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## On The Guise of the Good

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### On the Guise of the Good

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# On The Guise of the Good

Joseph Raz<sup>1</sup>

'Every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good'

Aristotle

In an article which established this phrase<sup>2</sup> as the standard name by which this ancient thesis is referred to these days Velleman rhetorically challenges its adherents:

The agent portrayed in much philosophy of action is, let us face it, a square. He does nothing intentionally unless he regards it or its consequences as desirable.. .. Surely, so general a capacity as agency cannot entail so narrow a cast of mind. Our moral psychology has characterised, not the generic agent, but a particular species of agent, and a particularly bland species at that'.<sup>3</sup>

To launch us on our way I will provisionally take **the Guise of the Good thesis** to consist of three propositions:

- (1) Intentional actions are actions performed for reasons, as those are seen by the agents.
- (2) Specifying the intention which makes an action intentional identifies central features of the reason(s) for which the action is performed
- (3) Reasons for action are such reasons by being facts which establish that the action has some value.<sup>4</sup>

From these it is said to follow that

- (4) Intentional actions are actions taken in, and because of, a belief that there is some good in them.

For most purposes we can ignore the second proposition, which is often assumed but rarely considered when discussing the Thesis. There are other ways in which the Thesis was understood and formulated. Velleman, for example, assumes a relation between intentions and desires. Explaining the rationale for the Thesis he writes:

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<sup>1</sup> The paper benefited from discussions with Kieran Setiya, Nico Kolodny, Geoff Sayre-McCord, and from helpful comments on an earlier draft by Nicholas Joshua The and David Enoch.

<sup>2</sup> Which is borrowed from Aquinas ST 1a2ae, 8, 1: what is willed is always willed '*sub ratione boni*'.

<sup>3</sup> D. Velleman, 'The Guise of the Good', (1992) reprinted in THE POSSIBILITY OF PRACTICAL REASON (OUP 2002) 99.

<sup>4</sup> Meaning: that there is some good in the action is the reason for it.

The reason is that he acts intentionally only when he acts out of a desire for some anticipated outcome, and in desiring that outcome he must regard it as having some value.<sup>5</sup>

I will remain non-committal about the relations of intentions and desires, and will therefore not discuss desires in this paper.<sup>6</sup> The above statement of the Thesis presupposes cognitivism about discourse about reasons and values. Trying to state and discuss the Thesis in a way which is neutral between cognitivism and non-cognitivism would unreasonably complicate matters. There should be little difficulty in applying the considerations below to non-cognitivist or other versions of the Thesis.

On the face of it Velleman is blaming supporters of the Thesis for a factual mistake, a mistake about human psychology. Perhaps because they are bland and square they think that all people are. But it is more likely that he is merely teasing his fellow philosophers. After all, the Thesis fits Hitler and religious fanatics more straightforwardly than it does your neighbourhood grocer (as the examples below will illustrate), and they are hardly your common or garden square and bland types. Besides if it is wrong the Guise of the Good is more likely to be wrong about all people some of the time than about only some people all of the time. Commonly alleged counter-examples to the Guise of the Good (for example touching a dark spot on the wall or passing one's fingers through one's hair 'for no reason at all') are hardly actions unknown to the square or bland among us.

The Guise of the Good is best understood as a conceptual thesis; the three propositions constituting the Thesis are taken to be conceptual truths. Section 2 considers the case for the first leg of the Thesis. It will lead to the formulation and defence of a revised version of the first part of the Thesis in section 3. Sections 4 and 5 will then tackle objections to the third part of the Thesis. But first, in section I, some different ways of understanding the Thesis are considered, and a *prima facie* argument for it is offered. In the final section I will raise the issue of the significance

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5 Ibid.

6 In *ENGAGING REASONS* (Oxford: OUP 2000) I argued against the view of desires which is required for the correlation between them and intentions assumed by Velleman.

of the Thesis as it emerges from these discussions. Does it still fulfil the aspirations of its traditional supporters?

### 1. Initial objections, clarifications & a *prima facie* case

What could support the Guise of the Good, given the many apparent counter-examples? Here are two such counter-examples:

**A: *The miner*:** The management proposes to close the colliery. The miners vote on whether to accept the proposal and the redundancy pay which goes with it or to oppose it. You talk to one of the miners: 'You are voting to stay put'. – 'Sure', he says. 'So you must have some hope [of keeping the mine open]'. – 'No hope. Just principles'.

**B: *The fish*:** sitting in the bath Johnny, and it does not matter whether he is a child or an adult acting like a child, says: 'I am a fish' and beats the water with his open palm (presumably pretending to flap it with his tail). 'Why did you do that, Johnny?' – 'That's what fish do'.

We can readily imagine how in cases like these it may be difficult to get the miner or Johnny to acknowledge that there was value in the action. The miner may insist that his vote does no good. He just had to vote that way. Perhaps, we may say, it is a matter of integrity for him. Johnny may be altogether puzzled by the thought that there was some value in the action. He was just playing at being a fish.

We know how the argument develops, or one way in which it may develop. When thinking about their intentional actions agents do not necessarily think of them under the Guise of the Good, and they may not even be disposed to think of them in that way. That is, there may be no ready way, no readily available evidence or argument which would lead them to acknowledge that their intentions express, imply or presuppose belief in the value of the intended actions. So the Thesis assumes that when such acknowledgement is not forthcoming people nevertheless believe that there is something good about their intentions, or intentional actions (which therefore conform to the Guise of the Good), and are somehow mistaken if they deny that.

But perhaps, contrary to (4) above, the Guise of the Good does not presuppose that

agents believe that there is value in their actions. Let us allow, for the sake of argument, that reasons are facts which endow the action with some value. Is action for a reason action taken in the belief that there is value in the action? There may be an alternative. It is difficult to deny that actions are intentional only if and because the agents are aware of some of their characteristics. But need they believe that the characteristics constitute reasons for actions? One alternative suggestion is that action for a reason is action performed in the belief that it has certain characteristics which the agent treats as reasons, that is as good-making. He need not believe that they are good-making, just as someone who believes a proposition treats it as true, though he need not believe that it is true. The analogy is Velleman's. He thinks that that is the most that can be claimed by supporters of the Guise of the Good. But, he contends, this claim is true only if 'take it as good-making' means that one treats the characteristic in the same way one would if one thought that it is good-making, which can be the case even though one may believe that it is not good-making. Velleman's point is that supporters of the Guise of the Good must resist this interpretation. They must understand 'take it as good-making' to mean take it to be good-making (though without believing that it is good-making), which – according to this suggestion – describes their attitude to the fact so taken.

A terminological convention may help. Let's say of people that they think that something is the case only when they believe so, and the belief is in their mind at the time. People have many beliefs which are not present to their mind. They believe much more than what they currently think about. Many such beliefs are remote from their thoughts, except on rare occasions. I believe that my mother was 30 when I was born. But it must have been some twenty years or more since I last had that thought. Applying this to the matter in hand I think that taking a feature of an action to make that action good in some respect is tantamount to believing that the feature is good-making. We say that the agents take the feature to be good-making rather than that they believe it to be good-making to intimate that they do not necessarily think of that at the time, but their conduct implies having that belief, it shows it to be one of their beliefs. It is not merely that they have the belief that the action has some value and that they take that action, but that the belief is part of what leads them to

take the action, and that it guides the action. It is not in their mind, but it is part of the explanation of what they do. There is of course the alternative understanding of what is meant by treating a feature as good-making, but as Velleman points out, that alternative does not support the Guise of the Good. So I conclude that to defend the Guise of the Good one has to accept proposition (4) above, that is that intentional action is action performed because of a belief that the action has some value.

