

# Guise of the Good

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## Introduction

The “guise of the good” (GG) thesis concerns the nature of human motivation and intentional action (*see* ACTION; INTENTION). It is generally understood as the view that everything that an agent desires (*see* DESIRE; PRO-ATTITUDES) or pursues is in some way thought to be good. In its most sweeping version, the thesis applies to any mental state capable of motivating the agent; that is, every state that can motivate the agent must involve some kind of thought of its object as good. An even more radical version of GG also accepts the converse claim: namely, that all evaluative judgments motivate.

It is important to distinguish GG from motivational internalism (*see* INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL) and similar views that relate motivation and specifically moral judgments. Internalism says, roughly, that if someone judges  $\phi$ -ing to be *morally* good or right, then she is motivated to  $\phi$ . GG does not claim that we desire or pursue all and/or only those things we conceive to be *morally* good or that what is judged to be morally good is thereby judged to be good *simpliciter*. Thus not even the most radical version of GG implies, or is implied by, motivational internalism or similar views about moral motivation. Similarly, psychopaths, amoralists, and similar agents who are often thought to be counterexamples to internalism do not pose a threat to either direction of GG; these agents might still be motivated by what they deem to be good *simpliciter* even if they are not motivated by anything they judge to be *morally* good. (For a similar claim, see Raz 1999b.)

Virtually all, if not all, arguments for GG start from a supposed role that the notion of the good plays in intentional action, and thus the minimal version of the thesis will claim that at least for the central cases of intentional action, an agent  $\phi$ -es only if the agent judges  $\phi$ -ing to be good. GG postulates an essential connection between motivation on the one hand, and evaluative or normative judgments on the other hand. Arguably the central idea behind the thesis is that intentional action is a form of rational activity (*see* PRACTICAL REASONING; RATIONALITY); intentional explanations on this view “rationalize” the agent’s behavior by showing how, at least from the agent’s perspective, the action brought about, or instantiated, some good. Some views that are not strictly speaking versions of GG accept similar relations between motivation and normative or evaluative judgments (*see* REASONS, MOTIVATING AND NORMATIVE). So, although Scanlon’s “buck-passing view” of the good rules out accepting some versions of GG, Scanlon (1998: Ch. 1) does argue that agents are motivated by their perception of normative reasons.

On the other hand, some philosophers accept a trivial version of GG, in which the good is explicated in terms of what we desire rather than vice versa. According to Hobbes, “whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth *good*” (1994; for a similar contemporary view, see Gauthier 1986: Ch. 2; see HOBBS, THOMAS; DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; REASON AND PASSION). Although these views preserve the truth of GG, they clearly run contrary to the traditional motivation of the thesis: namely, the idea that action and desire are guided by a (partly) independent aim much in the same way that belief is guided by the aim of arriving at the truth.

GG can be traced back at least to Plato’s early dialogues (see PLATO). However, in last few decades, GG has come under repeated criticism. Two landmark papers in the late twentieth century were particularly influential. Stocker (1979) argues that GG runs against what we know empirically about human action; cases of perversity, *accidie*, and depression seem to be cases in which GG fails. Velleman (1992) argues that various kinds of perverse agents provide counterexamples to the thesis. Velleman (1992, 1996) and Setiya (2010) provide more general arguments against the thesis that are not based on specific counterexamples. These attacks have led some philosophers to narrow the scope of GG to, for instance, normal cases of desire or intentional action or to some other privileged cases of action (Lavin and Boyle 2010; Raz 2010). But others have argued for a more or less sweeping acceptance of the thesis against such counterexamples (see, for instance, Tenenbaum 2007).

## Details and Motivation

In a famous paper on weakness of will (see WEAKNESS OF WILL), Davidson (1980) puts forward three potentially conflicting principles connecting intentional action, motivation, and evaluation. One of them (P2) says: “If an agent judges that it would be better to do  $x$  than to do  $y$ , then he wants to do  $x$  more than he wants to do  $y$ ” (1980: 23). A biconditional version of this claim would be a rather strong version of GG, one that does not simply say that we only desire or pursue what we see as good, but takes motivational strength to run exactly in parallel with comparative evaluative judgments. Roughly, on this view, one desires an object in proportion to its perceived value.

