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BETTER-MAKING PROPERTIES AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF VALUE DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT

A light form of value realism is defended according to which objective properties of comparison objects make value comparisons true or false. If one object has such a better-making property and another lacks it, this is sufficient for the truth of a corresponding value comparison. However, better-making properties are only necessary and usually not sufficient parts of the justifications of value comparisons. The account is not reductionist; it remains consistent with error-theoretic positions and the view that there are normative facts.

Keywords: values; axiology; better than; the good; objectivity; value disagreement.

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1. Introduction

This article defends a version of value realism, according to which many, if not most, value disagreements are objective and factual. When we rightly value something, it must have one or more distinctive properties that provide reasons why we value it more than other things. Value-based debates frequently revolve around whether or not comparison objects possess such "better-making" properties and which properties fall into this category. Addressing these questions is a factual inquiry.

Unlike metaphysical accounts of value realism like McDowell (1985), the argument presented in this article does not claim that all aspects of our value judgments are objective; the thesis is rather that a substantial part of our value judgments is objective. To "rightly value" is meant in an epistemic, not in a moral sense, in the above formulation. We may call the position defended in this article a light value realism because it remains compatible with the moral skepticism of John Mackie (1977) as well as the moral relativism and contextualism of authors such as Gilbert Harman (1975, 1996), David Wong (1984), and Brit Brogaard (2008, 2012). The objectivity of better-making properties invalidates purely subjectivist takes on value, however, and may therefore serve as a stepping stone towards a more encompassing value realism.

What are values, and what are facts? Providing a definition would be equivalent to solving the fact/value problem, and it is doubtful that this problem has a general solution. Instead, our prior grasp of these notions can serve as a starting point. Ordinary speakers can identify certain adjectives as evaluative. Competent speakers of English, for example, understand that "good" and "brilliant" are evaluative adjectives. The following statements will serve as examples:

(1) Friendship is good.
(2) a. Democracy is good.
    b. Democracy is better than oligarchy.
(3) a. This knife is good.
    b. Knife *a* is better than knife *b*.
(4) Alice: Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla ice cream.

Based on prior understanding, we can identify (1), (2), and (3) as value statements. In contrast, I argue in Section 3.1 that the statements in (4) are not value statements, albeit being evaluative in a more general sense. They are based on subjective preferences and do not give rise to direct disagreements about the content of the utterance.

This article assumes that values can be identified with the comparison structure that represents the abstract truth conditions of statements containing the comparative form of a corresponding value predicate. This assumption is prevalent in publications on value structure such as Hansson (2001), Carlson (2018), and Chang (2002). I will also follow Rast (2022a) in presuming that overall value can be calculated by aggregating a finite number of value relations that are regarded sub-values and represent characteristics of the overall value.[1] These relations will be abbreviated by '$\succeq$' for weak betterness reading *x is better than or equal to y*, and corresponding relations '$\succ$' for *x is (strictly) better than y* and '$\sim$' standing for *x and y are equally good*. What counts as good can be defined based on a value relation in this setting, where the exact definition hinges on whether value neutrality is allowed and whether there can be incomparability.[2] In this view, statements like (2a) and (3a) are true or false relative to a more specific value structure that the uses of the comparatives in (2b) and (3b) partly constitute. I will argue in Section 2.2 that examples of intrinsic value attributions such as (1) remain compatible with such a conception of value.

Before continuing, the risk of trivializing the fact/value problem must be mentioned. Cognitivists believe that value statements are either true or non-true (false or lacking a truth-value).[3] If a value statement turns out to be true, it will be true due to a specific fact. So there are trivially only facts in this view. To avoid this deflationary take on the fact/value problem, the following sections focus on "narrow" facts, and a dependence on broader facts will only be addressed in Section 3.2. Narrow facts are either empirical facts, that is, facts that can be confirmed by empirical evidence and are principally testable by experiment, or abstract mathematical and logical truths.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 details better-making properties and briefly addresses Moorean objections. In Section 3, reasons are laid out why better-making properties are objective and constitute sufficient conditions for the truth of value statements although they are typically only necessary and not sufficient parts of their

[1] In what follows, the term "value" will be used for value relations, sub-values, features contributing to value, and aggregated value. A gain in brevity outweighs the imprecision of this usage, as the details of multidimensional value representations are not relevant for the following arguments.

[2] See Chisholm and Sosa (1966), Dalen (1974), Hansson (1990), Gustafsson (2013, 2015), and Carlson (2014) about "good" in terms of "better than". See Hansson (2018, 512-514) for the opposite direction of deriving value orderings from classificatory value concepts. Rast (2022a, 74–94) provides an overview of value aggregation methods.

[3] According to Oddie (2013), the position may be more aptly named "propositionalism". However, the term "cognitivism" is more common. Importantly, a cognitivist could subscribe to an error-theory, according to which all value statements lack a truth value, but most cognitivists are not error-theorists in that sense.

justification. Arguing for this position involves several steps. First, if an apparent disagreement rests on subjective preferences, it does not concern values. Second, Section 3.2 details why better-making properties are objective properties of comparison objects. Having such a property or lacking it are narrow facts. Finally, one might dispute what constitutes such properties and how different betterness judgments ought to be combined. According to Section 3.3, answers to these questions require an evaluation of theories according to their merits. This process is epistemic and the values in it are epistemic values.

