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Title Page – What is the Attitude of Desire?

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What is the attitude of desire?

I defend a view of the attitude of desire against a close rival. Both views are versions of “the guise of the good” thesis. The guise of the good says that a desire for P involves P appearing good in some respect. I defend a content-based account of value appearances against an attitude-based account. On the content view, a desire for P represents P as good while the attitude of that desire presents P’s value as true. In other words, a desire for P presents it as true that P is good.¹ The attitude view says that a desire represents P non-evaluatively while the attitude of that desire presents P as good. In other words, a desire for P presents P as good. The attitude view struggles to explain the relationship between the qualitative character of desires and appearances of value. It must either implausibly deny that there is a close relationship between the two, or explain the relationship by introducing a poorly motivated, revisionist mental ontology. In the present state of the debate between the two views, this problem tips the scales in favour of the content view.

Keywords: desire, content, attitude, the guise of the good, perceptual analogy

¹ Thanks to [redacted] for suggesting this turn of phrase.

Introduction

The guise of the good thesis holds that a desire for a prospective state P involves P appearing good in some respect.² I defend a content-based version of this thesis against a rival attitude-based version. The content view claims that a desire for P represents P as good while the attitude of that desire presents P's value as true.³ The attitude view says that a desire for P represents P in a non-evaluative manner while the attitude of that desire presents P as good (Schafer 2013; Tenenbaum 2007, 2018).⁴ The content view has a decisive advantage over the attitude view. The attitude view struggles to explain why variations in the qualitative character of desires correspond with variations in value appearances. It either implausibly denies this correspondence or explains it by appeal to a revisionist and poorly motivated mental ontology. The content view easily explains this correspondence. This, in the present state of the debate, tips the scales in favour of the content view.

The paper is organised into seven sections. The first section explains and motivates the guise of the good. The second outlines the distinction between content and attitude. Sections three and four explain and motivate the commitments of the content view and the attitude view. The fifth section poses the problem of qualitative variation against the attitude view. Sections six and seven examine how the attitude view can respond to the problem of qualitative variation, and I argue that none of these replies are attractive. Until the attitude view can provide a satisfying reply, or sufficient countervailing independent motivation, we ought to presume the superiority of the content view.

1. The guise of the good

This paper takes for granted the guise of the good thesis. On this thesis, a desire for P involves P appearing good in some particular respect.⁵ For example, an agent's desire to drink a cup of coffee makes the prospect of drinking coffee appear good by virtue of its deliciousness. In such a case,

² I use the term "desire" to pick out occurrent desires with a phenomenal character. I defer the analysis of dispositional desires to another occasion. For the distinction between felt and dispositional desires, see Johnston (2001, p. 188), Schapiro (2014, pp. 136-138; 2021, pp. 21-26), Schueler (1995, pp. 29-32), and Vadas (1984).

³ I stipulate that "representation" is the function of content while "presentation" is the function of attitude. The content of desire "represents" the subject matter of a desire, while its attitude serves to "present" that subject matter in a certain way.

⁴ See also Smithies & Weiss (2019, pp. 29-30).

⁵ This is meant *de re* rather than *de dicto*. Contemporary advocates include, inter alia, Alvarez (2010), Anscombe (1957), Boyle & Lavin (2010), Brewer (2009), Clark (2010), Hawkins (2008), Johnston (2001), Oddie (2005, 2015, 2009, 2017, 2018), Scanlon (1998), Schafer (2013) Smithies & Weiss (2019), Stampe (1987), and Tenenbaum (1999, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2018).

the content of the desire is naturally understood as: “drinking a cup of coffee would be delicious.” I also take for granted a number of claims that are standardly associated with the guise of the good, although they are not strictly entailed by the thesis. The thesis is usually advanced under the assumption of value realism. I use “value” broadly to range over moral and non-moral values such as aesthetic, hedonic, and prudential values (see Alvarez 2010, pp. 85-86; Johnston 2001, pp. 181-183; Orsi 2015, p. 715). Desire’s value appearances can be a more or less accurate guide to (some portion of) evaluative reality (Oddie 2005, pp. 47-80; Schafer 2013, pp. 278-281; Stampe 1987, pp. 355-356). In the paradigm case, a desire provides *epistemic access* to value. I also assume, as part of this standard view, that values ground an agent’s practical reasons. An agent becomes aware of a reason for action by becoming aware of a value in a desire. If prospect P has value V, V constitutes a *pro tanto* reason to act in ways that would bring P about. Desires provide epistemic access to value, which in turn provides justification for judgments and actions that are appropriately based on a desire. For example, a desire for a cup of coffee, in the good case, provides an awareness of the deliciousness of coffee (i.e., its hedonic value), which in turn confers justification to the practical judgment that one has a reason to drink some coffee. This view explains the rational character of desire-based judgments and actions, and contributes to the explanation of the foundations of practical knowledge.

The guise of the good has been developed in too many different directions to effectively survey here.⁶ I focus on what is perhaps the dominant view: perceptualism.⁷ On this view, a desire for a prospect P involves P appearing good in some respect in a manner analogous to perceptual appearances (Hawkins 2008; Johnston 2001; Oddie 2005, 2009, 2015, 2018, Schafer 2013; Smithies & Weiss 2019; Stampe 1987). Desire and perception are analogous with respect to their phenomenology and epistemic function. I consider each point of analogy in turn.

First, desire and perception have an analogous phenomenology (Hawkins 2008, pp. 258-264; Johnston 2001; Oddie 2005, pp. 47-80; Schafer 2013, pp. 276-278; Smithies & Weiss 2019, pp. 38-40; Stampe 1987, pp. 356-357). A perception of P presents P immediately, it is not an intentional or voluntary experience, and it has an apparent objectivity. Analogously, a desire for P consists in P appearing good immediately, involuntarily, and it seems to tell one about the way the world is. For example, a desire to drink a cup of coffee presents the deliciousness of coffee immediately, involuntarily, and it seems to tell you that drinking coffee would be delicious. Desires,

⁶ For a comprehensive survey, see Orsi (2015).