Davidson accepts that “It seems obvious enough ... that we may think  $x$  better, yet want  $y$  more.” However, he claims that although “it is easy to interpret P2 in a way that makes it false, it is harder to believe there is not a natural reading that makes it true” (1980: 26). Although Davidson does not say much about why he thinks there is such a natural reading, one could say the following in his behalf: at least in the normal course of events, an overall evaluative judgment of this kind is sufficient explanation for choosing  $x$  over  $y$ . We do not need to add that the agent is also strongly motivated to choose  $x$  over  $y$  when she judges  $x$  to be better than  $y$ ; making the judgment seems tantamount to being in the relevant motivational state.

However, this argument, if successful, can secure at most that, in normal cases, if one judges some action to be good all things considered or good overall then one has at least *some* motivation to pursue it, or that:

(OVERALL) If one judges that doing *x* is good overall then one wants to do *x*.

Given that such evaluative judgments can suffice to explain intentional action, it seems that they must have some motivational power. Perhaps there are some situations that interfere with such motivational power, but here one needs to show that this is the case without compromising the way that the evaluative judgment figures in the explanation of action in normal circumstances.

However, weakening P2 thus leaves out the “original” direction of GG: namely, the direction that claims that we only want things under the guise of the good. From Davidson’s comparative version, it follows that it is never the case that an agent may want to do *x* more than *y*, but thinks that doing *y* is better than doing *x* (though the view allows that the agent wants one more than the other while thinking that they are equally good or while having no view on the matter). The weaker version says that certain evaluative judgments motivate, but it does not say that I must desire only under the aspect of the good or that we only pursue what we judge to be in some way good. Here, again, the best argument for accepting GG is the way that the thesis connects motivation and rationality: intentional action on this view is understood as an exercise of the rational faculties of the agent by being the pursuit of an object the agent deems good. An intentional explanation makes behavior intelligible by showing how, by the agent’s lights, it aimed at some good.

In the contemporary literature, this view is often boosted by the alleged “unintelligibility” of wanting something but not seeing it good in any way, or even wanting something that *is* not good in any way. The classic example of this kind is Anscombe’s saucer of mud (*see* ANSCOMBE, G. E. M.). Anscombe famously writes:

But is not anything wantable ... ? It will be instructive to anyone who thinks this to approach someone and say: “I want a saucer of mud” ... He is likely to be asked what for; to which let him reply that he does not want it for anything, he just wants it ... Would he [the other man] not try to find out in what aspect the object desired is desirable? ... Now if the reply is: “Philosophers have taught us that anything can be the object of desire; ... it merely so happens that I want [it],” then this is fair nonsense. (2000: 70–1)

To the example of the saucer of mud, others have been added such as counting blades of grass (Raz 1996), drinking coffee for the love of Sophocles (Raz 1999a), being simply disposed to turn on radios (Quinn 1993), etc. The general idea is that we do not get a proper intentional explanation of an action, or even a proper motivating reason or desire, if we cannot understand how the agent saw the object of his desire or action as good in some way. Needless to say, these examples do not

settle the issue. Anscombe's example is hard to evaluate since what the agent supposedly desires does not seem to have the proper form of an object of desire; a saucer of mud is neither an action nor a state of affairs. The fact that one cannot want a saucer of mud is arguably no more surprising than the fact that one cannot believe a saucer of mud; "saucer of mud" is simply not a proper complement to "wants (to/that)" or "believes (that)" (even if sometimes we can say elliptically "believes *The New York Times*" or "wants some food").

The same response cannot be made for the other examples or for a modified version of Anscombe's example. However one could dig in one's heels and say that, unusual as they might be, these are perfectly coherent objects of desire and potential explanans of actions. This move is made much more plausible if opponents of GG can show that this thesis faces much more serious counterexamples.

### **Purported Counterexamples to the Guise of the Good Thesis**

Most of the criticism of GG is by means of counterexamples. The case of Stocker (1979) against the guise of the good consists almost entirely of counterexamples. It is worth dividing the various purported counterexamples in different kinds. First, there are cases in which the agent desires something that the agent apparently believes not to be good (I will call those "nonevaluative desires"). Gary Watson (1975) famously presents a case in which a squash player feels the urge to smash his racket against his winning opponent. One might have this kind of urge even if one does not believe there is *any* value to smashing an opponent with a racket. Moreover small children and animals seem to have desires without (arguably) having any kind of evaluative belief. In this case, one desires something that one does not find valuable.

