Introduction

> There is an old formula of the schools, *nihil appetimus, nisi sub ratione boni; nihil aversamur, nisi sub ratione mali*. [We desire only what we conceive to be good; we avoid only what we conceive to be bad.]
>
> (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*)

> It is hardly unfair, if unfair at all, to suggest that the philosophical view is overwhelmingly that the good or only the good attracts.
>
> (Michael Stocker, "Desiring the Bad")

Whether accurate or not, Stocker's description of the philosophical landscape in the late seventies would have rung true to many philosophers at the time. Views that accepted what Kant calls the "old formula of the schools," or, as will call them, "scholastic views," enjoyed widespread acceptance through long periods of the history of philosophy. I would hazard a guess that something like what Kant describes as the "old formula of the schools," and perhaps even stronger versions of it,[1] were widely taken for granted around Kant's time, and they were certainly still very influential when Stocker wrote "Desiring the Bad."[2] But wherever the historical truth lies, the climate has changed significantly. Most philosophers accept that we do not necessarily desire the good. Partly because of the influence of

[1] As stated, the old formula of the schools does not say that we always desire what we conceive to be good. However, I do think that Kant holds that those who accept that old formula of the schools would also accept its converse.

[2] For a particularly influential example, see Donald Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?"

1

Stocker and others,[3] the current philosophical "mainstream" position is that evaluative attitudes (such as judging that something is good, valuing, etc.)[4] do not determine and are not to be identified with motivational attitudes (such as desires, wants, etc.).[5] Stocker presented some seemingly straightforward counterexamples to the view that the good and only the good attracts: Cases of *akrasia* (weakness of the will), *accidie* (defection), perversity, and so forth were cases in which evaluation did not correspond to motivation, or motivation did not correspond to evaluation. Other kinds of arguments can be added to these: Children and animals seem to want things or have motivational states, and yet it seems odd to attribute to them complex evaluative judgments to the effect that the object of their desire is good. It seems more in tune with their intellectual capacity to say that they simply want these objects. Moreover, one can argue that if anything like the old formula of the schools is true, the notion of the good employed there would be so general as to be vacuous; in order to make the scholastic view come out true, one would need to define the "good" so broadly that it would end up simply being another word for "possible object of desire."[6]

I will call any view that claims that there are motivational states (such as desires, wants, etc.) that do not imply any kind of evaluation, or that there are evaluative states (such as judging to be good, valuing, etc.) that do not imply any kind of motivation, or even the

[3] See also, for instance, David Velleman, "The Guise of the Good."

[4] For the purpose of this introduction, I will treat valuing and judging to be good as equivalent. I revise this claim in chapter 1. See Gary Watson's "Free Action and Free Will" for a different way of drawing this distinction.

[5] It is worth noting that although the position has become mainstream, I am certainly not the first to express misgivings toward separating evaluation from motivation. Warren Quinn raises challenges to this view, even if he is agnostic on the issue of whether there could be desires that involve no evaluation. See his "Putting Rationality in Its Place." Joseph Raz raises similar concerns in "The Moral Point of View." Thomas Scanlon's buck-passing theory of the good prevents him from giving a prominent place to the notion of the good in practical reasoning or intentional explanations, but his concerns about whether desires can serve as reasons are similar to my concerns about separating motivation and evaluation. See his *What We Owe to Each Other*. John McDowell also raises similar concerns in his criticisms of Bernard Williams in "Might There Be External Reasons?"

[6] Peter Railton, "On the Hypothetical and Non-Hypothetical in Reasoning about Belief and Action." See also Velleman, "The Guise of the Good," and Philip Clark's "Velleman's Autonomism," for criticism.

view that the motivational force of a mental state need not match its evaluative content, a "separatist" view.[7] Separatist views raise important challenges to scholastic views by presenting arguments for the claim that evaluation and motivation come apart.

