

The Guise of the Good and the Problem of Partiality

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Egoism is the *perspectival* law of feeling according to which what is closest appears large and heavy, while in the distance everything decreases in size and weight.

— Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §162

Consider the guise of the good thesis, on which we desire things under the “guise of the good.” A precise formulation of this idea is elusive. Defenders of the guise of the good thesis say that desire “aims” at the good, or that desires are “appearances” of goodness, or that what is desired “seems” good to the person who desires it. Here I will sympathetically articulate a precise formulation of the guise of the good thesis (§1), but one that exposes a problem for the view, which I call the problem of partiality (§2). I criticize some promising solutions to the problem (§§3 – 4), before proposing a concessive strategy: the defender of the guise of the good thesis should accept that partial pro-attitudes – i.e. pro-attitudes that manifest partiality – are incorrect, constituting a species of illusion (§5).

1 The guise of the good thesis

I shall articulate the guise of the good thesis in terms of the correctness conditions of pro-attitudes, but this formulation does not differ in spirit from other formulations.¹ However, it can avoid a number of standard objections to the guise of the good thesis. My formulation is inspired by G.E.M. Anscombe’s (1963) idea that:

The conceptual connection between ‘wanting’ ... and ‘good’ can be compared to the conceptual connection between ‘judgment’ and ‘truth’. Truth is the object of judgment, and good the object of wanting. (§40; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a29-b4)

On my proposal, just as truth is the correctness condition for belief, goodness is the correctness condition for pro-attitudes.

On my formulation, the guise of the good thesis is a thesis about pro-attitudes. Desiring (or wanting) something is a paradigm pro-attitude; pro-attitudes are sometimes characterized as being “desire-like.”²

¹ See Plato, *Gorgias*, 466e-468d, *Meno* 77c-78b, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2, 1113a22, 1136b7, 1139a29-b4, 1155b25, 1165b14, *De Anima*, 433a27, Anscombe 1963, Lewis 1974, p. 112, Davidson 1980, Essay 1, 1984, p. 137, Stampe 1987, Raz 2002, Chapter 2, 2010, Oddie 2005, §2.6-7, Tenenbaum 2007, Chapter 1, Moss 2010, Evans 2010, Railton 2012, pp. 40-41. Formulations that speak of desires as “appearances” (e.g. Tenenbaum 2007) or “data” (e.g. Oddie 2005) are ambiguous; what is needed are the senses of “appearance” and “data” on which appearances and data are representations: it is fine to say that someone who desires something is someone for whom that thing seems good, so long as this is understood to entail that they represent that thing as good (see below).

² English usage suggests a distinction between desiring, on the one hand, and being glad and wishing, on the other, in as much as we say neither that we desire things that have already occurred (we say that we are glad that they occurred) nor that we desire things that have already not occurred (we say that we wish they had occurred). Being

Other pro-attitudes include those that are partially constituted by desiring, or by some “desire-like” element or aspect, such as hoping, caring, and loving. Another pro-attitude will be important in what follows: preference. Just as desiring something is a pro-attitude towards that thing, preferring one thing to another is a pro-attitude towards the former thing.

Let’s begin with, as Anscombe puts it, the conceptual connection between “judgment” and “truth,” or, as I shall say, the fact that truth is the correctness condition for belief. What this means is that:

It is correct to believe that p if and only if it is true that p, and incorrect otherwise.

This is the truth expressed by the slogan “truth is the aim of belief.”³ What do we mean by “correct” and “incorrect” here? We mean to refer here to *representational correctness*, i.e. the property had by representations when they are accurate or right, and *representational incorrectness*, i.e. that had when they are inaccurate, wrong, mistaken, or in error. To put this another way, making a representation commits you to the truth of its content, so e.g. believing that p commits you to its being true that p.⁴ Here are some relatively uncontroversial examples of representations: pictures, perceptual experiences, assertions, and (as per the present formulation) beliefs. All of these can be correct or incorrect, in the present sense.

The fact that we are speaking here of representational correctness and incorrectness has three important consequences. First, attributions of representational correctness and incorrectness are not *prescriptive* – to say that it is correct (or incorrect) for someone to φ is not to say that they ought (or ought not) to φ . Consider the case of belief: it is correct to believe that p if and only if it is true that p, but this is not to say that you ought to believe that p if and only if it is true that p, since there are true propositions you ought not believe, such as those for which you have no evidence, and non-true propositions you ought to believe, such as those for which you have sufficient but misleading evidence. Second, attributions of representational correctness and incorrectness are not *evaluative* – to say that something is representationally correct (or incorrect) is not to say that it is good or that it is better (or worse) than the alternative. There are lots of situations in which non-accurate representation is better than accurate representation. Consider, again, the case of belief: sometimes having a false belief is better than having a true belief – this is obvious, although the extent of such cases is controversial. Third, attributions of representational correctness and incorrectness are not *functional* – to say that a representation is correct (or incorrect) is not to say that it is an instance of proper functioning (or malfunctioning). A properly functioning organism might sometimes, or perhaps often, or perhaps even all of the time, make incorrect representations. Think here, for example, of an organism whose evolved defenses against predation include a hyper-sensitive predator-detection system that interprets any movement in its environment as the presence of a predator. False representations of the presence of predators would be the normal result of its properly functioning predator-detection system.⁵

glad and wishing are also pro-attitudes, in as much as they are distinct from our paradigm pro-attitude of desiring. Cf. Charles 1982/3, p. 207, Velleman 1992, p. 17.

