

Desiring the Good: A Socratic Reading of Aristotle

The Guise of the Good Account (GGA) of Action says that, in every action, the agent is motivated by seeing the action or its outcome as good: something appears good to the agent, and is judged to be good; this judgment figures importantly in her motivation. The GGA of Action goes back to a broader thesis, which I shall call the GGA of Motivation. The GGA of Motivation, as it figures in Aristotle's philosophy, says that human agency is motivated by desire for the good. Contemporary Guise of the Good theorists adopt the GGA of Action and immediately turn to the analysis of individual actions. Contrary to this trend, I shall focus on the way in which the GGA is concerned with motivations regarding one's life as a whole. In what follows, I shall put Aristotle in conversation with recent discussions of the GGA, and develop what I call the GGA of Background Motivation.

Background Motivation – the motivation to have one's life go well – feeds into motivations for individual actions, and supplies side-constraints and a general directionality. The Guise of the Good is most compelling as an account of Background Motivation, and more problematic as a general account of particular actions. Aristotle, I assume, puts forward a GGA for Background Motivation *and* for individual actions.¹ I

¹ An important caveat is in order here: Aristotle's GGA is not really a 'guise of the good' account; it is a 'guise of the good, pleasant, and noble' account. A full reconstruction of Aristotle's theory would need to explore how, for Aristotle, these three value properties figure in motivation. See for example *NE* III, 1110b9-11, where Aristotle says that everything anyone does is done for the pleasant and the noble (*kala*).

suggest that we only follow him with respect to Background Motivation, or at least, that we re-evaluate how the motivations of particular actions should be understood in the light of larger-scale motivations. I part ways with Aristotle also in another respect. Aristotle does not acknowledge what today seems undeniable: that it is possible not to want one's life to go well. Against this, I shall argue that Background Motivation can take hits, and it can be wiped out. As long as it is in place, it directs other motivations. If it is weakened or annihilated, we are lost: we lose our grip on why we should be doing anything at all, or we want things that do not relate to a well-going life.² Background Motivation, as I understand it, is an ultimate and at the same time contingent motivation: it feeds into particular motivations, as long as it does.

1. Socratic?

In the title, I describe my account as a Socratic reading of Aristotle. By this I mean to highlight that the GGA is essentially an interpretation of the Socratic Paradox, namely, that everyone desires the good.³ This point is rarely recognized, which leads to a strange reduplication of philosophical debates: scholars of ancient philosophy aim to reconstruct compelling versions of the Socratic Paradox, and contemporary ethicists aim to address the same issues under the label of Guise of the Good theories.

² In this respect, my proposal is similar to Joseph Raz' discussion in 'Agency, Reason, and the Good,' in J. Raz, *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 22-45.

³ Socrates is credited with a number of paradoxical claims, most famously, the claim that no one does wrong voluntarily, which translates into the claim that everyone desires the good. Important texts on the issue include Plato's *Meno* 77a-87c and *Gorgias* 466a-468e.

Aristotle develops a core claim of his theory of action—that ultimately, all human agency aims at the good life—by starting out from an interpretation of the Socratic Paradox.

However, the scholastic approach to Aristotle's theory of action, which inspired much of contemporary philosophy of action, turns immediately to Aristotle's account of decision and deliberation in *NE* III, and thereby neglects this feature of his theory.⁴ To make it visible, we must begin with *NE* I, and in fact, with the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

- (I) Each expertise, each inquiry, each action and each decision “seems to aim at *some* good;
- (II) and for this reason *the* good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”⁵

The expression “seems to aim at some good” in (I) does not invoke a distinction between appearances and reality. It is a reference to what others have said (“to some people it

⁴ The scholastically informed reading, which contemporary theory of action inherits from Elisabeth Anscombe, does not focus exclusively on *NE* III. It draws on aspects of Aristotle's *Physics* (especially with a view to teleology) and *Metaphysics*. An important passage is *Met. Lambda* 7.1072a29: “we desire something because it seems good to us, rather than it seeming good because we desire it.” Cf. Charles H. Kahn, ‘Plato's Theory of Desire’, *The Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1987), pp. 77-103, p. 78.

⁵ My translation and emphasis. Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe say that (I) is uncontroversial (*Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 262). Once we recognize (I) as a version of the Socratic Paradox (that every action is motivated by the agent seeing something as good), we see that it is far from uncontroversial.

seems that, ...”).⁶ When Aristotle invokes the views of others, these others include, importantly, Socrates and Plato. Indeed, it seems crucial that we identify the first sentence of the *NE* as an interpreted quote of the Socratic Paradox, that everyone desires the good. By reformulating the Socratic idea in the way he does, Aristotle makes an important move. Rather than interpret the claim that everyone desires the good in terms of desire for possession of goods, he turns his attention to the analysis of agency.⁷ Aristotle considers different components of human activity: every expertise (*technê*) and every inquiry, and similarly every action and decision (*prohairesis*) is said to aim at some good.⁸ (II), then, is a brief version of the main thesis of *NE* I: that there is one chief good (as it turns out, happiness) at which all activities aim.

The transition between (I) and (II) is notoriously difficult. (I) presumably supplies the reason for (II): *because* all activities aim at some good, *the good* is that at which all things aim. This inference is programmatic.⁹ The details of the argument will have to be filled in later. Indeed, we might think that there is, as of yet, no argument, only a thesis.