2. Better-making properties

A property P is *better-making* for a value ordering $\succeq$ and comparison objects a and b if and only if $P(a) \,\&\, \neg P(b) \supset a \succ b$.[4] Since the rule that connects the better-making property to the value comparison uses a conditional, it expresses a sufficient condition. If a is not better than b, then a cannot have a better-making property for that value.

Why should anyone accept this rule? Suppose that $a \succ b$, and there is no better-making property. Object a would have no properties that might be cited as to why it is better than b. This position is absurd. A given comparison object must have *some* property that makes it better than another object, whatever that property may be. For example, it would be ludicrous to assert that knife a in (3b) possesses no properties that someone could use to justify why it is better than b. On the contrary, several properties may make it better; it may be sharper than the other, have a better handle than the other, have better steel, and so on. People rarely run out of possible candidates for better-making properties in evaluative practice.

2.1 Complex better-making properties

Multiple features complicate matters. Comparing the knives in (3b), a might turn out to be sharper *and* have a better handle than b, and therefore it may be more suitable than b as a kitchen knife. It is well-known that there are many ways to combine features in such a multidimensional scenario. If the features can be expressed quantitatively, one might sum them up, provided that intuitions about overall comparisons remain compensatory and consistent with additive models. For example, a knife with handle quality 3 and blade sharpness 5 must be equal in value to a knife with handle quality 5 and blade sharpness 3 in an additive model.

[4] As a rule for parenthesis elimination, '&' binds stronger than '⊃' in this notation.

Sometimes, such additive models do not suffice and more complicated aggregation methods are called for. We may put aside many of these details, however, because better-making property are allowed to be arbitrarily complex. Better-making properties are decisive for a comparison if all other relevant comparison features are equal, no matter how complex they are. Some such comparisons may be between hypothetical objects that only differ in one aspect.

Some cases deserve special attention, though. Several properties may be decisive only when they are present together in a sub-additive or a super-additive way. Super-additivity means, in this context, that if those features could be quantified, then their combined presence would have a higher value than the sum of the values of each of the features taken individually. Going back to Moore (1903), this view is often discussed under the label "organic unity".[5] In contrast, in a sub-additive value combination the combined presence of the features may have a lower value than the sum of the values of each feature taken individually. The holistic assumption behind sub- and super-additive value aggregation can be reformulated as the thesis that the complex better-making property emerges as a qualitatively new property. Claiming that such properties exist ought not pose more problems than the appeal to the holistic assumption.

Better-making properties cannot be contradictory under the same value. If there are two properties, P and P', and two items a and b such that $P(a)$ & $\neg P(b)$ & $\neg P'(a)$ & $P'(b)$, then P and P' cannot be better-making properties belonging to the same value. This constraint is more of a methodological requirement than one concerning value philosophy. Methodologically, it makes sense to specify that conflicting better-making properties belong to separate (sub)values, because methods for aggregating multiple value relations into an overall assessment already allow for dealing with such value conflicts. Otherwise, the underlying value representations would have to be paraconsistent, allowing for the truth of $a \succ b$ & $b \succ a$, rather than the unproblematic case $a \succeq b$ & $b \succeq a$ commonly used to define $a \sim b$. Paraconsistent logics of value can represent moral dilemmas. Still, an account with multiple dimensions has enough expressive power without additional paraconsistency if it allows aggregation failures to represent incomparability. Assume the knife a is better than b in terms of sharpness and b is better than a in handle quality. Various value aggregation algorithms provide solutions to this problem. If the sharpness aspect weighs more than or outranks the handle quality, a might be better than b. If the two values have the same weight or rank, then $a \sim b$ would be an

[5] See Moore (1903, 28) and Carlson (1997, 2020). Notice that super-additivity can be defined abstractly without assigning numbers to features first.

acceptable aggregation. Finally, it is feasible to have two values in a conflict so that aggregating them fails in a specific case.

There are additional technical requirements on the rules for better-making properties. They must generally cohere with the properties of the value relations they indirectly constitute when assembled from piece-wise comparisons. Strict betterness $\succ$ is often considered transitive.[6] If this is the case, then the following rule must hold: For any three objects x, y, z, if there is a better-making property $P1$ that implies $x \succ y$, and there is a better making property $P2$ that implies $y \succ z$, then there is a better-making property $P3$ such that $x \succ z$. Without further ado, the above rule also complies with the irreflexivity of strict betterness since $P(a)$ & $\neg P(a)$ is already excluded as a contradiction when the base logic is not paraconsistent. The standard account of "better than" does not require other rules, but when using nonstandard value relations like semiorders, additional rules must ensure that better-making properties comply with those alternative base relations. For instance, semiorders have the "Ferrer's property".[7]

Finally, we should avoid trivial positions. A better-making property for value comparison $a \succ b$ may not be circular. We should not allow properties whose comprehensive characterization would amount to restating the value comparison in the subsequent of the rule. For instance, this condition prohibits the *property of being better than b*. Although a better-making property can be relational, it may not be relational in the trivial sense of repeating the same or a similar value relation that represents the value under discussion.

