

Desiring the Good: A Socratic Reading of Aristotle*

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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.¹ This view goes back to an older, and broader thesis, which I shall call the GGA of Motivation. The GGA of Motivation says that human agency is motivated by desire for the good. Once the core intuition of Guise of the Good theories is formulated in this fashion, a distinction between two approaches becomes visible. For the most part, Guise of the Good theorists turn immediately to the analysis of individual actions. Contrary to this trend, I shall focus on the way in which the GGA is concerned with motivations that concern one's life as a whole. I shall put forward what I call the GGA of *Background Motivation*. As I shall argue, a general motivation to have one's life go well feeds into motivations for individual actions, and supplies side-constraints and a general directionality for their motivations. So far, the Aristotelian tradition has neglected its greatest resource for saving the GGA: that agents want their lives to go well.

Surely, scholars of ancient ethics as well as virtue ethicists often discuss the notion of a good life, or happiness (*eudaimonia*). However, the theory of motivation for action strikes me as an exception. Here, scholars focus immediately on individual actions, and neglect the notion of

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1 In *NE* III, 1110b33-1111a1, Aristotle says that action is concerned with particulars. This is the starting point of standard versions of the GGA of Action: they are accounts of motivation for individual actions.

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, thinks of the idea that happiness can be attained in this (mortal) life as a pagan “idiocy.”² 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).³ By doing so they misconstrue and underrate Aristotle's theory. As I see it, contemporary theory of action still bears traces of this approach.

Consider the kinds of examples that 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 in. For example, it sometimes looks as if we were not really motivated at all (we just find ourselves doing something), or we

2 In Book XIX of the *City of God*, Augustine gives a stunning account of different positions held in ancient ethics. He agrees with Varro that there are 288 positions on the question ‘What is the supreme good?’ Augustine then compares these positions—or rather, what is common to them: the immense folly (or, in the case of the Stoics, the “amazing idiocy”) of seeking happiness in this life—with the Christian conception of the highest good, eternal life.

3 I shall not be able to discuss these in-between things in as much detail as they deserve. I will assume that a ‘decision’ in Aristotle's sense (*proairesis*) might be for, say, a long-term plan (e.g., to study philosophy), a policy (e.g., to always brush one's teeth after lunch), or routines (e.g., to always check email during breakfast), rather than only for individual actions (e.g., to go to a certain restaurant for dinner today).

act out of silliness, or from desire for the bad, 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.⁴ According to such a theory, only actions in which something looks good to the agent count as actions in the strict sense.⁵ 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 practical reasoning and motivation is concerned with what we want for our lives as a whole.⁶

I shall develop my position by drawing on Aristotle, explaining what I see as some core features of his proposal. Eventually, however, I part ways with Aristotle. First, and this is the point I already made, I think that the GGA is most compelling when it comes to Background

4 In contemporary terms, this would be an account of *intentional* action. In my view, 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 certainly focus on actions that have similar characteristics, such as 'being under our control,' actions for which praise and blame are appropriate, and so on. I shall assume that these theories put forward a robust notion of action that, for example, excludes reflex actions as well as other limiting cases (which today might be classified as non-intentional).

5 This is Joseph Raz' approach in "The Guise of the Good" (MS, forthcoming in ed. Tenenbaum).

6 Further, there is much that is in between particular actions and the most general aim to have one's life go well—for example, policies (e.g., to exercise regularly), projects (e.g., to become a good chef), habits (e.g., to acquire a routine of doing one's email every morning during breakfast), and so on.

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.⁷ Second, Aristotle does not acknowledge what today seems undeniable: that it is possible not to want one's life to go well.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 two aspects of my proposal: first, I propose that Aristotle's method is more Socratic than this is usually assumed; and second, I think that the GGA is essentially an interpretation of the Socratic Paradox, namely, that everyone desires the good. Let me explain.

Contemporary scholars have moved away from scholastic readings of Aristotle in some respects, but not, in my view, sufficiently. According to the tradition, Aristotle formulates such principles as “we do not deliberate about ends.” But is this claim really put forward as the

7 An important caveat is in order here, another point that the Thomistic-Anscombeian tradition neglects: 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, in my view, 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 (*charin*) the pleasant and the noble (*kala*).

