Desires and Practical Judgments in Action: Sergio Tenenbaum's Scholastic View

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In his book *Appearances of the Good*, Sergio Tenenbaum has offered an impressive new defence of a classical account of practical reason, which marks him as heir to a philosophical tradition going back to Aristotle and Kant or, more recently, to Anscombe and Davidson. This account has come under heavy attack in the past twenty years, and it would be no exaggeration to say that it is now a minority view. This is at least so if one counts the number of living philosophers who deny that strict akratic action is possible. Tenenbaum claims that, minimally, his aim is to show that what he calls after Kant "the scholastic view" still merits a place in the philosophical landscape, and in this respect, it is clear that his enterprise is a success.

The scholastic view, as Tenenbaum develops it, is a complex and wide-ranging theory. Amongst its different ingredients, there are two claims that can be considered to be central. Firstly, and perhaps mainly, the scholastic view involves a claim about desires, according to which desires are necessarily tied to our "conception" of what is good, in the sense that desires represent things as good. Secondly, the scholastic view is committed to a claim about intentions, according to which intentions are necessarily tied to our judgments about the good — indeed, intentions and what I shall call *goodness judgments* are considered to be the same thing. This entails a strong form of internalism about goodness judgments. Insofar as intentions issue in action, to judge that something is good also issues in action. In Tenenbaum's own words, "[a]n unqualified judgement that something

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is good is one's final position on how the evaluative world matters, and if I am correct, such judgements always issue in action" (p. 25).

I'm inclined to accept the first claim or at least some version of it. Indeed, I have defended a similar view about emotions, according to which emotions are perceptions of values.[1] However, I have doubts about the second claim. In fact, I shall argue that the two claims are in tension. In a nutshell, the problem I see is that if you consider desires in the way the scholastic view proposes, you do not have to invoke judgments to explain intentional actions. I start by discussing this question. Then, I turn to what the scholastic has to propose with respect to akrasia and accidie. I argue that the problems the scholastic view incurs in attempting to account for these phenomena give us reason to reject the claim that intentions are goodness judgments.

1. Desires as Representations of the Good

According to the scholastic view, the claim that desires are tied to our conception of the good has to be spelled out as the claim that desires are "appearances" of the good from a certain perspective. When I desire to drink a coffee, drinking a coffee appears good to me, and it does so from a certain perspective.

Let me first put aside a terminological quibble. I wonder how far it is felicitous to say that desires *are* a kind of appearance. The reason is that it is not clear to me that appearances can be mental states. When I look at a star and it appears small, my perceiving it so is not the appearance. It is its small size that is the appearance, in the sense that this is the way it appears to me — something that can be usefully contrasted with what I know to be its real size. Thus, it would seem that, although it is true that when desiring, things appear to us in certain ways, the desire itself is not a kind of appearance. This is why I would side with Dennis Stampe (1987) and speak of desires as *perceptions*, rather than appearances of goodness.

The notion of a perspective, which has its home in our conception of perception, is central to the scholastic view. Tenenbaum's claim is that it is always so, and I guess necessarily so, that in desire the goodness of things appears from a perspective. Evaluative perspectives are defined as ways in which things appear good to someone, as something that "clusters various desires that share a 'point' or whose objects are found good for similar reasons" (Tenenbaum, p. 43). Thus, the envious person embraces a perspective from which a number of things, such as destroying the property of someone of whom one is envious, and/or acquiring property of the same kind as is held by that person, appear to be good. In a similar way, the gastronomic perspective is one from which various sorts of food appear to be good.

Now, it seems correct to say that our desires usually come in clusters of this kind. However, it is not clear that they have to. It seems possible that a simple-minded creature might have just one desire in life, such as, say, a desire for food. Maybe it could be argued that, even in such a case, there have to be a number of related desires, corresponding to different instances of food and maybe to means of obtaining

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food. Whether this makes for a cluster of desires forming a perspective or not, it seems clear that our lives are usually a bit more diversified than that.

In any case, the scholastic conception of desires claims that desires are representational states which have as their content that the object of the desire is good. This does not mean that it is represented as good or desirable in one way or another, such as being pleasant, or amusing, or useful for keeping one awake during a talk. It means that it is represented as something *worth pursuing*. In Tenenbaum's own words, "To say that desiring is conceiving something to be good is to say that a desire represents its object, perhaps implicitly, as good — that is, as something that is worth being pursued" (p. 21).