Supporters of the Guise of the Good must, therefore, attribute to The Miner and to Johnny, in the examples above, mistakes about their own beliefs, at the very least they must be held mistaken in rejecting certain characterisations of their beliefs.

What could explain such a mistake? Two responses help to explain what is at issue. First, the notion of 'the good' or 'value' used in expressing the thesis is not to be confused with the concepts which are normally expressed by ordinary use of these terms. This is evident from the fact that in discussions of the Guise of the Good Thesis 'value' and 'good' are used interchangeably, even though they are neither synonymous nor does their normal use express the same concept. In arguing for and applying the Guise of the Good Thesis philosophers rely on a concept with broader applications than those associated with the normal use of those words. There is no point in trying to describe this concept here. It is familiar from the writings on the subject, and on value theory generally. And of course, one familiar aspect of it is the absence of agreement about its nature.

The second response, made necessary by the first, as well as by other considerations, is that the Thesis does not assume that agents capable of intentional action must have the concepts used in stating the Thesis (the concepts of the good, intention, reason for action), nor does it claim that they believe that these concepts apply to each of their intentional actions. It assumes that they have a belief about their action which can be truly characterised as a belief that the action has a good-making property, one which constitutes a reason for the action, and that reason or their belief in it, explains why they perform the action.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I discussed the explanatory role of normative reasons in 'Reasons: Normative and

In attributing to the Miner, in the example above, the belief that the action is good because, e.g., it is required by principles, we are not distorting his views. We neither attribute to him a concept of value according to which being required by sound principles endows an action with value, nor do we ignore or pervert his distinction between actions which are good because they promote good ends and actions which are required by principles. We are simply describing his views using a broader concept of value, one which allows that an action can have value either because it advances the realisation of good ends or because it is required by a valid principle, as well as in other ways.

More, however, is required to deal with Johnny. First, we need to distinguish Johnny the child from Johnny the adult playing at being a child playing at being a fish. We – their parents and others – attribute to children beliefs they do not altogether have, and concepts they do not altogether possess, and our doing so is a vital part of their learning process.<sup>8</sup> Others may also have a defective grasp of concepts, and therefore a defective grasp of the beliefs which they use those concepts to express. Such cases are not counter-examples to this, any more than they are to other conceptual theses.

How about Johnny the adult? Even when prompted he does not endorse the thought that there is something good in acting as a fish would. Possibly he would assent to it if subjected to a lengthy explanation and argument. But that is not the point. The Guise of the Good Thesis claims that he has the belief when he acts like a fish, not that he can be brought to adopt that belief. To maintain the Thesis, to show that it applies to people like Johnny, one has to establish that his pretending to be a fish discloses a belief that there is some good in acting like a fish, perhaps because he believes that imaginative play-acting is good, or for some other reason.

There may be other positive indicators that Johnny does indeed have such a belief.

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Explanatory', and will not return to these matters here.

<sup>8</sup> I will not consider the conditions under which animals which do not possess concepts act intentionally, or have intentions, as I believe that those differ radically from the conditions under which animals possessing concepts act intentionally and have intentions.



But perhaps there are none. In that case defenders of the Guise of the Good will say that the fact that Johnny's play-acting is intentional shows that he believes that there is some good in his action. They will, in other words, take the Thesis to be at least to some extent self-verifying. This may look like a refutation of the Thesis, but it is not. For example, we would not hesitate to attribute to Johnny belief that his brother is unmarried, on the sole ground that he believes that his brother is a bachelor, given that it is a conceptual truth that bachelors are unmarried (and that Johnny is a competent user of the language, or of some relevant segment of it).<sup>9</sup> We do not require an independent ground for the attribution of the belief.<sup>10</sup>

The difference, some will say, is that the Guise of the Good cannot be relied upon until it is established. True. My point was merely that it is no refutation of it, no argument against it that on occasion the Thesis itself is the main ground for the attribution of the appropriate belief. I will return to cases like Johnny's once the case for the Thesis is examined.

But what is the case for the Thesis? It starts from a crucial point, made by Anscombe, and recently emphasised by Setiya,<sup>11</sup> namely that those who act intentionally know what they do (know it under the description under which the action is intentional, as some will add). In itself mere knowledge is consistent with the actions being done unintentionally. Agents may be mere witnesses to what is happening to them, or to what they do accidentally. What marks intentional actions is that they are done because of what their agents believe the action is (including what it may bring about). That means that what the agents believe about the action leads them to do it, and guides their doing of it, all the way to its conclusion, and that suggests that they approve of the action, given what they believe about it. They so

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<sup>9</sup> It is important for the analogy that 'My brother is a bachelor' and 'My brother is unmarried' are distinct beliefs, just as intending to  $\Phi$  and believing that there is some good in  $\Phi$ ing are distinct mental states or attitudes.

<sup>10</sup> It would be different if one were to say not that Johnny believes that there is some good in his action, but that he was thinking that at the time.

<sup>11</sup> Anscombe, INTENTION ; Setiya, REASONS WITHOUT RATIONALISM (Princeton: Princeton UP 2007) p. 24.

act because they approve of the action, and that in turn means that they think that it has some value, since value is what we approve of.

Human beings being what they are, their attitude to their intentional actions is often too ambivalent to say that they approve of what they do. They may retain doubts about the wisdom of their actions. They may believe that it would be better to avoid what they are (intentionally) doing. They may even do what they do because it is not the best thing to do, do it in order to hurt themselves, or someone else, or for other (explanatory) reasons. The Guise of the Good is meant to accommodate such ambivalent and akratic conduct by claiming merely that agents see some good in what they do, which they may do even when they are ambivalent or convinced that they are acting for the lesser good (or the greater evil).

The Thesis does not express optimism about human nature. It is meant to accommodate not only mistakes, even gross mistakes about what is of value, but also anomalous conduct in defiance of value.<sup>12</sup> Its point is that intentional actions are actions we perform because we endorse them in light of what we believe about them, and that means that we must believe that they have features which make them attractive, or as we say, features which give them value. The thought is that endorsement presupposes an appropriate object. It does not presuppose that the action has endorseable properties, but it does presuppose that it is taken by the agent to have such properties.

Talking of agents endorsing their intentional actions is metaphorical. It is meant to point out a feature of intentional action of which the Guise of the Good is meant to be an account. It assumes that intentions are partly constituted by associated beliefs about the intended action, rather than merely by their felt quality, or by their direction of fit. The thought is familiar: Fear is what it is partly because those afraid think that they are in danger. Envy is what it is partly because the envious believe that the object of their envy is superior in some desirable respect (success,

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Augustine's desire to steal the pears which, he said, he 'loved only for the theft's sake' and 'Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden. ... I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself' (CONFESSIONS, trans. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), Book II, ch. viii, sec 16)

reputation, happiness, possession of some advantages etc.). Neither can be identified by their 'felt' qualities alone. The Guise of the Good takes a similar view of intentions. They differ from other mental attitudes or states which accompany some of our actions, the Thesis claims, by being constituted in part by a belief about the action and by its role in the acting. The belief has to explain why the agents took the action, i.e. it must figure in an explanation of their action which relates to the way they saw the action, and aspects of themselves and the world, and how that led them to take the action. Hence the Guise of the Good's claim that intentions must include a belief that there is something attractive about the action, that it has some value. The preceding four paragraphs present a case for the Guise of the Good, which is good enough unless there are considerations militating against it. That is what we must examine next.

