

The problem of akrasia is among the oldest in Western philosophy, tracing back at least to Plato's *Protagoras*. It is still much discussed. In its simplest form, the problem is a question: how is it possible to act, both freely and intentionally, against one's better judgement? If you know what you should do, and that you are able to do it, how can you deliberately, voluntarily, do otherwise?

This problem is not my topic. I assume that akrasia is possible. Arguments against this possibility, at least those with which I am familiar, rest on premises all too easy to reject. What interests me instead is a claim about the rationality of akrasia, a claim that may survive the dissolution of the standard problem. According to this claim, akrasia is *distinctively irrational*: while it is possible to act, freely and intentionally, against one's better judgement, actions of this kind are especially puzzling or hard to interpret; they lack intelligibility. Akratic action is not merely irrational but incoherent.

The thought here can be clarified in three ways. First, it is a mistake to suppose that, in every case, if you believe that you should ϕ , in the sense of 'should' that tracks the balance of reasons, it follows that you should. That would make it impossible to be wrong when you believe that you should ϕ , and licence a bizarre form of bootstrapping in which unwarranted beliefs are bound to be true!¹ Nor is the claim at issue that one must have *some* reason to act on the belief that one should ϕ . That may not be right, and even if it is, it does not capture what is irrational about acting against one's better judgement. One can have some reason to ϕ and yet decide not to, with perfect rationality, if one has more reason to do something

1. See Kolodny 2005; and for related arguments, Setiya 2007b: 656–659 (this volume: 186–190).

else. The claim is not that one should never be akratic, or that there is reason not to be, but that akratic action is marred by practical irrationality.

Second, although *akrasia* is in some way irrational, acting against one's better judgement may be, in a given circumstance, more rational than anything else one could do. Especially where the circumstance includes a false belief about what is to be done, it may be that acting in accordance with that belief would be less rational, overall, than acting against it.² Still, the claim will go, in acting as she does the akratic agent manifests a defect or failure of practical reason.

Third, this defect is different from the mere imperfection or falling short of ideal rationality involved in any failure to be moved by the belief that *p*, when the fact that *p* is a reason to *φ*, or to be moved in proportion to its weight as a reason. The akratic agent is not just—or not even—making a bad decision; she is subject to a distinctive malfunction of agency, an internal tension or incoherence in her capacity to act for reasons, as it operates in the particular case.

So, at least, the claim will go. It remains obscure but, I think, appealing. My aim is to reflect on its meaning, and on its implications for action theory. Is *akrasia* distinctively irrational? And what follows if it is? I begin with another claim: that we act intentionally *sub specie boni* or 'under the guise of the good'. This is a claim I have argued against.³ In section I, I clarify the claim and sketch my reasons for rejecting it. In section II, I consider an objection that relates this claim to the nature of *akrasia*. According to the objection, it is only if we act under the guise of the good that *akrasia* is distinctively irrational. We can explain what is special about the rational defect of *akrasia* only by appeal to a theory of intentional action on which normative representations play an essential role in what it is to act for reasons. It follows that there must be something wrong with the arguments I give against such views. I argue, in response, that appeal to the guise of the good cannot explain why *akrasia* is distinctively irrational. If it can explain why *akrasia* is irrational, as I suggest it can, its irrationality will not be distinctive. The idea that there is something special in the rational failure of the akratic agent does not support the guise of the good and is no obstacle to my argument against it. In section III, I draw out a consequence of this result for the project of ethical rationalism. According to the rationalist or 'constitutivist' about practical reason, its standards derive from the nature of agency or the will. The problem is that, unless we act under the guise of the good, ethical rationalists cannot explain

2. See McIntyre 1990; Arpaly 2010.

3. In Setiya 2007a: Part One, and more recently in Setiya 2010 (this volume: Ch. 3).

why akrasia is irrational, distinctively or otherwise. Since akrasia is irrational and we do not act under the guise of the good, ethical rationalism is false.

I

The claim that we act under the guise of the good is multiply ambiguous. It is supposed to tell us something about the nature of intentional action and thus about actions we perform for reasons. But it can be specified in different ways, depending on how we answer a series of questions.