The old formula of the schools is also susceptible to criticisms from a different angle. To the extent that the notion of "good" in the old formula of the schools is a normative notion and refers to something that should guide us in what we should desire, then, one might argue, there is nothing corresponding to it. There is no external criterion for the "fitness" of the objects of our desires. Rational deliberation does not consist in trying to form appropriate desires or trying to "correct" the desires we have but in trying to figure out how to pursue the objects of our existing desires (or perhaps the objects of desires that we would form under certain favorable conditions) in the most efficient way possible. If the expression "good" has any meaning, it is just what we desire, or what we would desire under certain independently specified conditions. I will call any view that does not accept that legitimate criticism of the content of our desires in terms of an independent notion of the good is possible a "subjectivist" position or, for reasons that will become clear in chapter 3, a "contemporary subjectivist" position.[8] Subjectivist positions must thus hold that the old formula of the schools is either trivial or false.

These two different sets of criticisms correspond to the two roles that the notions of "desire" and "good" might play. In the context of practical reasoning, desires can be in the "background" of our reasoning about what to do;[9] they can be the sources of the importance we give to pursuing various outcomes or to engaging in various actions. The fact that I want to play soccer might give me a

---

[7] As we will see when we discuss the notion of valuing and conditioning, this might need some qualification. But the blunt version will do for the purposes of the introduction.

[8] See, for instance, David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (especially chapter 2); and Donald C. Hubin, "What's Special about Humeanism."

[9] One may think that the desires themselves are what we reason *about*; they are the content of our deliberations. I find that position implausible. See, on this issue, Talbot Brewer, "The Real Problem with Internalism about Reasons." The more plausible view is that the desires are in the "background" of the deliberation. See Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Backgrounding Desire."

reason to look for soccer leagues, take steps to find my way to the soccer field when a game is being played, make sure that I do not sustain major injuries, and so forth. In the same context, the notion of the good plays the role that we ought to aim for when we reason. Realizing that it would not be good (or good for me) to play soccer, I should give up this end. Because a subjectivist thinks that there is no possible criticism of the content of the agent's basic desires (or of her ultimate ends[10]), there is no independent role for the notion of good to play in the realm of practical reason. The old formula of the schools would at best say that we desire only what we desire. I could at most have realized that I didn't want to play soccer, or that I didn't want to play soccer as much as I wanted some other things.

In the context of intentional explanations, desires explain what motivated the agent in the pursuit of a certain thing. One can explain the fact that I took my umbrella by mentioning, among other things, my desire not to get wet in the rain, and we can understand this desire in dispositional terms, as a disposition to act in certain ways given certain beliefs.[11] The separatist can argue that although our desires are often influenced by our evaluative attitudes, there is no reason to think that our dispositions will always match these evaluative attitudes. What explains the action, the argument continues, are the dispositional states, not the evaluative attitudes, even if at times the evaluative attitudes can be part of the explanation of why we are motivated to act in a certain way – why we desire certain things. Thus a notion of the "good" has no necessary role to play in intentional explanations.

Looking at these subjectivist and separatist objections, one might wonder why the old formula of the schools ever enjoyed such widespread acceptance. Why would anyone find this kind of view appealing? What could be the motivations for such a view?[12] Let us start with the context of practical reason. What is the point, in this context, of arguing that our desires aim at the good? Why shouldn't we just accept that desires do not stand under any further ideal, that we should only pursue what we want? In order to answer this

[10] As opposed to their instrumental ends.
[11] See, for instance, Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, chapter 4.
[12] Of course, I do not propose to speak for every proponent of a scholastic view.

question, we should reflect on the ways in which one's action can manifest error. According to the subjectivist, the only possible error that can be manifested in one's action is, roughly,[13] lack of consistency in pursuing one's ends – such as pursuing incompatible things, or not pursuing appropriate means to one's ends. However, we ordinarily seem to be committed to the possibility that our actions can manifest a different kind of error: that they pursue the wrong kind of object, an object that one ought not pursue not just because it does not fulfill our desires but because it is not the kind of thing that one should desire. No doubt, examples of immoral ends come to one's mind in these cases, but this commitment also shows itself in choices that are not easily classified as moral choices. I might find that my friend is wasting her life away by spending most of her time playing video games. It is not that I believe she does not want, or that she does not want enough, to play video games; rather, it is the fact that she wants it so much that I find particularly disturbing.