⁶ Cf. Broadie/Rowe, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 262.

⁷ Both interpretations of the Socratic Paradox—that desiring the good figures in motivations for actions, and that it is a desire to possess goods—are prominent in earlier Greek ethics, and both are relevant to Aristotle's discussions in *NE* I.

⁸ On the hierarchy of expertises, each with its own good, with politics as the master-art that aims at the good, cf. John Cooper, 'Political Community and the Highest Good', in J. Lennox and R. Bolton (eds.), *Being, Nature, and Life: Essays in Honor of Allan Gotthelf* (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press).

⁹ Sarah Broadie discusses the widespread presumption that the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a fallacy in *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 8-9. As she puts it, II is a hypothesis, to be argued for later on in the text.

This thesis is, roughly, the following: particular actions and larger-scale pursuits each aim at *some* good, in such a way that all activity aims at *the* good. Contemporary Guise of the Good theorists only engage with the former idea, or rather, part of it: that particular actions aim at some good. But Aristotle proposes a more complex position. He suggests that, in order to understand motivation in particular actions and decisions, we need to think of them in relation to larger-scale pursuits, such as activities that involve practical skills and inquiry, and in relation to the final end of all activities—the good, or happiness.¹⁰ This thesis, I think, is right. We should take seriously Aristotle's proposal that the motivation of individual actions must be discussed in the context of larger-scale motivations, and eventually, against the background of the motivation to have one's life go well.

Scholars of ancient ethics as well as virtue ethicists often discuss the notion of a good life, or happiness (*eudaimonia*). However, debates on the theory of motivation focus immediately on individual actions, and neglect the notion of happiness. A peculiar historical accident plays an important role here. When Elisabeth Anscombe re-discovered Aristotelian thought about action, she approached Aristotle through the lens of Aquinas. By engaging with Aquinas, Anscombe turns to a version of Aristotle that is shaped by the theological preoccupations of medieval thought. From that perspective, human concern with happiness appears blasphemous, or at least foolish; St. Augustine, for example,

¹⁰ I am grateful for discussion of the first sentence of the *NE* to *.

thinks of the idea that happiness can be attained in this (mortal) life as a pagan “idiocy.”¹¹

Insofar as scholastic philosophers pick up Aristotle's theory, they immediately focus on motivations for individual actions, rather than the motivation to have one's life go well (or indeed, the various things that might be in between particular actions and the general motivation to have one's life go well, such as long-term plans, routines, policies, and so on).¹² By doing so they misconstrue and underrate the resources of a broadly speaking Aristotelian theory.

Consider the kinds of examples that contemporary scholars interested in the GGA discuss. The cookie looks tasty, the movie sounds interesting, the class is required for the degree one pursues. So, one is motivated to eat the cookie, rent the movie, or enroll in the class; in every case, something is seen as good. But there are also actions that do not seem to fit. For example, it sometimes looks as if we were not really motivated at all (we just find ourselves doing something), or we act out of silliness, or from desire for the bad,

11 In Book XIX of the *City of God*, Augustine gives a stunning account of 288 different ancient positions on the question ‘What is the supreme good?’ Augustine discusses what he sees as the immense folly (or, in the case of the Stoics, the “amazing idiocy”) of seeking happiness in this life, a common core of all ancient positions, and compares the ancient conceptions with the Christian conception of the highest good, eternal life.

12 I shall not be able to discuss these intermediate matters in as much detail as they deserve. I will assume that a decision in Aristotle's sense (*prohairesis*) can be for a long-term plan (e.g., to study philosophy), a policy (e.g., to always brush one's teeth after lunch), a routine (e.g., to always check email during breakfast), and for individual actions (e.g., to go to a certain restaurant for dinner today). Further, a decision might be a for an action that consists of several smaller-scale actions. Cf. John Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1975, reprint Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 23 and pp. 39-40. In a companion paper to this paper, [author paper], I discuss the motivation of pursuits, such as having a family, becoming an artist, contributing to an academic discipline, and so on.

or out of a destructive mood.

The standard approach, which focuses on particular actions, allows, as far as I can see, for three types of positions. One line of argument attempts to find some element of 'something-looking-good' in every action. A second approach takes the surface-structure of problematic actions at face value and argues that they are motivated differently, for example by desire for the bad. Third, one can argue that the GGA is part of a *normative* theory of action: only actions in which something looks good to the agent count as actions in the strict sense.¹³ From this perspective, the problem cases do not call into question the GGA. Rather, insofar as the GGA is a normative theory, it is to be expected that some actions do not meet these norms. This third approach avoids what looks like dogmatism in the other two approaches: the sheer insistence that actions are to be described in this or that fashion. However, it shares with them that it immediately turns to the analysis of particular actions. It thus neglects that much of our motivation is concerned with what we want for our lives as a whole.