Let me note that given this, it is not quite clear how the scholastic can hold that, while non-human animals and children have desires, they do not represent what they pursue as good. According to the scholastic view, such beings pursue things *as if* they were good and conceive these things as good, but they "do not represent them as good" (Tenenbaum, p. 247). These beings "do not have as the content of any of their representations that a certain object is good" (p. 248). On the face of it, this seems to flatly contradict the passage I quoted in the preceding paragraph, in which we were told that desires represent things as good and that this is how we have to understand the claim that when desiring, we conceive things to be good. It would also seem that when non-human animals or children desire something, they themselves are bound to represent it as good, insofar as they are in a state that has this content. What is clear, of course, is that such agents do not judge things to be good, for they do not have the required concepts. And I would add that this also entails that they do not *conceive* these things as good. But unless one thinks that representations necessarily involve concepts, this cannot be taken to entail that these beings fail to represent things as good when they have desires. For having a desire is to be in a state that has such a representational content.

Now, the scholastic view distinguishes between desires and judgments about the good. How can this be? After all, goodness judgments also seem to be states that represent things as being good. One possibility is that the difference lies at the level of content. As far as I can tell, there is no textual basis for this suggestion, but I'll briefly consider it nonetheless. Here is a first suggestion that could be made: Desires have as their content that things are good or worth pursuing, whereas goodness judgments represent things as what is worthiest to pursue or what ought to be pursued. There is some plausibility to the claim that, if goodness judgments are intentions, they cannot bear solely on what is worth pursuing. After all, many incompatible things can be worth pursuing and when deciding what to do, we need to choose among these different things. The problem with this suggestion, however, is that even if this were to allow us to distinguish between desires and a certain kind of value judgments, we still would have no way of distinguishing between a judgment that something is worth pursuing and a desire. Therefore, the scholastic view would in fact claim that desires are a kind of judgment. But intuitively, there

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is a difference between desiring something and judging that it is worth pursuing. As we often are sadly reminded, we can desire what we judge to be bad, in the sense that we judge that it is not worth pursuing or even that it is worth avoiding.

Another problem with this suggestion is that it seems foreign to a point that is central to the scholastic view, namely that the difference between desires and judgments is that the former but not the latter involve appearances. Should we thus say that the content of desires involves appearances? Desires would represent things as appearing to be good, whereas goodness judgments represent things as being really good. This suggestion is not convincing. First of all, it would seem to entail that desires are in fact judgments about appearances of goodness. As cases of non-human desires suggest, however, it is possible to desire something without judging that it appears to be good. Secondly, it just seems wrong to say that desires have this kind of content. Consider what this claim would entail in the case of visual perception. When I perceive the star as small, for instance, the content of my experience would be not that the star is small, but rather that it appears to be small. Thus, I would perceive the star as appearing to be small. Put otherwise, it would appear to appear to be small. I'm not quite sure what this would amount to, but it is clear that it is something very different from perceiving the star as small.

The other main option is to claim with Dennis Stampe (1987) that the difference between desiring something and judging or believing that something is good lies in the way a same content is represented. Desiring something, according to Stampe, is a perceptual state. When we desire something, it seems to us that it is good, just as when we look at something, it might seem to us as being green. In such cases, the content is represented in a perceptual way, something that is contrasted with the way the content is represented in judgment. But this does not take us very far, because one thing that distinguishes visual perceptions from judgments is that the former have a qualitative feel. However, Stampe and Tenenbaum might well be right to claim that desires do not necessarily come with feelings. Nor is it very promising to appeal, as Stampe suggests, to the aetiology of desires. Both desires and goodness judgments are, or indeed should be caused by, things' being good.

On my view, the best way to distinguish between desires and goodness judgments is to allow that they have the same content in the sense that they have the same correctness-conditions, but to claim that they involve different kinds of representations. By contrast with goodness judgments, desires are non-conceptual representations, in the sense that it is not necessary to possess and use the concept of goodness in order to have a desire, whereas this is required for judging that something is good.[2] This means that the contents of these states are not composed of concepts, where concepts are taken to be content elements that have to be postulated in order to account for the inferential relations between thoughts. This is not the place to discuss the notion of non-conceptual representation, but if we assume that there are non-conceptual representations, we can help ourselves to a

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distinction between two kinds of representations, which can help to make sense of the differences between desires and goodness judgments.