## **2. Are intentional actions actions for reasons?**

The Guise of the Good is, whatever else it is, a thesis about intentions. How does it relate to intentional actions? There are independent intentions, as I will call them, which are ones one can have at a time one is not doing what the intention is an intention to do. My intention to fly to New York next week is an independent intention, as is my intention to complete this paper. I have the second intention while doing what I intend to do, that is while being engaged in the activity of bringing the paper to completion, but I can have it while I am eating, sleeping, or gossiping with friends. It is not an intention which I can have only when doing what it is an intention to do.

On the other hand, when I (intentionally) drink some water the intentionality manifest in my action is an aspect of the action, an aspect of the way the action is performed. It could be that I am drinking the water because I have an (independent) intention to drink the water, but it could be otherwise. I may just distractedly pick up the glass of water and sip from it, while thinking about the implications of a flaw in my argument. My action is intentional, but there is no Intention with which I perform it. At other times while there is an independent intention with which I perform an intentional action it is not an intention to perform that action. When talking about my friend's holiday I uttered the word 'went' and did so intentionally, but I was

hardly aware that I used that word at that moment. I did it intentionally because I intended (had the independent intention) to describe his holiday experience, and saying 'went' was part of that activity. I did not have an independent intention to say 'went', but I said the word in the course of acting for an independent intention which I did have.

Embedded intentions, the intentions present in all our intentional actions, are aspects of, manners of acting, and thus distinct from independent intentions even when we act intentionally because we have an independent intention. They consist in facts like that our actions are guided by beliefs about what we are in the process of doing (what we do if our action is to be intentional), so that at the sub-personal level our movements are continuously monitored and adjusted to fit those beliefs, and in other facts playing a similar role in the performance of the actions.

Given this distinction between independent intentions and embedded intentions, which is the Guise of the Good about? The first part of the Thesis, as stated, is about embedded intentionality, as that is the feature which makes all intentional actions intentional. There can, of course, be a sister thesis to the effect that independent intentions to perform an action involve a belief that there is some good in the action. It may well be thought that this sister thesis is less vulnerable to objections than the Guise of the Good in the provisional form given it at the beginning of the article. I will return to this possibility. For the time being let us take 'intentions' in the discussion of the Thesis to refer to embedded intentionality.

Consider Ignatius who placed a bomb in a regular commercial flight in order to destroy incriminating documents being transported on it, knowing with complete certainty that if the documents are destroyed everyone on board will be killed. The bomb explodes, destroys the documents and kills everyone. I think that Ignatius has murdered the people on the aeroplane, and that he did that by intentionally killing them.

It is sometimes said that one  $\Phi$ s intentionally if and only if one  $\Phi$ s with the intention of  $\Phi$ ing. In the preceding paragraphs I suggested that some intentional actions are not performed with an independent intention, and it is natural to say that they are not performed with an intention. They are intentional because of their embedded

intentionality, as I called it, that is, because of the manner in which they were performed. But there is no need to make an issue out of a point of linguistic propriety. We can accept that whenever one  $\Phi$ s intentionally one  $\Phi$ s with the intention to  $\Phi$ , provided it is understood that the intention need not be an independent intention. It may be merely an embedded intention, i.e. nothing other than the intentionality embedded in the action.

Ignatius did not have an independent intention to kill the passengers and crew. He would have been just as happy, or even happier, had the documents been on a pilotless plane with no passengers, or if through a freak chain of events the documents were destroyed, but the passengers and crew were uninjured. But given how things were he did kill them intentionally. Therefore – by our terminological stipulation – he had an embedded intention to kill when acting to carry out his independent intention of destroying the evidence. His embedded intention to kill, his intentionality in killing the people, derived from his independent intention to destroy the evidence. More generally:

**Derived embedded intentions** (definition): whenever one intentionally performs one action by performing a second action, if one has an independent intention to perform the second action, but no independent intention to perform the first, then one's embedded intention to perform the first derives from one's embedded intention to perform the second. Putting it semi-formally:  $(x) (\Phi) (\psi)$  [If  $x$  intentionally  $\Phi$ s by intentionally  $\psi$ -ing, and if  $x$  has an independent intention to  $\psi$ , but no independent intention to  $\Phi$ , then  $x$ 's embedded intention to  $\Phi$  derives from  $x$ 's embedded intention to  $\psi$ ]

Does Ignatius's case constitute a counter-example to the Thesis? After all Ignatius intentionally killed people without believing that there was reason to kill them. This is familiar territory, and the responses to the alleged objection are numerous and well known. Some of them are more controversial than others, and there is no point in rehearsing them all. Think of one possible response to the objection, that is that Ignatius has a reason to kill the people, namely that the killing is a by-product of the destruction of the evidence, and Ignatius thinks that he has reason to destroy the evidence. This reply is unhappy as it stands. It does not even purport to show that

Ignatius believes that he has reason to kill the people on board the plane. Rather it claims that because he believes that he has reason to destroy the evidence he has reason to perform those actions which he will be performing by destroying the evidence. This cannot be right. One's belief (possibly mistaken) that one has a reason to do one thing cannot, in this way, generate reasons to do other things.<sup>13</sup>

Possibly if Ignatius has a reason to destroy the evidence he has a reason (obviously not necessarily undefeated) to kill the people on the plane, though even this is far from clear. After all killing them is not a means to the end of destroying the evidence. Be that as it may it is irrelevant to the assessment of the Guise of the Good which is, as it must be, about people's beliefs about their actions. That there was (possibly unbeknown to the agent) a reason to perform an action is no ground at all to think that it was performed intentionally.

So, does Ignatius believe that he has reason to kill the people? He may well not believe that, and if so he would not be mistaken. He believes that he has reason to destroy the evidence. But that, in itself, does not show that he believes that he has reason to do anything else, not even if he does believe that destroying the evidence will also constitute doing those other things.

Nevertheless, the objection fails to undermine the Thesis. Ignatius intentionally killed the people because he killed the people by intentionally destroying the evidence, and he knew it (knew that that is what he was doing while doing it). All that the objection shows is that the first proposition of the Guise of the Good which says

(1) Intentional actions are actions performed for reasons, as those are seen by the agents.

should be augmented to clarify its meaning:

(1')  $\Phi$ -ing is intentional only if, in the belief of its agent, there is either a reason to  $\Phi$  or a reason to perform another action such that by performing it he will, as he knows, be  $\Phi$ -ing.

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<sup>13</sup> The claim in the text is a generalisation of a claim often made regarding instrumental rationality, namely that if you think that you have reason to pursue a goal you really have a reason to pursue the means to the goal. Several authors argued against this view: Broome, Wallace, Korsgaard. For my argument against this view see 'The Myth of Instrumental Rationality'.

The question we face is whether the argument for the Thesis, namely that it contributes a vital element to the explanation of intentions, applies to the Thesis in this amplified form. We can reply by considering again the example: Had the embedded intention to kill the people not been derived from the embedded intention to destroy the evidence one might have felt that (I') defeats the promise the Guise of the Good holds of contributing to the explanation of intentions. Had the intention not-supported by belief in a reason, not been derived from the other intention, which is supported by such a belief, it would have appeared that the Thesis applies to some intentions only. Therefore it is not part of an explanation of intentions generally. But given that the objection relies on derivative intentions that problem is avoided.