⁷ I focus on perceptualism because it appears to be the standard view and I advocate for a version of it. However, the problem I pose applies to all versions of the attitude view and so motivates the content view as such.

unlike perception, have an essentially evaluative phenomenology. Yet, like perception, this evaluative phenomenology “makes a claim” on the way the world is or seems to make some portion of reality manifest to one.

Second, desire and perception perform analogous epistemic functions (Johnston 2001, p. 187ff.; Oddie 2005, pp. 47-80; Schafer 2013, pp. 278; Smithies & Weiss 2019, pp. 37-40, pp. 46-47; Stampe 1987, p. 342 ff.). Perception provides an epistemically basic access to empirical facts, it confers immediate justification, and the justification it confers is reflectively accessible. Under the right circumstances, an agent can rationally take her perception at face value as presenting the way the world is. Analogously, desires provide basic epistemic access to value, confer immediate justification, and such justification is reflectively accessible. A desire for coffee can, under the right circumstances, provide immediate grounds for the judgment that one has a reason to drink coffee and makes it (*ceteris paribus*) rational to drink some coffee. This explains why desires are central to practical reasoning (see especially Johnston 2001 and Stampe 1987). The justification of practical judgments and actions often naturally terminate by citing our desires (see Hawkins 2008, pp. 249–50; Johnston 2001, pp. 188–94; Oddie 2005, pp. 54–57; Scanlon 1998, pp. 41–50; Schafer 2013; Smithies & Weiss 2019; Stampe 1987, p. 344, pp. 375–76).⁸ Perceptualism vindicates this practice. Just as our empirical knowledge of the world bottoms out in perception, our evaluative knowledge bottoms out in our desires (Johnston 2001; Oddie 2005, 2009, 2015, Stampe 1987; Smithies & Weiss 2019).

Perceptualism is attractive because it explains the phenomenology of desire and the rational character of desire-based judgment and action. These explanatory payoffs depend on the idea that desires involve a quasi-perceptual experience of value. This evaluative dimension of desires could be “located” in its content or its attitude. Before we try to decide on where the evaluative dimension of desires is located, let us clarify the distinction between content and attitude.

2. Content and attitude

For the purposes of my argument, I adopt a way of distinguishing content and attitude that appears to be almost universally, albeit implicitly, accepted within the guise of the good literature. Content and attitude are parts of an agent’s relation to an intentional object. The intentional object is what

⁸ This is widely, but not universally, taken as an intuitive datum. For example, one might suppose that the epistemic status of affective experience is parasitic on one’s beliefs, see Brady (2014). Gregory (2018) argues that desires are sensitive to evidence, and can be rational or irrational, and these two features are incompatible with the claim that desires are epistemically basic. I wish to thank an anonymous referee for urging clarity on this point and for suggesting Brady and Gregory as representatives.

the state is “about,” while the content of a state is how the object of the state is represented, and the attitude is how the content of a state is presented to the agent (Boswell 2018, p. 18; Fodor 1978; Schroeder 2006, p. 66; Schafer 2013; Tenenbaum 2018). In the other direction, the attitude of a mental state is the relation an agent bears to representational content and (when all goes well) that content enables a relation to the intentional object of that state. Roughly, content specifies *what* the agent is mentally related to, while attitude specifies *how* the agent is mentally related to content. Both content and attitude are parts or aspects of an agent’s mental relation to the intentional object.

Let us consider how this framework applies to perception. A perceptual experience of a coffee cup is “about” a coffee cup – that is its intentional object. In the case of genuine perception, an agent is indeed perceptually related to that coffee cup. If the agent is hallucinating, she will not stand in any perceptual relation to that cup, nevertheless, her experience is “about” a coffee cup. The perception gets to be about a cup of coffee through its representational content. Here I use a simple, theoretically neutral conception of content: the content of a mental state is the way that state represents the world as being or a way the world could be. The content of a perception of a coffee cup specifies the features of the coffee cup, its location in the environment, and so on. The attitude of perception is the mental relation an agent bears to the content of perception. The attitude of perception involves presenting the content representing the coffee cup to the agent as true in such a way that the agent seems to be directly aware of that coffee cup.⁹ While we might have reservations about the unqualified truth of this simplified standard view, it provides us with a plausible framework to begin our analysis of the attitude of desire.

This standard way of distinguishing between content and attitude is theoretically fruitful. The notion of an attitude helps us to specify the rational role of a mental state. Intuitively, content seems portable. For example, I can imagine a transparent red cube, and I can also see a transparent red cube. Both have the content “a transparent red cube” yet each differs in the way it relates an agent to the world. Attitudes explain this difference. Imagining has the attitude of presenting P as possible, while perception has the attitude of presenting P as true in such a way that the agent seems to be directly aware of P. Attitudes also explain the unity of mental state kinds. Token mental states with the content P, Q, R, are brought under the category “perception” when each state involves the same way of presenting their object as true. Attitudes are therefore crucial in regimenting our folk-psychological taxonomy of mental states.

⁹ This characterisation of the attitude of perception was inspired by accounts of perception in Chudnoff (2012, 2013, pp. 173-203), Dorsch (2016, 2018), Frey (2013), McDowell (2006, pp. 23-27), and Sturgeon (1998, pp. 181-182).

For our purposes, I want to focus on the feature of attitudes called “presentation.” The attitude of a mental state presents the content of that state in a certain way (Boswell 2018, pp. 18-19; Crane 2009, p. 477; Schafer 2013, pp. 18-19). Each mental state presents its content in a distinctive way, but these distinctive ways of presenting an object can nevertheless belong to broad groupings. For example, imaginings, beliefs, and perception all in some sense present their object as true. They all purport to make claims about a way the world is or a way the world could be. “Presentation” has epistemic significance because, to put it abstractly, it ascribes properties to the object of a mental state that is not necessarily “contained” in the content of that state. Consider again the contrast between imagining P and perceiving P. Suppose that imagining P and perceiving P possess the overlapping content P. Each state “says more” than “P.” Imagining P “says” that P is possible, while perceiving P “says” that one is aware of P. The states convey information about the metaphysical status of P and an agent’s relation to P without that status or relation necessarily figuring in the content. “Presentation” also (at least partly) determines the phenomenology of a state, insofar as that state has a phenomenology. For example, the phenomenology of perception is partly determined by the way that the object of perception is presented as something one is aware of. These features of “presentation” explain our introspective attitudes toward mental states. Perception is often immediately taken up as a source of justification for empirical beliefs because it is evident within the experience that one is aware of some portion of the world.