A particularly compelling example of this kind appears in Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*. Voitski (Uncle Vanya) looks back at his youth, which was dedicated to making it possible for his brother-in-law to live an academic life in a big city. Voitski realizes when he is forty-seven that his youth has been completely wasted; he now sees that his brother-in-law's work did not have the importance he used to attach to it and thus that it cannot bear the weight of a youth sacrificed for its sake. The problem is not so much that his brother-in-law is a fraud and not really engaged in good academic work (although this is true to some extent and is at the forefront of Voitski's invectives against his brother-in-law) but that the importance of a life of academic excellence had been obviously exaggerated. Moreover, nothing that Voitski can do right now can redeem his lost youth; his life has simply been wasted.[14] The question of whether people have wasted their lives in this way is hard

---

[13] This clause is necessary to include informed desired accounts, considered preferences, and so on.

[14] Of course, I am giving a rather coarse version of the intricacies of the play. Unfortunately, I cannot here (or anywhere for that matter) convey with much precision the poignant way in which *Uncle Vanya* gives us a sense of the characters' lives being, at some level, simply wasted.

to understand as a question about whether they failed to fulfill their desires coherently or failed to pursue adequate means to their ends – part of the problem is that Voitski had done *that* all too well. The issue seems to be whether what one wanted was worth having. Of course, the subjectivist might try to find some way to accommodate this possibility, but it is far from clear how this would work. A scholastic view has a quite uncomplicated way of making room for the possibility of this kind of error. The person who wasted her life in this way was one who desired, and acted in pursuit of, something that was not good; the standard of goodness in this case is not fully determined by one's desires. Our desires express our *stances* toward the good, but there is no guarantee that these stances can serve as appropriate grounds for a correct judgment that their objects are good.

Subjectivism takes the ideal government of action and belief by means of our rational faculties to be radically different. To use Hume's apt metaphor, in the practical realm, reason is the slave of the nonrational parts of the soul, whereas in the theoretical realm it is presumably their master. In other words, whereas no theoretical attitude that is relevant for belief formation escapes rational scrutiny (certainly not the deliverances of our senses), in practical reason, our desires or appetites are beyond the reach of reason and yet provide the standard for the rationality of our actions. The scholastic view, on the other hand, conceives of our rational faculties as a unified whole.[15] They are the same rational faculties employed in two different endeavors: theoretical inquiry and practical inquiry. The inquiries are distinguished not by different cognitive faculties but by their formal ends: the truth in the case of theoretical reason and the good in the case of practical reason. By the 'formal end' of an activity I mean the end one must ascribe to an agent insofar as he or she is engaged in that activity. For instance, the formal end of competitive games is winning; insofar as we describe an agent as engaged in a competitive game, we have ascribed to the agent the end of winning. It is important to be clear on what this ascription

---

[15] The view that our rational faculties are a unified whole contrasts with subjectivism, but it is not an implication of its rejection. Doubtless, one could hold objectivist views that did not have this implication.

amounts to. If I take the agent to be engaged in a competitive game, I can now describe various actions such as, for instance, "adopting a strategy"; it makes sense to assess various moves in light of the end of winning. (I can say, for instance, that a certain move is foolish or brilliant, etc.) This does not mean that an agent playing a game always, or ever, represents her end as the end of winning. A soccer player might just be trying to score a goal or to steal the ball from the opponent, and the thought of winning might not be directly guiding her actions at any point in the game. Moreover, agents might engage in competitive games with other ends in mind; they might play for money or prestige or for any other further ends. However, one may at first say that insofar as the agent is engaged in the activity in question, the constitutive end of the activity places an inescapable normative constraint upon the agent's behavior. The fact that a soccer player displayed impressive ballhandling skills does not contribute to making the play a good move in soccer if the play predictably resulted in wasting an opportunity to score.