What I would like to consider now is what follows from the claim that desires and goodness judgments have the same contents in the sense of having the same correctness-conditions. Once we acknowledge that desires represent things as good, a difficulty arises for the second main claim of the scholastic view; that is, the claim identifying intentions and goodness judgments. The question is why we need to invoke a judgment to explain intentional action if a desire is already in place. Suppose I fancy a cigarette and you helpfully provide me with a lighted one, something which arouses in me a strong desire to smoke this very cigarette. And suppose I then intentionally smoke the cigarette in question. Do we need to say that in addition to the representation of the action as good in which my desire consists, I need to judge that smoking this cigarette is good? Why would I need to represent the same content in a different, possibly concept-involving way? It would seem that my desire fully explains my smoking the cigarette: it seemed good and worth pursuing to smoke it. Indeed, if we suppose that this is my strongest desire at the time, smoking this cigarette must have appeared to me as the worthiest course of action. And this is all we need to know to explain my action.

It might be replied that if we have just a desire and an action, but no goodness judgment, we have lost the intention. What state in my mind corresponds to the intention to smoke this cigarette if there is no goodness judgment? There are two possibilities. Either the state in question represents the action as good or it does not. If it does not — that is, if it is a state with a descriptive content, such as "I will do this" — the scholastic view has a problem. But if it does, the question is why the desire could not be considered to be the intention. After all, why should the content that the action is good be represented by a judgment rather than by a desire? I am not claiming that intentions are desires. My point is rather that if we take desires and goodness judgments to have the same content, there seems to be no reason to claim that the latter, but not the former, are intentions.

Let me now turn to puzzles raised by an apparent conflict between judgment and motivation.

2. Accidie

The scholastic view is committed to denying that goodness judgments and motivation can come apart. This seems to be flatly contradicted by two phenomena that have recently attracted wide attention: accidie and akrasia. Let me start with a brief comment on the scholastic conception of accidie.

What seems to happen in cases of accidie is that the agent judges that something is good, but she lacks all motivation whatsoever to act accordingly. Given the claim that goodness judgments are intentions, the scholastic view has to deny that this is the right description of accidie. According to the scholastic view, what happens in such cases is an opposition between two kinds of

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judgments: a judgment about what is valuable and a judgment about what is good. The claim is that although the agent judges certain things to be valuable, she does not judge these things to be good — hence the lack of motivation. The reason why she does not make that judgment, we are told, is that she thinks that some condition for these things to be good is violated. The accidic agent "takes certain evaluative perspectives to be conditioned by certain states of affairs that do not obtain" (Tenenbaum, p. 293). What it means for a perspective to be conditioned by certain facts is that what appears to be good from that perspective is good only if these facts obtain. In Tenenbaum's own words: "A certain perspective is conditioned by X if what appears to be good from this perspective could only be correctly judged to be good if X obtains" (p. 286).[3] Indeed, things can be so bad that all evaluative perspectives are taken to be conditioned by something that the agent thinks does not obtain, so that there will be nothing that the agent will consider to be good, and hence nothing that will move her to action.

There is certainly a grain of truth in this suggestion. As Tenenbaum reminds us, depressed persons tend to consider themselves worthless, so it is plausible to suggest that this explains why during times of depression they do not consider to be good the things that they normally so consider. The problem for the scholastic view, however, is to prevent this pessimism from taking over all the value judgments, and not only the goodness judgments, of depressed persons. How can it be the case that you believe that you have to meet certain standards for it to be the case that going to the movies is a good thing, and you believe that you do not meet these standards, but you nonetheless believe that going to the movies is valuable? If you do not consider something to be good, you certainly will not consider it to be valuable. The low opinion you have of yourself surely influences both your goodness judgments and your value judgments.