³ Cf. Shah 2003.

⁴ Cf. Hieronymi 2005.

⁵ My claim here is that attributions of representational correctness (and incorrectness) are *conceptually* distinct from attributions of obligation, value, and proper functioning (or malfunctioning). This is consistent with the existence of

Given these senses of “correct” and “incorrect,” and following Anscombe’s suggested comparison, here is my formulation of the guise of the good thesis, i.e. the conceptual connection between “wanting” and “good.” In this case of desire:

It is correct to desire x if and only if x is good, and incorrect otherwise.

And in the case of preference:

It is correct to prefer x to y if and only if x is better than y , and incorrect otherwise.

And the same, mutatis mutandis, for other pro-attitudes (as well as for con-attitudes). The guise of the good thesis, on my proposal, says that pro-attitudes are evaluative representations and therefore have evaluative correctness conditions. Desires, for example, represent their objects as good, and are correct if and only if their objects really are good, and are incorrect otherwise.⁶

Again, the fact that we are speaking here of representational correctness and incorrectness has three important consequences: attributions of representational correctness and incorrectness are neither prescriptive, nor evaluative, nor functional. So to say (for example) that it is correct to desire x if and only if x is good is not to say that you ought to desire x if and only if x is good, nor that it is good to desire x if and only if x is good, nor that all and only desires for the good are the result of proper functioning.

Although this is not essential for my purposes below, I assume that the objects of pro-attitudes are propositions – e.g. that desiring comprises desiring that p , for some proposition that p .⁷ For example, if I were stepping on your foot, you might desire that I stop stepping on your foot.⁸ Cases in which the objects of pro-attitudes appear not to be propositions can be analyzed propositionally – e.g. desiring to φ can be analyzed as desiring *de se* that you φ . This requires us to speak of the goodness of propositions, as in “It’s good that you made it home for Christmas,” “It would be good if you added thyme to the stew,” “It would be good if you stopped stepping on my foot,” and so on. To say that a proposition is good, in the present sense, does not entail that it is true – even if I were stepping on your foot, the proposition that I stop stepping on your foot might be good. This is a harmless deviation from ordinary English, where we would say that it *would be* good if I stopped stepping on your foot.

substantive connections between correctness, on the one hand, and obligation, value, and proper functioning (or malfunctioning), on the other. For example, our obligations to believe might be ultimately explained by the fact that truth is the correctness condition for belief. For another, you might think that correct beliefs are generally pro tanto good for the believer. Such ideas are compatible with my claim here.

⁶ The present formulation implies that pro-attitudes are either correct or incorrect. This mirrors a plausible assumption about belief: that beliefs are either correct or incorrect. However, that assumption about belief is justified by the plausible assumption about falsehood, on which the proposition that p is false if and only if the proposition that p is not true, along with the premise that it is incorrect to believe that p if and only if the proposition that p is false. Although it seems right that it is incorrect to desire x if and only if x is bad, the analogous assumption about badness – that x is bad if and only if x is not good – is problematic (cf. Feldman and Hazlett forthcoming). The present formulation therefore needs some refinement. But this will not, it seems to me, help solve the problem of partiality (§2).

⁷ Cf. Oddie 2005, pp. 77-8.

⁸ This is neutral between rival accounts of propositions (structured propositions, propositions as sets of worlds, etc.), although I assume that propositions are the contents of propositional attitudes like belief and desire.

Several standard objections to the guise of the good thesis target the idea that desiring something requires believing that it is good. The present formulation does not have this consequence.⁹ Thus it is consistent with the guise of the good thesis, on the present formulation, that it is possible to desire something whilst believing that it is not good and to believing something is good without desiring it.¹⁰

The guise of the good thesis says that pro-attitudes are evaluative representations. In the case of desire, desires represent their objects as good. We can distinguish, however, between things that are merely pro tanto good – i.e. things that are good in some way or respect and thus good to some degree – and things that are pro toto good – i.e. things that are best. Do desires represent their objects as pro toto good, or merely as pro tanto good? The latter is more plausible. The reason is that inconsistent desires, i.e. desiring that p and desiring that $\sim p$, is not per se incoherent. Imagine that you both want to eat the cake (because it is delicious) and want not to eat the cake (because it is unhealthy); there is nothing incoherent about your desires in this case.¹¹ If desires were representations of pro toto goodness, however, inconsistent desires would be incoherent: the proposition that p and the proposition that $\sim p$ cannot both be best; it cannot both be best to eat the cake and best not to eat the cake. But the proposition that p and the proposition that $\sim p$ can both be pro tanto good. Therefore, it seems to me, the defender of the guise of the good thesis should say that desires are representations of pro tanto goodness; it is correct to desire x if and only if x is pro tanto good.¹² However, if this argument is sound, then it seems like preferences are representations of pro toto betterness – where x is pro toto better than y when x is not merely better than y in some way or respect, but overall or on balance better. The reason is that inconsistent preferences, i.e. preferring x to y and preferring y to x , are per se incoherent. That preferences are representations of pro toto betterness would explain why this is so. Therefore, it seems to me, the defender of the guise of the good thesis should say that it is correct to prefer x to y if and only if x is pro toto better than y .