8 I also have doubts regarding two fundamental Aristotelian claims: that goods are ends, and that every action has an end. However, I assume that most particular actions have ends, and that the good life is a final end.

9 In this respect, my proposal is similar to Joseph Raz' discussion in “Agency, Reason, and the Good,” in *Engaging Reason*.

'principle' that the scholastic reception cites? Consider three features of the text.¹⁰ First, this claim is part of a contrast: we do not deliberate about ends, but about that which is “toward the ends” (*ta pros ta telê*); obviously, this latter expression is hard to interpret, and the interpretation of the contrast hangs on it. Second, it is explained through rather specific examples: a doctor does not, with every patient who enters her office, deliberate about the end (health); an orator does not deliberate about whether to persuade, and a politician does not deliberate about whether to bring about good government. In these examples, we consider people who have roles and professions that come with ends; however, ordinary actions often are not situated in equally well-defined contexts. Third, the quote is part of a discussion of one mode of practical thought, namely deliberation strictly speaking (the practical reasoning that directly leads up to action), to be distinguished from other modes of practical reasoning.¹¹

When we consider these aspects of the text, I guess a plausible reaction is to think that matters are more complicated than the scholastic slogan makes it seem. The claim that we do not deliberate about ends (which, for my present purposes, only serves as an example for what I see as too scholastic a reception of Aristotle's theory), is immersed into subtle considerations and specific examples. An account of Aristotle's theory that isolates such 'principles' misconstrues the spirit of Aristotle's philosophy, even where it rightly focuses on important ideas. I think that Plato and Aristotle learnt from Socrates an exploratory mode of philosophical investigation. If

¹⁰ More could be added.

¹¹ Another passage is immediately relevant here, and I turn to it in more detail below. In *NE* III.2, 1111b26-30, Aristotle contrasts decision (*proairesis*) with wish (*boulêsis*): “wish is more for the end, whereas decision is about what forwards the end (*tôn pros to telos*).” 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.”

we read the *Nicomachean Ethics* without the medieval slogans in mind, we find, in my view, a text that displays this mode almost as much as Plato's dialogues do.

Second, I think that Aristotle develops his position—that ultimately, all human activity aims at the good life—by starting out from a quote of the Socratic Paradox, or rather, an interpretation of the Socratic Paradox. Consider the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: Each expertise, each inquiry, each action and each decision “seems to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”¹²

The transition between the first and the second clause is notoriously difficult. As scholars have pointed out, the contrast is not between what seems to be the case and what really is the case. Rather, Aristotle's expression “seems to aim at some good” is a reference to what others have said (“to some people it seems that, ...”).¹³ The claim that these people put forward, Aristotle says, supplies the reason for a further claim: that all things aim at the good, and that is, the good life.

Who does Aristotle refer to, when he invokes the views of others? As I see it, these others include, importantly, Socrates and Plato. Indeed, it seems crucial that we identify the first

12 Broadie/Rowe write: “The argument is: since specific projects each seek some specific good, the good without qualification must be what is sought by any project whatsoever. The premiss is uncontroversial, ...” (2002, 262). I think that, once we recognize the premise as a version of the Socratic Paradox, it is clear that it is far from uncontroversial. Indeed, it is highly controversial, for precisely the reasons that contemporary philosophers like David Velleman cite when they disagree with the GGA of Action: it seems that we can point to a range of cases in which actions do not seem to involve desire for the good.

13 Cf. Broadie/Rowe (2002) 262. However, Broadie/Rowe do not point out who these others are. While they seem to me to be right in assuming that many have formulated views to this effect, it still appears important to identify the first and most prominent proponent of this claim—Socrates.

sentence of the *NE* as an interpreted quote of the Socratic Paradox, that everyone desires the good.¹⁴ By reformulating the Socratic idea in the way he does, Aristotle turns his attention to the motivation of activities, rather than the possession of goods. He thus sides with one of two interpretations of the Socratic Paradox that figure importantly in Plato: that desiring the good figures in motivations for actions, rather than being a desire to acquire and have 'goods.'¹⁵