2.2 Better-making properties and final value

Better-making properties seem to be hard to square with intrinsic and final value. Since there is widespread agreement in the Moorean tradition of axiology that final value exists, this criticism would at least severely limit the usefulness of the above definition. The purpose of this section is to show that better-making properties are compatible with final value.

Something has a final value when it is valuable for its own sake, without having to take into account other values and consequences of having the value. For example, if friendship in (1) has final value, it is not valuable because having friends provides pleasure or other advantages, it is valuable

[6] For counter-arguments to the transitivity of strict betterness, see Temkin (1987, 2012) and Rachels (1998, 2001).
[7] See Luce (1956) and Vincke and Pirlot (1997) for more information about semiorders.

for its own sake. Some philosophers, such as Korsgaard (1983), consider what is valuable for its own sake final value and oppose it to instrumental value, whereas intrinsic value is opposed to extrinsic value and based on intrinsic properties. This terminology makes final value more important than intrinsic value because there are compelling examples of things with final value not based on an intrinsic property (see Beardsley 1965; O'Neill 1992; Kagan 1998; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2000, 2005). Even authors like Zimmerman (2001), who prefers the label "intrinsic", agree that intrinsic value cannot always be based on intrinsic properties of comparison objects in the narrow sense.

For example, according to Beardsley (1965) rare stamps may have a value on their own, and being rare is not an intrinsic property of a stamp. Zimmerman solves this problem by delineating an ontology of states of affairs with basic intrinsic value, but we need not enter the (mostly terminological) debate about intrinsic versus final value. It suffices for current purposes to acknowledge that among arbitrary comparison objects, not all final value is based on intrinsic properties.[8] Likewise, it need not concern us that some authors like Zimmerman (2001) and Perrine (2018) argue that the basic objects of comparisons are states of affairs, whereas others such as Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000) argue against this view. The following discussion is neutral about the nature of the comparison objects.

The criticism is this: A better-making property provides the reason why one comparison object is better than another; that is a comparative definition. In contrast, final value does not seem to be comparative at all. To say that friendship in (1) has final value is to say that it is valuable on its own and not relative to other concepts. Hedonists consider pleasure a final value not because it is better than pain but because it is intrinsically good from their point of view. A painting might be valuable in its own right, being so unique that it would be hard even to compare it to other paintings. Such examples seem to indicate that better-making properties cannot provide a final value and, therefore, cannot be the sole reason why we attribute value in general if final value exists, although they may be useful for reasoning about the instrumental and extrinsic value of objects. As I will argue, this criticism rests on a misunderstanding. Any kind of value, including final value, must allow for comparisons, and better-making properties provide reasons for specific comparisons. There is no incompatibility in the first place.

[8] This is not to say that it is not possible to develop a mereology like Zimmerman's in which the basic value bearers (states of affairs akin to situations) are individuated in just the right way to allow them to have intrinsic value because they have an intrinsic value-providing property. I wish to remain neutral about such mereological approaches in this article.

My counter-argument relies on the choice-guiding nature of values. A necessary, though not sufficient condition for being a value is to potentially guide someone's choices. That is to say, a particular value might never guide anyone's choices in practice, but *if* someone has to choose between several alternatives, then the value must be able to guide the choice provided it is applicable and relevant. I consider this an analytic aspect of what it means to be a value. There are no values that cannot possibly be choice-guiding.[9] The person in need of guidance must somehow be able to apply or use that value to evaluate alternatives and figure out, based on that value, whether one alternative is better than another, they are equally good under that value, they are on a par in the sense of Chang (2002), or the comparison fails for some reason. In all cases except the last one, the properties that provide intrinsic value to a comparison object must play an integral role in the comparison since they are the reasons why these objects have value relative to the other object, and these reasons should guide choices rather than something else.

Thus, when something has a final value, the properties that give it this value must allow for comparisons. When comparing, a better-making property may be identical to the property or relation that lends the comparison object its final value. Nevertheless, the fact that a comparison is made need not be constitutive of the value. For example, suppose that two states of affairs *a* and *b* containing John and Mary are compared. Suppose John and Mary are good friends in *a* and no friends in *b*. If friendship has intrinsic value, then one might say that *a* is better than *b* because *a* has the property of containing two friends that *b* lacks. This property is the better-making property in this example. Despite this, the fact that *a* and *b* are compared is not itself constitutive of the intrinsic value of friendship.

For Moore (1922, 260-261), intrinsic value can come to a specific degree, which trivially enables multiple comparisons. Zimmerman (2001, 159-180) expands on this and even argues that value can be summed up. These fairly strong assumptions about value allow one to use utility functions to represent value. I will address some problems with such representations in Section 3.2 when discussing desire. For now, it suffices to show that better-making properties remain compatible with such views on intrinsic value.