The Guise of the Good explains non-derivative embedded intentions, and the derivative ones are explained by being derivative. There is nothing more to them. That is, it is not as if Ignatius has two separate (embedded) intentions. Rather, in the circumstances his (embedded) intention to destroy the evidence is extended, as it were, and counts also as an (embedded) intention to kill. As mentioned above, the intentionality of an action consists largely in its performance being responsive to a belief about what the action is to be. Ignatius's action of killing the people on board is responsive to the belief that the action is to be a destruction of the evidence, and to no other. There is no independent existence to the derivative embedded intention to kill (beyond his knowledge that in destroying the evidence he will be killing the people).

It is instructive to compare cases like Ignatius's with some activities consisting of a sequence of actions<sup>14</sup>, activities such as giving a lecture, singing a song, driving a car, or walking to the door. Here too each of the actions, which in combination constitute the activity, is intentional. But while every one of them could be an action we attend to and think about, our attention to them is intermittent, and of varying degrees of intensity. Typically, agents are not aware of many of the individual actions

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<sup>14</sup> To be distinguished from sequences of bodily movements which may constitute one action (e.g. lifting one's arm) but are not distinct actions in themselves.

which constitute such activities (saying ‘and then’ in the middle of the lecture, or singing an A flat note, or indicating when driving, or slightly adjusting one’s direction when walking to the door, and so on). Consequently, agents are guided by knowledge of how to produce the sequence, and not by beliefs about the reasons for many of the individual actions constituting the activities.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, these cases differ from Ignatius’s. While here too the performance of one action depends on performing the others, the dependence is very different. It is not a case of each of them being performed by performing another of them (though the activity as a whole occurs by performing all of them). Each requires different movements, or their absence, and each is governed and controlled by us separately. Their dependence expresses itself by the fact that later actions are modified in light of earlier ones, so that all are governed (to various degrees of success) by the overall purpose of the activity as a whole. (If in driving I stray slightly to the left at one point I will compensate by turning slightly to the right and so on).

This suggests that the embedded intentions of each of the actions which constitute such activities are governed by one or more independent intentions which determine the content of the embedded intentions, thus making the activity as a whole intentional: an intention to give that lecture, sing that song, drive home, and the like. It is tempting to go further and to claim that

(5) Every intentional action or activity is governed by some independent intention, which determines the content of its embedded intention(s).

If so, then the relationship of the governing independent intention to the embedded intentionality of the action merits careful exploration, which it cannot receive here. Roughly understood, if intentional actions are not only performed because of their

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<sup>15</sup> Is it the case that they have conditional beliefs: that one should say ‘went’ when that is required to express one’s thought in the way that one started to express it, etc.? Any attempt to pursue this thought runs into complications which expose the implausibility of the suggestion. We simply know how to use the language, etc. No specific beliefs of this kind are involved. At the same time we may interrupt, divert or abort the sequence if we suddenly become aware that it requires an action which there is a clear and undefeated reasons to avoid – intentional actions, and semi-automatic action sequences are controlled by subliminal monitoring of their progress, both in getting to their goal, and in not involving undesirable actions.



agents' belief in reasons for them, but are also controlled and guided by the agents in light of those beliefs, then the independent intention which involves belief in a reason for the action determines the content of the embedded intentionality which guides the performance of the action, to make it what it must be to conform to the believed reason.

(5) can be supplemented by

(6) Every independent intention involves belief in a reason for the action intended; and together (5) and (6) can replace (1') in a new version of the Guise of the Good thesis. Is this new version immune to criticism? (6) seems plausible. I will consider it later on. The weakness is in (5).

We can accept that in the case of many intentional actions their intentionality (their embedded intentions) is governed by independent intentions. Some such relationship between independent and embedded intentions is needed to explain how independent intentions lead to intentional actions. The question is whether all our intentional actions are governed in this way by independent intentions.

We have already seen examples which show that not to be the case. Acts such as passing one's hand through one's hair while thinking or talking, or of idly scratching the surface of the table, and many others, are intentional, but normally the people performing them do not have independent intentions to perform them. This is not because they do not plan or decide on them in advance. Independent intentions, just like embedded ones, can be formed in the acting. They need not precede the action. Nor are they counter-examples merely because the agents are disposed to say that they performed these actions for no reason (or for no special reason). Such utterances can be reconciled with the Thesis by claiming that people mean that there is no reason worth mentioning, that the reasons are too insignificant to mention. It is just that while all the counter-examples of this kind are actions which can be performed with an independent intention, typically they are not. Normally they are on the periphery of their agents' attention, and are genuinely performed idly, for no reason or purpose. But it is the core of (6) that independent intentions are constituted in part by belief in reasons or purposes. It is therefore impossible to endorse both (5) and (6). Since (6) seems plausible, we must take the examples to

refute (5), and with it the new version Guise of the Good.

### 3. Revising the Guise of the Good

Without (5) the thesis of the Guise of the Good must be weakened to apply only to actions which are done with an independent intention. (1) now becomes

(1'') Actions performed with an independent intention are actions performed for reasons, as those are seen by the agents.

The rest of the thesis is unaffected:

(2) Specifying the (independent) intention which makes an action intentional identifies central features of the reason(s) for which the action is performed

(3) Reasons for action are facts which establish that that the action has some value.

The problem is that this revised version appears not to be supported by the argument adduced at the end of Section One in support of the Guise of the Good. The argument for the Thesis was that it explains what it is to act intentionally, and how intentional actions differ from others. The counter-examples establish that there are intentional actions to which the Thesis does not apply, and that undermines its claim to explain the nature of intentional actions. But without this argument what is there to support the thesis?

One is tempted to dismiss the counter-examples as dealing with insignificant actions. I have sympathy with this response, but it cannot consist simply of dismissing the counter-examples. To sustain the Guise of the Good we cannot rely on the insignificance of those examples. On the contrary, we need to establish their significance, their role in our life as persons, and to show how this is consistent with the claim that the Guise of the Good explains the nature of intentional actions, once the Thesis is adjusted to allow for the counter-examples.

Nor is the task of explaining the significance of the examples likely to be simple. There are other counter-examples, which are very different from the ones mentioned so far. One well-known class of counter-examples is expressive actions, such as kicking whatever is nearby in anger, or uttering swear words in exasperation. Nor do these two classes exhaust the counter-examples. I doubt that there is an informative way of draw up a comprehensive list of types of counter-examples. But here are two others:

**Hypnosis:** Acting under the influence of post-hypnotic suggestion Jane goes to her wardrobe, puts on a dress then takes it off and returns it to the wardrobe.

**Kleptomania:** Rachel, a kleptomaniac, picks up a tin of pickled gherkins in the supermarket, and leaves the shop without paying.

Both Jane and Rachel knew what they were doing, and by all normal tests both acted intentionally. Both acted in a controlled way, tending to ensure that the actions would be successful (namely, that they accomplish what they intended to do). But both deny that they saw any reason to do what they did.

