

Dale Dorsey, *A Theory of Prudence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 336 pages. ISBN: 9780198823759 (hbk.). Hardback/Ebook \$85/\$80.75

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In *A Theory of Prudence*, Dale Dorsey develops a project-oriented subjectivism about personal value that he places within a temporally neutral account of prudence. Each part of the book serves as an important contribution in its own right, but they also work together to form one of the most comprehensive accounts of self-regarding normativity on offer. Anyone interested in wellbeing or prudence has much to learn from this book. But don't fret that there's yet another book on your reading list, because this one is a pleasure to read. Dorsey has the rare talent of being rigorous without being overly technical, all while being quite funny.

Dorsey begins the first part of the book by ably rebutting the skeptical view that there is only impersonal value (ch. 1). He then moves on to reject the requirement that intrinsic value supervenes on the intrinsic properties of the valuable item (ch. 2). I am completely persuaded by his arguments against the view that it's necessary that intrinsic value supervenes of intrinsic properties. However, I am unpersuaded by his argument against claim that supervening on intrinsic properties is sufficient to make value intrinsic, because it relies on taking dispositions to instrumental value to be intrinsic properties. But even if their categorical bases are intrinsic, dispositions themselves are extrinsic in that they rely on extrinsic laws of nature. Yet this issue about sufficiency isn't integral to his overall picture.

Dorsey starts the second part of the book by defending subjectivism, where this is understood as the view that something is valuable for someone only if and because they value it (p. 80). After a useful discussion of 'resonance' considerations motivating this link (ch. 4), Dorsey argues that the relevant valuing attitude is the belief that something is good for oneself (ch. 5). While Dorsey makes a convincing case that opposing desire-based views face significant issues, his own view seems to face analogous troubles, as I discuss below. Dorsey then turns to defending the important point that idealization does not serve to link personal good to idealized values but rather serves to identify what someone really values in the first place (ch. 6).

Dorsey goes on to develop a particular version of subjectivism that emphasizes the importance of projects (ch. 7). A crucial aspect of his proposal, which I question below, is that the value of a project can outstrip the strength of the corresponding valuing attitude. Thus, there is a 'mind-independent' aspect of his view. Given this focus on projects, Dorsey powerfully argues that someone is benefitted by a successful project at the times they hold the relevant valuing attitude, including in the past (ch. 8).

In the third and final part of the book, Dorsey offers a theory of prudence understood as an account of the reasons given by personal value (p. 207). The standard picture of prudence, as Dorsey helpfully frames it, is committed to the following four tenets:

1. *Deontic*: prudence requires that
2. *Maximizing*: the prudentially rational individual will maximize
3. *Scoreism*: the welfare value
4. *Temporal Neutrality*: of her life. (p. 208)

Dorsey accepts all of these except Scoreism, which he replaces with *Goodsism*: prudential reasons are given by goods, not value (ch. 9). He retains the standard view in the case of Deontic and Maximizing, though his defense involves an interesting discussion of intrapersonal egalitarianism (ch. 10). His defense of Temporal Neutrality is also unique in that he plausibly takes many of the standard defenses to largely beg the question (ch. 11). In their place, he offers two new arguments that revolve around the claim that temporal biases in combination with our rational attitudes lead to ‘normatively unsavory’ combinations of attitudes (ch. 12). Yet, I find myself wondering whether these arguments also beg the question. A proponent of temporal biases might simply claim that the relevant combinations of attitudes aren’t unsavory precisely because they are rationalized by temporal biases.

For the most part, I find Dorsey’s project successful – and even where I find it unsuccessful, I think it’s for insightful reasons. Let me discuss three such places.

First, I have my reservations about Dorsey’s defense of the view that valuing attitudes are beliefs about personal value. He offers compelling reasons to reject both first- and second-order desires as valuing attitudes on the grounds that they fail one or more of the following tests. The *burn out test*: one can fail to desire something even though one values it (p. 116). The *addict test*: one can desire something even though one fails to value it (pp. 115-116). And the *misdirection test*: one can have a second-order desire that cuts against what one genuinely values (p. 117). However, very much the same problems apply to Dorsey’s own belief-based view. There seem to be cases where someone believes that something has a certain value for them, but they don’t genuinely value it in that way – say they belong to an unduly repressive community. There also seem to be cases where a person lacks a belief about whether something is good for them, even though they value it – perhaps from lacking self-awareness. To his credit, Dorsey anticipates such concerns (pp. 130-133), but his response largely amounts to denying the relevant intuitions and to hold that valuing goes with beliefs. But, to my mind, this is no more convincing than it would be for the desire theorist to insist that valuing goes with desires.

Second, I have my doubts about Dorsey's motivation for holding that the value of a project can exceed the degree to which a person genuinely values it. His main argument revolves around cases where someone values a certain project for a long time and then suddenly comes to prefer an incompatible project. Dorsey suggests that in such cases it would be more valuable to pursue the older – now less valued – project, and he concludes that this means that the value of projects can outstrip the strength to which the person values them. While I agree with the first claim, I dispute the inference to the second. It seems, instead, that in the sorts of cases Dorsey has in mind the person genuinely values the older project more. And they value it more because they have valued it for longer and have invested more into it. If so, then Dorsey's discussion brings out – not that the value of projects can exceed the strength of valuing them – but that valuing has a diachronic component.

Third, I worry that Goodsism bars too many changes of valuations from being prudential. Dorsey rejects Scoreism because of the legitimate worry that one cannot make one's life better simply by adopting valuations that are easier to satisfy. Goodsism avoids this result, because it holds that prudence does not dictate that we maximize lifetime *value* but rather that we maximize lifetime *goods*. Goodsism and Scoreism thus only differ when it comes to deliberations about changing one's valuations. Unlike Scoreism, Goodsism prohibits taking into account any valuations would result from that very deliberation. Hence, a person cannot prudentially switch their valuations in order to make their life better relative to those new valuations. Instead, such changes are neither prudent nor imprudent.

While I think Goodsism is a fascinating proposal about one of the most difficult problems for subjectivism, I think it goes too far in banning *all* changes of valuations on the basis of value relative to those new valuations. Goodsism works best in ruling out 'adaptive' preferences, whereby a person abandons their original pursuits and switches to easier ones. However, some of these cases can be handled by appealing to Dorsey's notion of genuine value. Adaptive preferences often don't correspond to what a person really values, but rather are a form of cognitive dissonance.

More importantly, someone can adopt a new valuation without replacing older ones. Consider a person who has not yet come to either value or disvalue gardening. And suppose that upon deliberation they realize that it would improve their life if they came to genuinely value it, and they decide to take measures to induce this valuation. This seems a perfectly prudent choice. Indeed, this is how many people come to have hobbies, where we think these choices are often prudent – especially in the era of COVID-19. But Goodsism prevents this decision from being prudent. The choice to value gardening is made on the basis of the value of gardening activities relativized to that

very valuation. It is not made on the basis of the goods of gardening, because as of the time of deliberation gardening isn't good for the person because the person hasn't come to value it.

Despite these few disagreements, *A Theory of Prudence* is filled with many convincing arguments, interesting insights, and important distinctions. Dorsey's life has greatly benefitted from writing it, because it is a remarkable success.

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