Now that I have outlined the distinction between content and attitude, let us see how the notion of attitude has been used to analyse the nature of desires.

3. The content view

The guise of the good has traditionally been understood as the claim that a desire for P represents P as good in some respect. The content view has, broadly speaking, two options for how it models the content of desire.¹⁰ On the first, the content of desire is entirely evaluative and conforms to the schema “prospect P has value V.” On the second, the content of desire has two aspects: one represents a prospect in a non-evaluative manner (“P”) and the other represents the value of that prospect (“P is good”). The second view has the advantage of providing a straightforward account of how a desire for P gets to be about P, namely, it represents both the whole prospect as well as its good-making features. By contrast, the first account only directly represents the good-making features of P. This view has a couple of options for explaining how desires get to be about their object. We could say that a desire for P gets to be about P just by virtue of representing the

¹⁰ I wish to thank an anonymous review who urged explicit discussion of these two options and helped me to appreciate the relevance of these two models for the present debate.

evaluative properties of P. This might be analogous to how a perception of P gets to be about P by acquainting the agent with, say, the visible parts of P. Alternatively, an advocate of the first view could point out that the intentionality of desires is parasitic on other states. This seems to be a piece of common sense: an agent needs to have some inkling of what P is like through her beliefs, perceptions, imaginings and so on in order to have a desire for P. So, a desire for P with the total content “P is good” could get to be about P by being based on another state that provides a non-evaluative representation of P. The same explanatory work would be done as in the dual content view, only the labour has been divided between desires and the prior representational states on which desires are based. This is my preferred view, and I will assume it in what follows, however, the argument I develop here could be run with the dual aspect view as well.

The content view is best understood as saying that the attitude of desire presents the value of the object of desire as true. In other words, a desire for P presents it as true that P is good. Since this commitment is usually left implicit, I want to flesh it out a bit.

Assuming perceptualism, the attitude of desire should be analogous with the attitude of perception.¹¹ Perception presents P as true in such a way that the agent seems to be aware of P. Analogously, a desire for P presents the value of P in such a way that the agent seems to be directly aware of that value.¹² This explains how desires justify practical judgments and actions. Desires provide epistemic access to value and the presentational character of desire makes this epistemic significance of desires evident to introspection.

Perceptualists do not, and should not, claim that desires are a literal form of perception. Perception and desire intuitively involve distinct mental relations to their respective objects. How should the content view mark this difference? We can explain the difference by saying that the attitude of desire involves *being moved by* or *motivated by* the value of P (at least to some small degree) (Johnson 2001, p. 206, pp. 212-213; Oddie 2005, chapters 2 & 8, especially p. 41 & pp. 236-239). The motivational nature of desire depends on its objective purport. An agent is motivated to bring P about *because* she appears to be aware of the value of P. In the other direction, part of what it is to experience the value of P is to be moved by that value. This explains the intuitive idea that desires are essentially motivational. It also seems plausible to say that if P is valuable, then an agent who obtains the right epistemic relation to that value would be motivated (to some extent) to bring

¹¹ Advocates of the content view who deny perceptualism would want to draw the analogy with belief instead. On such a view, the attitude of desire would consist in holding a content to be good rather than having that content be presented in such a way that one seems to be directly and experientially aware of value.

¹² This view, or something very much like it, is held by many advocates of perceptualism, e.g. Johnston (2001), Oddie (2005), and Stampe (1987).

about or sustain P. The idea is that to call P valuable implies that it has the power under the right circumstances to motivate an agent to bring about or sustain P (Oddie 2005, p. 38; 2015, p. 68). Presumably an epistemically direct experience of value is the right kind of relation to produce motivation. However, the motivational component of desire is not a *causal consequence* of an experience of value but, rather, is part of what it means to experientially encounter value. Importantly, desires still belong to the broad class of states that present their object as true. But due to the peculiarly normative character of the object of experience, presenting value as true in an experiential manner essentially involves some motivation to bring the valuable state about (or sustain it, as the case may be). Another virtue of this account is that it explains how the motivational component of desire is intelligibly related to the object of desire. In desiring P, one is not simply moved to bring P about by a brute disposition, rather, one's motivation is (seemingly) merited by the value of a prospect.

Before moving on, I should address the objection that I have portrayed desires as being more belief-like than they really are. If a desire “makes a claim” about a way the world is, but this “claim” is not true, then perhaps that desire is false. However, we do not ordinarily call desires true or false. This is a significant strike against this account of the attitude of desire. In reply, perceptualists can lean on the perceptual analogy. Perceptual experiences “make claims” about the way the world is, yet, we do not ordinarily call perceptions true or false. For example, when subject to a visual illusion, it would sound odd to say that one “sees falsely” or has “false vision.” A plausible explanation for this is that, unlike beliefs, perception is not a relation to a proposition but rather to worldly facts. This feature of perception makes the vocabulary of accuracy and inaccuracy more appropriate than the vocabulary of truth and falsity. Analogously, perceptualism is most naturally formulated in terms of the claim that desires are a relation to values rather than propositions. On this view, we say that a desire that gets things wrong is inappropriate or misleading rather than false due to the nature of the object of awareness.

Another reason why talk of truth and falsity is unnatural in the case of desire is that the content of desire can be considered from two perspectives (Gregory 2021, pp. 16-17).¹³ Either the object of desire (P) obtains or that the evaluative content of a desire (P is good) accurately represents the value of the object of desire. Saying that a desire is “true” can be confusingly ambiguous between these two perspectives. When we consider a desire from the perspective of its evaluative content, it is correct to say that it is true or false, but when we consider a desire from the perspective of whether its object is actual, the obtaining of the object of desire is irrelevant to

¹³ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing to my attention the relevance of this discussion.

the epistemic success of the state. This makes talk of truth or falsity unnatural even when it is strictly speaking correct under certain circumstances. So, the content view does not generate absurd results about how we ordinarily conceive of the epistemic status of desires.