In considering these cases it is useful to return to the case of Johnny playing at being a fish, and of course his example stands for many. There I have suggested he did believe both that there was reason to play-act, and that there was some good in his play-acting. He is, I wrote, mistaken in denying these facts. It would, however, be implausible to think that this is true in the types of cases we are now considering. The intentions manifested in them do not, in the actual circumstances of these cases, reveal a possible reason for their actions in which they might believe. It is not like the case of someone who plays at being a fish, where the obvious reason is that it is fun. Second, we have an alternative explanation of their behaviour which undercuts the case for thinking that they have a belief in a reason for their actions. While in Johnny's case the attribution of belief that there was some good in the action did crucially depend on the Guise of the Good Thesis, it was also supported by these circumstantial, largely negative facts: the availability of a plausible belief to ascribe to Johnny, and the absence of an alternative explanation of his action.<sup>16</sup> So, while I rely on the Thesis in my understanding of Johnny's case, that reliance conforms to the general principle that belief is not attributed on the strength of a single indicator alone. The new types of cases are therefore different. They are real exceptions to

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<sup>16</sup> More needs to be said: First, the mistake I attributed to Johnny is slight. It results from an incomplete mastery of the concepts of reason or the good. It is rather like the mistake of philosophers who reject the Guise of the Good. Second, it may be denied that classifying an act as a case of kleptomania provides an explanation. Kleptomania is a poorly understood condition. But we know enough about it to rule out some explanations, including the attribution of normal independent intentions. We know for example that kleptomaniacs often steal objects they have no need for and which they are eager to get rid off once the episode is over.

the Thesis.

All of this notwithstanding, there is a strong case for not taking Jane's and Rachel's actions as damaging counter-examples. They are clearly exceptional, as the causes of their actions are inimical to the normal exercise of our powers of agency. Some may even challenge whether it is appropriate to call such actions intentional. I think that such doubts are unwarranted,<sup>17</sup> but that does not matter. We can allow that such doubts are natural for the cases are ones in which normal powers of agency are temporarily reduced, become partially ineffective.<sup>18</sup> That is why even though Jane and Rachel acted intentionally, and their actions do not conform to the Guise of the Good, they do not refute the Thesis.

That means that explanations, and theses in the theory of action need not aspire to be exceptionless. I would go further and say that they should not aspire to be exceptionless, and if they are exceptionless that is a worrying sign, a sign that they miss important features of the situation. The examples under discussion bring out that being intentional can be a matter of degree. Actions are characterised as intentional by a variety of criteria, several of which can be realised to various degrees, making it appropriate to speak of degrees of intentionality. There are cases of which one should say: Yes, up to a point, or in a certain respects it was intentional, but in others less so. In some respects Jane and Rachel acted intentionally, but in others they did not. That is why their examples do not refute the Guise of the Good. That is a thesis about intentional actions, and if it is true of all

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<sup>17</sup> To see that it is instructive to compare these cases with H. Frankfurt's description of what he regards as acting under coercion (Frankfurt, 'Coercion and Moral Responsibility' in *THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE CARE ABOUT*, Cambridge U.P. 1988). It does not matter that his characterisation of coerced action is unduly narrow. His coerced actions are cases of people whose will is overpowered by the coercing action or circumstances, and they cannot help but do what they are doing. They act intentionally, but their actions are unlike what is normally understood as coerced action, which is action for a (perceived) reason to remove the threat. Frankfurt's coerced person does what is necessary to avoid the threat, but not for a reason. He has lost normal control over his power of agency. I think that in this case it is even clearer that the Frankfurt-coerced person is acting intentionally, but there is little reason to distinguish him from Jane and Rachel.

<sup>18</sup> Only partially ineffective for they act, controlling their conduct as they would had they decided to act not under the influences which make them act in the given circumstances.

fully intentional actions; and if one can explain the exceptions by showing that the facts which establish that the Thesis does not apply to them also account for the fact that they are examples of diminished intentionality then they lose their force as counter-examples.

This burden is easily discharged in the case of Jane and Rachel: Their purpose, their goal of performing these actions, is, as it were, imposed on them from the outside, by a hypnotist or by a pathological condition, and that both stops them from conforming to the Guise of the Good, and makes their actions less than completely their own, and therefore intentional only in some respects.

In another place I discussed expressive actions along similar lines.<sup>19</sup> I argued that they do not conform to the Thesis precisely because of ways in which they involve loosened control over the actions, which means that while they are intentional there are respects in which they display diminished intentionality. How about the other counter-examples we noticed, those of idle actions like stroking your hair? I noted the instinctive reaction that they are insignificant kinds of action. There are two ways in which they are marginal or insignificant. First, they are performed when our attention is elsewhere. That, as in other cases, affects their intentionality: in most cases they are actions we routinely perform, and therefore we can perform them without attending to them. But it does not matter to us if they fail, or change their character. Our fingers may slide out of their routine rhythm. The action may be interrupted, and we may still not notice, nor would the agent mind that the action failed, or got transformed from, say, stroking one's hair to gently flattening it. Second, typically these exceptions are relatively simple actions, consisting predominantly of routines of bodily movement. They do not include actions such as giving a party, campaigning in an election, or writing a novel.<sup>20</sup>

The second point shows that these actions are of marginal importance. The first

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<sup>19</sup> J. Raz, ENGAGING REASONS 36-44. One can also question whether expressive actions can be governed by independent intentions at all. I will not consider this question.

<sup>20</sup> There are complications and further distinctions. For example, I can find myself operating an ATM without having noticed what I was doing. But in that case, while my movements may be intentional, I did not intentionally withdraw money from my account.

point shows them to be, while intentional, of reduced intentionality. The fact that we do not fully attend to them shows that. It follows from this that the action is unlikely to be one of securing a result which goes beyond the disposition of one's own body. When one kicks a ball or turns on the tap one needs to attend to what one is doing, and one cannot attend to kicking a ball or turning on a tap without believing that there is a point to doing so. Again, these cases are exceptions because they are marginal cases of intentionality, not displaying all the features of intentional actions. The revised Guise of the Good Thesis has other exceptions. Not being able to classify them exhaustively I will mention only one other kind of exception:

**Nibbling after blood:**<sup>21</sup> An accident causing horrible injuries and mutilations has just happened outside Jamie's window. The sight will disgust him, and he knows that. There is nothing he can do to help the injured. Yet he is powerfully drawn to the window, and is looking, feeling disgusted, and physically ill, at the sight. There is no doubt that he went to the window intentionally, and is intentionally looking at the injured people outside. I will return in the next section to the question whether Jamie has a reason to behave as he does. The crucial point is that he does not think he has such a reason, and yet his behaviour is intentional, and does not fall into any of the categories of exceptions so far examined. It should not be assimilated to the case of kleptomania. Jamie's case is meant to be one in which the agent is naturally motivated to act, but can resist. Jamie cannot help but feel drawn to look at the scene but he can suppress the urge, and stay away from the window. His situation is rather like that of someone who has a sweet tooth, and having had lots of chocolate already, is taking another piece, even though he knows that he will feel nauseated. Jamie is another exception to the thesis, and his case cannot be explained away in the way the others were. It is not a case of diminished or marginal intentionality. Yet I doubt that it can undermine the Thesis. It is possible that Jamie believes that he has no reason for his action because he is conceptually confused about reasons. For

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<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Ulrike Heuer for this example. My name for it derives from McEwan: 'Of the many things Lucy was noticing to-day, not the least remarkable was this: the ghoulish fashion in which respectable people will nibble after blood.' (Ian McEwan, ATONEMENT).

example, had he thought that one has reason to satisfy urges, like the urge to look at a gruesome scene (or the urge to have one too many pieces of chocolate) then he would have believed that he has reason to act as he does. Moreover, it seems plausible that if Jamie is mistaken about thinking that he, and people generally, do not have reasons to satisfy urges of these kinds, his mistake is a conceptual mistake, due to an incomplete, and somewhat mistaken understanding of the concept of a reason for action.