Engaging with what we might call the Motivation Interpretation of the Socratic Paradox, Aristotle considers different components of human activity: every expertise (*technê*) and every inquiry, and similarly every action and decision (*proairesis*) is said to aim at some good. *Therefore*, Aristotle says, *the good* is that at which all things aim. As I see it, the opening statement of the *NE* is programmatic. The details of the argument will have to be filled in later. However, Aristotle sketches two connections that he will develop throughout the *NE*. First, Aristotle will go on to argue that there is a hierarchy of 'arts' or expertises, each with its own good; we can only make sense of this hierarchy if we assume that there is a master-art, namely the art of politics, which aims at *the good*—the good human life.¹⁶ Second, individual actions are located, as it were, in a double framework: they take place in the context of practices, skills, and so on, and they ultimately take place against the background of desire for a good life.¹⁷

14 Aristotle's formulation picks up on one of two different ways of construing this claim: in every action or activity, the agent desires some good. The other option, which also figures in Aristotle's discussions in *NE I*, is that desire is for the possession of good things—the *having of goods*. Obviously, there are many more interpretations of the Socratic Paradox. However, the question of whether one reads it as a claim in the theory of action or as a claim about desire for possession of good things is a rather basic one. In different contexts, Plato explores both versions.

15 The Motivation Interpretation is, for example, prominent in Book IV of the *Republic*; the Goods Interpretation is central to Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*.

16 On Aristotle's discussion of politics as a master-*technê* at the beginning and end of the *NE*, cf. John Cooper, "Political Community and the Highest Good," in J. Lennox (ed.) (2008).

17 I am grateful to Verity Harte for discussion of the first sentence of the *NE*.

I shall adopt the perspective that Aristotle outlines in the beginning of the *NE*. I think that a formulation of the GGA is an interpretation of the Socratic Paradox. I follow Aristotle in arguing that a core component of the Socratic Paradox lies in how we relate to *the* good, and that is, the good life. That is, I accept 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.

2. Motivation and Justification

Consider one of Aristotle's examples for an action: going to the market to buy some food.¹⁸ This example displays key features of Aristotle's thought about agency.

- (1) 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.¹⁹
- (2) 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. This is the

18 *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 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.

19 I consider the identification of goods and ends a weighty step in Aristotle's theory. However, I shall not engage with it here, since it deserves separate and detailed discussion.

architectonic aspect of Aristotle's theory. 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.²⁰

(3) However, the same sequence of questions can be interpreted as being concerned with **motivations**. The agent was motivated by her thought that she should buy some food for dinner because, more basically, 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 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 comes to an end when we invoke a well-going life.

Consider some examples. Suppose a student in an ancient philosophy class is asked: “Why do you take this class?”

- “Because I want to learn more about ancient philosophy”
- “Why do you want to learn more about ancient philosophy?”
- “Because I find the ideas of these people interesting.”

²⁰ Cf. Gabriel Richardson-Lear.

- “Why do you want to hear more about things that interest you?”
- “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 goal. 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 reason for choosing her actions.

But things go less well for Aristotle if the questioning proceeds differently. For example, imagine an agent who gives as her final reason “because I think 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 other candidates for further final justificatory ends.

Another problem case can be called Circularity. A 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 many 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.²¹ 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. But this cannot be so. Accordingly, there must be at least one final end. I agree with Aristotle on this point: the good life is a final motivational end. 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 consider, for example, 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: that a desire to have one's life go well gives a characteristic motivational force and direction to everything else that one cares about. That is, with respect to motivation the end of a good life seems to play a distinctively different role from other final ends. In this sense, it seems plausible to single it out. The final motivational end—that one's life goes well—supplies motivational

21 "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)

force for other ends. It also supplies a kind of directionality: other, more particular motivations are 'framed' by this background motivation for a good life.

In my view, the justificatory side of the story is more difficult (and it is not my immediate topic). If the well-going life is to be the final justificatory end, then 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.²² 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 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?²³ One competitor of this claim is that Background Motivation is simply for our lives.

22 *NE* I.7 provides further arguments on the question of why there can be only one final end. However, it is far from clear that these arguments are successful. 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). We think of ends as standing to each other in for-the-sake-of relationships (and that is, hierarchical relationships). Aristotle explains that, for something to qualify as a final end, it must be *teleiōtaton*. "*Teleiōtaton*" 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* (*haplōs teleion*, 1097a34). For something to be of this kind, it must meet the criterion that it is never chosen for the sake of something else, and that it is always desired for its own sake. Second, the highest end must be self-sufficient. An end is self-sufficient if someone who 'had it' did not lack anything.