Does the thesis apply, in the first instance, to the desires on which intentional action rests, to intention itself, or to the reasons for which we act? One view is that, whenever you want something, you represent it as being in some way good.⁴ Another view is that, when you intend to act, you represent that action as worth performing. A third view is that, when you act for a reason, you represent that reason as counting in favour of your action.⁵

A second question asks what kind of representation is involved. Is it belief? Or a state of seeming or appearing that is consistent with disbelief?

A third question concerns the content of the representation. Is it that the action is good? That the reason for which one acts is sufficient to justify one's action? Or that it is a *pro tanto* reason for what one is doing?

Finally, we can ask whether the condition of acting under the guise of the good applies to every instance of intentional action, intention, or desire. The alternative is that its application is dispositional or generic. In general, or as a rule, we act under the guise of the good, but there are possible exceptions.

I will focus on versions of the guise of the good that apply to acting for reasons.⁶ For simplicity, I will work with a particular formulation, at least to start, but I will suggest that my objections generalize. According to the version I have in mind, which I will call 'the Guise of Reasons':

Necessarily, when A is ϕ -ing on the ground that p , A represents the fact that p as a reason to ϕ .⁷

4. See, for instance, Stampe 1987: 359; Raz 1999: 52–56; Tenenbaum 2007: 14.

5. For this claim, see Williams 1979: 107, Bond 1983: 30–31, Darwall 1983: 205, Broome 1997, Korsgaard 1997: 221, Raz 1997: 8, Wallace 1999, Dancy 2000: 97, Moran 2001: 124–128, and many others.

6. I investigate desire in Setiya 2010: §1 (this volume: 76–79), arguing that it is subject to the objection made below.

7. For similar terminology, applied to a slightly different claim, see Gregory 2013.

This statement assumes a contrast between two uses of ‘reason’, in the explanation of action—‘A is φ -ing on the ground that p ; that is among his reasons for doing it’—and in its justification—‘The fact that p is a reason for A to φ ’. The first sentence entails that A is φ -ing; the second does not. The second sentence entails that p ; the first does not.⁸ According to the second sentence, the fact that p is a consideration that counts in favour of φ -ing. It is what philosophers call a ‘normative reason’ and it is this normative element that qualifies the Guise of Reasons as a version of the claim that we act under the guise of the good. Understood in this way, the Guise of Reasons is a universal generalization about what is involved in the truth of sentences of the first, explanatory kind. It claims that, when a sentence of this kind holds, the agent must represent as true the proposition expressed by a corresponding sentence of the second kind. She must represent what she is doing as justified, to some degree, by the ground on which she is acting. It leaves unsettled whether the representation involved is a matter of belief or of appearance consistent with disbelief.

My strategy for arguing against the Guise of Reasons is not to rely on counterexamples, but to ask *why* it should be impossible to violate the proposed condition. The condition must derive from what it is to act on the ground that p . Put differently, it must be possible to explain why representing the fact that p as a reason to φ is necessary if one is to count as acting for that reason. We need to look, therefore, at the representations required for an act to be performed on the ground that p .

It is plausible that among these representations is the belief that p . If it were sufficient for acting on the ground that p that one’s belief that p play an appropriate role in one’s performance of that action, and if the role in question did not require any other representations of what one is doing or why—for instance, if it simply involved ‘non-deviant’ causation—there would be no basis for the Guise of Reasons.⁹ It would be possible to act on the ground that p without representing the fact that p as a reason for one’s action. But like those who advocate the Guise of Reasons, I believe that further representations are required. In particular, I follow Anscombe (1963: 9) in thinking that it is a condition of acting for a reason that ‘a certain sense of the question “Why?” is given application [by the agent]; the sense is of course

8. See Dancy 2000: 132. I expand on this in Setiya 2011: 132–134.

9. On the problem of causal deviance, see Davidson 1973: 79.

that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting'. In order to act intentionally, one must be aware of what one is doing and why. Does this give purchase to the Guise of Reasons?

Despite a popular impression to the contrary, it does not. The crucial thing is not to conflate the uses of 'reason' distinguished above, a conflation Anscombe invites. Her formulation suggests that the answer to the question 'Why?' gives *a* reason for acting, a fact that is a normative reason for what one is doing, or that one takes to be. By contrast, the question 'Why?' demands an explanation of what one is doing. Its answer takes the form, 'I am φ -ing because *p*', where this entails that I am φ -ing on the ground that *p*: this is among my reasons for doing it. Whether the ground on which I am acting is a normative reason for my action is another matter.

