be understood as affirmations of the mental faculties of will and feeling. Similarly, other such mental faculties and their corresponding affirmations can also be identified. This may be necessary to defend basic values that are not concerned with distribution. Typically, theories concerning desire and pleasure claim to have discovered a single, fundamental factor that determines what is good or bad.[5] Such theories are "monistic". In contrast, "pluralistic" theories maintain that there exist at least two basic values.[6] I am not concerned here with discussing whether this is right or even plausible. But there is one important point to note: MO does not entail that there is only one basic good. There is no prima facie reason to assume that everything axiological must be reducible to exactly one thing in order for ethics or value theory to be objective. Physics is not subjective just because (as far as we know) there are four fundamental forces; the existence of four distinct forces may simply be the nature of reality. So you don't have to be a monist to be an objectivist and Ross is not inconsistent in believing that his four basic values are each objectively valid.

If multiple basic values are valid,
then plurality is to be expected.

It is also important to distinguish between pluralism and value plurality. Pluralism refers to the philosophical position that there are, in fact, at least two basic valuable things; plurality, by contrast, refers to the social phenomenon that different individuals or groups hold divergent value beliefs. Pluralism and plurality are compatible with each other and both are also compatible with the negation of the other. This insight already furthers my main point: pluralism can explain why plurality is to be expected, even if MO is true. If multiple basic values are valid and hence certain alternatives will be similarly plausible or even have an unbiased relation,[7] then plurality is to be expected. Hence, pluralism supports MO. Objectivity must also be distinguished from generality and is by no means incompatible with individuality. At first glance, it may seem that something objectively good must be good for everyone. However, this assumption disrupts the dependency between WV and VS. Nothing is simply good simpliciter and therefore universally good for all. What is good simpliciter

5 This can be seen in many depictions of them, cf. for example Tiberius 2015.

6 These terms were also used by Heathwood (2015) that way.

7 This means that they are either equal or on a par in the sense Chang (1997, 122–123) uses it.

is so because it is, first and foremost, good for at least some individuals (or more precisely: because its positive WVs outweigh its potential negative WVs[8]). MO, therefore, is not concerned with values that are as universal as possible. In fact, the objective truth may be that there are enormous individual differences in terms of values – something already suggested by the remarkable diversity of human preferences, goals, dreams and inclinations. First, different things may serve as objects of desire, sources of pleasure or contributors to knowledge. All these goods occur in varying degrees and differ from person to person. Second, whether it is better for an individual to experience pleasure or to fulfill desires may also vary (assuming these are good-makers). None of this constitutes a problem for objectivity. We do not regard DNA testing as a subjective enterprise without any real truth simply because each person has a unique genetic code. Why, then, should it be any different with values? Yet, individuality is not necessary and may have less or no association with certain mental faculties such as cognition and consciousness. This may further complicate matters.

MO likewise has nothing to do with simplicity. Moral reality may indeed be complex, determining the precise value of something may be difficult and practical reasoning may require heuristics. Nevertheless, this does not render the entire field subjective, nor does it deprive it of evidential or rational grounding. If that were the case, particle physics should be seen as subjective too, which again is plainly absurd.

5 Plurality and Relativism

The aforementioned connection between value and orientation mentioned is obvious in light of modern value plurality. With the gradual disappearance of mass value belief monopolies, some experience a loss of orientation and feel a need for new (and often individual) orientation. Confrontation with value beliefs of other cultures, generations or other groups fosters an awareness of the cultural relativity of one's own and reinforces this loss. The resulting loss of orientation, in turn, can promote individualization and the emergence of multiple social groups, each with its own distinct value beliefs. Originally, the last sentence referred to "values" instead of "value beliefs", but I corrected this to draw an important distinction: if MO is right, the social process described does not concern changes in values, but only in what is believed to be or at least

8 With that I do not refer to mere calculative approaches. They have their plausibility, but also ideas of justice as advocated by Ross (2002) may be the answer.

treated[9] as valuable. Equating these two things is an epistemically vicious presumption of MO that is frequently found in this debate.
In fact, plurality has already been associated with relativism. For example, this was endorsed by Mackie (1977, 36–38) as his second main argument against MO. Yet, plurality clearly does not entail relativism. Even if everyone were to hold entirely different value beliefs, it would still be possible that there exists a single correct set of values, which may even differ from all of them.

The persistence of alternative theories is not due to a lack of evidence.