In reply to this, the scholastic view can claim that the term "valuable" is, in fact, a technical term, according to which to judge that something is not good does not entail that one judges it not to be valuable. Here is the definition of value judgments offered by Tenenbaum: "A judges X to be valuable if for some Y either (a) if he were not [to] judge Y to be good, he would judge X to be good, or (b) he would judge X to be good if A believed it were in his power to bring about X (and he were not, in this case, to judge Y to be good)" (p. 58). The idea behind this definition is that to consider something to be good is to judge it to be the worthiest thing to pursue — it is *the thing to be done*, as we might say. When two options are deemed attractive, only one can be considered the thing to be done, so that the other option cannot be considered to be good in this sense. It is merely valuable. It would have been considered to be good if another option had not been judged to be better. Or, it would have been considered to be good if it had been considered to be feasible while no other option would have been considered better.

The problem is that it does not seem that the agent suffering from accidie would consider her options as good if she did not consider something else as good, or if she did not believe that it was not in her power to bring about the

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options she considers. It is not that the accidic agent is tempted by the prospect of going to the movies, but judges that staying at home is preferable. And it is not the case that she is tempted by the prospect of going to the movies, but she considers going there to be impossible. She would consider it good if a completely different condition was met, namely that she live up to the given standards, for instance, by being a better person.

Another problem with the scholastic's take on accidie is that, given the distinction between desires and goodness judgments, the absence of goodness judgments does not entail the absence of all motivation. The agent might judge that none of his options are good, but this is compatible with desiring all sorts of things. If goodness judgments are intentions, what we would have here is someone who has lots of desires, but no intention to do anything. Maybe there are such cases, but it should be clear that they differ from the cases of accidie. Of course, what would seem to happen in the case of accidie is just the contrary: the agent judges that certain things are good, but they do not appear to be so, to her. The question that needs to be addressed, thus, is how the self-deprecating attitude of the accidic agent can influence how things appear to her, not how it influences her judgments.

3. Akrasia

The scholastic view also has to deny the possibility of strict akratic action; that is, action performed while the agent judges that another course of action that is open to her is better. This, at least, is so if this judgment is taken to be what Tenenbaum, following Davidson, calls the agent's *all-out* judgment. The *all-out* judgment is the final judgment about what option is worth performing or, in cases in which different options are compared, the one that is the worthiest to pursue. It contrasts with the agent's *better judgment*, which consists in the conclusion of the agent's deliberation, and which is merely a judgment about what is worth doing or better *from the perspective of reflection*. According to the scholastic view, what happens in the case of akrasia is that the agent judges that, from a reflective perspective, some action A is better than some other action B. She thus thinks that she ought to accept that A is better than B. But she ends up judging that B is better than A — something that issues in her performing B rather than A.

We are told that what causes the agent's failure is that the judgment that A is better than B from a reflective perspective is an *oblique* and not a *direct* cognition, while his judgment that B is better than A from a particular perspective is a *direct* cognition based on a desire. A direct cognition is defined as "a representation of an object or claim through which one clearly understand (or seems to understand) why the object is as one represents it, or *how* it is that this claim is true" (pp. 269-70), whereas an "oblique cognition is a representation of a claim or an object that is not a direct cognition but one through which one understands (or seems to understand) *that* there are reasons to accept that the object is as one represents it, or that the claim is true" (*ibid*).

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Let's consider an example, that of Ulysses tempted by the Sirens and, having forgotten to attach himself to his mast, freely and intentionally plunging into the water to join the Sirens. Ulysses strongly desires to join the Sirens, but, on reflection, he judges that not joining the Sirens is by far better than jumping into the water to join them. According to the scholastic view, Ulysses makes the following judgments:

(a) Joining the Sirens is better from the perspective of pleasure.
(b) Not joining the Sirens is better from the reflective perspective.
(c) Joining the Sirens is better. (And splash, there he goes.)

The reason why Ulysses fails to act according to his better judgment (as expressed in b) is that, while the judgment that joining the Sirens is better from the perspective of pleasure expresses a direct cognition, his better judgment expresses an oblique cognition. Paraphrasing Tenenbaum's own words, Ulysses' understanding that not joining the Sirens is better than joining them is a reflective appearance of which he has only a vague or oblique understanding (p. 277). He believes that he ought to be persuaded by his reflective understanding, but is not persuaded by it (p. 277). And the reason for this is that he fails to fully grasp the ground for his judgment that not joining the Sirens is better. Either he has little insight into why he should not join the Sirens, or he fails to understand that his desire misleads him (p. 276). Thus, his desire for immediate pleasure is more persuasive than his reflection (p. 282).

