

## ***How Does the Good Appear To Us?***

[Review Essay: Sergio Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), viii + 315 pp.]

### **1. Appearances of the Good**

According to what Kant called “the formula of the schools,” we desire only what we conceive to be good, and avoid only what we conceive to be bad. Historically, many philosophers have found attractive the even “stronger claim that the desire for a certain thing should be *identified* with a positive evaluation of this thing” (23). It is this stronger claim that Sergio Tenenbaum is concerned to defend—or rather, to resurrect—in *Appearances of the Good*. In this volume, Tenenbaum is concerned to motivate and articulate an attractive contemporary version of this *scholastic view* of desire, and to confront prominent criticisms from two main directions. The result is a bold and novel statement of a historically prominent view, which brings it back into the contemporary debate. Reading Tenenbaum’s book is not all easy going, and I’ll suggest in what follows that it leaves important holes and has some prominent problematic features, but the book does deserve a place as the most promising contemporary defense of the scholastic view, and is a must-read for those with a serious interest either in the nature of desire or the nature of practical reasoning.

The two main sources of opposition to the scholastic view with which Tenenbaum is concerned in the book are what he calls *separatist* and *subjectivist* views. Whereas scholastics insist on a connection between evaluation and motivation, separatists hold that evaluation and motivation can come apart. Not only can we fail to be motivated to do what we believe to be good, separatists insist, we can be motivated to do things that we fail to believe are good, or even believe are bad. In fact, we can even be motivated to do them *because* we believe they are bad. Cases of *akrasia*, *accidie*, and perverse motivations like those of Milton’s Satan motivate separatism and pose a special challenge for scholasticism—the challenge to which Tenenbaum attributes the migration of philosophers away from scholastic sympathies over the last thirty years, and for which

Michael Stocker receives prominent credit.<sup>1</sup>

Subjectivists differ from scholastics in another way. Rather than insisting that evaluation and motivation come apart, as separatists do, subjectivists differ from scholastics in their order of explanation. Whereas scholastics hold that desires are appearances of the good, subjectivists say that the good is determined by what we desire. This isn't explicit, but Tenenbaum appears to hold that subjectivism, like separatism, is motivated by examples. So while chapters 6 through 8, which constitute his response to separatism, are organized around using his scholastic framework to explain the examples—of perverse motivation (chap. 6), *akrasia* (chap. 7), and *accidie* (chap. 8)—that motivate separatism, chapters 3 and 4, which appear to constitute his response to subjectivism, seem likewise to be organized around granting and explaining “subjectivist intuitions” (chap. 3) without going so far as to commit to a subjectivist view (chap. 4). Chapter 5 is concerned with a sidelight—the question of whether a scholastic view, with its appeal to the *good*, is deontology-friendly (Tenenbaum claims that it is and to explain how), and the book is rounded out by opening chapters that explain and motivate the basic principles of Tenenbaum's scholastic view of desire, the corresponding view of intention, and the theory of practical reasoning that connects them.

In what follows, I won't address all of the important arguments in Tenenbaum's book. What I will do, after clarifying and explaining Tenenbaum's view as well as I am able, is to develop what is in my view the most serious challenge facing the scholastic view—the problem of *how* it is that the good comes to appear to us through our desires—how our desires come to be states that have the good as part of their content. In particular, I'll show how this question can be answered within a subjectivist framework, and in a way that preserves all of Tenenbaum's motivations for the scholastic view. Subjectivism, I'll be arguing, is not best understood as motivated by cases, but as attaining the advantages of scholasticism while being able to solve its problems. An adequate defense of scholasticism needs to explain why it can give a *better* answer to this question than subjectivism can—a prospect in which I'll close by suggesting there is little ground for optimism.