If there are truths about values, it is unlikely that any currently existing codification captures them fully and soundly. It is also improbable that all these and only these values are believed within any given social group. A comparison between ethics and science likewise does not suggest that the truth of MO would entail a high degree of homogeneity in value beliefs. A similar plurality can be observed in every scientific discipline among laypeople, provided that the subject matter is neither too theoretical for them to know enough about it to have any opinion on it, nor entirely trivial (as in simple addition), nor wholly irrelevant to their daily lives or interests. The latter aspect seems especially important. Laypeople seldom have opinions on the Collatz conjecture or about whether an organometallic intermediate follows an associative or dissociative substitution pathway. But they often have opinions on the origin of the universe, human intelligence, health and nutrition, education, pharmaceuticals, extraterrestrial life, animal consciousness, the COVID-19 pandemic, political systems and trends, the global economy, climate change, the nature of the mind or artificial intelligence. Of course, science still faces open questions on these topics, which invites belief plurality, but not all related questions are open in this sense. For example, scientific debates about whether there is a general human intelligence or multiple independent intelligences were resolved decades ago, with enormous empirical evidence supporting the existence of a general cognitive factor that plays a role in all cognitive abilities (cf. Rost 2009, 59–65). Nevertheless, many believe that linguistic and mathematical abilities are independent of or even negatively correlated to each other, or that the creativity relevant for arts is unrelated to the skills needed for academic success. Such views are found not only among laypeople but also among professional educators, as evidenced by the continued popularity of the "multiple intelligences

9 Not all cultural habits are linked to explicit beliefs. It already has been noted that the term "social values" is often used interchangeably with attitudes or serves as a post-hoc explanation (cf. Tsirogianni/Gaskell, 2011). The term "value" also often comprises longstanding traditions, norms of social interaction, everyday habits and anything else people care about (cf. Jonkers 2019, 191). Even if it is not about explicit beliefs in many cases, I think "value beliefs" is the best term to distinguish them from actual values. Schwartz (2012) notes that value beliefs often become conscious when they are in conflict.

theory" (Cavas/Cavas 2020, 405), despite its empirical refutation (cf. Rost 2009, 94–107). The persistence of such alternative theories is not due to a lack of evidence or real controversy. Other factors are at play. One of them is certainly that the relevant knowledge is not trivial and not widely known. But something else appears far more important: the conflict between non-theoretical interests (such as emotions and desires) and facts. Surely, many people dislike the idea of a single intelligence scale on which they are ranked. They fear being rated poorly, since they associate abilities with self-worth or social status and do not wish to have less of it than others. Of course, it is a mistake to make such associations, but they explain why people wish for and hence believe that there is a certain intangible creative, social or spiritual intelligence or something similar, that evades measurement and quantification, and is unrelated to mathematical talent. Of course, other non-theoretical interests can similarly conflict with empirical evidence. For example, the notion of evaluating or classifying people's mental abilities may appear derogatory or discriminatory.[10]

The natural approach to values is not an objective academic, but a social one.

It is quite plausible that similar mechanisms influence the other domains mentioned. Note that most of them relate in some way to value or orientation. Denying climate change allows you to avoid responsibilities you do not want to take on, certain beliefs about health justify your current lifestyle and certain beliefs about aliens make the world you live in more interesting than your boring 9 to 5 routine. People are simply very often not objective, but oriented toward their personal interests. However, this does not imply that objectivity is impossible in any of these matters. Clearly, it is possible, as purely evidence-based approaches and conclusions exist in each of these fields. Precisely the same applies to ethical and other value-related questions. Even if MO is correct and even if experts agree to a certain degree, considerable plurality within society is to be expected.

If value plurality of any kind poses a threat to objectivity, it must be plurality among experts. Still, such plurality may have several explanations other than MO: value beliefs are shaped by ideologies,[11] identity, parental education (cf. Jonkers 2019), peer group socialization (cf. Laursen 2017) and even social pressure within the academic bubble. The natural ap-

10 Such a view is based on the absurd association of cognitive ability and worth.

11 There is a lot of evidence showing that value beliefs are often the foundation of political attitudes (cf. Feldmann 2003) and those attitudes in turn, of course, exist in the context of self-sustaining social groups. This again perpetuates those value beliefs.

proach to values is not an objective academic, but a social one that serves social functions (cf. Laursen/Veenstra 2021). Furthermore, experts are philosophers, who can be expected to have a tendency toward being critical, which in turn could lead to even greater plurality. In reality, however, the plurality is not as great as it might be expected. Bourget and Chalmers (2014; 2023) conducted two surveys in which philosophers answered various philosophical questions. In both studies, more philosophers believed in moral realism and the associated cognitivism of moral judgment than in their alternatives. In addition, some value-related questions received much more agreement than some that are not value-related. In the first survey, pulling the lever in the trolley problem and cognitivism received more consensus than accepting the distinction between analytic and synthetic, choosing between empiricism and rationalism, the question of physicalism of the mind or even preferring classical logic over non-classical logic. In the second survey, over 60 % favored pulling the lever, pro-choice and moral realism, while less than 60 % agreed with the compatibilism of free will, any goal of philosophy, empiricism over rationalism, vagueness as a semantic rather than a metaphysical or epistemic phenomenon, or the use of classical logic. Despite the possible reasons for expecting plurality among experts, it does not appear to be significantly higher for normative topics than for descriptive ones.