Whether all these suppositions are true depends to a considerable degree on whether there is in fact a reason to satisfy such urges. I will return to that issue in the next section. For the moment what remains is to explain why exceptions which are due to a conceptual confusion do not undermine the Thesis. Whether or not Jamie's is an apt illustration, the general point is that conceptual truths about the way people use concepts are bound to have exceptions when people misuse concepts. That is, given that the ability to use concepts involves the ability to misuse them, theses about concepts cannot be refuted by examples of their misuse.

#### **4. Reasons and Value**

It is time to examine the third leg of the Thesis, namely that reasons for action consist of the fact that the action has some value. I will now assume that the (I'') is correct, that is that actions performed with an independent intention are performed for reasons, as those are seen by the agents, that is, I will assume that independent intentions involve belief that there is a reason for the intended action. The question under consideration is whether reasons for action are that the actions have some value. If they are then (I'') implies that barring conceptual ignorance or mistakes actions performed with an independent intention are performed in the belief that the action has some value.

The argument for this view will proceed in two stages, and be followed by an examination of some objections. The first stage concerns the character of reasons belief in which is necessary for action with independent intentions. Such actions, actions done for a purpose as we can also describe them, are actions which were done by people who had a view of their situation, and in light of that view found some reason to perform the action (so much is established once (I'') is

acknowledged). The reason must be something which makes the action one to perform, one which it would be good to perform, and that means that it must be something which renders the action desirable, namely a fact which shows some good in the action. In brief the reason the agent thought he had must be something which shows that the agent knew what he was doing, and not only that he felt, and witnessed himself being, propelled towards acting by some psychological condition. There must be something which he believed to be true of the action and which he took to make the action attractive. There must be something that decided him to act because what he took to be the reason seemed to him to make the action worthwhile. To take it to be worthwhile in the required sense, the agent's attitude to the reason for which he acts must be capable of sustaining certain counterfactuals: Had the agent been aware (or had he thought that he was aware) of undesirable features of the action he would have formed a view on whether the features which provide, as he believes, a reason for the action still make it the action to perform in spite of its undesirable aspects.<sup>22</sup> Such a view, and that is another conceptual observation, consists in some judgement on the relative importance of the good and bad features of the action.

Setiya did more than anyone else in recent times to challenge the Thesis. He thinks that intentional actions are taken for reasons but not in the belief that there is something good about the action. We need to address objections to the Guise of the Good advanced by him and others. But there are aspects of his view that reinforce my belief that the Thesis is right. In particular, he underlines the fact that agents who act intentionally know what they are doing and why:

It is sufficient to be acting for a reason that one meets the demand for an explanation of what one is doing and why. One need not also believe that the reasons for which one is acting are reasons to act in that way.<sup>23</sup>

Setiya recognises the difference between reasons explanatory of an action and a normative reason for the action. Explanatory reasons of actions are facts which

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<sup>22</sup> Though, as we must always remember, he might have acted for what he took to be the lesser reason.

<sup>23</sup> *Op. Cit.* page 12



explain the actions. The following are three such reasons, possibly all truly explaining the same intentional action:

Jill did it because she was jealous of Jim

Jill did it because she felt a sudden rage; a sudden rush of blood to her head made her do it.

Jill did it in order to inherit Jim's wealth, as she knew that she would after Jim's death.

Only the last one explains the action by reference to a normative reason. Setya insists, and is surely right, that whenever one acts intentionally one believes in some explanation of one's action. He is also right to insist that the explanation need not incline us, the spectators, to believe that the action was justified. Any and all of the above explanations can be available to the agent and none of them inclines me to believe that the action was justified. It is also right that being explanations of intentional actions they point to factors which (metaphorically speaking) pushed or pulled the agents towards the actions. But while there can be a number of (compatible but distinct) explanations of every intentional action, there must be for every action performed with an independent intention at least one explanation which meets an additional condition: it must explain why the agent decided to perform the action, rather than resist the pull towards it. Of the three examples only the last, only the explanation via a normative reason, does that. Depending on the circumstances the other explanations may be more revealing of the action, or they may constitute the more illuminating parts of a more comprehensive explanation which includes all three as elements. But only the third, killing to inherit, even establishes that the action was intentional (jealousy and a sudden rush of blood to the head, together or separately, may explain loss of control leading to accidental killing).

Setiya's account lacks the resources to distinguish between the first two explanations and the third one. Doing that is essential for an account of independent intentions. And, the suggestion is, what marks actions done with independent intentions is that they are ones which their agents believe to have some value in them, and thus the

agents have available to them explanations by reference to what they take to be normative reasons, namely explanations purporting to show that there is some good in the action.<sup>24</sup>

The second stage of the argument is required to counter one alternative understanding of actions for a purpose, and of normative reasons. According to it the argument thus far shows only that in acting for a purpose one believes that some feature of the action constitutes a normative reason for it. It does not follow that the agent believes that there is some good in the action (thus rejecting the tail end of the previous paragraph).

If, however, a fact cannot be a reason for an action unless it establishes that the action possesses some value, then in believing that there is a reason for an action one believes that the action has some value, unless one is mistaken or confused about the concepts of a reason, or of having value. So to deny that to act for a purpose involves acting in the belief that the action has some value one has to deny that to be a reason a fact must establish that the action for which it is a reason has some value. How would the argument proceed? Imagine the following conversation:  
**Jumping:** Abe: Why did you jump? – Ben: It was the only way I could save my life.  
Abe: I can see that but is there any good in that?

Or, imagine a different conversation:

**Job:** Ben: Why should I go to the interview? – Abe: It will get you the job. – Ben: Why is that a reason to go to the interview? – Abe: Because if you have a job you will earn a living and will not starve. – Ben: I can see that, but is there any good in not starving?

The last question in each exchange appears out of place, and redundant. The suggestion is that reasons can be just ordinary, i.e. non-normative facts. What is

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<sup>24</sup> It is not clear whether Setiya's own view (that necessarily when acting rationally one acts under the Guise of the Good, but irrational agents do not always do so) is inconsistent with the Thesis here defended. Irrational actions are by their nature deviations from the norm, and if those who do not conform to the Thesis are irrational (in part) because of their failure to act under the Guise of the Good. then, as explained above, while their actions are exceptions to the Thesis they are not damaging counter-examples.

special about them is that they stand in a normative relation to an action, being a reason for it. To say of them that they establish that the action has some value is superfluous. It does not contribute to the fact that the reason is a reason. Therefore, acting for a reason need not involve belief that there is some good in the action. It is enough if it involves belief that one has reason to perform the action.

This view, I will argue, ignores rather than replies to what the first stage of the argument established. To examine this claim I will focus on Ben and his Jump, and consider it in light of two further hypothetical situations:

**Torture** (and death): If Ben would be saving his life by jumping he would be immediately seized by people who would first subject him to severe torture and then kill him.

**Betrayal:** suppose that to save his life Ben has to reveal the whereabouts of a document which will inform the evil regime of the identity of his colleagues in the opposition, who will be tortured and killed.

Let us assume that Ben rightly thinks that were he in Torture he would have no reason to jump, and that had he been in Betrayal he would have had a reason to betray (i.e. to save his life), but a stronger reason not to do so. It seems reasonable to assume that in **Jump** Ben not only believed that jumping is the only way to save his life, but also that in the circumstances of the case that it would save his life is a reason to jump, i.e. that he is not in a situation like **Torture**, and that belief was relevant to his action, as he would not have performed it had he believed that his situation is one in which he has no reason to save his life. Similarly, we can assume that he believed that the situation is not similar to **Betrayal**, that is that it is not one in which while he has a reason to jump it is defeated by other considerations. The suggestion is not of course that Ben considers and rules out the possibility that he is in many specific situations where he would have no reason to save his life, or would have defeating reasons. Rather, the suggestion is that he entertains a general belief that he has an undefeated reason to save his life.