We can appreciate the appeal of the guise of the good thesis by considering a famous argument of Hume's. Hume appeals to the premise that “[a] passion is an original existence ... and contains not any representative quality” – in other words, that passions are not representations.¹³ In defense of this, Hume has the following argument:

⁹ Although it is consistent with it. On the view that desire requires such a belief, see Pettit 1987, Lewis 1988, pp. 323–5, 1994, pp. 117–25, Gregory forthcoming; see also Altham 1986, pp. 284–5.

¹⁰ On the former possibility as an objection to the guise of the good thesis, see Stocker 1979, p. 747, Brink 2008, p. 31; on the latter possibility as an objection, see Stocker 1979, pp. 741–6, Brink 2008, p. 31, Setiya 2010, p. 91–2; cf. 2007, pp. 33–8. For further discussion see Oddie 2005, §3.6, Tenenbaum 2007, §1.4 and §6.3, Raz 2002, pp. 36–44, Moss 2010, p. 72, Gregory forthcoming, §2.4.

¹¹ See Hazlett and Feldman forthcoming.

¹² Desires represent their objects as good, but they do not represent the way in which their objects are good (Anscombe 1963, p. 75, Raz 2002, p. 30; *pace* Setiya 2010, p. 85). This explains why it is sometimes hard to say why someone desires something. We sometimes want to do something just because it will be fun; such cases can appear at first glance like cases in which we want to do something for no reason at all (Raz 2010, p. 123; see also p. 115; cf. Velleman 1992, p. 17, 1996, p. 716). We struggle to understand desires that represent goods that we do not recognize, e.g. the masochistic desires of someone who finds being harmed pleasurable (cf. Velleman 1992, p. 17). It can take some work to make sense of cases in which people appear to desire things because they are bad (cf. Anscombe 1963, p. 75, Raz 2002, p. 32): the person who “likes bad movies” does not really like bad movies, but either likes movies that are considered bad by others or likes movies that are bad in some ways but good in other ways. For further discussion see Tenenbaum 2007, §1.3 and §6.1.

¹³ *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, Section III, at p. 415 in Hume 1978.

Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is incapable of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now ‘tis evident that our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts or realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, or actions. ‘Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason.¹⁴

Passions include both desires and preferences, and I will assume that all pro-attitudes are passions, in Hume’s sense. Given that they are not representations, passions cannot be “oppos’d by, or be contradictory to truth and reason,” and thus:

‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.¹⁵

The guise of the good thesis rejects Hume’s premise – at least some passions, namely the pro-attitudes, are representations – and can explain what is wrong with his conclusion: it is incorrect to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger, because the destruction of the world is no better – indeed, it is quite a lot worse – than the scratching of my finger. It speaks in favor of the guise of the good thesis that it can elegantly explain why Hume’s counterintuitive conclusion is false, as well as diagnose his mistake as deriving from his assumption that pro-attitudes are not representations.¹⁶

Hume sought to draw a distinction between beliefs, on the one hand, and pro-attitudes, on the other, by appeal to the idea that beliefs, but not pro-attitudes, can be correct or incorrect. The guise of the good thesis rejects this account: the difference between belief and desire is not that belief is representational and desire isn’t, but rather that belief and desire represent different things.¹⁷

Finally, it is worth noting that the guise of the good thesis is consistent with accounts of desire that appeal to its functional role or dispositional profile. However, it is sometimes suggested that desiring is essentially practical – for example, this is suggested by the idea that desiring that p essentially disposes you to bring that it about that p.¹⁸ I think this is, at best, misleading, since our desires are often manifested by our thoughts and emotions, rather than by our actions.¹⁹ In any event, the guise of the good thesis explains why desire has the functional role or dispositional profile that it does.²⁰ It is because someone who desires that p represents the proposition that p as good that someone who desires that p is

¹⁴ *Treatise*, Book III, Part I, Section I, at p. 458 in Hume 1978; see also Book II, Part III, Section III; cf. Smith 1993, p. 400. The premise that desires cannot be true or false is insufficient to establish the conclusion that desires cannot be incorrect, ignoring, as it does, the possibility of representing things other than the way the world is.

¹⁵ *Treatise*, Book II, Part III, Section III, at pp. 415-6 in Hume 1978.

¹⁶ Note that Hume’s discussion, given that attributions of representational correctness are not prescriptive, can be interpreted as conflating representational correctness (e.g. “agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact”) and obligation (e.g. being “contrary or conformable to reason”). My discussion above assumes a reading of Hume on which his topic is representational correctness.

¹⁷ This provides the sense in which belief and desire differ in their “direction of fit.”

¹⁸ Smith 1994, p. 115.

¹⁹ Cf. Railton 2012, p. 33.

²⁰ Cf. Stampe 1987, Tenenbaum 2007, Chapter 2, Gregory forthcoming, §1.

disposed to bring it about that p , as well as to think and feel in the ways we think of as characteristic of desiring that p .

2 The problem of partiality

The guise of the good thesis says that pro-attitudes are evaluative representations, i.e. that goodness is the correctness condition for pro-attitudes (§1). This articulation, however, exposes a problem for the guise of the good thesis: the problem of partiality.