Suppose *a* in the above example has the intrinsic value of friendship to degree 0.8 on a normalized scale between 0 and 1, and *b* has this value to

[9] Values must also allow for comparison for reasons not directly related to choices. For example, according to the positivity of goodness, if *a* is good and *b* is better than *a*, then *b* must also be good (Hansson 2018, 509). This principle cannot be formulated without comparisons.

degree 0 because there is no friendship at all in this state of affairs. The better-making property is the property of containing friendship to a normalized degree 0.8 (whatever that means). The same better-making property would also serve as a reason for the comparison to a third state of affairs with two more superficial friends of degree 0.4 only, yielding the judgments $a \succ c \succ b$. The better-making properties include the particular degrees or amounts of the intrinsic value in such cases. Although it is doubtful that such an account of intrinsic value would be adequate for examples like (1) and (2), and one might argue instead that such examples only involve ordinal value comparisons, better-making properties are perfectly compatible with stronger value conceptions according to which intrinsic value comes at a degree.

In summary, better-making properties neither implicitly nor explicitly presume that comparisons are value-constitutive. Value must be able to guide someone's choices under the right circumstances and allow for comparisons, yet the reason why something has value may still be that it has value for its own sake.

3. The role of better-making properties in value disagreement

A better-making property is sufficient for the truth of a "better than" comparison by some value. If object a has a better-making property and b has not, then a is better than b. However, the same property cannot make all "better than" comparisons under some value true. If $a \succ b$ and $b \succ c$ hold, then there must be two different better-making properties P and P' such that $P(a) \,\&\, \neg P(b) \,\&\, P'(b) \,\&\, \neg P'(c)$. Hence, better-making properties do not permit a more compact value representation.

The presence of a better-making property in one thing and its absence in another implies an individual value comparison, but this regularity does not necessarily *justify* the comparison. In general, justifications go beyond the mere mention of an isolated condition. Suppose a customer buys a new phone, and battery life is crucial to them. Then, a phone with a battery life of 24 hours is superior to one with an 8-hour battery life, but merely presenting such an attribute as a rationale for the value judgment is likely insufficient. Such a flimsy rationale is only admissible when it is clear that the relevant feature is the most important factor and no other reasons are expected. Generally, justifications need to be more detailed. Why is battery life so critical? How does it relate to other potential better-making properties such as price, camera, and reception quality? How complete a justification needs to be hinges on the context and the goal of the value assessment, but at some point, it must resort to a better-making property.

There is no way to argue that *a* is better than *b* without pointing out at least one property of *a* that *b* lacks and that makes *a* better than *b*. A better-making property is a necessary component of justifying a value comparison, though not always sufficient.

Justifications are typically broad and concern all value comparisons by a specific value instead of just one. They can be thought of as theories (in a broad sense) that comparison objects can instantiate. Let $T\,[a, b]$ be the outcome of instantiating such a theory T by objects a and b. For T to be a theory of value $\succeq$, $T\,[a,b]$ must entail the statements $P(a) \,\&\, \neg P(b) \supset a \succ b$ and $P(a) \,\&\, \neg P(b)$ for some better-making property P.

This characterization remains compatible with textbook definitions of necessary and sufficient conditions. According to these definitions, α is a necessary condition for β whenever $\beta \supset \alpha$ holds, and α is a sufficient condition for β whenever $\alpha \supset \beta$ holds. The presence of a better-making property P in a and its absence in b is a necessary condition for the theory to provide a proper justification of the value comparison because $T\,[a, b] \supset P(a)\&\neg P(b)$ holds and, at the same time, it is a sufficient condition for the truth of the value comparison itself since $P(a) \,\&\, \neg P(b) \supset a \succ b$ also holds.

Even when they are relational, better-making properties can be objective. In example (4), the better-making property of chocolate ice cream for Alice is that it tastes like chocolate. Tasting in a particular way is a relation between the object and the taster; thus, the property is relational and the supposed value is agent-relative. The property is also objective, or at the very least, intersubjective. Anyone with a functioning sense of smell will recognize chocolate ice cream. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the justification of an evaluative comparison statement can be subjective even though the better-making property is objective. In this example, Alice may state that ice cream *a* is better than *b* because she prefers chocolate over vanilla taste, whereas Bob may disagree. He prefers the flavor of vanilla to that of chocolate. The taste of the ice cream is mostly objective, but the evaluation of the taste is subjective.[10]

[10] As Smith (2007) lays out about wine tasting, "[t]astes are properties a wine has that give rise to certain experiences in us; and they cannot be reduced to, or equated with, those experiences". The circumstances and abilities of the taster need to be appropriate to identify tastes properly, and the possibility of error requires distinguishing more subjective experiences from how things taste. However, there are variations of smelling and tasting abilities among people, so the senses of taste and smell are not *fully* intersubjective. For example, according to a meta-study by Sorokowski et al. (2019), women tend to have better olfaction than men. Training also likely makes a difference. Master perfumers are expected to be able to identify hundreds of notes and accords blindly, a level of expertise laypersons can hardly reach without equivalent training.