4. The attitude view

The attitude view says that a desire for P presents P as good (Schafer 2013, p. 277; Tenenbaum 2007, 2008, pp. 135-136, 2009, p. 412; 2018, pp. 14-16). The content provides the subject matter for the desire (P) while the attitude provides the evaluative dimension of the experience (P's goodness). The attitude view is a different articulation of the same basic idea that desires are an experiential awareness of value. A desire that presents P as good seems to tell the agent about how the world is, and does so immediately and passively. Such a presentation "contains" enough evaluative information to pass a justified practical judgment about the value of P, and such justification is made reflectively accessible. In the present dialectical setting, the attitude view has three motivations. First, it seems to better capture our intuitions about the portability of content. Second, it seems to provide a better explanation of how desires rationalise intentions and actions. Third, it explains the possibility of perverse desires. Let us consider each in turn.

It seems intuitive to think that content is portable: the content P can be shared between a belief that P and a desire for P. For example, a perception of a cup of coffee and a desire for a cup of coffee in some sense have the same subject matter, namely, a cup of coffee. For some, it also seems intuitive that two states that are "about" the same thing have the same total content. This is a way of developing the initial thought. It is not just that states *overlap* in content but that two states can have identical *total* content. Furthermore, it seems possible that any belief and any desire can be "about" the same thing, and so have an identical total content. Accepting this idea rules out the possibility of the content view. If a belief that P and a desire for P share identical total content, then we would need to appeal to the attitude of desire to explain its distinctive phenomenology and epistemic role (see Tenenbaum 2009, p. 413).¹⁴ It seems that reflecting on platitudes about the portability of content and how we specify content forces us to adopt the attitude view.

The problem with this argument is that it is question-begging in the present dialectical setting. We cannot simply assume the truth of the claim that a belief and desire can always have an identical total content. Perceptualism claims that desires essentially have an experiential kind of

¹⁴ See also Kriegel (2019, pp. 5-8) for discussion of this motivation for an attitude view about moods. See Milona (in press, pp. 14-17), Deonna & Teroni (2015, p. 297), and Rossi & Tappolet (2019, p. 552).

content that conforms to the schema “prospect P has value V.”¹⁵ On this view, what differentiates desire from perception or evaluative belief is primarily its distinctive experiential and evaluative content. This flatly contradicts the idea that that any belief and any desire can have an identical content. We cannot motivate the attitude view by simply denying the central thesis of the content view. The first motivation for the attitude view needs support from an independent theory of content specification. Simply citing the portability of content is not enough.

The second motivation is that the content view allegedly provides the wrong account of how desires rationalise intentions to act (Schafer 2013, pp. 269-270). Schafer (2013) argues that experiences such as perception and desires rationalise other states by virtue of features of their attitudes. According to Schafer, the content view implies a strong disanalogy with perceptual rationalisation (which ought to worry perceptualists) and violates a general principle about the process of rationalisation. The attitude view, by contrast, is analogous to the case of perception and conforms to this general principle of rationalisation. So, we have decisive reason to prefer the attitude view.

Schafer (2013, pp. 258-259, pp. 263-264) understands rationalisation as the process by which an experience (such as perception or desire) makes it rational (*ceteris paribus*) to adopt another mental state concerning that same subject matter on the basis of that experience. For example, seeing a cup of coffee makes it rational (*ceteris paribus*) to believe that there is a coffee cup before one. According to Schafer (2013, p. 273), the “standard picture” of how perception makes belief rational is that the former has the same “force and content” as the latter. “Force” is a generic property of attitude types that explain the epistemic role of those states. A perception and belief both, in some sense, present their object as true. Both states share the “assertoric force” of presenting their object as true even though these states differ in the specific *ways* in which they present their object as true (Schafer 2013, p. 273, p. 276). Believing that P on the basis of perceiving P is (*ceteris paribus*) rational because both share the same content (P) and both involve attitudes that present P as true (Schafer 2013, p. 275). The alternative, non-standard explanation would be that a perception of P rationalises the belief that P because the former contains the content “P is true.” Such an alternative, according to Schafer (2013, p. 270), is absurd. On the basis of this case, Schafer (2013, 275) introduces the general principle that rationalisation occurs when (and only when) there

¹⁵ A possible version of the content view might hold that a desire for P constitutively involves a belief that P is good. Such a view might need to accept the portability of the total content of desire (depending on how one conceives of the relationship between phenomenal character and content). Such a view would need to appeal to a feature other than content to individuate desires (such as phenomenal character) or bite the bullet and maintain that desires are a species of normative belief.

is a fit between the content and the force of the state doing the rationalising and the rationalised state.

Assuming both perceptualism and Schafer's theory of rationalisation, it would be absurd to say that desires rationalise intentions because desires include an evaluative content. Positing the content of the form "P is good" for a desire would be as silly as saying that perception rationalises because it contains in addition to the content "P" the content "P is true." Rather, an intention is rationalised by a desire when they share the content (P) and both present P as good (in a certain way) (Schafer 2013, pp. 273-278).¹⁶ Schafer (2013, pp. 275-276) calls the feature of "presenting as good" that is shared by the attitudes of both states "imperative force." For example, an intention to drink coffee can be simply "an explicit endorsement" of the way one's desire presents the goodness of drinking coffee (Schafer 2013, p. 277). So, Schafer concludes, the attitude view offers the only possible way of explaining how desires rationalise intentions that is consistent with the perceptual analogy.¹⁷

I have two objections. First, it is implausible that rationalisation depends on two states sharing the same force. It is commonplace for a state that Schafer describes as possessing an assertoric force to rationalise a state that Schafer describes as possessing an imperative force, and *vice versa*. For example, an immediate judgment (with an assertoric force) that one has forgotten to mail a letter could rationalise the intention (with an imperative force) to mail the letter right away. Similarly, an evaluative belief (assertoric force) could rationalise an intention (imperative force). A belief (assertoric force) that one did well on a test could rationalise a desire (imperative force) to receive a good grade. In the other direction, an intention (imperative force) to mail a letter today could rationalise the belief (assertoric force) that you will mail it today. A desire (imperative force) to mail a letter could rationalise the immediate judgment (assertoric force) that it would be good to have the letter mailed. These all appear to be plausible cases of rationalisation that violate Schafer's general principle. Absent further argumentation, we should reject the idea that rationalisation requires matching force. So, we do not need to introduce the notion of "imperative force" to explain how desires rationalise intentions.