Like most people, I am partial towards myself and towards those to whom I am related by the bonds of friendship, on a broad sense of “friendship” where this can include relationships between family members, colleagues, and compatriots: I prefer things going well for us to things going well for others. However, things going well for us is no better than things going well for others. Assume the guise of the good thesis, which entails that preferences are evaluative representations. It follows that my partial preferences are incorrect. Consider an individual case of partiality: we’ve both entered a raffle, and I prefer my winning the prize to your winning the prize. Assume the guise of the good thesis, which entails that my preference is correct if and only if my winning the prize is better than your winning the prize, and incorrect otherwise. However, my winning the prize is not better than your winning the prize – or so we can easily imagine: there is no relevant difference between us, nothing that makes me more deserving of the prize than you, no better consequences if I win and you do not, and so on. Therefore, my preference is incorrect. And generalizing from this, partial pro-attitudes are incorrect.

At first glance, this conclusion seems problematic. Partial pro-attitudes are a ubiquitous feature of normal human psychology; is it really true that they are all incorrect? Is there some way for the defender of the guise of the good thesis to avoid accepting this conclusion? That is the *problem of partiality* for the guise of the good thesis. I will argue, below (§5), that the defender of the guise of the good thesis should accept this counterintuitive conclusion: partial pro-attitudes *are* incorrect. But might there be some way for the defender of the guise of the good thesis to avoid this conclusion? The next two sections (§§3 – 4) consider, and reject, two promising solutions to the problem of partiality.

3 Relative goodness

A natural thought at this point is that, although my winning the prize is not *absolutely* better than your winning the prize, it is better *for me*. Moreover, so the argument would have to go, its being better for me is sufficient for the correctness of my preference.

Let us attempt to re-formulate the guise of the good thesis so that this argument is sound. We will need to formulate the guise of the good thesis in terms of relative goodness rather than absolute goodness.

Consider an *egoistic formulation* of the guise of the good thesis:

It is correct for S to desire x if and only if x is good for S , and incorrect otherwise.

It is correct for S to prefer x to y if and only if x is better for S than y , and incorrect otherwise.

Is this plausible?

It is worth pausing here to consider whether the present proposal could plausibly be generalized to vindicate the correctness of other partial pro-attitudes. Suppose it is not I but my friend who has entered the raffle, and I prefer their winning the prize to your winning the prize. Even if it is correct for S to prefer *x* to *y* if and only if *x* is better for S than *y*, it is not obvious that my friend's winning the prize is good for me. Granted, it is what I prefer. But it is not obvious that preference-satisfaction per se is good for a person. What is obvious is that we care about our friends and want things to go well for them. What is not obvious is that things going well for them per se constitutes things going well for us. Indeed, you might think that one of the distinctive things about friendship is the fact that it involves caring about something distinct from your own wellbeing. In any event, although the present proposal clearly would vindicate the correctness of self-interested preferences, i.e. a person preferring what is better for them, it would not obviously vindicate the correctness of other partial pro-attitudes.

Is the present proposal plausible? It seems to me that it has some unhappy consequences. Consider a variant on Hume's case (§1): imagine a far-away continent populated by millions of people unknown to me – whose destruction would have no effect on my wellbeing – and imagine that I prefer the destruction of this continent to the scratching of my finger. It is easy to imagine that the scratching of my finger would negatively affect my wellbeing, and thus that the scratching of my finger is better for me than the destruction of the far-away continent. The present proposal therefore implies that my preference is correct. This seems wrong – such a preference would be insane, perverse, “contrary to reason,” whatever you want to call it. Better to follow Hume and reject the guise of the good thesis – and say that preferences cannot be correct or incorrect – than to say that self-interested preferences are always correct.

If the guise of the good thesis is true, it seems to me, preferring *x* to *y* commits you to more than just that *x* is better *for you* than *y*. It commits you to *x* being better than *y* – not just for you, not just for your friends, but better, full stop. Preferences are representations of absolute betterness, not merely of relative betterness. If I were to prefer the destruction of some far-away continent to the scratching of my finger, I would be committed to the destruction of that continent being better than the scratching of my finger – not just better for me, but better, full stop. And that is why such a preference seems insane, perverse, and “contrary to reason.” Pro attitudes, then, are representations of absolute goodness, not relative goodness.

This conclusion is consistent with the per se goodness of human wellbeing, or perhaps of wellbeing in general. Perhaps what is good for any human being is per se good. It does not seem that relative goodness in general is per se good: what is good for Microsoft is not per se good. Relative goodness is not a species of goodness, which is not to deny that some things that are relatively good are also good – just as relative truth is not a species of truth, which is not to deny that some things that are relatively true are also true.

You might object that nothing is absolutely good (and that nothing is absolutely better than anything else). There are various species of relative goodness – for example, things can be good *for me*, in the sense of benefiting me, or, for another, an artifact like a knife might be a good knife, in the sense of being good *as* a knife – but, so the argument goes, there is no such thing as absolute goodness. Some philosophers defend this claim on the grounds that “good” is an essentially attributive adjective, akin to “big.”²¹ Just as there is no such thing as absolute bigness, they argue, and attributions of bigness are

²¹ Geach 1956, Thompson 2008, pp. 1-15.

always relative (to some standard or comparison class), so there is no such thing as absolute goodness, and attributions of goodness are always relative (to some species or kind). Other philosophers argue that absolute goodness is an unnecessary theoretical posit, and thus that it is ontologically profligate to countenance it.²² And others argue that the notion of absolute goodness is unintelligible.²³ I have argued that pro-attitudes are representations of absolute goodness – however, so the objection goes, nothing is absolutely good.