The first stage of the argument above showed that to have that belief he needs to have and use certain conceptual capacities. Broadly speaking he must be able to judge that certain situations constitute reasons and others do not, and that

sometimes more than one reason bears on the case for and against performing an action. It was further argued that we individuate reasons by the good they do, the good that actions instantiate. An action which saves the life of Abe, and protects some beautiful picture from destruction, is one we have two mutually re-enforcing reasons to perform. They are two because the action instantiates two distinct good-making properties. For the purpose of the current argument we can accept that reasons are or can be ordinary facts, such as that jumping will save your life. That does nothing to undermine the argument that reasons are individuated by the good that conforming to them secures, and therefore that mastery of the concept of a reason requires some understanding of the notion of value. Therefore, given that action for a reason is action motivated and guided by belief that there is a reason, it also involves belief that there is some good in the action.

As we saw earlier, this argument does not establish that all actions with independent intentions are undertaken with such beliefs. It merely establishes (a) that given the direct conceptual connection between reasons and value one is justified in attributing a belief that there is value in an action on the basis of a belief that there is reason for it, so long as there is no evidence that the agent does not have such a belief. (b) Evidence that the agent does not believe that there is value in the action in spite of there being a reason for it establishes some conceptual confusion on the part of the agent. (c) Given that action with an independent intention involves belief in there being a reason for the action, any serious conceptual confusion about the nature of reasons means that the action is intentional in some deviant way only.

Let it be accepted that the facts which constitute a reason for an action also establish that there is some good in it. The rejection of the Guise of the Good now comes to rest on an additional contention: that the action has some value is not a reason for it. Stating that it has some good is nothing but another way of stating that there is a reason for it. For necessarily 'There is some good in  $\Phi$ ing' is true if and only if there is a reason to  $\Phi$ . It now seems that rejecting the third part of the Guise of the Good (that reasons for action are such reasons by being facts which establish that that the action has some value) depends on accepting some version of what is

known as “buck-passing”.

Some of the reasons why “buck-passing” accounts of the good are false have been explained elsewhere<sup>25</sup>, and the matter cannot be fully examined here. In rejecting the view I will say no more than that the good of inheriting, surviving, getting a job, having friends, etc. does not depend on there being a reason to bring them about. We can establish their value without raising the question whether there is reason to bring them about, and if we conclude that there is reason to bring them about that is because they are valuable. Hence, on cursory examination buck-passing fails to grasp the nature of value. But without it the alternative to the third leg of the Thesis fails.

## 5. Some Objections Considered

That concludes my two step argument for the Thesis. Can it be sustained in the face of the objections it faces? One of them has to do with value inversion, namely the fact that sometimes people sincerely take themselves to be acting against value, choosing actions because they are evil, bad, or worthless, and doing so with open eyes. Such cases hold many fascinations for the theorist as well as many horrors for those at the receiving end. I have discussed them elsewhere<sup>26</sup>, where I explained that another reason for many theses in theory of action not being exceptionless is the ability to deviate from any norm, including those of meaning and rationality. Not all deviations are possible, but (given that determination of our beliefs, intentions, emotions and so on is governed by multiple criteria) much is possible. I will not return to that discussion here. There are other objections: One objection has to do with cases where agents do believe in normative reasons for their actions, but in ones which do not establish any value in the action (for example, that it was undertaken to preserve racial purity). Second, there are those alien cultures whose normative reasons seem to be entirely unrelated to anything we can make sense of.

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<sup>25</sup> E.g. U. Heuer, 'Explaining Reasons: Where Does the Buck Stop?' in *JESP* 1:3, March 2006.

<sup>26</sup> ENGAGING REASON, ch. 2.

Third, there are familiar cases in which the agent's judgement that there was no value in the action or that there was no reason for it is hard to dismiss as a case of being mistaken about his own beliefs. Jamie's case above belongs here.

The first of the objections requires us to revisit some of the ground already covered. Think of Jill who kills her uncle to inherit his fortune. We can assume that she will deny that there is any value in her action, and dismiss this as irrelevant because she is likely to be applying a different concept of value, perhaps one in which only moral values are values. But why impute to her a belief whose articulation requires a concept she does not have? Because she takes the fact that as a consequence of the killing she will inherit from her uncle as a fact which explains her action, in the required way, that is by being a feature of the killing which determines her to kill, not merely one which makes her kill. It guides her deliberation and is subject to rational constraints.

This shows that inheriting is a rational factor in her mind, that it does not explain her action in the way that the influence of alcohol might. And as a rational consideration militating for the action it is capable of being seen to be in competition with still further considerations. For example, the fact, should she learn of it, that if she kills her uncle she will sleep no more will give her pause, and may or may not lead her to desist.

Jill furnished us with the outline of an argument of why it is right to attribute belief in value to a person who explains his action in non-normative terms and declines to apply normative concepts to it. But it was an easy case, because it makes sense to think that she has the belief we attribute to her at least in as much as the feature of the action she points to (inheriting from her uncle) has value (even though not one justifying killing anyone). Now suppose that you see Brian punching and kicking a person in the street. You ask him why and he says: 'he is a bloody foreigner'. 'But what reason do you have to beat him up?' 'That is the reason: he is a foreigner'. 'Why is that a reason?' 'It just is'. End of conversation, and end of Brian's own thoughts about the subject.

Here there is no value at all in the action. What can justify attributing to Brian belief in the value of his action in this case? In spite of this difference, in all essentials

Brian's case is like that of Jill. He regards the fact that his victim is a foreigner as a normative reason. He too recognises other reasons, and can reason which of them, if any, prevails when they conflict. Patient inquiry will show the contours of his beliefs, and disclose what normative concepts are apt to describe his views, and they will be concepts which show what, in his eyes, is good in this or that action.

It still remains unclear how the Guise of the Good can be reconciled with the possibility of mistakes. There is no difficulty if the mistakes are purely factual. The claim that Jill kills her uncle because (let us assume) she thinks that she will have a better life if she inherits from her uncle is consistent with her being mistaken about the prospect of inheriting. Maybe her uncle changed his will the week before, etc. There is no difficulty in reconciling such mistakes with the Thesis. But is it consistent with normative mistakes? Imagine someone who explains that this person deserves better treatment than that because he belongs to a superior race so that his interests count for more than the interests of members of inferior races, or that sex with people of inferior races is wrong because it dilutes the purity of the race, and so on. If he shares our concept of the good, and believes that racial purity is good, then that is his mistake. But assume that, as in our previous examples, our racist does not have our philosophical concept of the good. He does not admit to a belief that preserving purity is of value. In fact preserving racial purity has no value. What grounds do we have to attribute to him a belief which neither he nor we admit to? The answer depends on our racist's grounds for his racism. He may believe that racial mixing leads to strife, or that it causes members of both races to fail to excel in the use of racially specific talents which he believes them to have. Such reasoning shows that he takes racial purity to be instrumental to genuine values such as the avoidance of strife, or the development of one's talents. He is wrong about the relationship between the ideals of purity, harmony and fulfilment of one's potential. But given that he subsumes the mistaken value under real ideals or values it is plain that he believes that his racist actions have some value.