23 I am assuming that "a well-going life" or "happiness" is Aristotle's answer to "what is the good?" Aristotle suggests that we all agree that happiness is the good, and now the question is "but what is happiness?" Accordingly, one might say that his answer to "what is the (greatest) good?" is immediately the answer to "what is happiness?"; namely, "virtuous activity [of reason] in a complete life" (*EN* I, 1089a18). This is Sarah Broadie's way of putting things ("On the Idea of the *summum bonum*", in *Virtue, Norms, and Objectivity*, ed. Christopher Gill (Oxford 2005), 41-58). However, I think it is important to keep two things apart. The reply to "what is the good?" (namely, "the good life") and then the reply to the second question, that is, the question "what is the good life?" which is "virtuous activity in a complete life." Cf. note 29.

Against this, Aristotle's point in the *Politics* seems compelling: human beings do not just want to live, they want to live well. Many distinctive features of human life, such as writing laws, creating art and science, and so on, may not be explicable without this.²⁴

Both Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt hold views relevant to these issues. Both think that, in some sense, particular motivations depend on a more basic motivation. Williams puts this in terms of projects: if we did not set ourselves projects—things that we want to do in life—our life would lack meaning for us. Nothing propels us into the future, and we are not motivated to do the small things necessary to carry on living. Frankfurt talks about love for one's life as the first and most basic desire, and, in his terms, as the source of reasons. 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.²⁵

In his *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Frankfurt criticizes Williams' proposal as too stark.²⁶ It seems implausible that, without setting ourselves some projects, we have no motivations at all. Perhaps many of us have no real projects, and still do lots of things. Frankfurt thinks that his conception of self-love is more fundamental: it has something to do with being alive. When we are alive and relatively well, then we have motivations. What propels us into the many

24 Even though Aristotle claims that this is a characteristic of human life, he is not committed to the claim that there is a sharp line between human life and non-human animals with higher-level cognitive capacities. For example, it might be possible to say that animals with more complex kinds of communal arrangements (whom Aristotle would call political animals) also aim in some sense at a good life, even though they lack a concept of the good.

25 Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton 2004).

26 *Tanner Lectures* p. 25: Williams says that only people who have projects are propelled into the future, and have a reason to go on at all ("Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck* 1981, 12-14). Against this, Frankfurt argues that a certain kind of 'vitality' propels us into the future.

particular motivations we have is something that comes, as it were, with being a more-or-less healthy human organism.²⁷

One simple observation against Frankfurt's proposal however is the following: not everyone has children, and 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.²⁸ Love for one's children plays a key role in Frankfurt's conception: it extends our concerns beyond our own lives. This kind of scope is, I think, crucial. 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.²⁹ Aristotle elaborates on this idea when he explains the 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 near 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

27 I think that this is relatively 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 practical reasoning is not the sole source of our various activities. For a compelling recent interpretation of the relevant issues in *De motu animalium*, *NE*, and *De anima*, cf. Klaus Corcilius, *Streben und Bewegen: Aristoteles' Theorie der animalischen Ortsbewegung* (Berlin 2008).

28 Frankfurt's proposal is in striking ways similar to the Stoic view. The Stoics think that our first impulses are for our lives and for our children, and that motivation grows from there.

29 This is Plato's point in the *Symposium*: the way in which we desire the good (happiness) systematically extends beyond the confines of our own lives. I discuss this in "Desiring the Good Forever: Theory of Action in Plato's *Symposium*" (to be published as part of a volume co-edited with Dimitri El Murr, *Desiring the Good in Plato*).

life narrowly construed.³⁰

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 kind 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.³¹ These

30 There is a further point on which Frankfurt's position arguably differs deeply from ancient proposals; however, the details of the disagreement go beyond this paper (and, of course, Frankfurt does not present his views in any kind of explicit conversation with ancient theories). In his *Tanner Lectures*, Frankfurt begins with the claim that human beings take themselves seriously. This may mean that we occupy ourselves rather much with ourselves and our own lives. However, Frankfurt develops this idea with an emphasis on the *reflexive* nature of our engagement with ourselves (171). It is a difficult question whether the ancient view that we want our lives to go well involves this idea. Surely, self-knowledge or the probing of one's beliefs and quest for an ordered soul are central elements of various theories. There might be important differences between this kind of engagement with the beliefs and dispositions 'in one's soul' and reflexivity as envisaged by Frankfurt.

