**How to Keep Up Good Appearances: Desire, Imagination, and the Good**

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1. Introduction

There seems to be a connection between what we want, or have a desire for, and what we take to be good. For instance, if I want to eat ice cream, then I treat the prospect of eating ice cream as something good. Or, if I want to apply for a particular job, I see something good in getting it. On the other hand, cases in which someone claims to want something that she does not take to be good at all seem to be abnormal or even pathological.[[1]](#endnote-1)

That much should be relatively uncontroversial. The impression disappears quickly, however, when one tries to flesh out the connection between desire and evaluation. We can distinguish at least two questions here. The first concerns the relation between wanting something and taking it to be good. Is it necessary or merely contingent? Does it indicate something essential about desires or can it be disregarded when giving an account of the nature of desire? Those who think that the connection is not merely contingent have a respectable philosophical ancestry. The idea that desires represent their contents as good goes back to Plato and Aristotle. It was reflected in Scholastic philosophy, noticed by Kant (1997), and has found defenders today. Tamar Schapiro, following Talbot Brewer, gathers those views under the label ‘the evaluative outlook conception of desire’ and attributes it to authors with widely varying theoretical commitments, like Simon Blackburn, Sergio Tenenbaum and Stephen Darwall (Schapiro 2014, p. 131; see also Brewer 2009). Sometimes such a conception is also expressed as the view that desires represent their contents under a distinctive guise – guise of the good.[[2]](#endnote-2) I will be using both ‘the evaluative outlook conception’ and ‘the Guise of the Good’ thesis’ as labels to refer to the thesis that representing the content of a desire[[3]](#endnote-3) as good is *essential* to having the desire. Although some proponents of the conception would argue that desires are *identical* with evaluative representations, I do not think that the assumption of identity is a necessary commitment of that conception, given its motivations (which I will briefly introduce in the next section) and the variety of forms it has taken through history. I also do not think that the conception needs to assume that having an evaluative representation of a state of affairs is sufficient for having a desire for that state of affairs, because there are arguably other essentially evaluative mental states.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The second question concerns the nature of the relevant evaluation itself. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between judgmentalists and perceptualists. Judgmentalists argue that the evaluation is like a judgment or belief about the good. Perceptualists think of it as similar, or perhaps even identical, to a perceptual relation.[[5]](#endnote-5) The focus of this paper will be on this second question. I am going to argue that instead of appealing to judgment or perception, it is better to understand the evaluative outlook conception in terms of our imaginative capacities. This idea goes arguably back at least to Aristotle[[6]](#endnote-6) but it can be given a more modern shape which draws from recent work on imagination. This is not yet to say, though, that an evaluation is an essential feature of desire. Rather, the conclusion of this paper will be that by appealing to imaginative capacities we can make sense of the evaluative outlook conception in a promising way which also escapes at least some of the problems that existing accounts face. A full vindication of the evaluative outlook conception itself would require a separate paper.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I will elaborate on the evaluative outlook conception and the motivation behind it. In section 3, I will argue that, although perceptualism is *prima facie* more plausible than judgmentalism, it faces its own problems. In section 4, I turn to defend my positive proposal—Imaginative Evaluative Outlook thesis—a quasi-perceptualist position according to which the evaluation that is essential to desire is understood in terms of imagination. In section 5, I address a possible worry regarding the thesis and finally, in section 6, I will check if it respects the motivations behind the evaluative outlook conception.

2. The evaluative outlook conception

Before moving on to consider how to understand the nature of the evaluative outlook, we should briefly consider the main motivations for the evaluative outlook conception in order to explain why many philosophers have found it attractive. As I said in the introduction, the aim of this paper is not to argue for that conception. However, we should still keep these motivations in mind because any account of the desire-specific evaluation which does not satisfy at least some of them should be considered unsatisfactory.

The first motivation for attributing the representation of the good to the essence of desire arises out of considerations pertaining to action explanations. Take a famous example by Warren Quinn in which a person is disposed to turn on radios whenever he sees one that is turned off. Quinn argues that the having of such a disposition fails to rationalize that person’s behaviour (Quinn 1995, p. 189f). If desires are to justify that person’s behaviour, they should not be mere dispositions to behave, but they should carry with them an evaluative perspective which makes his actions intelligible (Tenenbaum 2007, p. 33). This line of reasoning has also been put forward by Talbot Brewer who argues that any attempt to make sense of the actions of an agent by appealing to the desires of that agent will require us to treat desires as evaluative states (Brewer 2009, p. 23).[[7]](#endnote-7)

Recently, Sabine Döring and Bahadir Eker have argued that even if we take the man in Quinn’s example to evaluate turning on radios as something good, we would still be puzzled by his behaviour (Döring & Eker 2017, p. 95). I think that here we have a confusion between an agent’s perspective and an observer’s perspective. From the observer’s perspective, the behaviour of turning on radios may remain puzzling even after an evaluative outlook has been ascribed because the observer might not share the agent’s evaluation. But from the perspective of the one who is turning on radios, representation of the results of that behavior as good does make a difference to the intelligibility of that behavior.