¹⁶ Schafer focuses on the case of a desire rationalising an action. Schafer (2013, p. 277) characterises imperative force like this: "Ought: Any mental state that presents A with imperative force to me presents A to me as something that I ought to do." I translate the idea that A is presented as something I ought to do into the idea that P is something I ought to bring about, or equivalently, that P is good. The differences between these formulations do not matter for the substance of the argument.

¹⁷ Schafer (2013, pp. 268-269) also worries that the content view has not explained the origin of evaluative content. This problem has been addressed in recent work by advocates of the content view, see McCormack (2022, 2023), Milona (2023), and Milona & Naar (2020).

Schafer also assumes that the content view must say that desires rationalise intentions on the basis of content alone (see Schafer 2013, pp. 258-259, pp. 267-268). My second objection is that the content view is not committed to this. Consider how perception rationalises belief. Perception presents its object as true in such a way that an agent's belief can just be an explicit endorsement of her perceptual experience. Why is this? It is (*ceteris paribus*) reasonable to take one's experience as revealing the truth when *the experience itself* purports to do so through the way it presents its object. If a desire presents its evaluative content as true, this provides the desiring agent with a reflectively accessible basis to regard their experience as revealing the truth. It is (*ceteris paribus*) reasonable to take one's desire to be revealing the truth about the value of P if *the experience itself* purports to do so through its attitude. So, the content view can say that desires make intentions (*ceteris paribus*) rational in just the same way that perception makes belief (*ceteris paribus*) rational.¹⁸ The same two factors, an experiential content and an attitude presenting that content as true in such a way that an agent seems to be aware of the object of experience, give both states their power to rationalise. So, the content view can not only explain how rationalisation occurs, but it also draws a closer analogy to the case of perception.

The third motivation for the attitude view is that it explains perverse desires (Tenenbaum 2018). "Perverse desire" is a technical term. A perverse desire for P involves desiring P for its bad features in their capacity as bad features. All parties agree that it is possible to desire something bad in the respects in which it appears good.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the apparent possibility of perverse desires (considered as a species of desires for the bad) presents a problem for the content view. The content view says that a desire for P involves representing P as good in some respect. Such a view either denies that perverse desire is possible, or it says that a perverse desire *simultaneously* represents P as good and bad (Tenenbaum 2018, pp. 11-15). The former seems to deny a piece of commonsense, while the latter implausibly predicts that perverse desires involve a "manifest contradiction" that is not evident to introspection (Tenenbaum 2018, pp. 13-15). The attitude view can explain perverse desires without implying a manifest contradiction (Tenenbaum 2018, pp. 13-18). On the attitude view, a perverse desire involves representing P as bad while its attitude presents P as good. There is still *some* tension within the desire. However, the irrationality of perverse desire is a weaker, more palatable form of irrationality than the "manifest contradiction" of representing P as both good and bad (Tenenbaum 2018, pp. 14-15, p. 18). So, advocates of the guise of the

¹⁸ The content view can meet this requirement by saying that an intention to bring P about involves presenting it as true that P is good, see Anscombe (1957), Boswell (2018, pp. 3-4), Davidson (2001, pp. 21-42), and Raz (2010). This is a natural and common extension of the guise of the good thesis from desire to intention.

¹⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me to clarify this point.

good ought to embrace the attitude view as the only way to explain the possibility of perverse desire.

I agree with much of Tenenbaum's assessment. However, I think the best strategy for advocates of the guise of the good is to deny the possibility of perverse desires (see Boyle & Lavin 2010, pp. 191-193; Hawkins 2008; Tenenbaum 1999). The first thing to note is that perverse desires are a technical notion. All we are committed to in commonsense is the idea that agents sometimes desire the bad. We are well into the realm of theory by the time we say that an agent can desire the bad *for the sake of its badness*. The content view can provide a plausible alternative: when an agent desires the bad their desire involves P appearing good in some respect(s) while the agent believes that P is bad in some respect(s) or all-things-considered bad. When an agent desires P for its bad features she does not desire those features *in their capacity* as bad features. Rather, some good feature is closely tied to or contained within a bad feature. For example, a desire to induce pain in one's body might represent some higher-order masochistic pleasure or perhaps represent the pain as a fitting punishment for a perceived failing. Indeed, if inducing pain did not appear in *any way* good it would arguably fail to qualify as an intelligible object of pursuit (see Anscombe 1957; Boswell 2018; Boyle & Lavin 2010). So, the attitude has no decisive advantage on this score.

We have seen that the motivations for the attitude view are not compelling. I will now present a problem for the attitude view that decisively tips the scales in favour of the content view.

5. The problem of qualitative variation

I begin with an overview of the problem before developing the argument in more detail. It seems plausible to say that changes in the qualitative character of desire correspond with changes in value appearances, and *vice versa*. However, the attitude view is naturally understood as saying that desires have a single attitude. This suggests that desires have only one kind of value appearance: for every attitude there is one way in which that attitude presents its content. The attitude view, on this formulation, seems unable to explain how qualitative variation could be possible. So, to explain qualitative variation, the attitude view should claim that desires have multiple attitudes. However, this move is highly revisionist and has little motivation other than to rescue the attitude view. The content view, on the other hand, easily explains why qualitative variation correlates with variations in value appearances. Let us now consider the phenomenon of qualitative variation.