31 Cf. Sam Scheffler's discussion of valuing ("Valuing," MS forthcoming). 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. While Aristotle does not make this kind of distinction, it seems to me implicit in his discussions. Aristotle engages with 'goods' (things that are of value) in several ways: as things we can consider without direct reference to our own life, reflecting on their value in human life generally; and as things around which people can organize their lives (recall the language of the "life of X").

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. 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. In our particular motivations, we have the end in sight, even if our sight of it is blurry.³² The different notions that people have of a well-going life give content to Background Motivation, as it figures in their lives.³³ However, some qualifications are in order here.

First, an agent's conception of a good life can relate in rather indirect ways to her particular motivations. For example, it will provide side-constraints, and a kind of general directionality. Not every particular motivation is *prothetic* (as we might capture Aristotle's expression “toward the end”) in the sense that what one is motivated to do appears to contribute directly to the realization of a good life, as understood by the agent. Sometimes, it can be enough that it does not interfere with it (say, eating a little more chocolate won't greatly affect one's life one way or

32 Cf. the widespread ancient image of archery, which aims to capture that, in virtue, we aim at a goal. Ideally, one is not only a good archer, but also has perfect vision, and a goal that is in full view. That is, ideally one is a good decision-maker, has a clear conception of the good life, and the good life is actually attainable. Cf. De Sosa's discussion of archery.

33 I am here bypassing a controversial question, namely, whether Aristotle's view that the good life is *one (single)* highest end immediately involves the claim that this good life is organized around one single *end*. Gabriel Richardson Lear (2004) argues forcefully for this interpretation: the best life is a life that is structured towards the highest end, which, in her view, can be identified with happiness *understood as* the life of contemplation. I am inclined to disagree with this reading of Aristotle, however, not because I would not agree that the life of theory is, for Aristotle, the best life. My view is that there are two distinct claims here: First, it is a substantive thesis that the good life is the highest good. This thesis competes with more traditional Greek views, which identify one good as the highest good, and then envisage a life organized around this good as the best life. Cf. Vogt, “Why Pleasure Gains Fifth Rank: Against the Anti-Hedonist Interpretation of the *Philebus*” for discussion of some relevant issues. Second, it is another substantive question whether the good (or best) life is organized around one single good in the traditional sense (such as *theoria*, virtue, etc.). I tend to think that it is. The difference between my view and Lear's view is thus that I consider “the good life is the good” a non-trivial thesis. However, for the present purposes, it is sufficient to assume that everyone shall be motivated by her conception of a good life, as far as it is explicit, and whether it is correct or not.

another).³⁴

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.³⁵ Further, people are likely to differ with respect to the effort they make in forming explicit conceptions of a good life.³⁶ Similarly, many of us may be prone to think through value questions in particular domains, domains which for some reason strike them as important to their lives (say, the values relevant to family relations), 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; rather, we postpone drinking, decide what to drink, develop routines such as drinking a cup of tea in the afternoon, and so on). But the pursuit of the things that relate to what we need is part of the pursuit of a good life. That is, the claim that the specific conception of the good life of a given agent supplies her with her Background Motivation is too stark. Only part of the content of Background Motivation is constituted by one's conception of a well-going

34 Again, this is in disagreement with the view that Aristotle envisages means-end-relationships. My claim is *not* that an agent is motivated to do things that are means to her final end, namely a well-going life, envisaged in such-and-such a fashion.

35 This is a point about which, I think, Frankfurt is right. See for example “The Importance of What We Care About.”

36 I am grateful to Susanne Bobzien for discussion of these matters.

life.