## 2. Tenenbaum's Scholastic Theory

Tenenbaum's scholastic theory has at least four important parts. First, desires are evaluations—but they are not judgments of the good. They

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Stocker, “Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 738-53.

are, instead, *appearances*, being related to judgments of the good in approximately the same sort of way that sensory appearances are related to beliefs. Second, appearances of the good involve, for Tenenbaum, a *certain perspective*. Desires are not just appearances; they are appearances *from certain perspectives* (more on this later). Third, the various perspectives on the good from which our desires involve appearances go together in order to construct what Tenenbaum calls a *conception of the good*. Each person has a single conception of the good, which is formed by synthesis of and reflection on the perspectives on the good given by her various desires, taking care about desires that are appearances from unreliable perspectives, in the same sort of way that our descriptive world-view is constructed from the appearances, taking care about appearances that result from colored glasses or other known visual illusions. And finally, intentions are a kind of “unconditional evaluative judgment”—on the model of Davidson’s “all-out pro-attitude”—that are ideally warranted by, but are not identical with, one’s conception of the good.

Since desires are appearances rather than judgments of the good, it is easy to desire something you think is bad. Desires are “cognitively impenetrable” in the same sort of way that visual illusions can be. Because desires are related to intentions in something like the way that perceptual states are related to belief, desires *license* intentions, at least *prima facie*. And because intentions are not identified with, but “ideally warranted by,” one’s conception of the good, it is possible to intend what one does not conceive to be good, all-things-considered. So these are some of the main building blocks of Tenenbaum’s view. The picture appears to be this: just as the perceptual experience of grass represents it as green, thus *prima facie* licensing the belief that it *is* green, the desire to drink coffee represents drinking coffee as good, thus *prima facie* licensing the judgment that drinking coffee *is* good—that is, the intention to drink coffee.

So the scholastic picture, at least at first pass, appears to be this:

desire : intention :: perception : belief

This, however, raises an interpretive puzzle, in connection with Tenenbaum’s further suggestion about *how* we are to understand the analogy between desire and perception, intention and belief:

I will be interested only in scholastic views that understand the notion of the good in the way presented in the introduction: The good is supposed to be the formal end of practical inquiry in the same way that truth is the formal end of theoretical inquiry. *Thus, one can take “conceiving to be good” as analogous to “conceiving to be true.”* 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. (21; my italics)

The problem is this: is “good” supposed to be analogous to “green” or to “true”? If appearances of the good are literally appearances *of* the good, and the transition from desire to intention is like the transition from perceptual experience to belief, then “good” must be like “green”—part of the *content* of the attitudes. But in this passage, Tenenbaum tells us that “good” is, rather, to be understood as analogous to “true”! So which is it?

“green” model	desire : good :: perception-of-green : green
“true” model	desire : good :: perception-of-green : true

Answering this question is crucially important, in order to understand the commitments of the scholastic view and why it faces the challenges that it faces.

At first blush, it might make sense to take Tenenbaum at his word that he means “conceiving to be good” to be analogous to “conceiving to be true.” But even putting aside the book’s title, “Appearances *of* the Good,” there are a variety of reasons why I don’t think this can be right. For example, it’s not clear why ordinary separatists can’t say that desire stands to the good in the same way that perception stands to the true—for desires are *mistaken* when they are for bad things and perceptions are mistaken when their contents are false. Moreover, a view built on the “true” model would not be even *prima facie* subject to the principal separatist objections that Tenenbaum labors over responding to in the final three chapters of his book: the objections from *akrasia*, from *accidie*, and from perverse wills.

To see why, suppose that we accept the “true” model, and hold that to desire something is to bear an attitude toward it that stands to its being good in the same way that the perception that something is green stands to its being true that it is green. The truth of its being green is not plausibly understood to be part of the *content* of the perception that it is green—children and animals can have perceptions of things as being green without having a concept of truth. So on this view, the desire for something must not have that thing’s being good as part of its content, either.