I reply, first, that the thesis that nothing is absolutely good is consistent with my conclusion that pro-attitudes are representations of absolute goodness. If both of these claims are true, it does follow that pro-attitudes are always incorrect. We should not automatically reject this consequence on the grounds that it implies systematic incorrectness in our representations; such incorrectness is possible (cf. §5). What the defender of this objection will need to do is to argue both that nothing is absolutely good *and* that some pro-attitudes are correct. But I do not think there is any plausible way to do this. The difficulty comes when we try to articulate what the correctness condition for pro-attitudes would be. It cannot be, as I argued above, that it is correct for S to prefer x to y if and only if x is better for S than y . Consider, alternatively, an *unrestricted relativized formulation* of the guise of the good thesis:

It is correct for S to desire x if and only if there is some R such that x is good for R, and incorrect otherwise.

It is correct for S to prefer x to y if and only if there is some R such that x is better for R than y , and incorrect otherwise.

Judith Jarvis Thompson (2008) suggests this at one point: she says that attributing relative goodness to a thing “is to make a favorable evaluative judgment about that thing.” (p. 32; see also p. 58) But it seems false that it is correct to desire what is good for some randomly selected plant growing in my yard, or what is good for some burglar rummaging through my drawers, or what is good for an alien creature that benefits only from the destruction of all life on earth.²⁴ Thompson maintains that “Smith is a good liar” constitutes both praise and “dispraise” of Smith (pp. 55–58) – perhaps, although I suspect this has to do more with the fact that lying well requires independently admirable abilities and emotional sensitivities, as well as with our sense that lying well is sometimes called for, than with the fact that using “good” always involves a positive evaluation: the example becomes less compelling when we switch to “Smith is a good torturer” (because we do not admire the abilities and emotional (in)sensitivities that being a good torturer requires) or “Smith is good at committing genocidal massacres” (because we do not think that genocidal massacres are ever called for). But “Destroying all life on earth will be good for that monster” does not imply, just because it involves an attribution of relative goodness, any favorable evaluative judgment about the destruction of all life on earth.²⁵ There are some things that are relatively good and yet are not worthy objects of desire. As Thompson (2008) herself puts it, when speaking of relative goodness, “[e]verthing is good in some respect.” (p. 16; see also p. 10) This suggests how difficult it will

²² Kraut 2011.

²³ Foot 1985, Thompson 2008, pp. 15–27.

²⁴ Cf. Foot 1985, p. 200.

²⁵ The sentence might be used to imply that – someone might make an empathic plea on the monster’s behalf – but that is no part of the meaning of the sentence.

be to articulate the guise of the good thesis in terms of relative goodness, given the assumption that it is not incorrect to desire some things and not others.²⁶

I reply, second, that the arguments that nothing is absolutely good are unconvincing. That “good” is sometimes used as an attributive adjective is clear; but it does not follow from this that “good” is essentially an attributive adjective: a word can be used sometimes as an attributive adjective and sometimes as a predicative adjective, as in the case of “famous.”²⁷ Why then think that “good” is essentially an attributive adjective? Thompson (2008) writes that “we know what the property of being (simply) famous *is* – it is the property of being (simply) well known. What is the property [of being (simply) good]?” (p. 14); this rhetorical question is, ultimately, the entirety of the argument. But what exactly is the argument? “Well known” is a synonym for “famous”; it is not as though there were not synonyms for “good,” and even if there were not, the existence or non-existence of absolute goodness does not plausibly depend on whether there are synonyms for some English word. In what sense, then, do we “not know what the property of being (simply) good *is*”? Thompson’s search for a definition (pp. 14-17) suggests that to know a property is to be able to define it; but if that is what it is to know a property, then we should not infer from our ignorance of a property that it does not exist, for there are many properties that exist which we cannot define. Could we say that to know a property is to be acquainted with it? If we mean acquaintance in sense perception, we should again not infer from our ignorance of a property that it does not exist. In any event, that “good” is sometimes used as an attributive adjective does not speak against the view that some things are absolutely good – at best, it speaks against the view that nothing is relatively good. It is by exclusively targeting that view that the critics of absolute goodness sometimes go wrong. Kraut (2011), for example, repeatedly attacks the Moorean view that there is no such thing as relative goodness, arguing, for example, that accepting this view would make you unappealingly impartial (Chapters 14-15), or, for another example, that the absolute goodness of beauty cannot explain our reasons for seeking out and sharing experiences of the beautiful (Chapter 18). Those points may speak against the view that nothing is relatively good, but they do not speak against the view that some things are absolutely good.