4. *The Good or the Attainable?*

Let me take a step back and look at one of the basic premises of my argument, namely, that to desire something under a positive description (leaving aside for the moment the question of desire for the bad) is desire for the good. 'Good' is here understood in a broad sense, where it is assumed that positive descriptions of something as fun, interesting, noble, and so on, are included. The notion of 'desiring the good' is broad also in another sense: 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 for the attainable. It is a long-standing idea that some key aspect of motivation—whether it is desiring, willing, or deliberating—is for the attainable. For example, in *NE* III.3 Aristotle says we deliberate about things that depend on us and are doable (1112a30-31). What is excluded here?³⁷ 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 which is impossible.³⁸ Consider also Aristotle's distinction between decision (*proairesis*) and wish (*boulêsis*) (*NE* III.2, 1111b19-30). Aristotle says that “wish is more for the end, whereas

³⁷ I am providing an incomplete list; each item on the list is subject to much scholarly discussion.

³⁸ 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.

decision is about what forwards the end (*tôn pros to telos*).”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

I cannot discuss the details of these much-debated passages. For our present purposes, it suffices that decision and deliberation—both of which are concerned with particular actions (and perhaps also with practices, routines, and so on)—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 towards ends that are not fully within our power. This is how we desire a good

39 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 [...]”

40 Broadie writes about this passage: “The object of wish only becomes an end when one sets oneself to attain it, e.g. by deliberating. Thus when it is an end there is already consideration of means. But the original wish for that which then becomes an end is innocent of any thought of means, which are therefore the concern of something different, namely decision. But since nothing can be a means in the abstract, decision must always be about means-for-a-given end.” (315) I think that what is 'prostelic' should not be construed in this narrow way, as if *ta pros ta telê* had to be means to an end. What is 'toward the ends' can be so insofar as the end supplies side-constraints, or directionality. Accordingly, I do not believe that this is the relevant contrast here. Rather, Aristotle seems to focus on the distinction between a limitation (in decision, we must be narrowly concerned with what is in our power), and the lack of this limitation (we can want to be healthy, happy, and so on, even though these things are not fully in our power).

41 A point that is familiar from contemporary discussions is closely related: one cannot intend to be happy, or directly pursue it; rather, one must pursue other things, which shall then contribute to happiness (see for example Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality” (1984)). This is another way in which something can be prostelic without being a means to an end.

42 I take it that part of the point of “one cannot deliberate about ends” is simply this: that ends are not fully in our power. We can pursue them, but there are usually also external factors outside of our control that determine whether we shall attain them. For example, we can do everything to remain healthy, and still get sick.

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.⁴³

David Velleman puts forward a similar claim: desire, as it figures in particular actions, is restricted to the attainable. “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)⁴⁴ Velleman's proposal is part of his rejection of the GGA of Action. The GGA of Action assumes that desire is for the good. Against this, Velleman says that the constitutive predicate of desire is 'attainable': we desire attainable things. Insofar as Velleman studies the GGA as an account of particular actions, his proposal is, in Aristotelian terms, not one about desire generally speaking; rather, it is a proposal about the motivation that immediately leads up to one particular action.

But what should we say about desire for a well-going life? Is desire here, also, for the attainable? Aristotle's answer, and the answer that I endorse in my account of Background Motivation, is 'no,' and it is 'no' on two counts. First, 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. The first point is easier to see. On any conception of a good life (say, a life centered

43 It is, of course, also not fully up to us whether we shall, say, go to the gym this morning—someone might push us down the stairs and we fall and never arrive at the gym. The relevant difference does not lie in the question of whether there might be external impediments to the performance of an action. That one shall go to the gym this morning is in one's power insofar as one's decision to do so is concerned; one cannot, in the same sense, decide to be happy.

44 For Velleman, this is part of why desire does not have (as he argues) correctness as its constitutive aim. I agree with Velleman on the point about correctness (see below); however, I think the two points can be taken apart. Velleman does not discuss attainability with a view to the questions that I consider here.

around having healthy children, or the life of a movie star), there are external factors that partly determine what we achieve, even though we can do much to further our end of leading the kind of life that seems good to us. However, 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.⁴⁵ At the same time, Aristotle thinks that the best life is the life of *theoria*, and that is, the life that a god leads.⁴⁶ Such a life, Aristotle says, is almost not on the human plane; but we ought not to listen to those who say “mortals you are, stick to your mortal sphere.” The best life is a life in which we aim for something that, for all we know, is impossible.⁴⁷ 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.”