Any truth-oriented philosophical inquiry into value must focus on basic values.

Furthermore, plurality is less extensive when looking at the basic components of concrete values assumed. There are several approaches to systemize them and some researchers conclude that the different value beliefs of different cultures can be reduced to the same few classes.[12] Such an approach is only half-way done if it does not lead to basic values—everything instrumental or derivative must disappear in the analysis. Given the enormous plausibility of PAR, this will not be achieved unless the values assumed are 1) states of mind, 2) relations between states of mind and reality, or 3) distributions of values. Catalogs of cultural value beliefs should therefore be regarded as heuristics indicating what leads to certain states, mind-world relations or distributions of valuable things. This is often confused because people learn and internalize that certain things are good or bad that are only good and bad because of their relations to basic values. Any truth-oriented philosophical inquiry into value

12 Most notable, Schwartz (2012, 5-7) offered such a reduction.

must focus on basic values – they are what value is really about.
Summative, plurality is problematic for MO only if the following assumptions hold true:

1. None of the value beliefs in question can be presented as false, implausible or at least much less plausible than others.
2. The value beliefs in question cannot be reduced to exactly one definitive basic value.
3. MO depends on monism.

None of these assumptions should be made without further justification.

6 Plurality as a Method to find Objective Values

Plurality and MO are therefore not contradictory. This leads to the final concern in this article: How can plurality be used to discover what is actually good and bad? A short answer might be: with a combination of Cartesian doubts about value beliefs and an axiological framework – and the framework I offered is already helpful in this regard. In this section, I present some ideas on this topic.
Any epistemically optimistic theory of values must make it plausible that there are ways to distinguish right normative views from wrong ones. The best way to do this is to offer such a method. Assuming that (cultural) value beliefs are probably not completely wrong, you can interpret your (cultural) value beliefs as initial (but not very good) value data that can at least provide an indication of what might be good and what might be bad. Prima facie, there is no reason why your value beliefs should be more or less valid than those of other individuals or cultures and, of course, some of them may contradict yours. Therefore, confronting foreign value beliefs aids the normative search for truth in two ways: it expands your value data and shows that your value beliefs are not self-evident and that it is necessary to distance yourself from prejudices. Every confrontation with conflicting value beliefs can be the starting point for critical doubt.
A clear distinction between WV and VS is necessary here. You might think that something that is good for you and that has seemed good for everyone you know is good for all people and that it is hence good simpliciter to strive for an outcome in which all people have it. In many Western societies, for instance, marriage, full-time employment or wealth may be

viewed in this way. But WVs depend, at least in part, on personal preferences and interests, and on cultural influences. Without recognizing this, accounts on VS or others' WVs lack epistemic justification. But this is not only helpful in determining VS. Foreign value beliefs can also show possibilities that you had not previously considered, showing you what you really want or what you actually feel good about.

Uncovering common ultimate goals shared among different value systems

Of course, this is not enough for good moral decision making or determining VS. Furthermore, it should not degenerate into a mere search for mutuality or a poll – truth is not about agreement or democracy. Yet one can try to find common denominators in order to identify (more) basic values. Some have attempted to deal with plurality by seeking common value beliefs at a higher level, which are more basic most of the time. For example, a search for common European value beliefs was conducted (cf. Joas/Wiegandt 2005). But such approaches are not unproblematic. Relativization cannot lead to what really is valuable and offers little more than an overview of similarities and differences in value beliefs. This may lead to agreement, but not to epistemic justification. The greatest potential of such approaches lies in uncovering common ultimate goals shared among different value systems. These may not differ as much as they initially appear to and can show you which basic values or value beliefs actually underlie your actual value beliefs. Still, any result from such an analysis is relative to what people have learned culturally. Here, the distinction between basic and instrumental values is helpful. The values cultures assume are often presented or treated as basic, even if they are not. For example, your culture might suggest that it is good for you to earn a lot of money and you might believe this. Still, it is obviously completely irrational to believe that money has intrinsic value. However, because it may have been so common to associate money with intrinsically good things, such as fulfilling your desires or experiencing pleasure, people may forget that money only has instrumental value and believe that having more of it is always better. Nevertheless, in many cases, earning more money makes no significant difference or at least is not worth striving for. It is good to be aware that such confusions between basic value and instrumental value are not easy to avoid.

