



Seminar

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Is a Unified Theory of the Good Possible?

Tuesday, 14 May, 2019, 2:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT GRAHAM ODDIE

Graham Oddie has broad interests in philosophy, publishing in epistemology, philosophy of science, metaphysics, logic, and ethics. His current work is focused on the nature and status of value—whether or not value is part of the furniture of the world and if so, whether and how we might have access to facts about value. He wrote a PhD at the University of London on the problem of truthlikeness—what it takes for one proposition to be closer to the truth than another—and published the first monograph on the topic (*Likeness to Truth*, Reidel, 1986). Recently he has been exploring issues of cognitive value in the burgeoning field of formal epistemology (e.g., “What Accuracy Could Not Be,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*). Over the last two decades he has developed a robustly realist account of value, presented in *Value, Reality, and Desire* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and in a variety of papers.

Oddie began his academic career at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He moved to a professorship at Massey University in 1988 and from there to a professorship at the University of Colorado Boulder in 1994, where he has served as Department Chair and Associate Dean for Humanities and the Arts. He has held visiting positions in Finland, Israel, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, including the Imre Lakatos Visiting Fellowship at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Starr Fellowship at the University of Oxford, and a Distinguished Visiting Professorship at the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm. As a Collegium Fellow, Oddie will continue working on value, including an account of the good that aspires to unify the plethora of diverse value phenomena.

ABSTRACT

We make a multitude of value judgements, every day, on just about every conceivable matter. We attribute goodness and badness to persons, character traits, dispositions, actions, states of affairs, institutions, performances, paintings, poems, proofs and practices. In addition to the thin evaluative concepts—such as *good*, *bad* and *better*—we employ a vast stock of thick evaluative concepts. We evaluate people—as *courageous*, *compassionate*, *callous* and *cruel*; actions—as *generous*, *vindictive*, *kind* and *foolhardy*; performances—as *brilliant*, *execrable*, *riveting*, *boring* and *delightful*; character traits—as *noble*, *demeaning*, *destructive*, and *virtuous*; remarks—as *tendentious*, *salacious*, *witty*, *craven*, *hurtful*, *sarcastic* and *helpful*, and so on. Even purely abstract entities—like numbers, classes and functions—may be ascribed evaluative attributes: for example, the number 10 billion may be *dangerously large* for the number of people on earth; the class of Nobel prize winners this year may be *extraordinarily accomplished*; the function that takes times to GHG levels in the atmosphere might be growing *alarmingly*. Taken at face value, these examples suggest that just about any kind of entity is a value-bearer, and that our evaluative vocabulary invokes a cornucopia of value concepts. The diversity of the value phenomena is undeniable. The question I raise is whether there might be a plausible *unified theory* of such diverse value phenomena. I outline desiderata for a unified theory of value, sketch an outline of an approach to the problem that seems at least promising, and consider a couple of prominent arguments against the very possibility of any such theory.