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 '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.

45 This example figures in Aristotle's contrast of decision and wish, and thus, strictly speaking, we should say that one does not make decisions here. However, I take it that both deliberation and decision cannot be concerned with the impossible.

46 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” 1987 [1999]), Richard Kraut (*Aristotle on the Human Good*, 1989), and Lear (2004).

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

5. *Correctness: The Good vs. the Apparent Good*

Next, consider the question of whether the GGA says that, when desiring the good, we desire that which *is* good, or that which *seems* good to us. The expression 'guise of the good' translates two Latin phrases: *sub specie boni*, and *sub ratione boni*.⁴⁸ These two phrases can be taken to capture different versions of the GGA.⁴⁹

Specie-GGA: In being motivated, the agent sees something in a good light.

Ratio-GGA: In being motivated, the agent judges something to be good.

Many philosophers consider *Ratio*-GGA as the obvious way to understand the GGA, as applied to particular actions.⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ This and similar formulations ascribe a belief to the agent. That which is desired is judged to be good. However, this is a problematic feature of the GGA. As Velleman argues, this view implies that motivation involves the aim of getting it right. In forming the belief “X is good” one would aim at the truth (just as in other instances of belief formation).⁵² Thus, to desire

48 I shall not attempt here an interpretation of how these expressions figure in medieval Aristotelianism. It is clear that *sub specie boni* invokes a weaker claim—that in action, something looks good. Only *sub ratione boni* suggests the stronger claim, that the agent judges something to be good.

49 Joseph Raz cites *sub ratione boni* (Aquinas, ST I.1a2ae8, 1); Velleman perhaps invokes, via the translation “guise” *sub specie boni*. However, both authors do not discuss the weaker version, which I call *Specie*-GGAA. They assume that the standard theory—and that is, the theory one should engage with—is *Ratio*-GGAA. But this is by no means obvious.

50 This may be supported by Aristotle's claim in NE III.2, 1112a7-8, that “decision is for what we most know to be good.” On the distinction between what seems good and what is good, cf. NE III.4 “That wish is for the end, we have already said; but to some it seems to be for the good, whereas to others it seems to be for the *apparent* good. [...] We shall then be saying that for the person of excellence the object of wish is the one that is truly so, whereas for the bad person it is as chance will have it...” (i.e., as it appears to her).

51 “Guise of the Good” p 1.

52 Following Davidson, Velleman thinks that the GGA says something like the following: “to desire something is

X would involve the aim of correctly desiring X—of only desiring it if it really is good. I propose that correctness figures in this way in Background Motivation, but not in every particular motivation. That is, when it comes to our lives as a whole, *Ratio-GGA* holds.

Consider a passage in Plato's *Republic*, where Plato discusses (what we may call) correctness as the constitutive aim of desire. With respect to the beautiful and the just, Socrates says, people often do not care whether they get it right. I like the painting, and more knowledgeable art critics do not like it, but I do not care; I still find it beautiful. But with respect to the good everyone cares: everyone wants to know. Plato does not explain why. However, the following reasoning can perhaps be supplied. When I find a painting beautiful that really is pretty bad, nothing much is at stake. But if I find, say, the life of drug-using parties good, very much is at stake. 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.

If it is right that we are ultimately motivated by the desire for a well-going life, then the particular conception we have of this life will give content to our desires. And thus, it makes a great difference what we think the good life is. This is the reasoning that Aristotle cites for why it is important to do ethics: we all seek happiness, but we shall be guided by what we think happiness is. 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,

to have an attitude toward it as worthy of that very attitude. We can now see that such a claim would make sense if it rested on the assumption that desire, like belief, had correctness as its constitutive aim" (16). Velleman refutes the GGA based on this assumption.

accordingly, aims to be correct.