Even this admittedly vague characterization of a constitutive end might be just a first approximation. Difficult questions arise when an agent is, or at least seems to be, engaged in a competitive game but is pursuing an end incompatible, and even necessarily incompatible, with pursuing the formal end of winning. So a baseball player might care only about making as much money as possible, and this might require that he extend a playoff series by making sure that his team loses a game. A parent might have as his end losing the game to his child. Even in theoretical inquiry, similar things seem to happen. There is much debate about whether it is possible to believe for pragmatic reasons, but it is hard to deny that even if one cannot believe at will, one can at least form the project of getting oneself to believe, by indirect means, a proposition that one holds dear for nonevidential reasons. And a physicist might go to the lab with the sole aim of publishing in a reputable journal and be ready to fudge data, disregard alternative hypotheses, and so on in a way that is incompatible with at the same time being engaged in the pursuit of truth. Are these agents still playing competitive games or engaged in theoretical inquiry? Does the existence of paradigmatic cases of the activities allow these "defective" cases to count (parasitically) as cases in which one is participating in the relevant activities, or are

these agents better described as mimicking those who are engaged in these activities? These are difficult questions. But even if such parasitical cases are possible in the case of competitive games or theoretical reason, it is far from clear that there could be "parasitic cases" of practical reasoning. In the case of competitive games, the baseball player engaged in this activity with an extraneous end in mind; the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for the physicist. If one thinks that belief can be formed for pragmatic reasons, one will thereby concede that there is such a thing as engaging in the activity of belief formation guided directly by an end that is extraneous to theoretical inquiry. But it is not obvious that it is possible to pursue an end that is, in this sense, extraneous to practical reason. Practical reasons ought to guide *all* our actions, and by engaging in any activity, in pursuing *any* end, one has entered the realm of practical reason. In this way, the formal end of practical reason is inescapable in a way that no other formal ends are. For that very reason, one might suspect that the formal end of practical reason cannot demand anything very substantive, for it must be something one aims at in every single action.[16] However, there might be important constraints on what can count as good even at this level of abstraction. Part of the aim of the first few chapters of the book is to show that there are such constraints. But independent of the constraints we can uncover, we can learn quite a lot about the structure of practical reason by focusing on the idea that practical reason employs the same rational faculties as theoretical reason toward a distinct formal end. In fact, we should be able to draw from our

[16] Similar reasons have made some philosophers suspicious of attempts to derive substantive moral requirements from constitutive ends of practical reason. See, on this issue, Railton, "On the Hypothetical and Non-Hypothetical in Reasoning about Belief and Action"; and Douglas Lavin, "Practical Reason and the Possibility of Error." I do not mean, however, that this argument should be regarded as conclusive. Philosophers speak of actions being "defective" (Christine M. Korsgaard, *Locke Lectures*; and Tamar Schapiro, "Three Conceptions of Action in Moral Theory") and as being more or less full-blooded (David Velleman, "What Happens When Someone Acts"), and one would have to engage their attempts to show that there are such things before dismissing them out of hand. My only suggestion is that making room for cases of actions that are defective is significantly more problematic than making room for defective cases of engaging in particular practices and activities. (Korsgaard, for instance, tries to draw on the analogy of defective cases of other activities to explain a notion of defective action. See her *Locke Lectures*.)