In saying this, I assume that it is possible to act because *p* even though the fact that *p* is not a normative reason for what you are doing. That you are φ -ing because *p* in the sense that answers the question 'Why?' does not entail that the fact that *p* is a reason for you to φ . If it did, a case could be made that, when I am acting because *p*, and I believe that I am doing so, I represent the fact that *p* as a normative reason for action. That it is a reason follows from the truth of what I believe. As far as I know, this argument has not been pursued by advocates of the Guise of Reasons. I think it is worth exploring, although it raises questions. Does it really follow from the fact that I believe *p* and that *p* entails *q* that I represent the truth of *q*? Does it follow when the entailment meets certain conditions, for instance, when it is conceptual or analytic? Are those conditions met in the present case? From my perspective, however, these questions are misguided. For the premise of the argument is false: it does not follow from the fact that you are φ -ing because *p* that the fact that *p* is a reason for you to φ .

If this is right, we can state the case against the Guise of Reasons. It turns on the claim that no further representations, besides the belief that I am φ -ing because *p*, are essential to acting on the ground that *p*. All that is required is that this belief play a suitable role in my performance of the action. This role need not involve any other representations of what I am doing or why; it may be no more than a causal relation, or process, of the right, non-deviant kind. It is therefore possible to act on the ground that *p* without representing the fact that *p* as a reason for one's action.

In saying this, I focus on basic intentional actions, not performed by intentional means. When I perform one intentional action by performing another, as in non-basic action, further beliefs will be involved. These are beliefs about the means by which I can φ . I am refilling the water in the house because that

is my job, and I am pushing the handle because I am working the pump.¹⁰ The belief that I am refilling the water in the house plays a suitable role in my doing so only by way of the belief that I can refill the water by working the pump, and that I can work the pump by pushing the handle, and so on. Accordingly, I believe that I am pushing the handle because I am working the pump, and that I am working the pump because I am refilling the water in the house. Do these beliefs support the Guise of Reasons? Clearly not. We can ignore them, without loss of generality, since they are beliefs of the same kind as the one considered above. It remains true that no further representations, besides beliefs of the form, I am φ -ing because p , are essential to acting on the ground that p .

How can one resist this argument? One might object, first, that the 'suitable role' played by the belief that I am φ -ing because p cannot be merely causal, even in basic action: there is no way to specify the right kind of causality, or solve the problem of causal deviance, without appeal to the representation of normative facts. But this is unpromising. If there can be the wrong sort of connection between the belief that one is φ -ing because p and one's doing it, there can be the wrong sort of connection between φ -ing and representing that fact that p as a reason to φ . Problems about the right connection of action to attitude, as in causal deviance, cannot be solved by adding further attitudes, whose relationship to what one is doing will be equally vexed.

A second response is to look upstream rather than downstream of the relevant belief. When I know that I am φ -ing because p , my belief has a distinctive epistemology: it is what Anscombe called 'knowledge without observation'.¹¹ That is to say, my belief is not formed by observation or inference: it does not rest on sufficient prior evidence. (Some will deny this, blocking the response before it begins—but I do not.) It can seem odd that we are entitled to form such beliefs, that we are justified in doing so. And it might be here that we appeal to the Guise of Reasons.¹² Does knowledge without observation of why I am acting somehow depend on representing my reason for φ -ing as a normative reason for doing it? I do not think so. As I have argued elsewhere, we can give an account of how we know what we are doing when we act intentionally in non-normative terms.¹³ On this account, one's intention

10. I adapt a well-known example from Anscombe 1963.

11. Anscombe 1963: 13ff.

12. For this suggestion, see Marcus 2013: 520–522.

13. This account is most fully developed in Setiya 2012 (this volume: Ch. 5).

in acting is cognitive: it involves the belief that one is φ -ing. It is knowing how to φ —being disposed to φ when one so intends—that explains why this belief should count as knowledge, even though it does not rest on observation or inference. When I manifest know-how, the truth of my belief is not an accident, since I was disposed to make it true. This point extends to reasons for acting. Suppose that I intend not just to φ but to φ because I believe that p . If I manifest know-how in acting on this intention, it will be no accident that I am acting as I intend. Since I intend to act on the belief that p , and my intention explains what I am doing, I am doing it because I believe that p . None of this is accidental or causally deviant: I am acting on the ground that p . By the same token, it is no accident that the belief involved in my intention, a belief that I am acting on the belief that p , is true. I know what I am doing and why.