2. A Final Motivational End

Consider one of Aristotle's examples for an action: going to the market to buy some

¹³ This is Joseph Raz' approach in 'The Guise of the Good' (in Sergio Tenenbaum (ed.), *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press). Raz offers an account of intentional action. This category does not map neatly onto anything in ancient philosophy. Since I am starting out from Aristotelian considerations, I shall not use the notion of intentionality. However, the ancient philosophers construe a robust notion of action that, for example, excludes reflex actions as well as other limiting cases, cases that today might be classified as non-intentional.

food.¹⁴ This example displays key features of Aristotle's thought about agency. The action is done for the sake of something. That is, the agent goes to the market in order to buy some food. Aristotelian agency is teleological: the good that motivates the agent is an end, a *telos*. Goods are ends. But the end of the action—getting some food—is not a final end. The agent buys food, but not for the sake of buying food. She buys it in order to have something to eat. Why does she want something to eat? These kinds of questions, Aristotle thinks, come to a halt when the answer is “because she wants her life to go well.” *Eudaimonia*, happiness, is the chief end in the sense that it is the highest end within a hierarchy of ends. We can describe this aspect of the theory as being concerned with justification. Asked why she did such-and-such, the agent will eventually have to say that, ultimately, she did what she did because she wants her life to go well. However, the same sequence of questions can be interpreted as being concerned with motivations. The agent was ultimately motivated to buy some food for dinner because she wants her life to go well. There would be no motivations for particular actions if there was not this more fundamental motivation. It is this aspect of motivation and agency that I call Background Motivation.

For Aristotle, both *motivation* and *justification* are jointly captured in the discussions of teleology and the hierarchy of ends. However, one might still want to distinguish between

¹⁴ *Physics* II, 196a. I follow Gabriel Richardson Lear in assuming that Aristotle's teleological account of agency must ultimately be interpreted via the theory of causes he develops in the *Physics* (*Happy Lives and the Highest Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)). From the *NE* alone, it is not clear why goods are ends, and why the analysis of human action should focus on final causes.

motivation and justification. The proposal that our motivations are quite generally rooted in a larger motivation that is in the background—a motivation to have one's life go well—is different from the proposal that justification always leads us to invoke a well-going life as our final end.

Consider some further examples. Suppose a student in an ancient philosophy class is asked: “Why do you take this class?”; she responds “because I want to learn more about ancient philosophy.” Asked why she wants to learn more about ancient philosophy, she says that she finds the ideas of these thinkers interesting. In response to the question why she wants to do things that interest her, she says “well, I think that somehow enriches my life.” Here the questioning comes to an end. The student cites a well-going-life as her ultimate end. If all justifications ended with this kind of reply, then Aristotle might be right: there is one final end, in the sense of one final justificatory end *and* in the sense of one final motivator. The fact that the student wants her life to go well supplies motivation for particular actions; and it is her final justification for choosing her actions.

But things go less well for Aristotle if the questioning proceeds differently. For example, imagine a student whose final response is that “one should do what is right.” The student might take the class for the credits, so as to graduate, get a job, and supply for her family. Asked why she wants to supply for her family, she might say: because I think this is the right thing to do. This might be a final justificatory end, different from the final end of a good life; and there might be further candidates for final justificatory ends.

Another student might take the class for the credits, so as to graduate, in order to get into graduate school, in order to get a well-paying job, in order to be able to send her children to college, so that the children can go to graduate school and get well-paying jobs. In this case, two ends, money and education, supply the motivations for each other. The agent wants money for the sake of a good education, and a good education for the sake of money. Of course, the circularity need not be quite as simple. We can think of more complicated cases, in which ends support each other, while no end is the ultimate end. An agent may cite always yet another end, and it may not be immediately obvious how her various ends interrelate; but in any case, she always refers to yet another end as supporting a given end.

Aristotle dismisses the idea that there is no ultimate end with the following remark: if there were no ultimate good, and the series of ends went on *ad infinitum*, life would be pointless.¹⁵ For him, it is obvious that life is not pointless. Thus, this option is not a serious one. There must be at least one final end, otherwise nothing would have any real significance. If we wanted everything for the sake of something else, and nothing for its own sake, that would mean that everything is pointless and empty. I agree with Aristotle on the following, limited, version of this claim: the good life is a final motivational end.

¹⁵ “If then there is some end in our practical projects that we wish for because of itself, while wishing for the other things we wish for because of it, and we do not choose everything because of something else (for if that is the case, the sequence will go on to infinity, making our desire empty and vain), it is clear that this will be the good, i.e., the chief good.” (1094a18-22, tr. Broadie/Rowe, *Nicomachean Ethics*)

If one did not care about one's own life, then other ends would be motivationally inert.

While there is much to be said about the details of this proposal (I shall turn to some difficulties below), I think that it is compelling. Think of people who experience their lives as pointless, say, due to severe depression. They might, for example, consider duty or beauty as final values. But in a state in which one no longer cares about one's life, these ends, while final, might not exert their characteristic motivational pull. This is the core intuition of what I call **Background Motivation**: a desire to have one's life go well gives a characteristic motivational force and direction to everything else that one cares about. Other, more particular motivations are 'framed' by this background motivation for a good life.