But all of the separatist objections turn on the idea that desire is a state that represents its object *as good*. The perverse wills objection is that it is possible to desire what you think is bad, and even to desire it because you think it is bad. This looks like a good objection to the view that to desire something is to *think that* it is good. Similarly, the *akrasia* objection is that it is possible to be unmotivated to do some thing that you believe to be good. This looks like a good objection to the conjunction of the views that to desire something is to believe that it is good, and that desires are necessarily motivating. And the *accidie* objection is that

it is possible to be completely unmotivated to do the things that you believe to be good. This, again, looks like a good objection to the view that to desire something is to believe that it is good, and that desires are necessarily motivating. In chapter 6 Tenenbaum explicitly considers the objection from animal behavior, that animals and small children have desires without having the concept of good or the ability to have thoughts about it at all. Again, this looks like a good objection only to a view that involves the claim that to desire something is to represent it as being good.

If the scholastic view were to be understood on the “true” model, none of these would obviously be even candidate objections to the view. Animals and small children have perceptions of things as being green without having the concept of truth, so whatever the relationship is between perceptual experiences and truth will do for the relationship between desire and the good, as far as that objection goes. Similarly, it is unproblematically possible to have a perceptual experience of what you believe to be false, and to have no perceptual experience of something that you believe to be true.

Tellingly, Tenenbaum makes precisely this point his fallback position in his treatment of the objection from animals and children:

In particular, we can say that the more plausible it is to attribute to a being moves between various *prima facie* and all-out practical attitudes that resemble acceptable moves in the practical realm, the more we are justified in taking the agent to be guided by the formal end of practical reason (i.e., the good), *even if the agent cannot represent anything as good*. It is worth noting that this is no different from how we attribute beliefs to beings that do not have a concept of truth. (248; italics in original)

Here the idea seems to be: since the scholastic view is that desire and intention stand to the good in the same way that perception and belief stand to the truth, and small children and animals can have beliefs and desires without having a concept of truth, there can't be any problem with small children or animals having desires, either, without having a concept of the good.

This, I think, is a cheat, or at least a very large slip. It is true that if the scholastic view is to be interpreted on the “true” model, then there will be no problem about small children or animals having desires, just as there is no problem about them having perceptions or beliefs. But on this interpretation, it is hard to see why the objection from animals and small children—or any of the other separatist objections, for that matter—were even objections in the first place. I suspect that the answer is that, as indicated by the book's title, the scholastic theory is really correctly interpreted on the “green” model, which requires that desires represent their objects *as good*, but that in this fallback response to the animals objec-

tion (which looks to me to be the most serious of the separatist objections he considers in the final three chapters), Tenenbaum is exploiting the false impression that he is only committed to the “true” model.

### 3. The Motivation for the Scholastic View

Another important reason why we shouldn’t take Tenenbaum at his word when he says that desires stand to the good in the same way that perceptions and beliefs stand to the true, is that it isn’t supported by the primary motivation he offers for the scholastic theory. A look at this motivation, however, can also help us to see where the analogy between the good and the true comes from, for Tenenbaum. Moreover, I’ll argue later that a sophisticated subjectivism can retain the main insights of this kind of positive motivation for the scholastic view.

Tenenbaum’s motivation for the scholastic view begins with the idea that practical and theoretical reasoning each have *formal ends*. The formal end of an activity is the end that any agent must necessarily have, insofar as she is engaged in that activity. Actually, Tenenbaum says that it is the end that “*one must ascribe to an agent insofar as he or she is engaged in that activity*” (6), but here I assume that he is being sloppy—what I have to ascribe to you is neither here nor there; what is important is surely whether it would be *correctly* ascribed to you—that is, whether you really have it.

The argument for the scholastic theory is basically this: no one is engaged in practical reasoning unless she is aimed at the good. But desire attributions serve in rational explanations of action. So if desires are to play a role in making action rationally intelligible, then they must make intelligible how the agent could see that action as furthering the formal aim of practical reason—that is, as good. And how could a desire make intelligible how the agent could see an action as good, if it didn’t represent that action as good? So desires must represent their objects as good (6-9).