The following sections aim to show that such examples of subjective justification are not the basis of value comparison by arguing for the following theses:

1. If justifications of value comparisons are subjective, we cannot speak of value comparisons. When Alice states that chocolate is better than vanilla ice cream, she ought not be taken literally.
2. Better-making properties are always objective, or at the very least, intersubjective.
3. Because better-making properties provide sufficient conditions for individual value comparisons, many value disagreements concern what constitutes the better-making properties of a value comparison and whether the comparison items have or lack these properties.

3.1 Lack of disagreement about matters of personal taste

This section aims to show that apparent disagreements about personal taste are not value disagreements since they are no disagreements. This idea is not new; it has been discussed quite extensively in recent literature on relativism versus contextualism of predicates of personal taste.

Consider a disagreement in the ice cream scenario. As Lasersohn (2005, 2008) argues, disputes involving uses of predicates of personal taste may be cases of faultless disagreement. Alice might truthfully state (4), and Bob might truthfully state the negation of this sentence. Both assertions may be true, respectively, in relation to the assessors Alice and Bob. According to Lasersohn, in such a case the disagreement is faultless; both of them are right. Other people may also assess the statements in one or the other way in this version of relativism.

It is controversial whether such statements are true relative to an assessor (assessor-relativism) or whether their truth-value varies only because their semantic content varies (contextualism).[11] We do not have to decide on these issues, as both accounts share the same idea: If a comparison is based on preferences of personal taste, it is subjective because people's tastes differ. What is questionable about these cases is whether these cases count as instances of disagreement.[12] As long as Alice in (4) provides as a reason that this is her preference, there need not be any disagreement between Alice and Bob precisely because subjective justifications are deemed

[11] A contextualist might claim that *better than* is a shortcut for *better than for + AGENT*, for example.
[12] This concern was first voiced by Stojanovic (2007), and later refined by Stojanovic (2015) and McNally and Stojanovic (2017). The criticism is also at the heart of Dworkin's "semantic sting" argument in Dworkin (1986).

appropriate in matters of personal taste. Suppose Bob prefers vanilla over chocolate ice cream. In that case, *his* preference is compatible with Alice's preference, and he can agree with Alice if he agrees that (4) is based on *her* preferences. Strictly speaking, it is incorrect to call such cases subjective disagreements because they are no disagreements in the first place.

This is not to say disagreements over such issues cannot occur at all. A dispute might concern whether someone has a particular preference. Although there is some first-person authority about preferences, this authority is not absolute. Bob may know Alice's preferences better than her. People only sometimes know what they want and can be mistaken or confused about their preferences. Moreover, people may signal disagreement in a conversation, even when there is no disagreement about the underlying subjective aspect of an evaluation. A dispute might concern something else, such as presupposed content or social inferences drawn from the belief that someone has a specific taste. For example, Bob may disagree with Alice because he believes that people who prefer chocolate ice cream over vanilla ice cream are tasteless brutes. As ridiculous as this may sound about ice cream, disputes about musical preferences are often of this sort.[13] It is common in the personal, social, and political realms to have disagreements about something other than the content of a particular utterance the disagreement seems to be about. In these indirect disputes, the utterance content only serves as fuel for other persistent disagreements in the background.

There may also be disagreement over whether the justifications can be subjective. For example, one person may believe that there are objective criteria for determining if one painting is better than another, yet another may be a subjectivist about art. People may also dispute what constitutes a better-making property and whether objects have the property in question. However, once we identify a disagreement as one about taste, we know it will involve primarily subjective justifications. In the other examples mentioned, the disagreement concerns something else, such as social norms and functions. Such additional disagreements may be legitimate, but they are not direct disagreements about the evaluative statement in question. They concern the better-making properties, or a standpoint or social issue hidden behind the evaluative statements seemingly under dispute.

[13] To mention a famous example (out of many), there were violent clashes between "rockers" and "mods" in Southern England in 1964-66. Cohen (2002) analyzes the media coverage of these incidents and the reactions it caused.

Considering all this, I suggest distinguishing between more broadly conceived evaluative comparisons and value comparisons in the narrow sense. Value comparisons, in the narrow sense, are not based on subjective preferences, although the underlying value relations may look similar to these from a modeling perspective. Value statements are meant to be intersubjective or objective. In contrast, apparent taste disagreements concern evaluative comparisons that reveal subjective preferences, but they involve no disagreement; if there is disagreement, it is not directly about the evaluative statement.

3.2 Better-making properties are objective

In this section, I argue that better-making properties are objective. As previously stated, agent-relative and relational properties can be objective. But what does *objective* mean? Although this question may be hard to answer in general, the following distinctions suffice for the purpose of this article. A subjective property is one that an object can only have if one particular person has a belief or a similar non-factive, truth-upholding attitude about the object and if the property cannot be reduced to a property that does not entail that attitude.[14] In contrast, characterizing an objective property does either not involve any reference to attitudes at all or it involves factive attitudes like knowledge.