²⁶ Richard Kraut (2011), for example, argues that we ought sometimes do what is good for others because it is good for them (p. 7, p. 65), that parents should care about what is good for their children (pp. 86-7), that “in our interactions with … all creatures … we should be guided by our conception of … what is good *for them*,” (p. 96) that friendship requires hoping for and being glad about what is good for your friend (p. 115), that we must in general take into account what is good for others (p. 123), that we must be attentive to what is good and bad for non-human animals (p. 147), but writes also of the coherence of self-interested motivations (p. 111) and of our having greater reason to help friends than to help strangers (p. 105). It is unclear what formulation of the guise of the good thesis, formulated only in terms of relative goodness, might vindicate all of these claims. Indeed, Kraut ultimately appeals to the notion of absolute goodness – or at least to something equivalent – in his accounts of practical reason. He writes that “there is such a relation as one state of affairs being absolutely better than another,” (p. 105; see also pp. 101-3, pp. 171-2; cf. Foot 1985, Thompson, p. 59) of which relation he suggests a “buck-passing” account (Chapter 17; see also Chapter 11), on which one thing is better than another if and only if there is a reason to prefer the former to the latter. (He goes on to present an argument – a dubious argument, in my view, and one that undermines his conclusion that “we can give a fully adequate explanation of why we should do [what we should] without using the concepts of absolute goodness or betterness,” p. 167 – that human beings are better than other creatures, based on the extent of our “mental powers” and the “depth of our emotional lives,” p. 160; see in general Chapter 25.) But all this is compatible with the guise of the good thesis, on which it is correct to prefer *x* to *y* if and only if *x* is better than *y*.

²⁷ See Thompson 2008, p. 13, Kraut 2011, Chapter 30.

4 Value and perspective

Here is another way we might try to avoid the conclusion that partial pro-attitudes are incorrect (§3). Many defenders of the guise of the good thesis posit an illuminating analogy between pro-attitudes and sense perceptual experiences.²⁸ Just as sense perceptual experiences are representations of how things stand in the perceiver's environment, pro-attitudes are representations of the value of actual and possible states of affairs. Just as your sense perceptual experiences determine one of the ways in which things in your environment seem or appear to you, your pro-attitudes determine one of the ways in which actual and possible states and affairs seem or appear to you. When you desire that p, for example, it seems or appears good to you that p.

However, note that sense perception is *perspectival* in at least two ways. First, sense perception gives us a spatiotemporally *limited* picture of our *local* environment – we see only what is presently in view, hear only what is presently in earshot, touch only what presently contacts our bodies, and so on. Second, the picture sense perception provides is drawn, as it were, from a particular spatiotemporal *point of view* – we see and hear objects as being near or far, above or below, to the right or to the left, and so on. Neither of these ways in which sense perception is perspectival, however, provides for a way in which our sense perceptual experiences are representationally incorrect – neither provides a way in which our sense perceptual experiences are inaccurate. My present visual experience, for example, is inaccurate neither in virtue of representing only what is before my eyes (as opposed to what is behind me, or how things stand right now at the Whale Pub in Hong Kong, or what was before my eyes yesterday) nor in virtue of representing what is before my eyes from a certain point of view (as opposed to from some other spatiotemporal point of view, or perhaps *sub specie aeternitatis*).

What has this to do with partial pro-attitudes? Here is a thought: just as sense perception is perspectival, our pro-attitudes are perspectival – the partiality of our pro-attitudes is just a symptom of their perspectival nature.²⁹ First, so the argument might go, our pro-attitudes give us a *localized* picture of the evaluative landscape: a picture of what is good when it comes to what is close to us – not spatiotemporally close, but personally close, such that our friends (perhaps among other things) are closer to us than strangers. Second, so the argument might go, our pro-attitudes give us a picture of the evaluative landscape from a particular *point of view* – namely, ours; and where, again, this point of view is defined not spatiotemporally but personally, in terms (among other things) of our interpersonal relationships with other people. And just as sense perception is perspectival without any representational incorrectness, our pro-attitudes are perspectival – and thus partial – without any representational incorrectness.

There is something right about the present proposal (cf. §5), but it cannot vindicate the correctness of partial pro-attitudes. There are two reasons for this. First, it seems right that there are always people who fall outside the scope of our affective awareness and towards whom we have no affective attitude, just as there are things that fall outside the scope of our sense perceptual awareness and of which we have no sense perceptual experience. Consider some individual distant stranger, of whom I know nothing. But it is not that my affective perspective leads me to prefer things going well for me to things going well for

²⁸ Cf. Stampe 1987, Oddie 2005, §2.7, Tenenbaum 2007, Moss 2010.

²⁹ Cf. Oddie 2005, §3.5 and §8.3.

her. Rather, it is that my cognitive perspective – and in particular my ignorance of her – leads me to not have any attitude towards her at all. Compare, again, sense perception: vision does not represent what is out of view as absent; it simply does not represent what is out of view. Partiality, however, is not merely a matter of our not having any attitude towards those outside our circle of friends. No: we prefer things going well for us to things going well for them. I prefer my winning the prize to your winning the prize – you, whom I see hopefully clutching your ticket, wanting and deserving the prize no less than I do. It is not that you fall outside the scope of my affective awareness – you fall squarely within it, but I nevertheless prefer my winning the prize to your winning the prize.

Second, it seems right that our pro-attitudes give us a picture of the evaluative landscape from our personal point of view. However, sense perceptual point of view is a matter of *presentation*, rather than of representation. Suppose I see two pencils on my desk; the nearer pencil is presented as larger than the farther pencil. But the nearer pencil is not represented as larger than the farther pencil. The “largeness” of the nearer pencil is a property of my representation of the two pencils, not part of the representational content of said representation. My visual experience of the pencil is not inaccurate on account of the fact that the nearer pencil is presented as larger than the farther pencil.³⁰ But pro-attitudes, on the guise of the good thesis, including partial pro-attitudes, are representations. It is not just that we experience ourselves and our friends as being closer to us, in something like the way that we experience what is near as being larger than what is far. Our partial pro-attitudes go beyond this, for example, when we prefer things going well for us to things going well for others.