The second motivation comes from the phenomenology of having a desire. Many who consider having a desire from the first-person perspective take it to be phenomenally manifest that the content of desire appears good. For instance, Graham Oddie says:

When I desire that P, P has a certain magnetic appeal for me. It presents itself to me as something needing to be pursued, or promoted, or preserved, or embraced. Now the good just *is* that which needs to be pursued, or promoted, or preserved, or embraced (Oddie 2005, p. 55).

Similar observations are made by Stampe (1987, p. 356), Schapiro (2009, p. 253), Scanlon (1998, p. 38), and Tenenbaum (2007, p. 27). Despite their different theoretical commitments, all these authors acknowledge that when we want something, then what we want appears to us as having positive significance or salience. Positing the evaluative outlook would be one way of accounting for this phenomenology. If desires represent their contents as good, then the phenomenology of wanting matches the intentional structure of desire.

The third motivation comes from the need to explain why in certain cases there seems to be something wrong about a person’s desire. Positing that desire involves an evaluative representation allows us to make sense of such situations because we can then say that the person mistakenly represented the content of her desire as good. For instance, there are cases in which a person wants something but when she gets what she wanted, she feels regret or disappointment. Although the desire itself is satisfied, the agent is not.[[8]](#endnote-8) It seems that something went wrong in such cases and, as Sergio Tenenbaum puts it, the failure seems to be internal to the desire itself (2007, p. 27). If we now assume that agent satisfaction can be identified with a type of goodness, a reasonable explanation for this failure is that by wanting a state of affairs to obtain, the person misrepresented it as good, but it turned out that it was not. This line of reasoning thus motivates the claim that desires essentially involve representations of goodness which can be either correct or mistaken.

Having now presented some motivations for the evaluative outlook conception, I have hopefully shown that it merits philosophical interest. I don’t pretend to have demonstrated that the conception is correct nor have I even articulated all possible motivations.[[9]](#endnote-9) However, given that the conception is in a position to make a contribution to theories of action, consciousness, and normativity—not to mention to the theory of desire itself—we should try to see what is the best way of making sense of it.

3. Judgmentalism and Perceptualism

As I already pointed out in the introduction, one can distinguish between two broad approaches to what it is to possess the evaluative outlook: judgmentalism and perceptualism. According to judgmentalism, the evaluative outlook is constituted by or is identical with an evaluative judgment or belief about the content of the desire. Proponents of such a view have arguably included such philosophers as Plato (at least in some of his dialogues),[[10]](#endnote-10) Quinn (1995); Davidson (2001), Raz (2010), Gregory (2013) and Campbell (2018).[[11]](#endnote-11)

If someone is a judgmentalist in this sense, what does she have to say about the evaluative outlook? Well, she should say that, given that the evaluation is a judgment or belief, it commits one to the claim that the state of affairs that satisfies the desire has the property of goodness. If a judgmentalist denied that the evaluations carry with them such a commitment, it would be difficult to understand in what sense they are constituted by judgments. In addition, if judgmentalism is true, then depending upon your views about the norms of judgment and belief, the evaluations involved in desire should also be governed by these norms.

Perceptualists, on the other hand, take the representation of goodness to be perception-like. Among them we have authors like Stampe (1987), Saemi (2015), Wallace (1999), Oddie (2005), Hawkins (2008). The overall idea is that just as things in the world appear to us in a certain way when we perceive them, so too things in the world appear to us as having positive evaluative properties.[[12]](#endnote-12) Unlike judgmentalism, perceptualism does not have to assume that to have an evaluative outlook is to be commited to the goodness of that state of affairs because experiencing the appearance as of something being good does not entail that the agent judges or believes that the thing in question is good. Perceptualism thus easily accounts for cases in which the outlook that belongs to desire represents something as good against one’s better judgment: it only appears to one that the content of desire would be good (Stampe 1987, p. 357). In addition, perceptualism can take an evaluative outlook towards a state of affairs, which is the content of desire, to be something that *grounds* or *justifies* a judgment that this state of affairs is good or worth pursuing, while judgmentalism arguably cannot allow this because it identifies evaluative outlooks with judgments.

Because of these features, I take perceptualism to be a more promising approach to evaluative outlooks than judgmentalism.[[13]](#endnote-13) I take it that perceptualism is also more plausible from the first-person perspective: considering my experience of wanting something, there is something in the content of desire that appears attractive to me, but I do not yet commit myself to the claim that the desired state of affairs would be good. Whether it would be good or not is still an open question for me. The divergence between evaluative outlook and judgment is thus more easily explicable when one adopts perceptualism. Given the phenomenological motivation behind the evaluative outlook conception, this is a clear advantage.