A property may also be intersubjective. If a property *P* is such that having *P* presupposes that rational persons within a given community with common knowledge about the world can be expected to hold certain attitudes dispositionally, or upon sincere reflection, about objects that have the property, then *P* is intersubjective.

To exemplify these distinctions, consider monetary cost. Being believed by Bob to cost $50 is a subjective property. So is being believed by Alice to cost $12. In contrast, the property of costing $50 is an intersubjective property. Monetary systems hinge on people's attitudes about money and its worth, the governing institutions, and markets. In the case of fiat money, those beliefs partially constitute the property of costing $50. Nevertheless, the property of costing $50 is not constituted by any *particular* person's belief about the object, not even the seller's, and therefore is not subjective. Finally, being known by Bob to cost $50 is an objective property because knowledge is factive; everything with this property also has the property

[14] We may speak of a truth-upholding attitude whenever an attitude holder takes an embedded proposition more likely to be true than false. For example, certainty and belief are truth-upholding, whereas entertaining a thought and considering a proposition are not.

of costing $50, which does not require a specific person to hold a belief about it.[15]

Suppose a better-making property *P* was subjective. According to the definition of a better-making property, $P(a)\&\neg P(b)$ implies the value comparison $a \succ b$. Since a person needs to hold a non-factive attitude about an object for that object to have a subjective property, the rule states in this case that it is a sufficient condition for the truth of a value comparison that a particular person holds an attitude about the object. This position is absurd if the attitude in question is belief or another truth-upholding attitude. The mere fact that someone believes something about *a* and does not believe the same about *b* does not warrant that *a* is better than *b*; there must be some property in which *a* and *b* differ that allows for that conclusion regardless of what a particular person believes about them.

Consider the monetary value of two comparison items, for instance. Just because Alice believes that *a* is cheaper than *b* and therefore better in terms of cost does not warrant the conclusion that *a* is better than *b* in terms of cost; *a* is only better than *b* under this value when it is cheaper. Under normal circumstances, it is not enough for someone to believe that the comparison items have or lack a particular property; they must actually have the property or lack it. If Alice happens to find out that her belief was false and *b* is cheaper than *a*, she would not say that her values (or, in this case, subjective evaluation) have changed. She would rather say that she misjudged the value of *a* in terms of costs and concede, insofar as she acts rationally, that *b* was better than *a* in terms of costs in the first place.

Only matters of personal taste might be an exception to this rule. Maybe Alice's belief that some ice cream tastes like chocolate is good enough for her evaluation, even if her senses are confused and the ice cream does not actually taste of chocolate. However, as I have argued above, such examples do not illustrate value comparisons because they do not give rise to disagreement. A subjectivist may call these subjective evaluations values, of course. However, this is merely a terminological choice; the point is that subjective evaluations based on personal preferences differ substantially from value comparisons that constitute what one might call

[15] Although objective and intersubjective properties need not be mind-independent, they presuppose properties that supervene on mind-independent facts. Such a notion of objectivity evades a recent attack on the inherent value judgments of realism by Dasgupta (2018); see Sider (2022, 196), who does not endorse this notion of objectivity and proposes a metasemantic account instead. However, the debate ranges back to Goodman (1955) and Putnam (1980), and in my opinion a proper response to Dasgupta needs to go back to Putnam's original model-theoretic argument and the role of measurement and combinatorial restrictions imposed by theories, as these theories evolve over time. However, this topic needs to be left for another occasion for lack of space.

real or "genuine" values because the latter give rise to disagreements, whereas the former do not.

Properties involving attitudes that are directly about comparison items fare better. Could the property of being desired by someone be a better-making property? Such an account might seem plausible for Humeans who consider desire a basis for choice. However, there are compelling arguments against the idea that the property of being desired by someone makes something better.

To begin with, being desired does not suffice. To conclude that *a* is better than *b*, the desire for *a* must be greater than the desire for *b*. So degrees or intensities of desire are needed. If these exist, then it is indeed possible to formulate a rule stating that whenever the amount of *X*'s desire for *a* is larger than the amount of *X*'s desire for *b*, then *a* is better than *b* for *X*.

However, such conceptions of "better than" as desire get the direction of justification wrong. We desire *a* more than *b because* it is better (for us, to stay within the agent-relative realm for the sake of argument). The converse is not valid. It is not generally true that whatever we desire more than something else is better (for us).[16] The reason to reject desire as a basis for goodness is not potential psychological confusion, as is sometimes argued against subjectivists, but rather a temporal dimension of desire that goodness does not have. We desire something episodically, at a particular time, when the consequences of fulfilling that desire are not yet fully known. If the consequences turn out to be negative in the future, the person still had the desire in the past.