Throughout the day I experience several desires for my regular cup of coffee. I brew my coffee the same way, use the same ingredients and ratios, and the resulting taste is uniform. However, although the coffee stays the same, the qualitative character of my desires vary. Some

of my desires for coffee feel like a desire to satisfy a basic need, some more like being tempted into indulgence, some feel more dispassionate and contemplative, and some feel like a part of a comforting habit. These desires feel different, motivate me to drink coffee in a different way, and would dispose me to cite different reasons in favour of drinking coffee. Compare the first two desires. I feel a desire for coffee that feels like a desire to satisfy a basic need motivates me to drink coffee for its headache-relieving powers. I am motivated to drink coffee with a certain degree of indifference about, say, its taste or cost because the target of my desire is a particular means of headache relief. If asked: “why are you drinking coffee?” I would say: “I have a huge caffeine headache.” In my desire that feels like a temptation, I am motivated by the delicious flavour of coffee. If asked: “why are you drinking coffee?” I would answer: “it tastes delicious.” In each case, the different qualitative character of each desire corresponds to a different motivational profile and a difference in the reasons for which an agent acts. It seems that differences in the qualitative character of desires correspond with different ways in which the object of desire appears good. In the first desire, the agent is aware of the hedonic value of pain relief while in the second desire the agent is aware of the aesthetic-hedonic value of (a certain kind of) deliciousness. In each case there are different values that provide different reasons for drinking the coffee, or the same value that provides reasons for drinking coffee in different ways.

The reverse also holds: variations in value-appearances corresponds to variations in qualitative character. Suppose that on Monday I feel a desire to purge myself of all desires. This desire (re)represents the state of being free of all desires as a state of moral purity. Then, on Tuesday, I feel a desire to purge myself of all desires which (re)presents that prospect as good in a prudential way: life would be easier if I did not have to manage my desires. We expect these desires to feel very different. This qualitative difference is made intelligible by reference to the difference in value appearances. Consider another case in which a desire increases in complexity. I begin with a relatively simple desire to drink coffee to stave off caffeine withdrawal. As I consider the prospect of drinking coffee in more detail, my desire presents other respects in which the coffee is good. I begin to desire the coffee not only for its pain-relieving consequences, but also because it has a delicious flavour that produces bodily and aesthetic pleasure. The qualitative character of the desire will undergo changes as more features of the prospect appear good to me. The examples we have considered, considered under the assumed truth of perceptualism, make it *prima facie* plausible to think that the primary constituents of the phenomenology of desires are value appearances.

One might at this stage object that it is nevertheless not mandatory to understand qualitative variation in terms of variation in value appearances. One could insist that it is conceptually possible to explain the variations in the phenomenology of desire in terms of features

other than value appearances. The primary alternative would be that variations in qualitative character can be explained in terms of changes in the object of desire, considered in abstraction from its evaluative features.²⁰ For example, a desire for the bodily pleasure of enjoying a delicious cup of coffee feels different from a desire for the aesthetic pleasure of tasting a complex flavour profile because the former concerns *bodily changes* while the latter concerns *complex flavour profiles*. In the abstract, there is no barrier to tying the phenomenology of desire to its non-evaluative object.²¹ However, I will present two reasons why we should reject the idea that the phenomenology of desire is *primarily* determined by non-evaluative features.

First, the idea that the primary constituent of the phenomenology of desire are value appearances is truer to the phenomenological data. When my desire for coffee increases in complexity, it does not appear to me that my desire has changed in qualitative character because my desire becomes directed at further non-evaluative features that ground possible ways in which drinking coffee could be valuable. It is not evident on reflection that my desire has changed by representing first the cessation of pain, then a bodily reaction in response to the flavour of coffee, and then a representation of the complexity of the flavours of coffee. Rather, my desire seems to change because I am presented with further evaluative features: the prospect of drinking coffee seems to be first a source of *relief* from pain, as a way of enjoying *bodily pleasures* and *aesthetic pleasures*.²² Furthermore, it appears to me that the qualitative changes in my desire are intelligible by reference to these changes in value appearances. If I were to naively ask myself, “why do I feel differently about drinking coffee now than I did 2 minutes ago?” a natural answer would be something like: “well, before I only wanted pain relief, but now I want a delicious drink as well.” Reference to the apparently valuable features of the object of desire ordinarily has priority in explaining the phenomenology of desire.

²⁰ I wish to thank an anonymous referee who suggested this line of objection. Another possibility suggested by the referee would be to say that what varies is differing grounds for value, which is compatible with the value in each case remaining constant. Suppose that one thought there was one basic way of P being valuable, namely, that of there being a set of reasons to bring P about (the set might consist of one reason alone). On this view, having a delicious flavour and having an aesthetically interesting composition of flavours and textures would be two ways of achieving the same value status. This view is of course possible and would be compatible with the “guise of reasons” view, e.g. Gregory (2013) and Scanlon (1998). However, it predicts that the evaluative phenomenology of desire is arbitrarily related to the content of desire because qualitative character would vary significantly while desire’s content remained constant. This conflicts with one of the primary motivations for the guise of the good, namely, of explaining the (variable) evaluative phenomenology of desire, see Hawkins (2008), Johnston (2001), Stampe (1987), Tenenbaum (2007) *inter alia*.

²¹ Note that there is a sense in which my proposal is compatible with a version of this idea. I can allow that the phenomenology of desire is *partly* determined by the object of desire considered in the abstract from its evaluative features. What I need to deny is that qualitative variations are *primarily* explained by changes in those objects.

²² Where relief and pleasure are understood as thick evaluative properties.

Second, this more natural interpretation of the phenomenological data also fits better with the motivations for the guise of the good. One major motivation for the guise of the good is that it explains how agents can acquire immediate justification for judgment and action on the basis of a desire.²³ An advocate of this general framework should not completely decouple the phenomenology of desire from its evaluative purport. Suppose it is true that all variations in the phenomenology of desire can be explained primarily or entirely in terms of changes in the object of desire considered in abstraction its evaluative features. This implies that it would never be rationally appropriate for an agent to immediately take a qualitative change in her desire as a changing awareness of her reasons for judgment and action. After all, the qualitative character of a desire for P would always be at best tenuously, or at worst arbitrarily, related to the value of P. One could not trust that changes in how her desire made things seem would even be purporting to tell one how things are, evaluatively speaking. An advocate of the guise of the good, in order to preserve one of the primary epistemic motivations for her view, should say that value appearances are the primary constituent of the phenomenology of desires.

We can understand the relationship between qualitative character and value appearances in two ways. First, each qualitatively distinct desire concerns the same value property (deliciousness) represented in different ways (bodily enjoyment, aesthetic pleasure, etc.). Second, the each qualitatively distinct desire concerns distinct value properties. As we will see, the content view can easily adopt either or both strategies to explain qualitative variation. Let us consider how the content view explains qualitative variation before turning to how it is a problem for the attitude view.