The justificatory side of the story is more difficult (and it is not my immediate topic). If the well-going life were the sole final justificatory end, then all agents would have to refer to it when they give correct ultimate justifications of their actions. But as we saw, it seems possible to justify one's actions by reference to a whole cluster of ends.¹⁶

Aristotle's most compelling reason for insisting that there cannot be an infinite regress of ends is not that, otherwise, one could not fully account for one's actions. His strongest

¹⁶ *NE* I.7 provides further arguments for the claim that there can be only one final end. Aristotle suggests that, once we think in terms of final ends, we can envisage degrees of finality (see 1097a 27-34 for various relevant expressions). Ends stand to each other in for-the-sake-of relationships. For something to qualify as a final end, it must be *teleiōtaton*, which is usually translated as "most complete." Literally, Aristotle is here saying that, for something to be a final end, it must be in the highest degree "end-ish" or "end-like." That which is most end-like is, in another expression, end-like in an unqualified way (*haplôs teleion*, 1097a34). For something to be of this kind, it must meet the criterion that it is never chosen for the sake of anything else, and that it is always desired for its own sake. The highest end must be self-sufficient (to have attained it is to not lack anything).

point is that, without happiness as final end, all of our actions would be (or appear to be) pointless.

3. The Content of Background Motivation

Assuming that there is such a thing as Background Motivation, why think that it is for a well-going life? One competitor of this claim is that Background Motivation is simply for our lives. Against this, Aristotle's point in the *Politics* seems compelling: human beings do not just want to live, they want to live well.¹⁷ Many distinctive features of human life, such as writing laws, creating art and science, and so on, may not be explicable without this.

Our conceptions of a good life systematically exceed the confines of particular lives. In desiring a good life, we hope that our children will be happy, that our paintings will give pleasure to someone, and so on.¹⁸ Aristotle elaborates on this idea when he explains the

¹⁷ Harry Frankfurt discusses related issues. In *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), Frankfurt argues that love for one's life as well as love for one's children give one reasons to do all kinds of things. If it is lost, we lose our grip on why we should be doing anything at all. In *Taking Ourselves Seriously: Getting it Right. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Utah: University of Utah Press, 2005) Frankfurt argues that a certain kind of 'vitality' propels us into the future (25). Self-love has something to do with being alive. When we are alive and relatively well, we have motivations. This is close to Aristotle's view. Aristotle's account of human action is in part an account of animal action. As animals, we are already in motion, guided by perception and the kinds of cognitive and volitional capacities that we share with non-human animals. Reason steers and directs this motion, but is not the sole source of our activities. Cf. Klaus Corcilius, *Streben und Bewegen: Aristoteles' Theorie der animalischen Ortsbewegung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008). One simple observation against Frankfurt's proposal is the following: not everyone has children; it is not clear that, absent this, love for one's own life as he construes it can take on all that there is to Background Motivation.

¹⁸ This is Plato's point in the *Symposium*: in pursuing happiness, we conceive of the good as extending beyond the confines of our own lives. [Cf. author paper].

idea of self-sufficiency (*NE* I.7, 1097b6-15). While a good life is the only self-sufficient end (the only end where nothing is lacking), it would be misguided to assume that one can draw a sharp boundary around one person's life. We can neither draw this boundary with respect to her life-span (what happens after someone's death can be relevant to how good her life was), nor is a person's life *her* life in a sense that excludes those who are close to her. Whether one's life goes well has something to do with the way the lives of others go. That is, desire for a good life includes an extensive range of concerns, many of them not strictly located within an agent's own life narrowly construed.

I shall thus assume that the object of Background Motivation is a well-going life. But this is a rather abstract proposal. Aristotle observes that, though everyone might agree on this point, not much has been gained: we all disagree on what a good life looks like (*NE* I.7, 1097b22-24). Given that we aim to have our lives go well, it is of the utmost importance what conception of a good life we have. One could have a flawed conception of the good life, and then one would be guided by this conception. Most likely, one would end up being miserable. But one does not want to be miserable. So, one needs to think one's way through value-questions. Some of these questions will be quite general: one might aim to find out which kinds of things have value. Some will be even more basic: one may have to study human psychology (for example, the workings of pain and pleasure, as Aristotle does in *NE* II), human cognitive capacities (as Aristotle does in *NE* VI), and the ways in which reason and desire can be in conflict (a topic in *NE* VII). Other questions will be more immediately concerned with one's individual life: one needs to figure out which of

the valuable things one wants to pursue in one's own life.¹⁹ That is, while an agent is importantly concerned with trying to see what the good life is in general, she also needs to come up with a conception of the good life-for-her. These reflections, I propose, aim at a conception of the good life that is correct in the following sense: if one attained the life one pursues, one would (absent adverse events not under one's control) have a well-going life.²⁰ To aim at a good life, and to try to understand what a good life is, are projects that run parallel, and that are works in progress.²¹ In particular motivations, we have the end in sight, even if our sight of it is blurry. The different notions that people have of a good life-for-them give content to Background Motivation, as it figures in their lives.

However, some qualifications are in order here. First, an agent's conception of a good

19 Cf. Sam Scheffler's discussion of valuing ("Valuing,"*). Scheffler distinguishes between judging to be valuable and valuing. For example, one might judge the opera to be valuable, and not value opera-going as a part of one's own life. Though Aristotle does not make this point, it is implicit in his discussions. Aristotle distinguishes between kinds of life that people see as good, and he considers two kinds of life as very good lives: the life of politics and the life of contemplation. Though he arguably thinks that the life of contemplation is best (*NE X*), it is also clear that the active life of politics is a good life to choose for some people, and the life of contemplation a good life to choose for others. An agent might think that, overall, the life of contemplation is best, and at the same time hold that, for her, the life of politics is best.

20 This is similar to J. McDowell's reading of Aristotle. Cf., for example, 'Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology', in S. Everson (ed.), *Companions to Ancient Thought 4: Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 129-145.