Other purported counterexamples involve desiring something *because* one thinks it is bad. Satan is often thought to be a coherent character who exhibits this kind of desire (Velleman 1992), but ordinary agents also seem to often desire things because they are bad. Augustine, for instance, describes stealing a pear because it was forbidden: "I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself" (1991: 29). Finally there could be motivation that does not match the comparative evaluative beliefs of the agent (I will call those "mismatched motivations"). Cases of *akrasia* would be such cases, but also cases in which one is motivated more by an option one judges to be just as good as another (I might find donating to Oxfam just as good as donating to the American Heart Association but prefer donating to the latter). There seems to be also cases in which evaluative judgments do not give rise to *any* motivation. Cases of *acédie* or depression, for instance, would be cases in which a person judges that certain things are good but she is not motivated at all to pursue it (Stocker 1979).

It is not clear what these putative counterexamples show. The view that one only desires what one *believes on reflection* to be good is very implausible, as Watson's example shows. However, more sophisticated versions of GG will avoid the simple identification of a desire with an evaluative belief. Desires are more plausibly identified with seemings (Stampe 1987) or appearances (Tenenbaum 2007) or

experiences (Oddie 2005). On these views, desires are states in which certain objects appear or seem good to the agent rather than species of beliefs with the content “*x* is good.” Cases like Watson’s racket smashing urge can be taken to be the practical analogues of the Müller-Lyer illusion; in this illusion, your belief that the lines are of the same size coexists with their *appearing* to you to be of different sizes. This response does not yet explain how GG is compatible with attributing desires and intentional actions to animals and small children.

However, we can explain these attributions if “appearing as good” is not a matter of having “good” as the content of the attitude, but a matter of the force of the attitude (Schafer n.d.) or the formal end of the attitude (Tenenbaum 2007, 2008). Either view allows us to ascribe desires to animals and small children without having to assume that they have the conceptual resources to represent “good.” It also seems possible to explain cases of mismatched motivation in a way that is compatible even with the most radical forms of GG. Davidson (1980) provides the framework for such a solution in his discussion of *akrasia* (see also Tenenbaum 2007, 1999). Davidson distinguishes between an “all-things-considered” evaluative judgment and an “all-out” or unconditional evaluative judgment. The former is the agent’s reflective judgment of what is good or better, given all the considerations that are relevant to the choice in question. The latter is the agent’s unqualified judgment of what is good or better. Although arguably rationality requires that the agent’s judgments about good or better *simpliciter* correspond to the agent’s all-things-considered judgment, it is conceptually possible that these judgments will diverge. But since the intuitive claim is that *akrasia* is conceptually possible but irrational, this account fits the “data” well.

Similar moves can be made with respect to other cases of mismatched motivation (see Tenenbaum 2007 for a systematic treatment of these cases). This seems to put us at stalemate regarding GG. Advocates of the thesis bring up examples of cases in which the attribution of desires or explanation of actions fail seemingly because the purported motivational state had as its object something that could not have appeared good to the agent; opponents bring up cases in which motivation and evaluation apparently part company. This leads us to suspect that without principled arguments for either side, examples will not be conclusive (Setiya 2010 makes a similar point).

## **General Arguments Against the Guise of the Good Thesis and Replies**

GG does not simply say that one pursues actions that one happens to believe or judge to be good. The idea is that a rational agent pursues these actions *so as* to bring about that which is good or so as to act in a manner that is good. So it seems fair to say that GG claims that the good is the constitutive aim or goal of action; that is, whatever else one pursues in acting one also is acting so as to bring about some good or so as to act in a manner that one views as good. One might oppose this idea in at least three ways: (1) argue that GG fails to specify a proper general end for action, that is, the thesis is either obviously false or trivial; (2) argue that there is no general, constitutive end of action; (3) argue that there is a different constitutive aim.

The second argumentative strategy is obviously incompatible with the third, but either of these two can be pursued in combination with the first. Let us examine each such strategy.

### ***The charge of triviality***

A number of philosophers argue that GG faces a dilemma. One way to understand the claim that the good is the constitutive aim of practical reason is to provide a substantive characterization of the good (for instance, pleasure or knowledge) and then claim that all intentional actions aim at pleasure or at knowledge. But this would be an extremely implausible view; obviously, not all intentional actions aim at pleasure or knowledge, and it is dubious that we could do better by replacing “pleasure” or “knowledge” with any other candidate for a substantive theory of the good. On the other hand, we could just define the good as “whatever we aim at in an action.” But this would obviously make GG trivial. In other words, there is no understanding of “good” in GG that makes the thesis neither false nor trivially true (Velleman 1996; Railton 1997).