The content view explains the correspondence between qualitative variation and value appearances by advancing two claims: first, the content of a desire contributes to its overall phenomenology, and second, that qualitative variation is grounded in corresponding variations in representational content. Qualitative variation involves either representing the same value in different ways or representing distinct value properties, or some combination of both. How exactly the content view develops this explanation will be decided by independent considerations about the nature of experiential content and one's meta-ethical commitments about the nature of value. Although I cannot develop such a view in detail here, we have good reasons to trust that a highly detailed and plausible account of such content is possible. An analogous strategy has been enormously successful in other domains, such as the analysis of perceptual experience. The same

²³ See Hawkins (2008, pp. 262-263), Johnston (2001a, pp. 205-213), Oddie (2005, pp. 47-80), Schafer (2013, pp. 276-278), Smithies and Weiss (2019, pp. 38-40), and Stampe (1987, pp. 356-357).

basic strategy for explaining how qualitative variation in perception corresponds to changes in representational purport can be employed in explaining the content of desires. At least, there are no obvious theoretical barriers to the completion of such a project.

By contrast, the attitude view cannot satisfactorily address the problem of qualitative variation. First, observe how natural it is to suppose that the mental state kind “desire” has only one attitude. Indeed, the very notion of a mental state attitude seems to be a theoretical way of regimenting our folk-psychological conception of mental state kinds.²⁴ Take the case of belief. Ordinarily, we are inclined to suppose that belief involves one basic kind of mental relation to the object of belief across various instances of belief. The beliefs *Vienna is the capital of Austria* and *Jakarta is the capital of Indonesia* appear to involve one basic way of presenting each proposition as true. Similarly, if I see a blank, darkened theatre screen at time 1 which get illuminates by a vivid red light from a projector at time 2, it seems that the episode involves one way of presenting as true a complex, evolving event. If we apply this natural thought to the case of desire, we get the result that desires involve one way of presenting their objects as good. Schafer (2013) seems to presuppose this idea when he argues that desires all rationalise intentions in the same basic way. Similarly, for Tenenbaum’s (2018) view, which explicitly draws an analogy between how things “appear true” in belief and how things “appear good” in desires, it is natural to understand such a claim as positing a single type of relation for each mental state. However, there appears to be a contradiction between the claims that there is only one way something can appear good in a desire and the phenomenological data that in our desires there are many ways in which the objects of our desires appear good. On the face of it, the attitude view apparently cannot explain why qualitative variation corresponds with variation in value appearances because it maintains that an invariant feature of desires produces phenomenological variety. Let us consider how the attitude view might reply to this problem.

6. Reply 1: Variations in a single attitude

An advocate of the attitude view could argue that a single attitude can produce qualitative variation by varying in degrees of intensity. There is one mental relation to value in desire, but this single relation comes in different degrees of intensity.

Consider the case of perception. It seems possible that the way perception presents P as true could differ in degree. Morrison (2016), for example, has argued that a fundamental feature of perception is “perceptual confidence.” The idea is this. Suppose I enter a café to meet my friend

²⁴ Thanks to [redacted] for this observation.

John.²⁵ As I walk through the café I see a man of the right height, complexion, hair colour, and so on to be John. However, John is not a remarkable looking man, and my eyesight is not perfect even when wearing glasses. It seems to be John, but I cannot be sure, so I wait until I am a little closer to greet him. Morrison (2016) suggests that my uncertainty is *part* of the perceptual experience rather than a higher-order epistemic attitude. On such a view, every perceptual experience comes with a grade of epistemic confidence. Whether or not this view is true, it provides a general framework for the view that the attitude of desire comes in degrees.

An analogous view for desire says that desires comes with an “evaluative intensity.” This explains some qualitative variation. It explains the difference between two desires that concern the same value to differing degrees, say, hedonic value. A mild desire to enjoy the delicious flavour of coffee and an intense desire to enjoy that flavour both present their respective objects as good in the same way but to differing degrees. It would be like hearing the same note played on a guitar at different volumes. The proposal loses its plausibility when we compare desires that concern different types of values. Compare the desire to purge oneself of all desires and the desire to take revenge on a dangerous driver. It seems implausible that these two objects would be presented as good in the same way even if they shared a similar or the same intensity.

In addition, this strategy relies on an analogy with a highly controversial view of the content of perceptual experience. This makes it hostage to the independent plausibility of that account of perception. For those who maintain the standard view that the attitude of perception cannot admit of degrees, the ideas that the attitude of desire admits of degrees is likely to have little appeal. So, the strategy of retaining a single attitude for desires is not a promising way of handling the problem of qualitative variation.

7. Reply 2: Multiplying attitudes

Another approach is to multiply the attitude of desires. The idea would be to introduce as many qualitatively distinct attitudes as are needed to account for the qualitative variation exhibited by desires. There could be an attitude for each determinable type of value, or there could be an attitude for each determinate type of value, or perhaps there could even be multiple attitudes which are different *ways* of relating to the type of value. Any combination of these claims might do the trick, so I won’t decide between them. Note that the attitude view could still plausibly claim that the attitudes of desire are still in some sense unified. All attitudes would belong to the category of those which present their object as good in some way. This would parallel the claim made by the

²⁵ A similar example is discussed throughout Morrison (2016).

content view that the content of desire always conforms to the schema “prospect P has value V” even though desires exhibit a wide diversity of value representations.

Tenenbaum (2007) has proposed a version of the attitude view along these lines.²⁶ On this view, a desire presents its object as good in a manner analogous to how perception presents its object as true (Tenenbaum 2007; 2008; Schroeder 2008). However, value appearances issue from evaluative perspectives (2007, pp. 42-51). For example, a desire for the deliciousness of coffee issues from the perspective of pleasure, while a desire to refrain from making myself jittery by drinking more coffee issues from the reflective perspective of prudence. A desire makes its object appear good *via* an attitude that is intelligible by reference to the content of the evaluative perspective it issues from. If we suppose that such attitudes always partially determine the qualitative character of desires, the attitude view then has the resources to explain why variations in qualitative character correspond to changes in value appearances.