21 Cf. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, pp. 3-4. Broadie cites a much-discussed passage from the *Eudemian Ethics*, according to which it is folly not to organize one's life according to some end; we should come up with some account of what it is to live well (1214b6-14). Broadie suggests that it is a kind of luxury and freedom to be able to think about one's life in such terms, rather than just struggle along. However, we might think that, even if few people have the leisure to consider abstract and general questions about human life in the kind of depth that, say, is exemplified in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ordinary life also comes with some thought about what is good, what should be valued and pursued, and the like.

life-for-her can relate in rather indirect ways to her particular motivations.²² Aristotle says that we do not deliberate about ends, but about that which is “toward the ends” (*ta pros ta telê*) (*NE* III.3, 1112b11-12). I suggest that, in describing how particular motivations relate to Background Motivation, we adopt this expression in its widest sense. For an action to be *prostelic*, as we may say, it needs to display a directionality *toward* the end. With a view to many individual actions, one's conception of a well-going life provides no more than side-constraints, and a kind of general direction. Not every particular motivation is prostelic in the more immediate sense that what one is motivated to do appears to contribute directly to the realization of a good life, as understood by the agent. Suppose an agent is motivated to eat a piece of chocolate. In being so motivated, she is unlikely to see any real connection between the way her life is going and her eating this piece of chocolate. However, the general orientation of her particular motivations means that, if, by this piece of chocolate, she was going to reach a threshold and her health would break down, this would affect her motivation. Eating a piece of chocolate might otherwise just be an instance of something, call it 'harmless pleasures,' that the agent thinks is plausibly part of a good life. But by seeing it in this way, the agent does not perceive *this* piece of chocolate as affecting how her life as a whole is going.

22 Importantly, I do not mean to suggest that, as Rachel Barney puts this view that she too rejects, “all our particular desires trickle down, so to speak, from One Big Desire, our desire for happiness—that is, whatever I want, I want strictly as an instrumental means to happiness” (“Plato on the Desire for the Good”, in S. Tenenbaum (ed.), *Desire, Good, and Practical Reason*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, p. 69). Barney's formulation implies two ideas that I reject: first, that the desire for happiness generates all particular desires; and second, that whatever is wanted is wanted as a means to happiness.

Second, it is not clear to what extent our conceptions of the good life are explicitly available to us. For example, it is possible to discover that certain things are important to us, where we had no prior awareness of this fact.²³ Further, people are likely to differ with respect to the effort they make in forming explicit conceptions of a good life.²⁴ Similarly, many of us may be prone to think through value questions in particular domains, domains that for some reason strike us as important to our lives (say, the values relevant to raising children), without at the same time aiming to formulate a comprehensive conception of a good life.

Third, it seems that some of what we desire as part of a good life is, as it were, built into our biology: we want food, drink, shelter, and so on. Under relatively standard conditions, one does not need to reflect on one's values in order to pursue these things (even though the way in which one pursues them is subject to many considerations—we are not simply moved to drink when we are thirsty; we postpone drinking, decide what to drink, develop routines such as having a cup of tea in the afternoon, and so on²⁵). But the pursuit of the things that relate to biological needs is part of the pursuit of a good life.

23 This is a point about which, I think, Frankfurt is right. See for example 'The Importance of What We Care About', *Synthese* 53 (1982), pp. 257-72. Aristotle does not discuss this point, but there is nothing in his theory that precludes it. Surely, many evaluative beliefs are somehow 'buried' in our minds, acquired in childhood, or in other ways not fully transparent to us; in particular situations, they can become relevant to our motivations.

24 I am grateful to * for discussion of these matters.

25 Plato discusses related issues in the *Republic*: in a sense, thirst is a desire for drink, without qualification (not for good drinks, hot drinks, etc., but for something to drink; 439a4-7). However, our particular desires, at given occasions, are for specific kinds of drink. For discussion of the so-called good-independent desires in *Republic* IV, cf. Barney, 'Plato on the Desire for the Good,' pp. 76-77.

That is, the claim that the specific conception of the good life of a given agent supplies her with Background Motivation is too stark. Only part of the content of Background Motivation is constituted by one's conception of a well-going life.

4. The Good or the Attainable?

Background Motivation, thus, is for a good life. 'Good' is here understood in a wide sense, so that positive descriptions as fun, interesting, noble, and so on, are included. The notion of a good life, too, is construed broadly, because it is assumed that an agent's life is not neatly demarcated and separate from the lives of others. But the notion of 'desiring the good' is broad also in another sense, which I have not yet mentioned: it allows for the idea that we desire things that are in part outside of our control, and may, for all we know, even be impossible.

Against this latter point, one could propose that desire is, in some sense, for the attainable. In *NE* III.3, Aristotle says we deliberate about things that depend on us and are doable (1112a30-31). What is excluded here?²⁶ First, we do not deliberate about eternal things. Second, we do not deliberate about things the causes of which lie outside of human agency, such as the turnings of celestial bodies. Third, we do not deliberate about things that depend on the actions of other people. Fourth, we do not deliberate about that

²⁶ I am providing an incomplete list; each item on the list is subject to much scholarly discussion.

which is impossible.²⁷ Consider also Aristotle's distinction between decision (*prohairesis*) and wish (*boulêsis*) (*NE* III.2, 1111b19-30). Aristotle says that “wish is more for the end, whereas decision is about what forwards the end (*tôn pros to telos*).”²⁸ For example, “we wish to be healthy, but decide on the things through which we shall be healthy, and we wish to be happy, and say that we wish it, whereas it is out of keeping to say 'we decide to be happy'; for generally decision appears to be about things that depend on us.” There is no decision for impossible things, and decision is also not concerned with things that are not fully in our power. One does not decide to be healthy, or to be happy. But one can wish for impossible things, say, for immortality. One can also wish for things that are not fully in our power, such as health or happiness.