understanding of theoretical reason resources that will help us clarify the structure of practical reason. Understanding our rational faculties as unified in this way has both theoretical and heuristic advantages. As we said earlier, the "good" in the old formula of the schools can be interpreted as having a function in the practical realm similar to that of the true in the theoretical realm: The good and the true are abstract characterizations of the aim of action and belief, respectively. That is, in saying that we aim at the true and the good, we are saying that we aim to get things right in the theoretical and the practical realm, respectively, but this is not to say anything more particular about which actions and beliefs would constitute getting things right. The author of a nonfiction book who when pressed by a strict word limit decided to shorten the introduction to "In this book, I will assert the truth about these events" would probably not be lying about her intention. However, such an introduction wouldn't help us to say *what* the author thought had happened. If we understand "good" in an analogous manner, the old formula of the schools will not settle for us how, in particular, agents should act.[17] Understood this way, the old formula of the schools will only commit us to the view that rational agents aim to act rightly (in this abstract sense) and that intentional explanations aim to show how actions appear to be correct (or make sense) to the agent.

Suppose we accept this reason to give the scholastic view a hearing in the context of practical reason. A separatist might accept all these points and still think that there is no reason to think that motivation and evaluation could not come apart. Is there anything we can say in favor of the old formula of the schools in the context of intentional explanations? At least under one way of thinking about the nature of intentional explanations, there will be a smooth transition from one point to the other. This will be the case if we think that intentional explanations are in certain respects importantly different from explanations in the natural sciences; that is, if we think of intentional explanations as attempts to *make sense* of the

---

[17] As we will see, this does not mean that there will be no general constraints on what can be intelligibly conceived to be good. See chapters 1 and 2 for some of these constraints.

agent, as aiming not so much to show how the agent's behavior *had to happen* given certain natural laws[18] but to explain and evaluate the extent to which it lives up to the ideal of rationality or to understand the extent to which the life of an imperfectly rational agent goes as it *ought to go*. Intentional explanations understood this way would try to track the agent's reasoning so that we can understand how her actions are an expression of a rational, albeit imperfectly rational, will.[19] Because we are imperfectly rational, intentional explanations will not always display the action as a rational conclusion given the agent's situation.[20] However, what the intentional explanation would show in this account is that the action was *intelligible*, even if one cannot be convinced that it was the (or a) right action given the circumstances, one understands why the agent took it to be so.[21] Of course, the aim of intentional explanations cannot be to show that the agent acted rationally; agents don't always do that. The aim of

[18] This is not to say that folk psychology has no predictive power. Even if we accept that folk psychology is to be understood primarily as providing explanations that display agents as approximating the ideal of rationality, these explanations could not work if our actions did not, by and large, approximate this ideal. But if this is so, insofar as folk psychology provides good explanations, its categories and assumptions should be capable of being put to use to predict the behavior of agents.

[19] The assumption that there is this kind of internal relation between the items that appear in intentional explanations and those that are in the background of practical reasoning is often also exploited by those who oppose the scholastic view. This relation is at the forefront of Williams's argument against the external reason theorist in his "Internal and External Reasons." These arguments tend to demand that practical reason conform to a certain conception of explanations. My proposal is to invert the order of priority: to examine how intentional explanations must look if they are to conform to an intuitive understanding of practical reasoning.

[20] Although I think that the conclusion of practical reasoning is always an action (I argue for this claim in my "The Conclusion of Practical Reason"), nothing in the book hangs on this view. However, often for simplicity's sake, I will just rely on the assumption that the conclusion of practical reason is an action.

[21] The notion of "intelligibility" here is borrowed from G. E. M. Anscombe, even if Anscombe might not have fully agreed with my "rationalist" use of the notion. See her *Intention*. I will discuss this notion of intelligibility further in chapter 1. The idea that the ideal of rationality has a constitutive role to play in intentional explanations comes from Davidson. See his "Mental Events." An understanding of intentional explanations that perhaps comes closer to the one I am proposing here can be found in John McDowell's "Functionalism and Anomalous Monism" and Jennifer Hornsby's *Simple Mindedness: In Defense of Naive Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind*. Jonathan Dancy goes as far as to argue that normative reality directly explains our actions. See his *Practical Reality*.