Note that one cannot resist this argument by giving an account of intentional action on which its epistemology is explained in normative terms.¹⁴ That the Guise of Reasons is part of one such explanation is not enough. One must show that it is essential to any explanation of the knowledge involved in acting for reasons. In the absence of that proof, we leave open the possibility of acting on the belief that I am φ -ing because p , where this belief is not formed by observation or inference, without representing the fact that p as a reason to φ .

Finally, one might contend that my argument is invalid. The most it shows is that the Guise of Reasons does not follow from other conditions on acting for a reason. It may be true that one can act on the belief that p , and know without observation that one is doing so, without representing the fact that p as a reason for what one is doing. This phenomenon is possible. But it begs the question to identify acting in this way with acting for a reason. The upshot is much weaker: that if the Guise of Reasons states a condition of acting on the ground that p , it is a condition in its own right, independent of the rest. Understood in this way, the Guise of Reasons may still hold.

In a sense, I do not deny this. There is nothing to prevent you from picking out the instances of acting on the ground that p , as I understand it, that meet a further condition: ones in which the agent represents the fact that p as a reason to φ . I acknowledge such cases, which may be very common. If you like, you can refuse to say that the agent ‘acts on the ground that p ’ unless this condition is met. But on this merely conjunctive account, there is a phenomenon just like acting on the ground that p except that it violates

14. Here I disagree with Tenenbaum 2011.

the Guise of Reasons. Whether you call this phenomenon ‘acting on the ground that p ’ is basically irrelevant. It is a form of self-conscious agency whose nature can be understood without appeal to normative representations, one that meets every condition of intentional action apart from the one in dispute, which has the status of an optional extra. The possibility of this phenomenon is the substantive issue, and here the objection concedes my point.

So much for the Guise of Reasons. How far can we generalize to other versions of the guise of the good? Nothing in the argument turns on the nature of the representation involved in acting for a reason, whether belief or appearance or something else. Nor does it turn on the specific content represented. According to the Guise of Reasons, one represents the ground on which one is acting as a reason for action. What if we say instead that one must represent one’s action as in some way good, where goodness is not explained in terms of normative reasons? So long as the relevant claim is not entailed by the fact that one is acting because p , this makes no difference to the argument above.¹⁵

The remaining question is whether we can motivate a version of the guise of the good that is weaker than the Guise of Reasons in allowing for cases of intentional action, or action done for reasons, that the agent does not represent as good. Two thoughts suggest themselves. First, one might hold that the capacity for intentional action turns on a general disposition to conform to the Guise of Reasons, or to be moved by beliefs about what there is reason to do, though the disposition need not be realized in every case. The problem is that the sufficient conditions proposed above for acting on the ground that p omit not only normative representations but any disposition to rely on them in deciding what to do. We may have that disposition. It may even follow from our possessing the concept of a normative reason. It does not follow from the capacity to act for reasons, as such.

The second thought is to replace the Guise of Reasons with a generic proposition, one that permits exceptions. This generalization may allow for agents who lack the disposition to conform to the Guise of Reasons. But it holds that agents in general are disposed to do so. The obvious analogy is with ‘natural-historical

15. Might the claim that I am acting because p entail some weaker proposition about the rationality of my action, in light of the belief that p , a proposition I thereby represent as true? In principle, yes. In practice, such contents are too weak to play the roles considered in section 2. Nor do I think they follow from the explanation of action by agents’ reasons. I give an argument to this effect in Setiya 2010: §3 (this volume: 89–98).

judgements' that state the nature of living kinds.¹⁶ Wolves have four legs and hunt in packs, even though some are deformed and others free-ride. Could it be a truth of this kind that we act under the guise of the good? Here I will be brief. As I argued in 'Sympathy for the Devil' (Setiya 2010: §4 [this volume: 98–104]), while it might be a truth of human nature, like the fact that we use language and have thirty-two teeth, that we act under the guise of the good, it cannot be a truth about the nature of rational agents, ones who have the capacity to act for reasons. Rational agents are not the kind of thing whose nature can be captured in generic terms. We say that the oak tree grows leaves and the spider spins webs, but not that 'the rational agent' acts in one way or another or has such-and-such disposition—unless we mean that all of them do.¹⁷

I thus deny that rational agents act under the guise of the good, in any of the senses considered so far. Intentional action may be distinctively self-conscious; it need not rest on representations with normative content, or on a disposition to respond to them. Is there good reason to resist this view?