Unfortunately, perceptualism has its own problems. In particular, there is a crucial representational difference between desires and perceptual states. Desires are typically for states of affairs which one takes not to obtain yet and therefore also the relevant evaluations are of such states of affairs. This is not to say that desires can’t be for already obtaining states of affairs, but only that they are not limited to them. Because of this, also the evaluative outlooks that they involve are not limited in that way. Perception, on the other hand, functions to represent what is actually there in the relevant organism’s environment. When I want to eat ice cream, for instance, my desire does not represent me as eating ice cream, but when I perceive that I am eating ice cream, I represent myself as actually eating ice cream.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Although this seems like a trivial point, it underscores a clear difference between how the evaluative outlook and perception represent. Even under the most accommodating conceptions, there are representational limits to perceptual states, limits which derive from the stimulus-dependence of perception: genuinely perceptual states are under a robust control of incoming sensory information (Phillips 2017; Beck 2018).[[15]](#endnote-15) Evaluative outlooks are doubly stimulus-*independent*: first, they can represent non-obtaining states of affairs—there need not be any distal stimulus[[16]](#endnote-16)—and second, the representation of the desired state of affairs is not causally sustained by proximal sensory stimuli.

Among perceptualists, Stampe does acknowledge that desires are usually for non-actual states of affairs (Stampe 1987, p. 359). On the other hand, he also acknowledges the actuality requirement for perception (Ibid. 371). In order to reconcile these two ideas, he distinguishes between non-epistemic perception and epistemic perception where the former is a relation to an object while the latter is a relation to a proposition. To use Stampe’s example, to non-epistemically see a piece of cheese does not entail epistemically seeing *that* it is cheese or *that* the cheese is moldy. Stampe proposes that what underlies the epistemic appearance that p would be good is a non-epistemically perceived actual mental or bodily state of the subject, Σ (Ibid., 373). Since the latter is actual, desire can still be treated as a form of perception.

The problem with this suggestion is that there should be an intelligible connection between the perceived (existing) object and the epistemically perceived content that is grounded in it. For instance, if it seems to me that cheese is moldy, this seeming is grounded in my non-epistemic perception of that piece of cheese. That piece is the common focus of both states. In the case of evaluative outlooks, however, Σ which is supposed to be the object of non-epistemic perception need not be a component in the content of the putative evaluative epistemic appearance at all. If I want to become the president of the United States, for instance, and it appears to me that it would be good to become one, then Σ need not enter into the content of that evaluative appearance.

Someone could argue in response that the non-actuality of the content of desire is just irrelevant for perceptualism. In cases where the desired state of affairs does not obtain, what the subject does take to obtain is that the satisfaction of desire is good and that is enough to maintain the analogy between the evaluative outlook and perception. I grant that this probably conveys a more accurate understanding of perceptualism. That being said, it does not seem to save the analogy. Although the goodness of the possible state of affairs is taken by the agent to actually apply to it, the evaluation still requires representing that possibility. There is thus an inescapable modal aspect to the evaluative outlook that is involved in desires for non-obtaining states of affairs. This does not seem to characterize perception in case of which perceptual property is attributed to actual things and situations in the environment (or more accurately, things and situations that are taken to be actual). Notice, also, that the evaluative appearance still remains stimulus-independent: there is no robust way in which that appearance is causally sustained by incoming environmental information about the desired state of affairs. After all, often that state of affairs does not obtain yet.

One reaction to this difference between perception and desire is to just admit it but insist that the analogy between the two lies elsewhere. After all, probably all perceptualists would acknowledge the stimulus-independence of evaluative outlooks but they would still insist that some other similarities can ground the analogy. However, stimulus-dependence is not a mere contingent property of perception. It is arguably what distinguishes perception from cognition in the first place (Beck 2018). Alternative criteria have not been up to the task. For instance, an appeal to a distinctive analogue or imagistic representational format does not distinguish genuine perceptual states from sensory imaginings and sensory memories (Langland-Hassan 2015). Also, the idea that perception, unlike cognition, is a matter of bottom-up processing has lost plausibility in light of psychological data which suggests that perception involves pervasive top-down processing (Lupyan 2015).[[17]](#endnote-17) If we want to maintain the perception-cognition boundary—and a perceptualist needs it to do that in order to retain the distinction between perceptualism and judgmentalism—stimulus-dependence is the most promising criterion. But if evaluative outlooks lack the distinguishing feature of perception, it makes the analogy highly tenuous.

One resort is to to stress the similarities in phenomenology and argue that these are sufficient to ground perceptualism. As noted above, phenomenological considerations have played their part in motivating the evaluative outlook conception. A proponent of perceptualism could insist that there is a sense in which the content of the evaluative outlook is phenomenally present to us, even when it does not actually obtain. This would mean that what is common to the evaluative outlook and perception is their presentational phenomenology.

In the case of perception, what is presumably phenomenally present to us is the state of affairs that our perceptual state represents as obtaining, and this state of affairs is the truth-maker for the content of our perceptual state (Chudnoff 2012, p. 55). Presumably, what makes perceptual phenomenology presentational is that in cases of perception it seems to us that we are in contact with the actual world. However, is it not more plausible to think that the experience of having a desire and thereby possessing the relevant outlook involves the sense of phenomenal *absence* instead? Experience of wanting is usually an experience of a lack, of missing and not possessing what one wants. One could argue that what is phenomenally present is the goodness of the desired state of affairs. This would not be a garden-variety of presentational phenomenology, however, because the evaluative property is still attributed to something that does not appear to obtain, while in the case of ordinary presentational phenomenology, both the properties and the possessors of those properties appear as present to the subject. The phenomenology is, if not of full absence, then at least of partial absence.