An initially attractive objection to Tenenbaum has been posed by Boswell (2018). Boswell (2018, p. 22) objects that Tenenbaum’s view makes the explanatory role of attitudes indistinguishable from the traditional explanatory role of content (Boswell 2018, p. 22). On the traditional view, the content of a state specifies its subject matter while the attitude of a state specifies how the agent is related to that subject matter. However, on Tenenbaum’s view, the attitude of desire is no longer a purely relational notion since it specifies the value properties of a prospective state, thereby contributing to the specification of the subject matter of that state. The attitude of desire performs an explanatory role that was traditionally played by content. So, for Boswell (2018, pp. 21-22), Tenenbaum’s view collapses into a version of the content view.

However, Boswell’s argument risks begging the question against the attitude view. After all, the *central claim* of the attitude view is that the attitude of desire contributes to the specification of the object of desire. The content view cannot refute such a position by asserting without argument that specification of the subject matter of a state *just is* content. To do so would establish as a starting point of the debate the denial of the central claim of the attitude view. Pointing out that such explanatory work has been traditionally performed by content is not by itself sufficient to reject the attitude view.²⁷

²⁶ For an analogous view of emotions, see Kriegel (2019).

²⁷ Boswell (2018, pp. 22-23) further argues that the attitude view should, in light of this problem, be understood as advancing an adverbialist theory of desire. I explore this implication below. For a similar argument in the domain of emotions, see Dokic & Lemaire (2015, pp. 277-281).

There is an objection with real bite lurking in the vicinity, however. The attitude view has managed to address the problem of qualitative variation only by incurring a significant theoretical cost. As we saw above, the standard view of mental state attitudes is that they are singular – this is why we appeal to attitudes in explaining the unity of mental state types. The value of “attitude” talk is that it provides a way of regimenting our folk-psychological intuitions about various mental state types. It is a massive revision to this standard view to say that desires have *multiple* attitudes, perhaps, an *indefinite number* of attitudes. Of course, this view is logically possible. But it has wide-reaching implications for how we understand the nature of intentional mental states. Specifically, it implies one of the following three positions:

- (1) Desire is unique as the only state that has multiple attitudes.
- (2) Desire belongs to a class of mental states that all have multiple attitudes.
- (3) All mental states have multiple attitudes.

Endorsing any of these positions would be to propose a highly revisionist mental ontology. Each position comes with its own peculiar explanatory burdens. Any of these positions would need strong theoretical backing to acquire even a *prima facie* plausibility. Let’s consider each position in turn.

The first position implies an untidy mental ontology. There is no obvious reason why desires would be unique as the only state with multiple attitudes. Furthermore, there are a number of problems that would need to be addressed concerning the intelligibility of the proposal that desires have multiple attitudes. For example, it is unclear what Tenenbaum’s view would say about desires that present complex, structured sets of values.²⁸ For example, my desire for a delicious, aesthetically pleasing, and pain-relieving coffee represents multiple value properties that are non-accidentally related. The attitude view might say that such a desire has multiple parallel attitudes each targeting a different value property. How, then, is the agent aware of their non-accidental relations? Perhaps the multiple attitudes would be somehow co-ordinated in a distinct way. It’s not obvious what the co-ordinating mechanism could be, or whether the mechanism is internal or external to the desire. Perhaps the various attitudes in that desire form a new compound attitude that simultaneously specifies the three distinct value properties. It is not obvious how attitudes, considered as aspects of a mental relation to an object, could be capable of being composed into complexes. Indeed, the position would be so revisionist, it is unclear whether there is enough

²⁸ This is analogous to Jackson’s famous “many properties problem,” see Jackson (1975).

continuity between it and the standard view to warrant the continued use of the shared term “attitude.”

The second position would not have the burden of explaining why the attitude(s) of desire are so unique. Perhaps there is something special about experiential states (e.g. perception, desires, emotion, intuitions) that makes them especially suitable for multiplying their attitudes. However, this seems to commit us to a wholesale revision of the standard understanding of experiential states as those that attribute properties to objects *via* their content. While this approach is certainly possible, it is associated with a number of potentially very serious conceptual problems.²⁹ In addition, this position would encounter problems in individuating mental states. Suppose that the broad class of mental states that has multiple attitudes are those that present their object in an evaluative manner. How then would we distinguish between a desire for a cup of coffee from one’s hope that one drinks a cup of coffee? Both could share the same content and make the prospect appear good in the same way *via* their attitude(s). However, these two states are intuitively distinct. The attitude view would need to either implausibly lump them together as the same state or gerrymander unique attitude types that allow us to individuate these states.

The third position represents a comprehensive paradigm shift in the philosophy of mind. Given the success of the existing explanatory framework, we would need powerful reasons indeed to multiply the attitude of every mental state. This might, after all is said and done, be the right position. But advocates of the attitude view would need to provide much stronger arguments to motivate such a comprehensive revision. By contrast, the content view can capture all the motivations for the attitude view, it can also easily handle the problem of qualitative variation, and it does so while remaining comfortably within a standard explanatory framework. As such, in the present state of the debate, we ought to presumptively favour the content view as the better formulation of the guise of the good.

Conclusion

We should be pessimistic about the prospects of the attitude view. If we accept the natural thought that the attitude of a mental state should be unified across its instances, the attitude view is unable to explain why variations in qualitative character correspond to changes in value appearances. The attitude view can address this by either allowing for variation within a singular attitude or by

²⁹ See Boswell (2018, pp. 22-23) and Dokic & Lemaire (2015, pp. 277-281). In particular, “adverbialist” versions of this approach are widely held to fall prey to Jackson’s (1975) “many-property” problem concerning the composition of perceptual experience. There have been several replies to this problem from adverbialists, however, see D’Ambrosio (2021).

positing multiple attitudes for desire. Both strategies produced surprising and implausible consequences. By contrast, the content view can neatly explain why qualitative variation involves variation in how the object of desire appears good. It simply says that the content of desire varies. Moreover, the content view can provide an informative and plausible theory of the attitude of desire. So, given the present state of debate between the two views and the difficulties presented by the problem of qualitative variation, we ought to presume the superiority of the content view.

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