This argument, I think, supports the “green” model, but not the “true” model. Only if desires represent their objects *as* good, will they serve to make intelligible how their agents see themselves as furthering their formal aim of doing what is good. If desires are merely states that are correct if their objects are good, in the way that beliefs are states that are correct if their objects are true, nothing would follow about the intelligibility of various actions in pursuit of the good. For Tenenbaum, the argument also makes sense of where the analogy between the good and the true comes from. Just as the good is the formal end of practical reason, he holds that the true is the formal end of theoretical reason.

The argument does have a number of problems, however. For starters,

there is the obvious and important Humean Objection, which asks how, exactly, we are to understand the formal aim of practical reasoning. Is it a *desire* that anyone has, insofar as she is engaged in practical reasoning? Whether or not it itself counts as a desire, its existence seems to lead to a picture on which other aims can explain action only on the assumption that they involve representing their objects as good, but the aim to do good can explain action without having to represent doing good as good (on pain of circularity or regress). I have a hard time distinguishing this picture from the view that the scholastic theory is false, but we all have only one intrinsic desire—to do good—and all other desires are merely instrumental.

I don't want to make heavy weather of this or similar objections to the details of Tenenbaum's motivation for the scholastic theory, however, because though I'm uncomfortable about its details, and I think in the form advocated by Tenenbaum it is heavily theoretically committing, in broad outline it has much to be said in its favor. It is very easy, I think, to get a related argument going to the effect that desires must represent things as being *reasons* for action—a view that is structurally analogous to the scholastic view. And as I'll suggest shortly, given the way that Tenenbaum understands the way that *good* works, the differences between *good* and *reasons* are perhaps not very deep.

The argument that I have in mind goes like this. Not every way of acting as a result of a belief in some consideration that happens to be a reason for action is a way of acting for that reason. Suppose, for example, that the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie (who likes to dance) to go there. And suppose that, finding out that there will be dancing at the party, Ronnie goes there. So far, so good—it's natural to assume from this description that he went to the party for this reason. But what if Ronnie has a peculiar virus that makes him head to Alicia's house whenever he tokens a thought about dancing, and Alicia's house happens to be where the party is, and it is this virus that, together with his belief that there will be dancing at the party, leads him to go to Alicia's house (and hence to the party). Clearly, in this case, Ronnie is not acting on this reason. So it takes more to act for a reason than to be caused to act by a belief in that reason. Your behavior must be caused by your belief *in the right way*.

Now, this simple observation is compatible with very many different stories about what the right way of being caused to act by this belief is, so nothing follows deductively about desires having to represent things as being reasons. For example, according to Michael Smith, the *right way* of being motivated by a belief in order to count as acting for a rea-

son is just to be motivated by a desire (and not by a virus, for example).<sup>2</sup> But the hypothesis that desires involve representing certain things *as* reasons explains something that Smith's view doesn't. If the desire to go dancing involves representing the fact that there will be dancing at the party tonight *as* a reason to go there, then when Ronnie is motivated by this desire, in connection with the belief that there will be dancing at the party tonight, to go to the party, it is understandable why this counts as acting *for* this reason. The hypothesis that desires involve representing things as reasons is nonmandatory, but it is explanatorily fruitful: it explains why action for reasons involves *responding to* reasons. That's why I think it is attractive, and, on grounds involving sparse theoretical commitments (contrasting, I think, with the detail of Tenenbaum's approach, which requires the defense of an entire picture involving a formal end of practical reason), something that he takes for granted and I don't know how to argue for—and something that raises the specter of the Humean Objection, besides.