Decision and deliberation—both of which are concerned with particular actions or sets of actions (as they are involved in, say, making some tea), and perhaps also with practices, routines, and so on (say, going for a bike-ride every day to stay fit)—are confined to the things that are possible and depend on our actions. But there is at least one other mode of practical thought, wishing, where we look toward ends that are not fully within our power. This is how we desire a good life: we want it, and our smaller-scale motivations are shaped by this wish; but whether we attain it is not fully up to us.

²⁷ In *NE* VI.5, 1140a33 f. Aristotle says that no one deliberates about what cannot be otherwise, or about things that one has no possibility of doing.

²⁸ Cf. *NE* III.5, 1113b3-4: “Given, then, that what is wished for is the end, while what we deliberate about and decide on are the things that forward the end [...]”

In his influential paper “The Guise of the Good,” David Velleman argues that desire is restricted to the attainable.²⁹ “One cannot desire something if it seems impossible or if it seems already to have come about; one can desire that *p* only if *p* seems attainable, in the sense of being a possible future outcome.” (17) In agreement with the tradition initiated by Anscombe, Velleman is exclusively concerned with desire as it figures in the motivations of particular actions. He rejects the GGA, partly for the reason that, as he puts it, the constitutive predicate of desire is 'attainable': we desire the attainable, not the good. But insofar as Velleman engages with the standard version of the GGA—that is, the version that concerns itself only with particular actions—his proposal is not one about desire generally speaking. Rather, it is a proposal about desire as it figures in the motivation that immediately leads up to one particular action (or set of actions). Though Velleman takes himself to disagree with the Aristotelian tradition, in fact he agrees with an important feature of it: with respect to particular deliberations and particular actions, Aristotle too thinks that desire is confined to the attainable.

But desire for a well-going life is a different matter. Desire for a well-going life is what Aristotle calls wish: it is a desire for what is not fully in our power, and for what may be impossible. On any conception of a good life (say, a life centered around having children, or the life of a movie star), there are external factors that partly determine whether we achieve what we pursue. We thus desire something that is not attainable in the narrow sense that it would be in our power to attain it.

²⁹ *Nous* 26 (1992), pp. 3-26.

More than that, our conception of a good life can also include things that are not fully possible. Consider Aristotle's point that we do not deliberate about how to become a god.³⁰ At the same time, Aristotle thinks that the best life is the life of *theoria*, and that is, the life that a god leads.³¹ Such a life, Aristotle says, is almost not on the human plane. But we ought not to listen to those who say that, as humans and mortals, we should think human and mortal thoughts (*NE* X.7). The best life is a life in which we aim for something that, for all we know, is impossible.³² A core intuition behind this proposal is one about ideals: it is valuable to love ideals and strive for ideals, even if they are not “possible outcomes.” Today we might think of other ideals than the ideal to become like a god. But nevertheless, the claim that, in desiring a good life, we strive for ideals that, for all we know, might not be fully attainable, seems right.

Accordingly, I shall assume that Background Motivation is for the good, not for the attainable. Insofar as Aristotelians focus on particular actions, they should formulate a

30 This example figures in Aristotle's contrast of decision and wish. However, I take it that both deliberation and decision cannot be concerned with the impossible.

31 I am here taking a stance on a long-standing interpretative issue: whether Aristotle indeed ranks the life of *theoria* higher than the political life (the life of character virtue). In recent years, several commentators have presented arguments for the view I am adopting. Cf. John Cooper, ‘Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration’, in J. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 212-236; Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Lear, *Happy Lives*.

32 With this formulation, I am trying to capture the thought that we may not know what is possible. For all we know, it is impossible to become a god (though Epicurus thought he successfully became a god). I am grateful to * for discussion of this point.

'Guise of the Attainable (Possible/In-Our-Power)' theory, not a Guise of the Good theory.

Only if the fundamental role of desire for a good life is recognized, we see that desire for the good figures importantly in our motivations.

5. Correctness

According to standard versions of the GGA of Action, motivation involves evaluative judgments or beliefs, and these judgments, qua judgments, aim to get it right. For example, Joseph Raz formulates the key assumption of the GGA as follows: "Intentional actions are taken in, and because of, a belief that there is some good in them."³³ That which is desired is judged to be good. I shall assume that this is a standard assumption of the GGA of Action: motivation involves evaluative beliefs.³⁴ Like other beliefs, evaluative beliefs aim to be true.³⁵ This might be a highly counterintuitive feature of the GGA. Do agents pursue, in each and every action, what is 'really' good?

As Velleman points out, motivation, according to the GGA of Action, appears strangely

33 'The Guise of the Good', MS p.1.