There is room for a view, however, according to which desires are appearances of the good, where the appearance in question is not understood as a perceptual appearance, strictly speaking, with its limited content, but as a *seeming*, distinguishable both from perceptual appearances and judgments.[[18]](#endnote-18) If seemings are distinct from perceptual appearances in being in a position to represent what is not actual, and desires involve evaluative seemings regarding the content of desire, then the non-actuality argument might not get off the ground. Given that seeming, like perception, is supposed to be judgment-independent and epistemically grounds judgment, let’s call this position *quasi-perceptualism*. Authors like Sergio Tenenbaum, who do not embrace the full analogy between the appearance of the good and perception, seem to fall in this camp (Tenenbaum 2007, p. 39).

However, by retreating to the claim that evaluative outlooks are seemings, the ground is no clear to doubt if perception is the most fitting candidate on which to model those seemings, given the disanalogies brought out above. What other possibilities are there?[[19]](#endnote-19) In the next section, I will propose an alternative idea of what the evaluative seeming consists in.

4. Imaginative evaluative outlook

In the previous section, we saw how modeling evaluative outlooks too closely on perception faced the non-actuality problem. There is a type of mental state, however, which is exactly in the business of representing non-actual states of affairs and is stimulus-independent – imagination. Admittedly, *imagination* is a contested concept but most people would agree, minimally, that when one imagines some situation or object, one need not take that situation to be actual or that object to be real. Minimally, to imagine something is ‘to think of it as possibly being so’ (White 1990, p. 184). For instance, when I try to imagine an eagle flying above me, my attempt can be successful independently of whether there is actually an eagle in my surrounding environment. And, of course, I can also imagine things that are far from actual: like dragons, gods and pixies. Admittedly, imagination can also take an actual state of affairs as its content. For instance, in the context of trying to figure out what is going to happen, we can represent the actual state of the world and then imagine different ways it could turn out to be. But what is important for present purposes is that imagination lacks those representational constraints that perception has: whether the imagined state of affairs obtains or not is usually irrelevant for the success of an imagining.

Returning now to desires, my proposal is that the relevant evaluative seeming that constitutes the evaluative outlook can be made sense of by explaining it in terms of our imaginative capacities. Since imagination represents non-actual states of affairs, it makes more sense to say that the evaluative seeming is imaginative, as opposed to perceptual. It is constituted by an imagining of the content of desire as good.[[20]](#endnote-20) Let’s call it the **Imaginative Evaluative Outlook thesis** (IEO henceforth). By appealing to imagination, we can arrive at a more extensionally adequate conception of the evaluative outlook than by appealing to perception because although we often cannot perceive what we desire, we can imagine it.[[21]](#endnote-21) In other words, and to put it slightly metaphorically, the limits of what can be desired are closer to the limits of the content of imagination than they are to the limits of the content of perception.[[22]](#endnote-22)

What does it take to imagine the content of desire? Is it to imagine a proposition? I do not think so. A relevant distinction in the present context is that of between objectual and propositional imagination. While the latter relates the imaginer to a proposition, the first is directed at an object or a situation (Yablo 1993, p. 27). In the case of desire, the imagining is of a possible state of affairs that would satisfy the desire. We can then say that by objectually imagining the content of desire, we imagine a way in which desire could be satisfied. Such an imagining may be rich in content because the imagined state of affairs appears to the subject in a particular way (Weatherson 2004, p. 90). For instance, if I want to eat ice cream, then the relevant imagining can be of me eating strawberry or chocolate ice cream, me eating standing or sitting, me either licking or biting, etc. All these different ways of imagining can count as imagining the content of my desire. In the ice cream example, the relevant imaginings are usually perception-like in that the imagining simulates perceptual experience of eating ice cream in terms of its content (Noordhof 2002). However, there are also more abstract ways for a desired state of affairs to appear in imagination in which case the subject only imagines its highly determinable features. In such cases, the content of the relevant imagining is more akin to the content of thought than to that of perception. Even in the case of wanting to eat ice cream, the relevant imagining might simply be of the activity of eating ice cream, without any specification of its perceptual appearance.

If both perceptual and cognitive imaginings can constitute evaluative outlooks, we can avoid a possible concern that the cases of aphantasia disprove IEO. Aphasia is a condition in which a person is reportedly not able to produce visual imagery (Zeman, Dewar & Della Sala 2016). Since aphantasiacs clearly have desires, it renders IEO suspicious if the latter is understood as a thesis that the evaluative outlook boils down to perceptual imaginings. Although, as far as I am aware, the evidence does not exclude the possibility that aphantasiacs still have *unconscious* perceptual imaginings[[23]](#endnote-23) or that they still have perceptual imaginings of other modalities, the present view is in a safer position. There is no reason to think that aphantasiacs cannot employ cognitive imagination and thereby still possess imaginative evaluative outlooks.