II

This is where the problem of akrasia comes in. You might think, first, that the possibility of akrasia is an argument *against* the claim that we act under the guise of the good. If I can judge that doing A is better than doing B, all things considered, but prefer to do B, preference comes apart from comparative assessment. What then prevents the more extreme dissociation in which I recognize nothing good about doing B but want to do it anyway?¹⁸ And what can stop me from acting on that desire?

The challenge for my account turns not on the possibility of akrasia, but on the sense expressed in my opening remarks, that it is distinctively irrational. When someone acts against their better judgement, they manifest a defect or failure of practical reason, even if their action is, in the circumstance, more rational than anything else they could do. What is more, this defect is not a mere imperfection or failing short of ideal rationality, like the failure to be moved by the belief that p , when the fact that p is a reason to φ . It is an internal tension or incoherence in the capacity to act for reasons, as it operates in this case.

16. So called by Michael Thompson (1995: 281). He is drawing on brief remarks by Anscombe (1958: 38); see also Moravcsik 1994 and Foot 2001.

17. By 'rational agents' I mean ones who are able to act for reasons, not ones who meet the normative standards of rationality.

18. A similar question is raised in Svavarsdóttir 2009: 315–316.

Or so it can seem. It is this appearance that generates a problem of *akrasia* for views like mine. Assuming that there are norms or standards of practical reason, these standards may require the disposition to be moved by one's beliefs about what there is reason to do. Failure to possess or manifest this disposition is irrational in just the way it is irrational to be unmoved by the belief that *p*, when the fact that *p* is a reason to act. But this does not explain what is distinctively wrong with the *akratic* agent. If there is no essential connection between acting for reasons and normative representation, as I have claimed, it is difficult to see what could account for the internal tension or incoherence in *akrasia*. It will simply be another way in which one can fall short of the ideal.

The idea that *akrasia* is distinctively irrational is thus an objection to those who reject the Guise of Reasons and related claims. It seems to be something they cannot explain. In my view, this is not a flaw: *akrasia* is irrational, but its distinctiveness is superficial. In *akrasia*, one believes that one is less than practically rational and so is condemned by one's own lights. That is not true of every failure to respond to reasons. But that is all. There is no further sense in which *akrasia* is distinctive, in which it involves a kind of irrationality different from that involved in any failure to respond to reasons.

Nor do I believe that the objection works, even if we grant its premise at the start. The objection assumes that, if intentional action were subject to the Guise of Reasons or something similar, that would explain why *akrasia* is distinctively irrational—as views like mine cannot. But as I will argue, this is not the case. We can explain why *akrasia* is irrational by appeal to conditions on agency, but only at the cost of its distinctive character. The idea that *akrasia* is not only irrational but distinctively so may be tempting, but it eludes our grip.

In order to see this, we need to ask how the explanation goes. How is the claim that we act under the guise of the good meant to explain the irrationality of *akrasia* as a kind of incoherence in agency? Appeal to the Guise of Reasons is not enough, since one can meet that condition perfectly when one acts against one's better judgement. A more promising view is that the capacity for intentional action involves a disposition to be moved by reasons in proportion to the weight one takes them to have. This disposition is part of what it is to be a rational agent, in the minimal sense: one who can act for reasons, not one who meets the standards of full or ideal rationality. In acting for reasons, one is regulated by this disposition, though such regulation may fail. Although one tends to act as one thinks one should, in a particular case one may act intentionally against one's better judgement. If the argument of section I is right, we can say what it is to act for reasons, and thus to be capable of

doing so, without appeal to any such disposition. But let us set that argument aside, supposing for now that its conclusion is not true. Can we then explain what is wrong with akrasia?

Perhaps we can.¹⁹ We are assuming:

- (1) Part of what it is to be a rational agent is to be disposed to conform one's motivation to the apparent weight of reasons.