Note that any relativization from the outset, such as labeling certain values as "European" entails at least three additional risks: First, it suggests relativism because it proposes to be oriented by what your kind of people (whatever that means) do, rather than by what is simply best. This view implies that there are no objectively right or better decisions, only more or less culturally typical ones. Curiously, such a view not only confuses descriptivity with normativity, but also usually implies a form of objective normativity, since it assumes that, at a higher level, it is objectively right for Europeans (or residents of Europe) to act in a European manner.

Bettering the world as a shared task rather than a battle of identity

This is similar to a problem that can also be found in unreflective moral relativism: some seem to deduce (implicitly) from their denial of objective values, that it is objectively right (!) to let everyone live according to their current value beliefs and that it is objectively wrong (!) to guide or direct someone or to even criticize their value beliefs. This, in turn, reminds on typical problems of self-application of relativistic theories, as already pointed out by Rutte (1958, 364-367). Second, linking value beliefs to demographic characteristics encourages identification, which in turn encourages rigidity. Plurality should be interpreted as a hint that your value beliefs could be wrong, rather than be taken as a reason for holding on to them even more strongly or making them part of your identity. Third, this identification fosters divisions between in-groups and out-groups, i. e. those who share your beliefs and everyone else. This, in turn, can have negative social consequences and promote grouping, othering, exclusion, discrimination, misunderstandings or lack of communication. MO and the search for true values make no distinction between subjects as that would be pointless. MO is therefore the more inclusive view, framing bettering the world as a shared task rather than a battle of identity.

In order to achieve an evidence-based orientation, false value beliefs must be eliminated. One way to do this, is to analyze whether the potential values in question are necessarily ontological in a queer way or (which often goes hand in hand) mind-independent. This serves as a basic test for their plausibility: if they are, they are not really values. PAR greatly supports evidence-based objectivist ethics: it bases evaluative reasoning on the individuals concerned rather than on the priorities or belief systems of the evaluating subject. Potential values that cannot be reduced to

basic ones of the three groups mentioned can be abandoned, but that is not all: you can also check whether value beliefs align with an evidence-based understanding of the world. This method is powerful: for example, cultural value beliefs often include gender roles and thus assume a sharp distinction between men and women. This is not biologically justifiable (cf. Blackless et al. 2000), which shows that strict normative gender distinctions cannot be true. If value beliefs presume empirically wrong things, they are wrong themselves.

Although beginning with cultural value beliefs carries risks, it remains a practical starting point. Discarding those value beliefs that imply mind-independence or ontological existence and those that contradict empirical evidence leads to a smaller number of potentially orienting factors. There is another way to filter out false value beliefs: it seems more plausible to be oriented by what you would consider valuable, even if you had never been taught what to consider valuable, than by what you have simply adopted from a culture. Mere adoption is not a justification for a belief in any domain, so why should it be any different in axiology or ethics? The following framework makes this even clearer.

"Value idealism" and "value realism"

Oddie (2015) analyzed the relation between value and desire because of their obvious correlation: usually, good things are desired and bad things are undesired. He distinguishes two possible relations that fit to this correlation: desires either generate values or represent them. The first is a desire-based theory of value, in which value depends on what you desire; the second is open to anything that makes things valuable and interprets desires as cognitive representations of values that may be right or wrong. He calls the first option "value idealism" and the second "value realism". Oddie presents these two options as competing theories, but there is no reason to exclude the possibility that some desires are realistic and others idealistic. Furthermore, these terms are not necessarily tied to desires and can be applied to different things that correlate with values. For instance, something might be good for you because it makes you feel good, leading you to desire it. In this case, the feeling is idealistic (because the feeling makes it good) and the desire is realistic (because your desire is a representation of its value). Conversely, you might strongly desire something and feel good when you obtain it because of the value your desire attributes to it. Here, the desire is idealistic and the feeling is realistic.

If PAR is right, it is necessary that idealistic relations exist, but it also seems obvious that realistic relations exist too: suppose that something is good for everyone, society, humanity or good simpliciter, and that you know this. Would that not be a reason to desire it or to feel good about it, even if you did not initially? Your insights (as well as your half-baked opinions) about values clearly influence your desires and feelings, regardless of what you believe makes things valuable or what actually makes them valuable. Thus, if desires and feelings make things valuable and you are aware of this, that awareness in turn shapes your desires and feelings, assigning them a dual role.