IEO is also in a good company with empirical research on desire and motivation, in particular with the Elaborated Intrusion model of desire. According to that model, desires in the occurrent sense[[24]](#endnote-24) are complex mental episodes that are initiated by intrusive thoughts, usually triggered by some cues associated with the content of those thoughts, followed by affect-laden imaginative elaboration of that content (Kavanagh, Andrade & May 2005; May, Kavanagh, and Andrade 2015). This elaboration can take various forms, from specification to expansion of the content, and has various effects which can either weaken or strengthen the movitational force of the desire. The support for the Elaborated Intrusion model has mostly been based on self-report data but the model has also found practical application in the form of functional imagery training (Andrade et al. 2016). Since, according to the model, imaginings form a proper part of the desire episode, it suggests that there is a constitutive connection between desire and imagination.

But shouldn’t the intrusive thought in the beginning of the episode be seen as a kind of perception, given that it seems to be triggered by an external stimulus? If that were the case, the Elaborated Intrusion model would not really favor IEO over its perceptualist rival. It is not the case, however, because nothing in the model implies that the cue has to be in the environment, it may as well be internally generated. In addition, the cue itself is not generally a part of the content of desire that is generated.[[25]](#endnote-25)

But in what sense does the content of desire *seem good* to us in imagination? In the case of wanting to eat ice cream, eating ice cream seems good insofar as it seems pleasant. Imagining the content of desire usually presents one with what it would be like to experience the satisfaction of the relevant desire and if this seems pleasant, we can say that one imagines the content of desire as good. I take it to be the most basic way in which one’s imagining can constitute one’s evaluative outlook.

This need not be the only way in which a content of desire can be imagined as good, however. One may also imagine the satisfaction of desire as realizing some moral or prudential value, or as contributing to a good life overall (Vogt 2017).[[26]](#endnote-26) Also in these cases we can say that the content of desire is imagined as good. For instance, if someone wants to help another person overcome some difficulty, then the fulfilment of such a desire need not seem pleasurable in imagination (although it might and probably does seem as such). Instead, their evaluative outlook might be constituted by the appearance of the act as morally appropriate.

The imagining that constitutes the evaluative outlook can thus accommodate different ways in which the content of desire seems good to us. This derives from the multifarious nature of imagination. On the one hand, imagination can take a sensory form which is akin to perception, rich in detail and affectively engaging, and in which case the evaluation presumably consists in an imagined pleasantness of the content of desire. On the other hand, the desired state of affairs can seem valuable in a more abstract and non-perceptual manner. The relevant evaluative imagining may also combine both perception- and thought-like elements. For instance, if an agent wants to get a promotion, she may consider the prospect of getting it to be good both in virtue of imagining the satisfaction of this desire causing in her fuzzy feelings *and* in virtue of enhancing her professional reputation.[[27]](#endnote-27)

According to IEO, then, an agent takes the content of desire to be good when the state of affairs which is the content of her desire seems good to her in imagination.[[28]](#endnote-28) The relevant imagining can be either sensory or cognitive or both.

But couldn’t one argue that IEO boils down to judgmentalism? No. IEO understands evaluative outlooks in terms of imaginative seemings and seemings are distinct from judgment or beliefs. Instead, they ground evaluative judgments. By drawing a distinction between judgments and imaginative seemings, IEO also naturally allows for cases in which one possesses a positive evaluative outlook on the content of desire but judges that content to be bad. The cases in which an agent imagines the content of her desire as good, but imagines this against her better judgment, are quite common.

Let me illustrate this with an example. I used to imagine that eating a hamburger in a neighborhood pub would be pleasurable, and thus represented it as good for me in that sense. However, given what I knew about my negative responses to greasy and bland foods, I had good evidence to think that eating it would not be pleasurable. Despite granting that this counted against the value of eating burgers, I still continued to imagine eating a burger in that pub as good. Now I do not imagine this prospect as good anymore, but this change did not happen on account of me becoming convinced (by reasoned reflection) that eating a burger would not be good—I was convinced about that already—but rather on account of the changes in my affective and hedonic dispositions after having tried out different foods in my neighborhood. The imaginative seemings that constitute the evaluative outlook often do not fall in line with the respective evaluative judgments.

5. A worry

There is an objection to IEO that needs to be addressed. It seems that what we imagine seems to be (in a strong sense) up to us. We exercise agential control over our imaginings. For instance, if I want to imagine a pink elephant, I can simply form an intention to imagine it and act on that intention. Imaginative success ‘comes cheap’ in that sense. Unlike perception or belief, imagination does not seem to reliably depend on the external world but originates in us; *a fortiori* what we imagine to be good seems to be up to us. If that is the case, it is difficult to see how an imagining could constitute an evaluative outlook. After all, the outlook is supposed to be an essential feature of desires and the latter cannot simply be formed by deciding to have them. Our desires, and therefore the evaluations that they involve, are not up to us in that way. There seems to be a level of arbitrariness which characterizes imaginings, but not desires.

My response to the worry is simply to deny that the imaginings that constitute the relevant outlook are up to us in any problematic way. This was reflected in my previous example of my imagining eating a burger as good. In that example, I could not just give up the imagining, but only managed to do it after a process of dishabituation. There are substantial constraints on the imaginings in question. First, the etiology of the relevant imagining does not originate in the agent’s decision. The imaginative evaluation that is generated by having a desire is not something that the agent intentionally forms. It is rather something that she just tends to have, given her desire and affective dispositions more generally.[[29]](#endnote-29) An imagining which the agent simply decides to form, on the other hand, arguably does not amount to an evaluative outlook.