If this is true, there is a sense in which agency has a 'constitutive aim': it is, in effect, a functional or teleological kind, defined in part by an end or goal, towards which it is oriented or disposed. This claim will support a form of rationalism or constitutivism, on which we derive the standards of practical reason from the nature of agency or the will. (I use 'rationalism' and 'constitutivism' as synonyms here.) Rationalists differ on the content of the constitutive aim. For David Velleman, it is self-knowledge or self-understanding.²⁰ For Christine Korsgaard, the aim is self-constitution.²¹ Others may turn to the aim of autonomy or freedom, to means–end coherence, or the satisfaction of desire. On the present conception, at least part of the aim is to act on the apparent weight of reasons, an aim that is not achieved in akrasia.

Whatever its substance, the rationalist project moves from metaphysical premises to normative conclusions, from the metaphysics of agency to the norms of practical reason. How does this transition work? How do we get from the *is* of what it is to be an agent to the *ought* of practical rationality? Here we can draw on the following claim:

- (2) *Excellence*: When Fs have a defining function or activity, a good F is one that performs that activity or function well.

It is worth stressing how modest this principle is. It does not claim that 'good' is essentially attributive, that it must be used in conjunction with a common noun, or that when 'good' is attributive, the noun must refer to a functional kind.²² It simply asserts that, when we are dealing with a functional kind, being good as an instance of that kind turns on performing the function well.

19. The following discussion draws on Setiya 2013: §1; its framework derives from Setiya 2007a.

20. See, especially, the introduction to Velleman 2000.

21. In Korsgaard 2009.

22. Compare Geach 1956; Setiya 2007a: Part Two, §2.

If the function of clocks is to tell the time, a good clock does so both legibly and reliably. If the defining activity of a thief is to steal others' property, a good thief is one who gets away with the loot. Likewise, if what it is to be a rational agent is to aim at autonomy, or self-knowledge, what it is to be good *as* a rational agent is to aim at these things effectively, to manifest in full the dispositions that constitute the capacity to act for reasons. From (1) and (2) we can thus infer:

- (3) To be good *qua* rational agent is, in part, to manifest the disposition described in premise (1): to conform one's action to the apparent weight of reasons.

We have almost explained why akrasia is irrational. For that, we need a final premise:

- (4) To be practically rational is to be good *qua* rational agent.

This premise draws on a compelling thought: that standards of practical reason are standards for rational agency, not some other aspect of our lives. They bear on the assessment of rational agents, as such. To say this is not to assume the truth of ethical rationalism. One can accept it even if one doubts that the nature of agency is a source of substantive norms. Even if they are not explained by the aim of rational agency, standards of practical reason are standards for being good *qua* rational agent. It follows from (3) and (4) that:

- (5) Akratic action is irrational: it involves a failure to conform to standards of practical reason that derive from what it is to be a rational agent.

This argument strikes me as compelling, so long as we grant the first premise. Its strategy is rationalist or constitutivist: deriving norms of practical reason from the nature of agency. But it is not subject to standard objections. One complaint is that, if norms are constitutive of the kind to which they apply, it will be impossible for full-fledged members of that kind to violate those norms.²³ There is no risk of such preclusion here. According to premise (1), rational agents are disposed to conform to the apparent weight of

23. For this complaint, directed at Velleman, see Clark 2001: 581–585; and for other treatments of the difficulty, Railton 1997: §2; Korsgaard 2009: Ch. 8.

reasons. This disposition sets an aim of which they can fall short. It is not a condition of acting for reasons that one realize this aim, though it belongs to our nature as rational agents to be directed by or tend towards it. This structure allows for practical irrationality: the capacity to act for reasons can be exercised imperfectly, in ways that do not fully achieve its ends. The possibility of akrasia is thus preserved.

A second complaint is due to David Enoch. Conceding for the sake of argument that intentional action has a constitutive aim—following Korsgaard, he imagines that its aim is self-constitution—Enoch’s sceptic responds as follows:

‘Classify my bodily movements and indeed me as you like. Perhaps I cannot be classified as an agent without aiming to constitute myself. But why should I be an agent? Perhaps I can’t act without aiming at self-constitution, but why should I act? If your reasoning works, this just shows that I don’t care about agency and action. I am perfectly happy being a shmagent—a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not of shmagency) of self-constitution. I am perfectly happy performing shmactions—not action events that are very similar to actions but that lack the aim (constitutive of actions but not of shmactions) of self-constitution’. (Enoch 2006: 179)

This speech is initially puzzling. Enoch assumes that, while it is constitutive of agency to aim at self-constitution, it is possible to be a ‘shmagent’: a kind of being very similar to an agent except that its activities lack this constitutive aim. This begs the question against constitutivism. The constitutivist view is not that the aim is a further feature, independent of the other characteristics of intentional action—being moved by one’s beliefs and desires, knowing what one is doing and why, and so on—but that nothing like intentional action would be possible without it. There is no such thing as a shmagent. The only way to show otherwise is to engage with the metaphysics of constitutivism. But Enoch claims to concede the metaphysics and to dispute the inference from *is* to *ought*.