The difference between the cause of a value belief and its philosophical justification

Let's assume that pluralism is correct, that different mental faculties such as cognition, desire, sensation, experience or consciousness itself make things valuable, and that everything that is of basic value is assigned to one of the three categories mentioned (a state of mind, a relation between mind and reality, or a distribution of values). Then every value that is not related to distribution must have ≥1 idealistic relation and ≥0 realistic relations. So if something not related to distribution has only realistic but no idealistic relations to mental faculties, then these all go wrong and the thing in question does not have the supposed value. This means that if you desire something or feel good about something simply because you believe it already has positive value (for you), then your desires and feelings are not idealistic (they do not generate value), but they also fail to correctly represent the axiological reality.[13] Distinguishing between realism and idealism can help to overcome and abandon unjustified value beliefs and thereby change your feelings and desires. This works even better if you recognize their cultural roots. Anything that evokes pleasure or desire and that has special significance in your culture but not in many other cultures could be based on a false value belief. Here, it is essential to distinguish between the cause of a value belief and its philosophical justification.

Suppose you live in a culture that tells you it is good to become a financial manager, whereas you might otherwise be drawn to work as a miller at a beautiful windmill. You may desire the former life or experience it as pleasant only because you have adopted the unproven belief that it is good simpliciter or good for you. I doubt that these feelings and desires

13 For further discussion of correct representation of values see Oddie (2015) regarding desires and Mulligan (1998) regarding emotions.

have idealistic power that generates value and makes it really good for you. There is a crucial difference between things you regard as valuable due to socially adopted beliefs and those that are valuable for you because of how your mental faculties are wired. In the first case, false value beliefs underlie your feelings and desires, and in the second, predoxastic personal inclinations do. These, in turn, are the best basis for values and much better than anything you have learned culturally. Experiencing plurality can help to reveal that some of the things you feel good about or desire are not truly good (for you), but only what you have been taught to feel good about or to desire. It can improve your life to reflect on whether your (implicit) everyday value beliefs regarding family ties, having children, social status, materialism, working hours, certain foods, consuming alcohol, sleep-wake cycle, clothing or annual vacations are influenced by this.

Note that such social influences affecting feelings and desires do not always go the extra mile via value beliefs and can become so deeply internalized that they form genuine feelings and desires. Mental faculties are not predetermined, they are strongly shaped by experiences and social environment. It would be a fundamental mistake to regard all socially influenced interests as worthless or even inauthentic. The distinction made here does not mean that you have to give up all your culturally influenced desires and feelings. Nevertheless, in many cases you can determine whether your desires and feelings are based on unfounded value beliefs or not. Plurality can be the starting point for such an introspection. Furthermore, even if something is really good for you due to your culture, plurality can reveal that the same thing is not good for everyone and hence not necessarily good simpliciter.

Imagine two worlds: In the first one, a certain type of lifestyle is good for everyone. In this world, it is clearly good simpliciter to establish an outcome in which everyone lives this type of lifestyle. In the second one, the same lifestyle is good for many people within a culture because of that culture, but bad for many more others unknown to them. The people within the culture mentioned may believe that the same outcome as in the first world is good simpliciter, but this would be wrong and this lifestyle should not be established worldwide. A confrontation with plurality can help to understand this and to clarify the differences between VS and WV.

7 Conclusion

Most of my conclusion is likely uncontroversial. What is (objectively) good and bad for you depends on your mind and is partly individual (if feelings or desires generate values). Consciousness or cognition, if associated with basic values at all, allow little or no room for individuality. So, no surprise: some things are good for everyone and others are not. What is (objectively) good simpliciter depends on the mental faculties of the individuals involved and the distribution of WVs. For a good life, you must orient yourself toward what is objectively good for you and act morally well, you must orient yourself toward what is objectively good simpliciter. To find out what is good means to identify which mental faculties are axiologically relevant, to understand their conditions and interrelations and to find out how a set of WVs leads to VS. To this end, all faculties of mind must be known and it must be determined whether and how they generate value. This includes understanding when they are idealistic and when they are realistic. Only in this way, uncritical adoption of cultural value beliefs, problematic ontological implications and moral relativism can be avoided, which means that this is the only way toward evidence-based and epistemologically justified orientation.

Plurality and the absence of shared cultural orientation may indeed lead to disorientation, doubt, problematic individual moral convictions, value nihilism, dissent, conflict and mutual incomprehension. But they can also be the starting point for Cartesian doubt, and the chance to overcome unreflectively recited value beliefs and to be open for evidence based ethics. This again can be the key to a better society of tomorrow and a central goal for ethical education.

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