Second, there are elements of imaginative content which the agent does not control and arguably what seems good to the agent is such an element. That we do not fully control the way in which the content of our imaginings seems to us is most saliently indicated by the phenomenon of imaginative resistance: when we are invited to imagine the truth of a claim which we find unacceptable, we are not inclined to do it. One’s imaginative exercise just does not allow for this kind of development. For instance, when one is invited to imagine that killing babies is morally right, then one resists following through with such an imagining (Gendler 2000). Imaginative resistance is not limited to imagining moral cases. It arguably extends to normative evaluations more generally, aesthetic judgments, attributions of mental states and attributions of content, etc. (Weatherson 2004) The fact that there are such constraints on the content of imagination is also what arguably makes imagination different from mere supposition (Arcangeli 2014, p. 615).

How exactly to explain imaginative resistance is a controversial issue but here it was simply meant to point towards the constraints one’s imagination may have. The constraints on imagination also depend on the context in which imagination is used. The set of possibilities that an imagining represents is probably always relativized to its context of employment. For instance, in the case of metaphysical argument, the relevant set is much larger than in the case of practical deliberation: in the first case, it is constrained by what is metaphysical possible, in the second, by practically relevant possibilities. We can treat desiring as a distinct context of employment where imaginings that constitute the evaluative outlook are limited to the possibilities that are consistent with what one desires. A person cannot just decide to include some conatively irrelevant possibility in the content of that outlook.

To elaborate on this idea, it is useful to consider Timothy Williamson’s distinction between imagination’s voluntary and involuntary modes of operation (Williamson 2016, p. 115). In the case of the first, we actively intend a particular content while in the case of the second, we just attend to what our imagination presents us with. Williamson provides an example of a hunter who is facing a stream and imagines whether jumping over it would be feasible. In that particular case, the imagining is only successful when it is accurate and corresponds to the hunter’s ability to jump. In order to be successful, it also has to be involuntary because otherwise the hunter could have simply decided what to imagine.

I suggest that in imagining what the satisfaction of desire would be like, we are also relying on the involuntary mode, insofar as the imagining constitutes an evaluative outlook. In other words, we employ imagination in the involuntary mode also in the context of desiring. Just as in the particular context of decision-making it is not up to the agent to decide whether she can jump over the stream in her imagination, at least when the imagining is employed in its involuntary mode, so it is not up to the agent whether the content of her desire seems good to her in her imagination. We imagine what it would be like to satisfy the desire and attend to whether it appears good; we do not decide whether it appears so. Take again the example of wanting to eat ice cream. If I imagine the satisfaction of my desire, then – given IEO – I also imagine the pleasantness, i.e. goodness, of the experience of eating ice cream *by* imagining that experience, without having to form an intention to imagine that it would be pleasant. Whether an imagined experience seems good is not what we need to decide in addition to imagining the experience.[[30]](#endnote-30) I could of course also imagine this in a voluntary mode which requires effort on my part, but this is not what happens when the imagining is controlled by my desire. The imaginings that are relevant for IEO are thus not up to us in any problematic sense.

There is an important difference between the constraints on IEO and Williamson’s example of the hunter, however. In the latter, the imagining was oriented towards actual objects in the external world. One might argue that only by being anchored in the actual environment can the content of imaginings unfold in non-arbitrary ways. The success and accuracy of the hunter’s imaginings is determined by the actual dimensions of the stream. On the other hand, given that imagining, the satisfaction condition of desire is usually not controlled by the external environment in such a way, how can IEO claim that what appears good in imagination is not arbitrary? A reasonable response to this concern is that although things in the external environment of the agent do not settle whether the satisfaction of a given desire (the obtaining of a given state of affairs) will seem good to the agent, the imaginative evaluative outlook is still non-arbitrary because it is constrained by the agent’s affective dispositions, i.e., what the agent is inclined to like and dislike, and these dispositions are not under agent’s direct control. One could say that the imaginative capacity that is involved in desire is controlled by the agent’s internal environment.[[31]](#endnote-31),[[32]](#endnote-32)

6. Delivering the goods

Having explicated the evaluative outlook in terms of IEO, we can now check whether it can explain those features of desire that the evaluative outlook thesis was intended to explain. Remember that there were (at least) three motivations for the thesis. The first was that it made intentional actions that were motivated by desire intelligible. The second was that it enabled us to explain the phenomenology of desire. And third, it made sense of why there was something wrong about desires the satisfaction of which did not bring about agent satisfaction. Can the evaluative outlook thesis, understood in terms of IEO, still satisfy those motivations? Let’s go through each of them individually.

The first motivation was that it made intentional actions intelligible. Let us again consider Quinn’s example of a person who is disposed to turn on radios whenever he sees one (Quinn 1995, p. 189f). The idea was that if desires were states that merely ground or are identical with dispositions to act, perhaps together with relevant beliefs, then the actions that were motivated by such states would seem unintelligible and irrational to the agent. The present proposal which does not take desires only to involve behavioral dispositions can give a story of what is missing from Radio Man’s behavior that would make his behavior intelligible: if he imagined that turning on radios would be good, his behavior would not seem so strange anymore.