34 In passing, I want to mention one further complication. The expression 'guise of the good' translates two Latin phrases: *sub specie boni*, and *sub ratione boni*. Arguably, *sub specie boni* captures an idea that is widely neglected in contemporary discussions: in motivation, there is not only active judgment of the agent about the world. There is also the world, as it were, speaking to the agent. The coffee smells delicious, the snowflake looks lovely; the coffee asks to be drunk, the snowflake invites us to touch it. The 'guise' is something like a glow, a glow that affects the agent.

35 Velleman engages with cognitivist and non-cognitivist intuitions about the GGA, and rejects the standard version of the GGA, according to which motivation involves evaluative judgments ('The Guise of the Good'). The Aristotelian version of the GGA that I propose is cognitivist in the following sense: I assume that agents are partly guided by explicit conceptions of the good, and that these conceptions aim to be correct in the sense that, if one consistently lived according to them, one's life would—absent drastic adverse events—turn out to be a good life.

uniform: agents seem to always aim at what is really good. This weakness of the GGA, however, does not result from the general thesis that motivation involves desire for the good. It emerges only when we reconstruct the GGA as a thesis about particular actions, instead, as I suggest, primarily as a thesis about Background Motivation. The correctness conditions for evaluative judgments, I propose, vary depending on the scale of the motivation. When we desire something under a positive description, it makes a great difference whether we see a link between the desire and the way our life as a whole is going, or whether we see no such link. Where our choices affect the way our life is going, we aim to get things right in the sense that what we believe to be good should really affect our life in a good way. Suppose, say, that I find the life of partying and drugs good. I will run up against reality, for sooner or later I shall be miserably sick, and my life will be devoid of things that could have emerged had I had a different conception of the good life. Background Motivation can mislead us quite significantly, if we have a sufficiently misguided idea of what it would be to have a good life. Background Motivation, accordingly, aims to be correct in a comprehensive sense: we aim to judge as good that which is really good for the way our life is going. Where our life as a whole is affected, this does not seem overly ambitious. Even if it may be hard to figure out what will be good for us, we tend to consider it worthwhile to try to do so.

In particular motivations, however, the final end of a good life may recede into the background, because whatever we do, our life does not seem to be greatly affected by it. In such situations, we do not aim to get things right in any ambitious way. For example,

when we pick one cookie from a plate, we are not trying to assess how this particular choice shall affect our life. We take one that looks good. In a more localized sense, we still aim to get it right: we aim to pick a cookie that not only looks good, but tastes good; accordingly, we might look closely, avoiding cookies with fillings that we dislike. But the aim to judge correctly is limited: we are not sufficiently serious about this choice in order to assess it in more comprehensive terms. When Guise of the Good theorists focus on particular actions, asking whether the agent aims to judge correctly in every particular motivation, they neglect the fact that often, we hardly care. We are not sufficiently invested to even try to see whether a certain course of action is ultimately good for us. Similarly, actions performed out of silliness (a kid pinches her sister and runs away giggling), actions performed out of a self-consciously superficial desire for the good (another piece of chocolate, even though I know it is not good for me), and so on, are not actions in which we aim at what is good in any comprehensive or ambitious sense. Sometimes, we are motivated by what may be an odd mix of attraction and aversion (the fun! the badness!); but we do not find these actions important. We are happy to act on trifling motivations, because we do not think that, one way or another, much is at stake.³⁶ Indeed, we think that someone who simply cannot decide which cookie to eat is getting her priorities wrong, and misunderstands something about the relationship between small-scale choices and her life as a whole.

³⁶ Note that I am not referring here to actions that are trivial in another sense, such as tapping one's fingers on the desk; actions that are trivial in my sense—actions that we do not see as contributing to how our life goes on the whole—can be non-trivial in this first sense.

6. Lack of Motivation and Self-Destructive Motivation

I suggested that Aristotle is right in arguing that, for us to be motivated at all, there must be the Background Motivation of desiring a good life. It is a familiar point that *eudaimonia* is not to be identified with well-being, or happiness as a state in which we 'feel great.' Background Motivation is for a life that *goes well*.³⁷ For example, an agent who is chronically ill and who does not expect to ever feel well in her future life, can nevertheless care about her life, and be motivated to have her life go well. But we must take seriously the option that Aristotle dismisses: that for some, life is pointless.

Background Motivation can take hits. It is possible not to care what will happen to one's life, and not to be 'carried along' in one's particular motivations by a more general motivation for a well-going life.

Today, philosophers tend not to ask whether life actually is pointless. Rather, they ask what it is that generates the experience of one's life having meaning. The most prominent type of answer is that, for this to be the case, we need to have things that matter to us.³⁸ It is conceivable to drift into a life where one cares about nothing. This would likely be a life that is experienced as pointless. With Background Motivation intact, we are motivated to prevent this. That is, where we do not find ourselves having things that are

37 This idea is relatively close to what Frankfurt calls "taking ourselves seriously"; we concern ourselves with how we want our lives to go. 'Taking Ourselves Seriously' is the title of the first lecture in Frankfurt's *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*.

38 H. Frankfurt, 'The Importance of What We Care About' and *The Reasons of Love*; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy & Policy* Vol. 14 (1997), pp. 207-225; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (forthcoming from Princeton University Press).

important to us, we seek out things that will matter to us. However, various negative moods and states, such as dejection and depression, can arguably wipe out motivation. This is an empirical assumption—that in cases of depression motivation goes away. There might be cases where depression affects the way in which our thoughts and desires set us in motion. For example, the decision to get up and get oneself something to drink may simply prove ineffective: it may not *make* one get up and get oneself a drink (and not because of a weak will problem, or anything of that kind).