A difficulty exists only when the agents under discussion do not defend their belief in their false values by reference to any genuine values. They take them to be ultimate considerations, which cannot be justified by reference to any others. But even in

such cases there may be direct evidence that these agents take their reasons, however misguidedly, to show that there is some value in their actions. For example, they are likely to recognise the relevance of questions of consistency, logical or factual, between their alleged consideration and others, which are genuine values. They may, of course, believe that their reasons are consistent with those values. And it may be impossible to convince them otherwise. That is neither here nor there. In acknowledging the relevance of the issue to decisions about what to do, or to whether their reasons are sustainable, they show that they treat their reasons as facts which contribute to the value of actions.

What if the agents are indifferent to the relations of their racial reasons to genuine values? They may have some priority rules, avoiding the need for reasoning about the relative case for one or another consideration. This scenario is even clearer when we turn to the third of the classes of cases I listed above, the case of thoroughly alien cultures. In the nature of things there are no examples to give. We imagine a culture where the concepts used in stating reasons for action are alien to us, and have no equivalents among our normative and value concepts. Possibly such a culture is not possible, at least not among humans. Be that as it may the general argument given earlier, namely that independent intentions are formed for believed reasons, and that reasons relate to value, apply. The alien culture is not a counter-example. To be that we need to understand it. All we can say is that it is a culture of concept-using people, who can act intentionally. That, given the general argument for the Guise of the Good, is enough to establish that the thesis applies to them, and our ignorance prevents us from finding anything to challenge or undermine the conclusion.

There will be the inevitable charge that in claiming that the Thesis applies to alien cultures we distort their meanings, and impose on them 'our' concepts which are not suited as tools for understanding their culture. But the charge is unwarranted. No claim to understand alien cultures was made. The concepts used in the Guise of the Good are "our" concepts, and there is no pretence that they are not. Nor are they used to interpret aliens' world view, or their ways of justifying actions. Only two claims about the alien cultures are made: one is that the people there use



concepts (or it would not be a culture) and that sometimes they act with independent intentions. The Thesis is true of them for no other reason than that it states part of what is involved in having independent intentions, and in acting intentionally.

Finally we have to address the third kind of objection, illustrated by the nibbling after blood type cases. Jamie, you will remember, intentionally goes to the window to look at the gruesome sight which makes him sick. He thinks that looking at it has only disvalue, and he should not act as he does. How can we say that in spite of this he really believes that there is value in his action (or for that matter that there is a normative reason for it)? The answer is in the details of the case. One misguided objection to the Thesis points out that sometimes we act in pursuit of desires which arose in us neither by deliberation nor in response to recognition of the value of their satisfaction. Hunger, thirst and sexual desires are examples. In many such cases we recognise the value of satisfying such desires once they arise, thereby recognising that there are reasons (not always undefeated) for satisfying them. These cases are therefore not counter-examples. The value of satisfying such desires is sometimes the value of having the desire and satisfying it. Food and sex are among the good things in life and they are better if we have them when we desire them. Even with food and sex the desire for them does not always come when it would be good to have them. Sometimes the only value in satisfying the desires is to get rid of them. In his own eyes Jamie's case is rather like that. He thinks that there is nothing intrinsically good in looking at gruesome sights whether or not that is done in response to an urge to do so. That is what he is telling us when he denies belief in the value of the action. But he could have resisted the urge, and he did not. He decided to go to the window and look at the sight. That shows that he takes it that there is some value in his action. It will relieve him of the tension of wondering what things are like, wanting to see them, regretting not having done so. It will probably also give him some satisfaction, some pleasure, which he does not understand and probably does not want to understand. He looks out in order to rid himself of the urge and the tension it produces, and probably also in order to get that pleasure. Perhaps, you will say, but that does not establish that he believes that there is some

value in his action, given that he denies having the belief in its value. I think that his denial shows that he disapproves of his own action even while he is so acting. But that is typical of cases of akrasia, and Jamie's is one of them. In acting with an intention to see the gory sight he is acting in the belief that there is some good in so doing. But his disapproval of his own action leads him to be less than completely honest with himself. He is reluctant to admit to the satisfaction he derives, and confines himself to referring to the nausea he feels. His emphatic disapproval overpowers any recognition of the value of relieving his urge, which he does not want to acknowledge as a benefit, even though he knows that it is.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Velleman complained that the Guise of the Good takes people to be square and bland. I suggested that it applies not only to larger than life fanatics like Stalin whose reasons we can understand but also to people who defy comprehension. Moulay Ismail was supposed to have said: "My subjects are like rats in a basket. And if I do not keep shaking the basket, they will gnaw their way through."<sup>27</sup> By all accounts he behaved accordingly. I doubt that Moulay Ismail was square or bland. Those who read the quotation as simply expressing concern for his continued rule underestimate him by ignoring the attitude to other people which it expresses. I do not think that I can understand many of his actions. Of course, we have learnt to expect the worst of people. We may be shocked by stories of his conduct, but are not surprised. Something like that is what we expect to happen from time to time. That does not establish that we understand his reasons. Yet we have reason to think that the Guise of the Good was true of him, for even though much of his brutality was spontaneous, his actions were commonly informed by independent intentions. Of course, the Thesis which I was defending is neither the one which Velleman or Setiya and other critics objected to, nor the one that others upheld. The question arises whether the modified Thesis retains the philosophical interest and the promise

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<sup>27</sup> Sultan Moulay Ismail was the founding father of the Moroccan royal Alawite dynasty. For our purposes it does not matter whether the attribution is true. It is enough that people can believe it to be true.

that the criticised Thesis held. In particular, can it still be seen as providing a key to the understanding of rational agency by explaining the nature of intentions? A brief survey of the modifications made and of one or two other points made in the course of argument suggests an affirmative answer.

The revised Thesis presupposes a distinction between embedded and independent intentions. It does not claim to apply to embedded intentions except in as much as they depend on and their content is determined by independent intentions. Hence it applies only indirectly (if at all) to derived embedded intentions, and it does not apply to intentional actions not governed by independent intentions. Even regarding independent intentions it allows for exceptions, provided they can be explained as deviations from the norm, either by being cases of less than complete intentionality or as anomic inversions of the norm. Finally, I emphasised that the Thesis attributes to agents belief that the action has some value-endowing property and that they recognise it as value-endowing. They need not be able to express that belief in words, and they certainly need not have the more general belief that their reason for the action is that it has some value (rather than that it has the specific value they take it to have).

This last clarification is vital to make the Thesis plausible. It would be absurd to assume that intentional actions presuppose possession of abstract concepts, nor does the purpose of the Thesis require it to assume that. This clarification does not undermine the claim of the Thesis to express a central element of intentional action. The other modifications and clarifications are not ad hoc. They arise out of the general nature of theses about concept-employing attitudes and actions. They apply to the full or mature form of the attitude, allowing exceptions in other cases, so long as the fact that the case is an exception explains why the case is less than paradigmatic of full intention, and allows for the possibility of people playing with the norms, twisting them in a variety of ways, a phenomenon very familiar from creative ways of using language, which achieve an effect by deviating from the norms (of meaning or grammar, etc.).

So the revised version of the Thesis retains its role in the explanation of action and of intentionality. From its earliest origins, whatever version of the Guise of the Good

was viewed with favour was the keystone keeping in place and bridging the theory of value, the theory of normativity and rationality and the understanding of intentional action. Its success in fulfilling this key role makes the version here defended a variant of the traditional Thesis, serving the same role in establishing the interconnections of those wider theories.