In contrast, suppose we say that something is better than something else for someone. If the consequences turn out to be negative, the initial betterness statement is retracted and considered false. It is not the case that the option for that person was good and is now no longer good; rather, it was bad from the start. This asymmetry in the temporal dimension of the two notions makes it impossible to use desire as a substitute for goodness. Suppose, for the sake of argument, an account built on a Desire Satisfaction Principle despite these flaws. The resulting position would render value relations obsolete. Utility functions from objects to real numbers can represent an amount of desire that allows for "greater than" comparisons. Desiring *a* more than *b* means that the amount of desire for *a* is greater than the amount of desire for *b*, i.e., $u(a) > u(b)$ holds. According to the theory

[16] Broome (1999, 3) mentions a related principle in terms of preferences, the Preference Satisfaction Principle: the principle that humans always prefer what is better for them. He also considers this principle implausible.

of scale types introduced by psychologist Stevens (1946) and formally worked out in measurement theory (see, e.g., Roberts 1979; Krantz et al. 1971, 1989, 1990), talking about amounts in this way means that the utility function $u(.)$ rests at least on an interval scale and more likely on a ratio scale.[17] A corresponding value relation can be extracted from such a utility representation in a mechanical way by defining $x \succ y \Leftrightarrow_{Def.} u(x) > u(y)$ and $x \sim y \Leftrightarrow_{Def.} u(x) = u(y)$. This construction makes the value relation dispensable and requires assumptions much stronger than merely talking about "better than" comparisons within a value. Utility functions guarantee that all value comparisons are complete and transitive, provided that additional constraints are met in case there are uncountably many comparison objects. Utility functions also make all value comparisons compensatory, which is a dubious assumption. To cut a long story short, desire understood in this way is a stronger value representation than a mere value relation. It makes the latter redundant.[18]

Even if one is willing to defend such an account, the property of comparison object *a* of being desired to amount $u(a)$ by person *X* cannot serve as a better-making property. The comparison $u(a) > u(b)$, not the amount of desire for *a* itself, makes *a* better than *b*, and this comparison violates the circularity prohibition of Section 2.1. Finally, even under a desire-as-utility view, when we ask why a particular object *a* is better than *b* in a given evaluation situation, the reason cannot just be that it is more desirable. Rather, *a* is more desirable *because* it has some property that *b* lacks. Desire is not blind, something in the desired object needs to spark it.

3.3 The objectivity of value disagreement

To recapitulate, objective better-making properties are sufficient conditions for the truth of value comparisons. These properties are also necessary for justifying value comparisons, so every justification of a value comparison has an objective component. However, one point of the previous sections was that these justifications are typically more exhaustive. Part of a justification may also concern what constitutes a better-making property for a particular value and how different values enter an overall value assessment. Finally, a disagreement may also arise over the relevance of specific values. For example, someone might deny

[17] On an interval scale, any linear transformation $u'(x) = a \cdot u(x) + b$ for positive non-zero constant *a* and positive constant *b* represents the same information as $u(x)$. On a ratio scale, only transformations of the type $u'(x) = a \cdot u(x)$ are allowed for positive non-zero constant *a*, meaning that the 0-point is meaningful and shared. In contrast, an ordinal utility function only represents an underlying preference relation, but talking about amounts of desire would be meaningless on such a scale.

[18] I have argued in Rast (2022a, 2022b) that these utility representations are inadequate for values in general. These arguments are independent of the current point and go beyond the scope of this article.

that comparisons of a product's packaging design ought to enter its evaluation. In contrast, someone else might insist that it is an essential aspect of the purchasing experience. Because of these additional possibilities, one might doubt that broader aspects of a justification need to rest on narrow facts.

Moral intuitionists and particularists like Dancy (2004) have expressed one such doubt. According to Dancy, there cannot be an overarching systematic theory that justifies moral judgments and morally relevant value comparisons. Our moral practices are too context-dependent and have too many exceptions to allow for general theories. Instead, we must rely on moral intuitions in each evaluative context. These enter broader justifications of value statements.

It is worth noting, however, that moral intuitionism and particularism are compatible with the approach presented thus far. Sometimes a justification may appeal to intuitions, and it is also possible to have different justifications in different contexts. Nevertheless, it seems doubtful that intuitions alone can be decisive for particular value disagreements.

The problem is that intuitions are not generally a source of evidence. I follow Hintikka (1999) in this regard, though my own take is a bit less radical. In my point of view, intuitions may provide evidence in moral philosophy due to certain anthropological constants, but I agree with Hintikka that they are methodologically useless for resolving disagreements. Suppose most people share roughly the same intuitions about a value statement. That means the value statement is uncontroversial, and most people agree about it. In that case, there is no demand for a justification, and there will be widespread agreement over the better-making properties. Such cases may occur, but they are of little interest in the light of error-theoretic arguments like those of Mackie (1977). Many interesting value statements trigger persistent disagreements. So suppose there are conflicting intuitions instead. Then intuitions themselves cannot resolve a disagreement, although they might help to address it. There are essentially three ways to deal with such cases:

1. One might deal with them like in the ice cream example. The result is moral relativism.
2. One might claim that some people have mistaken intuitions or misidentify them. This leads to moral skepticism and an error theory.
3. Justifications may involve something else besides intuitions, such as moral and narrow facts.