5 Partiality as illusion

The problem of partiality (§3) is that the guise of the good thesis seems to entail that partial pro-attitudes are incorrect. I criticized two strategies the defender of the guise of the good thesis might employ to avoid this conclusion (§§3 – 4). I propose a different approach: the defender of the guise of the good thesis should concede that partial pro-attitudes are incorrect.

We can begin by offering a possible diagnosis of why this claim is counterintuitive. We have been using “correct” and “incorrect” in their representational senses (§1). The present claim, that partial pro-attitudes are (representationally) incorrect, doesn’t mean that we ought not have these pro-attitudes, nor that it is bad that we have these pro-attitudes, nor that these pro-attitudes are instances of malfunctioning. For example, the claim that it is (representationally) incorrect for me to prefer that I win the prize (§2) does not entail that I ought not prefer that I win the prize. But “correct” and “incorrect” have other senses. We sometimes use “correct” and “incorrect” to speak prescriptively, evaluatively, or functionally. So it is easy to confuse the claim that it is (representationally) incorrect for me to prefer that I win the prize with the claim that I ought not prefer that I win the prize.

³⁰ I think some philosophers have held that point of view is part of the representational content of a sense perceptual experience. I have in mind the view that distant objects are visually represented as being smaller than nearby objects, which mistaken representation is corrected by reasoning. But note well: such a representation would be *mistaken* – thus the analogy with sense perception would be of no help when it comes to vindicating the correctness of partial pro-attitudes.

Graham Oddie (2005), in articulating a version of the guise of the good thesis, suggests that partial pro-attitudes are analogous to “the kind of systematic ‘illusion’ that is generated by the fact that our perceptions are perspectival,” as when “the sun appears smaller than the moon, even though it is much larger.” (p. 213; see also Tenenbaum 2007, p. 39, p. 56) The illusion, in that case, is constituted by an inaccurate sense perceptual experience – a type of incorrect representation (cf. §1). The present suggestion is that partiality constitutes a comparable species of illusion. My preferring my winning the prize to your winning the prize incorrectly represents my winning the prize as better than your winning the prize, just as my visual experience of the moon and the sun incorrectly represents the moon as larger than the sun. Oddie’s suggestion is on the right track. However, the perspectivity of sense perception generally does not involve incorrect representation (cf. §4). Of two pencils laying on my desk, the nearer pencil does not look larger than the farther pencil – it merely looks nearer. In general, when sense perception represents our environment from a particular point of view, no illusion is involved. (This is even clearer when considering sense modalities other than sight.) It is only in exceptional cases – e.g. when objects are (as Descartes put it) “very small or in the distance” – that perspective gives rise to illusion. This is why, I imagine, that “illusion” must appear in scare quotes when we describe perspectival illusions as “systematic.” To say that an illusion is *systematic* is to say that it is ubiquitous and pervasive, as opposed to those illusions are arise only in particular circumstances, contexts, or domains. But if partial pro-attitudes are incorrect, then they are in this respect not analogous to perspectival perceptual experiences: partial pro-attitudes are systematically inaccurate; perspectival perceptual experiences are not.

Sergio Tenenbaum (2010), another defender of the guise of the good thesis, suggests that (at least some) partial pro-attitudes constitute a species of “malignant recalcitrant illusion,” analogous to the case of a superstitious person who consciously rejects the superstition that you can “jinx” your favorite sports team by speaking confidently about their chances of winning, and yet finds it hard to “shake off its influence in belief formation,” such that they are reluctant to do things that might “jinx” their team. (p. 218) Just as the superstitious person is affected by an incorrect belief in “jinxes,” the partial person is affected by an incorrect preference that things go well for their friends, as opposed to for others.³¹ This, too is, on the right track. But there is, again, a salient disanalogy: the “jinx” superstition is a one-off, isolated case of illusion, lacking the systematicity of partiality.

To capture the systematicity of partiality, our analogy must be to a case of systematic illusion. If we seek an analogy with an illusion of sense perception, the more fitting analogy is the illusion involved in color perception. Our visual experiences of colored (or apparently colored) objects represent them as instantiating qualitative properties that they do not actually instantiate. Or so many people think, and for our present purpose, it doesn’t matter whether this claim about color perception is true.³²

However, analogies with illusions of sense perception can only take us so far, because there is an important disanalogy between desires and experiences (including sense experiences). We are capable of

³¹ See also Tenenbaum 2007, §4.5, as well as §1.4 and p. 47n.