In fact, I think that is what he does. The passage above is in this respect misleading. Enoch’s real objection is not that shmagency is possible but that even if it is not, it does not follow that we have reason to achieve the constitutive aim of action. Even if it is impossible for me to stop being an agent—and so to lose the aim of self-constitution—while engaging in anything like

intentional action, it may not be true that I *ought* to aim at self-constitution or that I have reason to do so. We cannot derive a normative necessity from necessity of any other kind.²⁴

Enoch may be right to dispute the inference from inescapability to normative reason. But he is wrong to think that the constitutivist needs it. Enoch begins with functional kinds, noting that a good car is one that is ‘good *as a car*’, one that measures up to standards ‘built into the very classification of an object as a car’ (Enoch 2006: 170). But although he cites ‘constitutive functions’, he quickly shifts to ‘commitments’ and does not mention *Excellence* or any version of the argument above. He thus omits the most promising form of constitutivism, one that does not draw an inference from unavoidable commitments of agents to practical reasons, but from functions or aims to standards for being good as an instance of a functional or teleological kind. The standard in question is that of being good *qua* rational agent. It is the standard of practical rationality. It is from this standard that we extract conclusions about what there is reason to do, assuming, roughly, that normative reasons are facts by which it is rational to be moved. The path to reasons from the constitutive aim of rational agency is therefore indirect, and its details may need work.²⁵ But it is not subject to Enoch’s complaint.

There are no doubt other objections to constitutivism. But given the initial premise—that agency has an aim of the relevant kind—it is not easy to resist. How does this bear on the problem of akrasia? Recall the objection with which we began, that there must be some mistake in the argument of section I, since it prevents us from explaining why akrasia is distinctively irrational. Unless there is an essential connection between acting for reasons and normative representation, of the sort proposed in premise (1), it is hard to see what could account for the internal tension or incoherence in akratic action. We have learned that this is only partly right. If we accept the derivation above, we can explain why akrasia is irrational by appeal to the nature of rational agency. The akratic agent is subject to a malfunction of agency, as such, an inner conflict in her capacity to act for reasons, as it operates in the particular case. At the same time, however, this argument undermines the objection to my view.

24. Here I sketch the argument of Enoch 2006: §6.

25. I discuss the final step, from practical rationality to reasons, in Setiya 2014 (this volume: Ch. 9).

For the irrationality of akrasia is not in this way distinctive. For the rationalist or constitutivist, it is a general truth about the standards of practical reason that they derive from the nature of rational agency, with its constitutive aim, and that their violation is the exercise of agency turned against itself. In this respect, akrasia is no different from the failure to be moved by a belief whose content is a normative reason in proportion to its rational weight. Like me, the constitutivist is forced to assimilate akrasia to other defects of practical reason. She cannot explain why it is distinctive or special.

Is there room to resist this point by advocating rationalism or constitutivism only for the indictment of akrasia, while giving some other account of the rest of practical reason? I do not see how. We can explain in constitutivist terms why akrasia is irrational, given premise (1). The disposition to conform to the apparent weight of reasons belongs to rational agents, as such. In order to be good *qua* agent, and therefore practically rational, one must possess and manifest this disposition in full. If this explanation works, however, *all* requirements of practical reason must be explained in the same way. The dispositions involved in agency are the exclusive source of rational norms. Why so? Because the principles that underwrite the explanation in the given case are general: they leave no space for hybrid views. According to *Excellence*, when Fs have a defining function or activity—as we are supposing agents do—a good F does *nothing more* than perform this activity or function well. That is what it is to be good as an F; there are no further conditions. We may of course be subject to standards of other kinds: a good F may be a bad G. But as we found in premise (4) of the argument above, there is no failure of practical reason in falling short of standards that do not apply to us as rational agents. To be practically rational is to be good *qua* rational agent, not in any other way. One cannot challenge these claims, which are in any case plausible, without ruining the desired account of akrasia.