The second motivation for the evaluative outlook conception came from an appeal to phenomenology. As I drew attention to above, in section 3.1, there is a widely shared, albeit vague, sense that when we want something, the object of desire appears to us as appealing and in a positive light. Can the present account do justice to the phenomenology of desire?

It can. The presentation of the satisfaction condition of desire in imagination as good constitutes the appealing appearance of the object of desire. If I want to eat chocolate ice cream, for instance, an imagining of eating it makes it appear appealing. Take again Oddie’s description:

When I desire that P, P has a certain magnetic appeal for me. It presents itself to me as something needing to be pursued, or promoted, or preserved, or embraced. (Oddie 2005, p. 55).

The present proposal makes sense of this ‘magnetic appeal’ in terms of imagination. It also has a phenomenological advantage over perceptualism because it does not take the experience of the evaluative outlook to involve full perceptual presence. At least when I consider my own experience of wanting, what I find appealing is experienced by me as non-actual. IEO can account for the sense of phenomenological absence or distance between myself and the content in terms of imagination.

The third motivation for the evaluative outlook thesis was that it was supposed to explain why there is a failure, internal to desire, when the desire satisfaction and agent satisfaction do not match. If one’s desire is satisfied but one does not get any agent satisfaction from it, then the feelings of regret indicate that there was something wrong with the desire. IEO explains this intuition of failure by appealing to the imagined good not corresponding to the actual good. The failure is a representational failure, because in the case of mismatch between desire satisfaction and agent satisfaction, the agent has, in her imagination, inaccurately represented what desire satisfaction would be like for her.

IEO thus respects the motivations for the evaluative outlook thesis pretty well. Even if one might have concerns about its capability of respecting all of them, it is still recognizable as an account of what an appearance of goodness could be.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that a viable way to make sense of the evaluative outlook thesis is to understand it in terms of our imaginative capacities. Our imaginings have the representational profile needed to plausibly constitute the evaluative outlook. There is a lot of work that still needs to be done in order to establish that the evaluative outlook thesis is true, however. I have not proven that desires have the relevant imaginings as their essential feature and I have not fully specified what the good in the representation of goodness exactly amounts to.[[33]](#endnote-33) For many, especially completing the first task may seem insurmountable. I am much more optimistic in that regard and base my hopes on the Elaborated Intrusion model. But the present paper had a more modest aim.[[34]](#endnote-34)

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1. Under the term ‘desire’, some philosophers have distinguished between desires in a substantial sense and as a placeholder for any attitude that explains one’s intentional actions. For instance, G. F. Schueler has drawn a distinction between desires proper and pro attitudes, respectively (Schueler 1995). In this paper I am interested in desires proper, not pro attitudes. Also, my focus is only on intrinsic, not instrumental, desires. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Some authors think that instead of the good we should take desire to involve representing *pro tanto* reasons (Gregory 2013; Scanlon 1998). In this paper, I am agnostic as to whether such a position presents an alternative to the evaluative outlook conception or whether it constitutes a particular version of that conception. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I take ‘content’ of desire to be a state of affairs which is the satisfaction condition of desire. It is that state of affairs which the evaluative outlook is supposed to represent as good. Although it often sounds more natural to talk about ‘objects’ of desire, this way of speaking hides the fact that we can’t really make sense of a desire for an object without specifying the way in which that object is desired, i.e., without specifying the content of desire. For instance, it is not enough to say what a person wants if one says that she wants ice cream. To fully grasp what she desires, one has to specify in what sense she wants it. Does she want to eat it? Rub it on the table? Desire, then, seems to be directed at a way for an object to be and not merely at the object as such (Sinhababu 2015, p. 169). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also the generic formulation by Milona & Schroeder:

   GENERIC GUISE: There is some particular normative property or relation N and some other relation R, such that every time an agent has a desire with object o, she perceives things that are R-related to o as being N. (Milona & Schroeder 2019, p. 122)