This argument assumes that there is no middle position between having a trivial notion of good and a full-blown substantive theory of the good, but this assumption has been challenged. Clark (2001), for instance, argues that the notion of a good life can be a “generic” one (one in which everyone who reasons practically must aim at having) without being a “formal” one (one that is simply defined as the aim of practical reasoning). Clark argues that all we need is a notion of a good life that has a “semantic life of its own” (2001: 591). Tenenbaum (2007: Ch. 1) argues that a formal notion of the good can impose substantive constraints on our understanding of practical reasoning and intentional rationality without presupposing a specific theory of the good.

### ***An argument against the need for a constitutive end***

Setiya (2010) argues that Anscombe correctly identifies a general criterion for intentional action: that the agent be in possession of an answer to the question “Why?” in the particular way in which it is posed in this context. (The appropriate understanding of the question “Why?” in, for instance, “Why did you shoot the sheriff?” accepts the answer “Because I wanted to avoid arrest” but not “Because the pressure I put on the trigger was sufficient to release the bullet” etc.) However, the appropriate answer to the question “Why  $\phi$ ?” could be “Because  $p$ ” even when  $p$  is not a good reason to  $\phi$ . That is, most, if not all, defenders of GG would agree that often people act in pursuit of things that are not *in fact* good. So everyone must accept that:

- (1) A is  $\phi$ -ing because  $p$

is compatible with

- (2)  $p$  does not make and/or give A any reason to believe that  $\phi$ -ing is good in any way.

But now, why couldn't John believe (1) and (2) about the action he is undertaking, given that these are compatible statements? But if John believes that he is  $\phi$ -ing because of  $p$  and that  $p$  gives him no reason to  $\phi$ , then John is  $\phi$ -ing while not (necessarily) thinking that  $p$  is good in any way. The argument generalizes to any proposed constitutive end as long as we can replace (2) for a similar statement regarding the proposed end that is compatible with (1).

However, the move from the compatibility of (1) and (2) to the claim that an agent could accept (1) and (2) when A is replaced by the first person pronoun is problematic (Tenenbaum 2012). We know from other contexts that the fact that two beliefs are compatible does not imply that an agent can believe both at the same time, especially if one of them is about her mental states. Moore's paradox ("It is raining and I don't believe that it is raining") is a particularly well-known example of such a case.

### ***An alternative constitutive aim***

David Velleman (1996) argues that the constitutive aim of action is autonomy or "conscious control of one's behavior." According to Velleman, a full-blooded action is one that issues from an "inclination to do what one accepts that one will do" (1996: 722). This, on Velleman's view, would explain the difference between stopping the fall of a cup by reflex, and doing it as a full-blooded intentional action. In the latter case, but not in the former, one's actions were determined (at least partly) by one's desire to do what one had decided to do; namely, prevent the glass from falling. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine Velleman's proposal in detail.

A defender of GG would complain that Velleman's proposal makes unclear how normative standards apply to actions; whether one acts from good or bad reasons, one is "in conscious control of one's behavior." But if this is so, why is an action done for bad reasons criticizable (Clark 2001)? This highlights the fact that the plausibility of Velleman's proposal depends in part on whether the criticisms above against GG are successful. If they are not, GG has the advantage of making rational standards internal to agency itself. If GG is true, an agent can be criticizable for acting on bad reasons in a similar way that a believer can be criticizable for believing on insufficient evidence; just as the latter is in tension with the internal aim of belief (knowing or believing truly), the former is in tension with the internal aim of action (pursuing the good).

### **Conclusion**

The guise of the good seems to be a compelling view insofar as it promises to be, as Raz puts it, "the keystone ... bridging the theory of value, the theory of normativity and rationality, and the understanding of intentional action" (2010: 134). Whether it can keep this promise depends on whether it can survive the apparent counterexamples that are the subject of much of the literature and whether it can outperform alternative views on the constitutive aim of action.

**See also:** ACTION; ANSCOMBE, G. E. M.; DESIRE; DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; HOBBS, THOMAS; INTENTION; INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; PLATO; PRACTICAL REASONING; PRO-ATTITUDES; RATIONALITY; REASON AND PASSION; REASONS, MOTIVATING AND NORMATIVE; WEAKNESS OF WILL

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