Velleman does not share the view that, in depression, we lack motivation. He assumes that an agent with depression, who, say, stays at home, is motivated to stay at home, and that this kind of motivation is something like “to hell with it all.” Velleman considers an agent who, apart from staying home, smashes things in her apartment, thinking something like “I am determined never to do a good or desirable or positive thing again. If smashing things seemed like a good thing to do, I would pointedly avoid it [...] I’m smashing things because this seems like an utterly worthless act, worthless from every perspective but especially from mine.”³⁹

Velleman here suggests that cases of not-doing-things, such as not leaving one's room, are actions. In general, this seems to be a kind of inflation one should avoid. If everything one does not do were to count as an action, this might mean that one performs countless actions at the same time. However, Velleman could insist that not leaving the apartment *is*

³⁹ ‘The Guise of the Good,’ pp. 20-21.

plausibly described as something 'the depressed person does'; it might be understood as part of a pattern that reflects the person's condition. Velleman's depressed agent does not leave the room, does not talk to anyone, and smashes things in her apartment. That is, Velleman ascribes actions-cum-motivations to the dejected agent, rather than the absence of motivation. Velleman describes these actions in terms of attraction to the bad. On his account, not leaving the room is continuous with smashing things: not leaving the room is, in the given scenario, a self-destructive action. Velleman's example is, for him, a case against the GGA: the agent is motivated by seeing his action or its outcome as bad.

It seems futile to me to deny that both kinds of cases occur: dejection with self-destructive action, which in some sense embraces the bad, and dejection that wipes out motivation. But once we include these extreme cases, we might add that other conditions in which agents are seriously unwell, be it through depression, trauma, severe oppression, and so on, might affect motivations in yet further ways. Motivation may, in some cases, not be wiped out or directed toward the bad, but instead confused or stirred into some kind of chaos. Background Motivation for a good life, if intact, supplies side-constraints for particular motivations, and it supplies a kind of directionality for them: a directionality toward the good. But once we admit that Background Motivation can be affected, there is no principled reason to assume that it could only be affected in one way. That is, it could be wiped out, lose its power to supply a direction toward the good, or it

could be upset and confused.⁴⁰

7. Conclusion

I propose that the GGA is best located in the analysis of the motivation that feeds into the motivations for particular actions, rather than in the analysis of particular actions. With respect to Background Motivation—and that is, the desire to have our lives go well—we want to get it right; we want to pursue that which will actually make our lives go well. And thus we desire the good. But with respect to particular motivations, things are more complicated and elusive.

First, there is the much neglected matter that we often do not care at any deep level.

Another piece of chocolate is not good for me—but so be it. In fact, it strikes us that there is something pedantic about people who take every little thing they do seriously. Second, there are moments or even prolonged phases of profound motivational confusion.

Background Motivation for a good life can take hits. If we are severely depressed, traumatized, and so on, particular motivations may no longer be framed and directed in the ways that they otherwise are. Or we may get deeply misled with respect to our conception of a good life—for a moment, a life of excessive and addictive pleasure seems

⁴⁰ In *Engaging Reason*, Raz describes cases that look as if they did not fit into the GGA of Action as follows: the agent cannot give reasons that others would see as reasons. If I said that I kept clicking my pen because nothing else in the universe seemed at all worthwhile to me, my interlocutor would respond with concern. She would not say “ah, now I see.” Since talk about reasons is alien to the broadly Aristotelian framework I adopt, I do not speak in these terms. But the point that our motivations might be confused aims to include this kind of case.

the best life there could be; or 'sin,' as envisaged by authors like Augustine, looks so alluring that we forget our conception of the good. Again, under such conditions, particular motivations may not be for the good.

My proposal aims to avoid what I see as difficulties in approaches that immediately focus on the analysis of particular actions. Some theorists insist that every particular motivation contains an element of something looking good to the agent. It may be possible to extract such an element even from cases that, at first glance, look as if the agent was motivated by the bad, acted from silliness, and so on. There is much to be said about deceiving appearances, and perhaps also about the way things appear to our desires as opposed to how they appear to reason. But such accounts have a disadvantage: they deny the most obvious description, namely that in some actions people are not motivated by the good.

Other theorists—and recently most notably Velleman—embrace the fact that agents sometimes desire the bad, act from silliness, and so on, and almost celebrate this as a kind of diversity in human agency. While there might be something refreshing in this anti-scholastic proposal, I think it neglects that correctness is indeed our aim when our lives as a whole are concerned. While we may desire all kinds of pointless, bad, and so on, things when it comes to particular motivations, we do not want them under the description that our whole life will become a shipwreck. Once we see that some action we are otherwise motivated to perform involves a serious threat to our life as a whole, we tend to hold back. Only if Background Motivation is wiped out, and we do not even want to go on

living, or do not care at all what our life will look like, no such threshold-considerations apply—then, motivational inertia, desire for the bad, or lack of direction take over.⁴¹

⁴¹ I presented this paper at Penn University and at Yale University. I am grateful to Christiana Olfert for her comments on an early draft. Jens Haas provided extremely valuable feedback on several versions of the paper.