According to the thesis defended in Section 3.1, the first response means that the alleged value statement does not concern value but only subjective preference. There is no fundamental disagreement between people who seemingly disagree about such statements, or the disagreement is about something else. The second response is likewise possible. However, it is a long stretch to claim these are the only possibilities. At least *some* value comparisons can reasonably be expected to fall into the third category. So what about the third case?

Factual disagreements can be persistent, and their resolution may require detailed domain knowledge. Nobody would expect non-specialists to be able to determine whether a statement in physics is reasonably well-confirmed or false; physicists do that, and they need to study physics for years to acquire the skills to judge and advance physical theories. Similarly, problems of what constitutes better-making properties and how to combine different values into an overall assessment might hinge on moral facts. Scanlon (2014) and Parfit (2011) defend moral facts based on "domain pluralism", the thesis that the truth of statements and the existence of corresponding facts are established differently by different domains of inquiry. Science is concerned with narrow facts, mathematical reasoning is concerned with mathematical facts and the existence of mathematical objects, moral reasoning is concerned with moral facts, and so forth. If this view is correct, moral and axiological facts might make the theories that support value statements true or at least more adequate than other theories. Some of these facts might not be narrow in the sense introduced in Section 1.

Domain pluralism is controversial. What would these non-narrow facts be, and how do we access them? Are they like mathematical truths? This article does not need to answer these questions and decide whether domain pluralism is acceptable. Whether moral facts exist is independent of justifying and ranking the overall merits of theories that support value comparisons. Error theory, moral relativism, naturalism, non-cognitivism, and moral realism have one thing in common: Theories are *not* compared according to their moral value. We compare them according to how close we believe they are to being true, and, in a more practical sense, according to theory virtues and merits exemplifying (broadly conceived) epistemic value. There is no reason to believe that axiological theories work substantially differently than theories in other fields from an epistemological point of view. A justification of a value statement rests on a supporting theory and corresponding beliefs, which may include metaethical and normative stances, and any theory is ultimately assessed on the basis of its overall merits. Epistemic values decide the outcome of such an evaluation. Which justifications and supporting theories are most

likely true? Which justification has best explanatory adequacy? Which one integrates best with other value-related issues and metaethical theories? Which one is internally most coherent? Justifying a value comparison requires answering these questions, which cannot be answered by intuitions alone.

So, the answer to the question of how to deal with questions of the third kind is that, ultimately, the epistemic merits of supporting theories decide between competing justifications of value statements. It is a separate question whether those merits reliably track moral facts and in which way, and it seems likely that viable answers to these questions vary from value to value. Different types of values have different supporting theories with different overall merits, and we need to address each of them separately.

Is this the trivial position mentioned at the beginning of this article? Although it remains close to it, the new position is no longer trivial. First, better-making properties are not trivial, and whether a comparison object has better-making property or lacks it depends on narrow facts. This aspect of value comparisons is objective. Value comparisons between hypothetical comparison objects are equally objective. In this case, law-like statements from well-confirmed theories allow us to derive the relevant facts about the comparison objects. For instance, to have any validity, causal consequences of hypothetical courses of action that give rise to better-making properties are based on law-like statements about the world, and the theories supporting these statements are empirical. Second, ranking theories according to their overall merits is far from being trivial, as the vast body of literature on abduction and inference to the best explanation illustrates.[19] The epistemic evaluation involved in inference to the best explanation does not involve moral value. Even when non-narrow facts are involved in this evaluation, epistemic values trump other types of value and ultimately guide our judgments about value statements. All aspects of value disagreement are objective in this sense.

This position remains compatible with the view that there is sometimes no acceptable justification for a particular type of value statement. Judging that there is no acceptable justification is itself an evaluative position, though one that might remain agnostic about the original value statement. In that case, the proper response acknowledges that there is no corresponding value. This response is similar to how we (epistemically should) deal with existence claims in other domains of inquiry. For

[19] See, among many others, Peirce (1955), G. H. Harman (1965), Hintikka (1999), Magnani (2001), Lipton (2004), Gabbay and Woods (2005), Minnameier (2004), Schurz (2008), Mohammadian (2021), McCain and Poston (2017), and Niiniluoto (2018).

example, as Russell (1952) famously pointed out in his rejection of theism, the claim that there is a teapot flying in orbit between Earth and Mars has no good enough justification, so the default assumption ought to be that there is no such teapot. Likewise, if there is no good enough justification for a value statement, the default assumption is that there is no underlying value.

4. Conclusion

The above arguments support the thesis that value disagreements are disagreements about facts but do not say anything about the existence of such facts in a particular case. That is the right kind of theory because it matches how we deal with alleged facts in other domains. We rank theories and justifications according to their overall merits, and this evaluative process rests on epistemic values and theory virtues. So, the conclusion of this article is that value disagreements are objective and rest on epistemic values, provided there is a value behind them. In contrast, seemingly subjective value disagreements are no value disagreements because they are no disagreements.

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