A first question is whether this would really be a case of clear-eyed akrasia. Clear-eyed akrasia is such that the akratic agent is fully aware of the fact that another course of action would have been better, all things considered. As Tenenbaum underlines when considering this question, it is true that Ulysses makes the same better judgment as his continent counterpart. There is no difference in the content of their better judgments. But since Ulysses' grasp of the reasons why this judgment is true is defective, it is not clear that one can say that he is fully aware of the fact that not joining the Sirens is the better course of action. After all, he does not really understand that not joining the Sirens is what he ought to do. In the same way, it is not clear that one can say that someone who has an oblique cognition of a mathematical fact — she believes it because she was told that it is true by someone trustworthy — really understands the fact. But how could Ulysses be fully aware of the fact that joining the Sirens is not optimal if he does not really understand that this is so? Also, and maybe more importantly, were Ulysses fully aware of, and would he have fully understood, the fact that not joining the Sirens is the better course of action, surely he would also have made the corresponding *all-out* judgment.

Another problem is that the scholastic diagnosis of Ulysses is difficult to believe. Contrary to what the scholastic view wants us to believe, Ulysses certainly has a vivid and clear grasp of why he ought to judge that refraining from jumping into the water is better. After all, he has good reason to believe that more or less

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imminent death will result. And, as far as I can tell, we are also inclined to claim that Ulysses does not make the last of the three judgments, that is, that joining the Sirens is better. On the contrary, he certainly judges that joining the Sirens is much worse than not joining them. But instead of acting on this judgment, he follows the presentation of the action's goodness in which his desire consists.

The question is whether it is possible to claim nonetheless that Ulysses acts intentionally and freely when he ends up jumping into the water. This is certainly what the scholastic view will deny. Whether Ulysses' action can be considered to be free and intentional depends on what we take such action to involve. Given that the desire represents the action as good and worth pursuing, or indeed, given that the desire is the strongest one, that it represents the action as the worthiest to be pursued, it would seem that we have enough to claim that the action is intentional. In any case, we can explain what Ulysses saw in this action: sensual pleasure, in all likelihood very short-lived, is what he aimed at. Moreover, one could claim that according to a minimal account of freedom, what is necessary for free action is that (a) the agent could have done otherwise, in the minimal sense that, had the causal chain issuing in the action been different, she would have acted otherwise, and (b) the action is autonomous, in the sense that it is the agent herself, and not some alien force, be it external or internal, who determines what she does.

The first condition is easy enough to satisfy: had his desire to stay alive been stronger, or had he thought to tie himself to the mast, Ulysses would have been able to resist the temptation. Given this minimal condition, it is true that Ulysses could have controlled himself, though in fact he did not. The truth of the second condition depends on an account of autonomous action, which I will not try to provide here. What I shall simply emphasize is that one should not assume that it is only if the agent acts according to her evaluative judgments, be they of the form of (b) or of (c), that she is herself and acts autonomously. It is not obviously the case that when one acts on a desire that is contrary to the judgments one makes, the "desire takes charge of the agent" (p. 262). To claim this is simply to assume a controversial conception of autonomy, which needs to be argued for. Also, it should be noted that the assumption that autonomous action flows from evaluative judgments seems difficult to reconcile with the claim that desires are representations of the good. Why should acting on one kind of representation of the good allow for autonomous actions, while acting on another kind of representation with the same content consist in one's agency being high-jacked by an external force?

Conclusion

To sum up, I am inclined to accept the view that desires are a kind of representation. But I have doubts about the identification of intentions and goodness judgments, and about the strong form of judgment internalism that comes with the scholastic view. Cases of accidie and akrasia teach us that practical judgments and desires can come apart.

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Notes

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1 See Tappolet 2000 and forthcoming.

2 For the notion of non-conceptual content, see Evans; Crane; Bermudez; Tye.

3 See also p. 290, where two kinds of conditionality are distinguished. In the weaker case, the condition only brings the agent to judge that something is of lesser value than she would have judged if the condition had not obtained.

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