Of course, Tenenbaum wants the different thesis that desires involve representations of their objects as *good*, not representations of anything as *reasons*. But I think that the argument that I've provided may leave us closer to Tenenbaum's conclusion than you might have thought. For example, it turns out that Tenenbaum rejects both the standard conception of ascriptions of good as directed primarily at propositions or states of affairs, and correspondingly the standard conception of desires as first and foremost taking propositional objects. The kind of desire analyzed by Tenenbaum is not desire *that*, but desire *to*—which is apparently not analyzed in terms of desire *that*, because the desire to do *A* is the appearance that *A* is good from a certain perspective, and the things that are good from perspectives are courses of action, not outcomes or states of affairs.

Putting aside the problem of how propositional and object-directed desire will be accounted for within this kind of framework (which Tenenbaum says nothing about), this leaves us a picture on which, for all of the talk about “good,” the basic category of appraisal in which Tenenbaum is trading is a lot more like the deontic categories of *permissible* and *impermissible* than like the *good* of Moore and Sidgwick.

Moreover, there is a way in which Tenenbaum's account of desires as appearances of the good *from certain perspectives* makes them out to be more similar to appearances of *reasons*, which are in general pro tanto and capable of being overridden, than like appearances of all-out categories like *permissible* or *required*. Perspectives, whatever they are, play more than one important role in Tenenbaum's account—for example,

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).



they are used to explain why desires come “clumped” in interesting ways, and never by themselves. But they also explain how it is possible to have a range of conflicting desires toward a single object—because these desires correspond to the appearances from a range of conflicting perspectives. An agent’s *conception of the good* agglomerates these appearances into a single judgment of what is good, in the same sort of way that *permissibility* agglomerates the sum of the pro tanto reasons in a given case.

So all told, I think Tenenbaum’s scholastic view may be closer to the thesis about *reasons* for which I just argued than might be apparent at first glance.<sup>3</sup> Despite my qualms about the details of his argument and the looming Humean Objection, there appears to be strong merit to the idea that desires involve representing their objects as good—the central tenet of Tenenbaum’s scholastic view.

#### 4. The Fundamental Problem for the Scholastic View

The most disappointing feature of *Appearances of the Good*, unfortunately, is that it completely fails to address what looks to me to be the most serious problem for the scholastic view. The scholastic view, recall, does not merely claim that desire stands to the good in the way that perception stands to the truth. It is the thesis that desires *represent* their objects *as* good. This is both what motivates the theory in the first place, and why it has traditionally been subject to the kinds of separatist objections that Tenenbaum takes so seriously that he spends three out of eight chapters over them. But if the good is independent of desire, as the scholastic view claims in contrast with subjectivism, then how does it get to be *about* it?

Compare the question of how your greenish perceptual experiences get to be about green, rather than about some other thing, such as orange, or square. There is great disagreement in the theory of content determination about just how this happens. But there is widespread agreement that it doesn’t happen simply by magic. Your perceptual state has to somehow *latch on* to green. What different theories of content determination differ on is exactly how this “latch” is effected. Causal theories require a causal relationship between green and your perceptual state; co-variation theories require that they co-vary in some nomic way; teleological theo-

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<sup>3</sup>Compare Kieran Setiya, who contrasts Tenenbaum’s “radical advocacy” of the scholastic view with the “middle ground” position that acting for a reason involves taking oneself to have a reason to do it. Kieran Setiya, “Appearances of the Good,” Review of Sergio Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason*, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, May 21, 2007.

ries require that it be the *function*—whether supplied by design or by natural selection—of your perceptual state to be tokened in the presence of green; and inferential role theories require that there be some kind of structural match between the inferential relations that your perceptual state actually stands in and the ones that would be licensed if it were about green.

For all that it is a very nice story about desires, that they represent their objects as good, the scholastic view fails to tell us why this is so, or even how it could be so. Are desires caused by the good, as would be required by a causal theory of reference? Do they nomically co-vary with the good, and if so, due to what kind of laws? Is it their function to be tokened in the presence of the good, and if so, does this require assuming that we are the products of a Designer, or how did natural selection manage to hook us on to the good?