But correctness may not be an aim for particular desires, for a variety of reasons. In many particular actions, we might be guided by mere 'seemings,' not aiming to get things right. We consider many of the things we do as hardly affecting our life as a whole. That we want a well-going life is a *side-constraint* for particular motivations. Some particular actions have obvious adverse long-time effects. But many actions, though they are (locally speaking) not for the good, have very little overall effect. 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's not good for me), and so on, are not actions in which we aim at what really is good. We are motivated by what may be an odd mix of attraction and aversion (the fun! the badness!); but we don't find these actions so very important. We are happy to act on trifling motivations, not thinking them through, and not trying to figure out what is good in these cases. We don't think that, one way or another, much is at stake.⁵³

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 where we 'feel great.' Background Motivation is for a life that goes well. This idea is relatively close to what Frankfurt calls "taking ourselves

⁵³ 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.

seriously” (we think a great deal about our lives and concern ourselves with how we want our lives to go).⁵⁴ 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 with 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 don't tend 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.⁵⁵ It is conceivable to drift into a life where one has nothing about which one cares. 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 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 does not make one get up and get oneself a drink (and not because of some conflicting desire, weak will problem, or anything of that kind).

54 “Taking Ourselves Seriously” is the title of the first lecture in Frankfurt's *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. I shall not enter here into a discussion of Frankfurt's notion of caring. What matters for my purposes is that 'wanting one's life to go well' is closer to the idea of caring how one's life goes than to the idea of a pursuit of elation and 'happy experiences.'

55 Cf. Frankfurt and Susan Wolf.

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 thinks that, apart from staying home, this agent might smash 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.”⁵⁶

Velleman here suggests that cases of not-doing-things, such as not leaving one's room, are actions. In general, this seems to me 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* 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, in some sense 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.

⁵⁶ Guise of the Good, p. 20 and 21.

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 which 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, but rather 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.⁵⁷ 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. When Background Motivation takes a hit, we may have motivations that are truly hard to understand—we could not give reasons to others for doing what we do, or our reasons would simply not strike them as reasons.⁵⁸

57 Thomas Nagel argues for a similar view: our motivations have a *normative direction* toward the good. Nagel makes this point when he discusses deontological reasons. He thinks that, when we consider a course of action in which we need to inflict pain on an innocent child as the overall best course of action, we might be able to *bring ourselves* to perform this action; but it is an awful experience, because it is a kind of swimming against the normative current. In this example, the agent sees the action as good from an agent-neutral perspective, and as bad from an agent-centered perspective. The fact that one of these perspectives views the action as bad makes it hard for the agent to go through with her decision (*The View from Nowhere*, “Values”).

58 This point is similar to a point that Raz makes in *Engaging Reason*. We might do something because all we care about is the order of little scraps of paper on the floor of our apartment; or we do something because it harms us. These are motivations. But they are not reasons that we can refer to when someone says “why did you do this?” If I said that I kept clicking my pen because nothing else in the universe seemed at all worthwhile to me, my interlocutor will respond with nothing but concern about my current state. She will certainly not say “ah, now I see.”

7. Conclusion

I propose that the GGA is best located in the analysis of the motivation that feeds into the motivations for particular actions (and that is, Background Motivation), 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 have the general framework and directionality that they otherwise have. In other circumstances, 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 the best life there could be; or 'sin,' as envisaged by authors like Augustine, looks so alluring and seductive 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 those approaches that immediately focus on the analysis of particular actions, assuming that, if examples of actions can be found where

nothing looks good to the agent, the GGA has been refuted. Some theorists insist that every particular motivation contains an element of something looking good to the agent. I think that 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, or about the way things appear to our desires as opposed to how they appear to reason.⁵⁹ But such accounts have a disadvantage: they deny the most obvious description, namely that in some actions people are not motivated by the good. They also have a deeper disadvantage, namely that they do not aim to explain why such actions do not appear comprehensible to anyone but the agent. The depressed agent, or the perverse agent, or the silly agent, may be motivated in such-and-such ways; but her reasons will not appeal to others, and that is an important point to note.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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 bad, crazy, or pointless things when it comes to particular motivations, we do not want them under the description that our whole life will become a shipwreck. We want a further piece of chocolate, but we would not want it if this particular piece of chocolate would mean that we hit a threshold, where suddenly our health breaks down.

59 Much of the detail in Plato's and Aristotle's discussions can be read along those lines.

60 Again, this is the point I adopt from Raz, *Engaging Reason*.

61 I take this to be the 'spirit' of Velleman's position.

Once we see that some not-good action 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, irrationality, lack of direction, and lack of reasons take over.