³² Elsewhere, Ed Averill and I (2011) have argued that the present claim about color perception is consistent with objectivism about color, e.g. the view that colors are dispositional properties of objects or the view that colors are microphysical reflectance properties.

effectively deliberating about what to desire. But we are not – at least not under normal circumstances³³ – capable of effectively deliberating about what to experience. This is manifested in the case of illusions of sense perception by the fact that such illusions do not go away when we become aware of them. But desires are unlike experiences in that we can be responsive to reasons in forming, sustaining, and revising our desires; in this respect, desires are similar to beliefs. Our abilities to deliberate about what to believe and desire are not infallibly effective. There is such a thing as an “unshakable” belief that we cannot get rid of, despite our concluding that it is false or irrational; there are cases of “intellectual akrasia.”³⁴ (Tenenbaum’s case of the person who believes, in spite of themselves, in the possibility of “jinxing” is a case of this kind.) And there are analogous – and familiar – cases of desires that we cannot get rid of, despite our concluding that their contents are not good or that they are irrational. Tenenbaum (2010) says, and Oddie’s analogy implies, that partial pro-attitudes are like this, since “the illusion does not go away even if one knows that the desires and aversions in question are not accurate conceptions of value.” (p. 219) But this isn’t quite right. We are capable of changing and modifying our pro-attitudes on account of adopting a more impartial perspective. Your gluttonous preference that you get the biggest slice of birthday cake, for example, might give way to a preference that the person whose birthday it is get the biggest slice, after brief reflection on some principle of fairness. But no amount of reflection will make the sun look larger the moon or make a rose look like it has only its primary qualities.

So I think that a better analogy for the illusion constituted by partiality will be an illusion that involves belief. And there is actually a case that is very close to home: partiality in belief.³⁵ Consider the parent who believes, without sufficient evidence, that their child is the most talented basketball player on the team. This kind of biased thinking is widespread and, more important for our purposes, systematic: our beliefs about ourselves and our friends (again in a broad sense of “friends”) are typically and in general colored by our emotional attachments to ourselves and our friends. Some social psychologists argue that these are “positive illusions,” on the grounds that this kind of biased thinking is beneficial and a component of mental health.³⁶ But whether such illusions are “positive” does not matter for our present purpose. Here we have a case of systematic incorrect representation that is more deeply analogous to the case of partial pro-attitudes.

Given this way of understanding the illusion constituted by partiality, two comments. First, we can draw a distinction between illusions and delusions, and in particular, in the case of belief, between (i) beliefs that, although biased, are nevertheless partially responsive to evidence and (ii) beliefs that are mostly or completely unresponsive to evidence.³⁷ Partial pro-attitudes are more like the former kind of belief and less like the latter – it is therefore apt to say that partiality constitutes an “illusion” (as opposed to a “delusion”). Second, once we appreciate the similarity between partial pro-attitudes and beliefs that are biased by partiality, there will be no temptation to hedge on the claim that partial pro-attitudes are incorrect. Oddie (2005), for example, when he argues that impartiality in desire would be impermissible, inappropriate, or unmerited (pp. 221-6), suggests that this is a qualification or amendment to the idea that partial pro-attitudes are incorrect. In this paper (cf. §1), I have insisted that attributions of correctness and

³³ I am thinking here of the possibility that you might effectively deliberate about how to see an ambiguous image like the “duck-rabbit.”

³⁴ Mele 1987, Chapter 8; see also Hazlett 2013, pp. 219-20.

³⁵ Cf. Hazlett 2013, Chapters 2 and 3, Hazlett 2014.

³⁶ See Taylor 1989, Taylor and Brown 1988, 1984.

³⁷ Cf. Hazlett 2013, §2.5.2.

incorrectness are not prescriptive. The case of beliefs that are biased by partiality helps us see why we should insist on this: even if it is right and proper that a parent's beliefs about their child manifest their love, those beliefs are not thereby rendered correct – even if you ought to believe that your child is the best basketball player on the team, that does not imply that your child really is the best basketball player on the team. Likewise, even if you ought to be partial towards yourself and your friends, that does not imply that you and your friends are better than everyone else.

6 Conclusion

I have articulated the guise of the good thesis (§1) and argued that the guise of the good thesis implies that partial pro-attitudes are incorrect (§2). I criticized two strategies for avoiding this conclusion (§§3 – 4), and sympathetically considered the idea that partial pro-attitudes comprise a species of illusion, analogous to the illusion comprised by partiality in belief (§5).

A disposition for illusion is not, in general, something that we ought to lament or try to change. Color perception, for instance, is a great benefit to members of our species. My argument here leaves open the analogous possibility when it comes to partiality. Our disposition towards incorrect pro-attitudes, it could plausibly be argued, is not, in general, something that we ought to lament or try to change, because partiality, although it constitutes an illusion, is a great benefit to members of our species. Whether such an argument would be sound is one of the deep questions in philosophical ethics.

Hume describes “taste” as having “a productive faculty,” which by “gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation.”³⁸ If partial pro-attitudes are incorrect, then something like this can be said of partiality: our partial pro-attitudes “gild and stain” ourselves and our friends with the appearance of being more valuable, more important, more significant, than we really are.³⁹

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³⁸ *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I, at p. 294 in Hume 1975.

³⁹ I presented versions of this material in 2009 at a conference on *Epistemic Goodness* at the University of Oklahoma, in 2011 at the University of Edinburgh, in 2013 at the University of York, in 2014 at the University of California, Riverside, New Mexico State University, and the University of New Mexico, in 2015 and 2016 at a summer seminar (at the University of Missouri) and a conference (in San Antonio) on *The Value and Evaluation of Faith* (which were funded by the Templeton Religious Trust), and in 2017 at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In addition to my audiences, I’ve also received valuable feedback from Anne Baril, Christian Piller, Matthew Chrisman, and Mike Ridge. Research on this paper was supported by an Early Career Fellowship from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council and by a pilot grant from the University of Edinburgh’s School of Philosophy, Psychology, and Language Sciences.

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