   Note that their formulation also dispenses both with the identity and the sufficiency condition. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Some authors seem to have limited the term ‘Guise’ to the judgmentalist option (Velleman 1992), but here I am using it to cover both judgmentalism and perceptualism. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Moss (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brewer seems to assume that desires are *identical* with evaluative representiations but, as I pointed out above, I take this to be an assumption that the evaluative outlook conception need not be committed to. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For the distinction between desire satisfaction and agent satisfaction, see Braun (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A full defense of the conception certainly requires more work, given that there has been some powerful criticism of it, e.g. Baker (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Protagoras* 358b–358c; *Meno* 77d–77e. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I say ‘arguably’ because some of these authors seem to attribute the relevant judgment primarily to intentions or intentional actions instead. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Importantly, when distinguishing between the perceptualist and judgmentalist options, one should keep in mind the difference between desires in the occurrent and desires in the dispositional or standing sense. I here take them to be primarily about the evaluative outlook that characterizes desire in the occurrent sense. But that does not mean that perceptualists or judgmentalists cannot account for the dispositional meaning: an evaluative outlook that characterizes desire as a standing state can be understood in terms of a disposition to have an occurrent desire. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Of course, I do not pretend to have disproven judgmentalism. But this is not the purpose of this paper, anyway. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Obviously, I could be under an illusion that I am eating ice cream. But it still *appears* to me as if I am actually eating it. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Farennikova (2013) argues that we can also perceive absences. However, since her view is that absence perception consists in a mismatch between a perceptual template and sensory input, she is still committed to the stimulus-control condition: without (mismatching) sensory input, there would be no perception of absence. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. One could try to argue that although desires are often for what does not obtain, the evaluative outlooks that they involve represent those non-obtaining states of affairs as actual. This would imply that such evaluative outlooks would amount to something like hallucinations. I suppose that a perceptualist would find this option rather unpalatable. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Green (2020) has recently proposed that perceptual, as opposed to cognitive, processes are dimensionally restricted: they compute over a limited set of perceptual dimensions. Could a perceptualist apply to this idea in motivating an analogy between the evaluative outlook and perception? Perhaps, but I am not sure what this would exactly look like, given that it is difficult to see how one can attribute evaluative properties independently of the non-evaluative properties that they supervene on. Evaluation thus doesn’t seem to be restricted in the same way as perception is. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Whether there even are such states as seemings is a contested issue in philosophy of mind and epistemology (Byerly 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. I leave aside the option that seemings are distinct, sui generis mental states (see Cullison 2010). But even if this were the case, one would still need to ask what distinguishes seemings that are constitutive of desire from other seemings. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In the context of explaining pretense and engagement with fiction, some have posited desire-like imaginings, which are supposed to be imaginings which are distinct from genuine desires but simulate them in important respects (Currie 2002; Doggett and Egan 2007). It is important *not* to confuse such imaginings with the kind that IEO takes to constitute the evaluative outlook. The present proposal is neutral on the question as to whether desire-like imaginings even exist. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. It is not uncommon in philosophy to think that the difference between perception and imagination is only a matter of degree. Take Hume, for instance, for whom the difference was only a matter of the level of force and vivacity. Would the adoption of this view undermine the distinction between perceptualism and IEO? I am not sure because also a difference in degree can be significant enough to distinguish between two mental kinds. That being said, I also disagree with the view that the difference between perception and imagination is a difference in degree. I have already brought out stimulus-dependence as another crucial distinguishing factor, which presumably makes perception categorically different from imagination. Furthermore, there are good conceptual and empirical reasons for thinking that the Humean view is false (see Tooming & Miyazono, Forthcoming). I thank the anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This is not to say that anything that can be imagined can be desired. I will outline the constraints on the imaginative evaluative outlook in the next section. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. I do not dismiss the possibility of unconscious perceptual imaginings. In fact, their existence would be a boon for IEO. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The proponents of the EI only consider desire in the occurrent sense. However, I think that we can also define the standing desire by using the recipe that was suggested above (footnote 11): as a disposition to token the occurrent desire in certain conditions. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The cue can be seen as a prop that enables the generation of imagings that partially constitute the episode of desiring. This would enable us to connect IEO with Kendall Walton’s theory of make-belief in the context of engaging with fiction (Walton 1990). However, IEOs rarely represent merely fictional possibilities, unless the respective desire is for something fictional. Instead, they represent possible situations wherein the respective desire is satisfied. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It is important to keep in mind that imagining the satisfaction condition of desire as good does not imply that the desire itself is for the good. Desires are for whatever their satisfaction conditions are and most desires do not include the realization of the good in those conditions. If I want to eat ice cream and imagine eating ice cream as good, then my desire is still for the ice cream, not for the good. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. For the way in which sensory and cognitive components can combine in a single act of imagining, see Kung (2010) and Langland-Hassan (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. One might raise a concern that imaginings themselves are not evaluative and evaluation is accomplished by some further mental act or attitude like judgment. Imagination’s role in that case is just to supply a target for that act or attitude. However, since I take the imagining of the content of desire to be a kind of evaluative seeming, I see no reason why imaginings should not have the capacity to represent evaluative features of possible situations. If I imagine the pleasure of eating ice cream, for instance, I thereby represent the value of eating ice cream. There is no need for a further evaluative mental act or attitude. Assuming otherwise implies embracing some form of judgmentalism or rejecting the evaluative outlook altogether. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Compare this to Walton’s notion of spontaneous imagining (Walton 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Compare this with Robinson’s (2006, p. 746) account of how we imagine liking an experience. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. I have been stressing here the constraints that the imaginative evaluations have in order to fend off the objection from arbitrariness. That being said, IEO also provides an opportunity for thinking how the relevant imaginings and therefore desires can be *to some extent* under an agent’s control (see Tooming 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. This is similar to Stampe’s idea that what can seem good to the person is constrained by their mental and/or physical condition. But the present proposal need not make the problematic assumption that desire itself is a form of non-epistemically perceiving that condition. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. For an interesting suggestion regarding the second task, see Orsi (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Early versions of this paper were presented on three continents: at A Highly Desirable Symposium in Durban, European Society for Philosophy and Psychology 2016 Conference in St. Andrews, and Department of Philosophy Talk-Shop at Harvard University. Special thanks to Richard Moran, Jessica Moss, and two anonymous reviewers.

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