We might suppose that an inferential role theory is the more promising way for the scholastic theory to go, but there are distinctive problems with this idea, as well. What, after all, is the distinctive inferential role for the good such that a psychological state standing in these relations will have to be about the good? Given the wide disparity among the objects of different people's desires, it would seem that the only inferential role that could do the job would have to involve some central tie to motivation. But this conflicts with one of Tenenbaum's most central claims about the scholastic view—that motivation is only intelligible if it is by a state that represents its object as good. Since Tenenbaum claims that motivation is *impossible* except by a state directed at the good, he can't really go on to say that motivation is part of an inferential role that a state can satisfy *antecedently* to having a content about the good, and hence a role that can be what makes it the case that the state has that content.

In any case, the thesis that desires represent their objects as good is something that subjectivists *can* explain, and without too much trouble. Take, for example, the very simple subjectivist view that the good is what anyone would desire in reflective equilibrium in the presence of full information. On such a theory, it is both possible to desire something that is not good and to fail to desire something that is good. In fact, these failures might happen in a large range of cases. But there is still a *match* between the structure of desire and the structure of the good. If something is good, then if you are in "ideal circumstances"—you are fully informed and are in reflective equilibrium—then you will desire it. And if you desire something, then if you are in ideal circumstances, it is good. And this *match* looks like the right kind of thing to enable an explanation of the *latch*—how desires manage to latch on to the good in the way required for them to acquire contents *about* it.

So a subjectivist can agree with the scholastic view that desires repre-

sent their objects as good, but deny that this is what makes them desires. The scholastic view that this is what makes them desires leaves unexplained how they come to have the representational content in the first place, and hence how there get to be any desires at all. Instead, the subjectivist can appeal to an independent, nonscholastic, account of desires, and then appeal to a subjectivist account of the good in terms of desire, in order to explain *how* there is the right match between desires and the good in order for desires to get to have contents that are about the good.

This, I think, is a major reason to prefer subjectivism to the scholastic view—the scholastic view overgeneralizes on the descriptive claim that desires represent their objects as good, but subjectivism can explain it. And this means that the central motivation for the scholastic view doesn't discriminate between the scholastic view and subjectivism at all. Recall from section 3 that the motivation for the scholastic view is that the hypothesis that desires represent their objects as good makes intelligible why motivation by desire furthers the formal aim of practical reason—the pursuit of the good. But notice that nothing in this argument turns on the scholastic *identification* of desire with representing one's object as good. It only relies on the weaker assumption that desires do, in fact, represent their objects as good. So the argument doesn't actually support the scholastic identification of desire with representation of the good at all, and hence serves just as well to motivate the sophisticated subjectivist position, which as I argued, has the further virtue of being explanatory.

Throughout his book, Tenenbaum treats subjectivism as if it is motivated by cases, or just sounds intuitively true. That's why he spends a chapter distinguishing senses of "subjective" in which his view accommodates the intuition that values are "subjective," and a further chapter distinguishing the senses of "subjective" in which he holds that they are not. But if the foregoing is on the right track, then this crucially misrepresents the space of serious motivations for subjectivism. The kind of subjectivism to which I'm attracted, for example, is distinguished by its *explanatory* ambitions, not any intuitions about cases.<sup>4</sup> It aspires to yield the same advantages as the scholastic view, but to make both desires and the good easier to understand.

There is much in Tenenbaum's rich discussion that I've left untouched—most saliently, I've said nothing about his complicated explanation in chapter 5 of why his version of the scholastic theory is deontology-friendly. Tenenbaum's explanations of his position are difficult to discern in places, and as I've argued, his discussion leaves important

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<sup>4</sup>See Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

questions unanswered and unaddressed. But the reward of this challenging book is acquaintance with a philosophical position as strong and unique as it is a worthy successor to the scholastic views of ... well, the scholastics. It deserves to be grappled with and taken seriously by anyone with a serious interest in practical reason and the theory of action.

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