It follows that one cannot have it both ways. If akrasia is irrational because it violates the constitutive aim of rational agency, it is not distinctively irrational. Practical rationality is quite generally explained in terms of such aims. If the special character of akrasia is explained by something else, the explanation is consistent with my view. There is no argument from the distinctive irrationality of akrasia, authentic or otherwise, to the claim that we act under the guise of the good. Nor is there reason to resist the case set out in section I. Its conclusion therefore stands: rational agents need not act, or be disposed to act, under the guise of the good.

III

I want to close by drawing out an implication of the argument so far. The implication is that we should not be rationalists or constitutivists about practical reason. My opposition to such views goes back to *Reasons without Rationalism* (Setiya 2007a). There I urged a conception of agency on which its nature is too minimal or ‘thin’ for the derivation of rational norms, even norms of instrumental reason. But there is a more immediate way to make the point.

I have argued that one can act on the ground that p even though one does not represent the fact that p as a reason for what one is doing. More strongly, we can say what it is to be a rational agent without appeal to normative representations or the disposition to act on the apparent weight of reasons. Yet I agree that akrasia is irrational, at least in a qualified sense. An action that is akratic may be more rational than anything else one could do in the circumstance. This might be true when one has false beliefs about what there is reason to do. But even then, in being akratic one manifests a defect of practical reason. One is less than fully rational. We could explain the irrationality of akrasia—though not why it is distinctive—by appeal to premise (1), which is a version of the claim that we act under the guise of the good. But premise (1) is false.

What matters now is the converse claim: we can explain why akrasia is irrational, in rationalist or constitutivist terms, *only* by appeal to premise (1). On a rationalist or constitutivist view, the standards of practical reason derive from the nature or constitutive aim of rational agency. If it is not part of this aim that one conform to the apparent weight of reasons, what prevents an instance of fully rational akrasia, in which one achieves the constitutive aim of agency while acting against one’s better judgement? In principle, there could be some other aim one is bound to frustrate in akratic action. But in light of the argument in section I, it is hard to imagine what this could be. The dispositions involved in acting for a reason do not appeal to normative representations. Why can’t you manifest these dispositions regardless of your beliefs about reasons to act? Note that it is not enough to show, in rationalist or constitutivist terms, that there is reason to act on the belief that one should φ . (Perhaps this belief amounts to a desire, and the constitutive aim is desire-satisfaction.) The problem is that, as we saw at the beginning, one can act against a reason to φ with perfect rationality, if one has more reason to do something else.²⁶

26. A different thought: it may belong to the constitutive aim of rational agency that one manifest in full the dispositions involved in possessing the concepts one does, where the disposition to conform to the apparent weight of reasons is essential to the concept of a reason.

Again, one might hope to resist this argument by going hybrid: advocating rationalism or constitutivism for the rest of practical reason, while offering some other account of akrasia. This would involve a curious reversal, in which akrasia turns out to be the one form of practical irrationality that does *not* involve internal conflict or incoherence. And we have already seen that it will not work. If any standard of practical reason derives from the nature of rational agency, all of them do. To be practically rational is to be good *qua* rational agent, and if agency is a functional kind, to be good *qua* agent is to perform that function well.

In brief, then, the argument runs as follows. First, we do not act under the guise of the good. Second, akrasia is practically irrational. Third, it is only if we act under the guise of the good, in something like the sense of premise (1), that ethical rationalists can explain the irrationality of akrasia. So ethical rationalism is false.

Unlike other arguments against rationalism or constitutivism, this one does not dispute the prospect of deriving norms from the nature of rational agency. Nor does it appeal to the possibility of primitive rational agents, whose nature fails to generate such norms. Instead, it points to a standard of practical reason that seems to conflict with the rationalist approach, on the conception of agency I defend. It is open to the ethical rationalist to reject this standard. She might stress, in doing so, the defects of other accounts. If the alternative to rationalism or constitutivism is scepticism about practical reason, the view that practical rationality is a myth and that there are no reasons to act, we might be willing to live with uncomfortable verdicts on what is rational and what is not. In this way, the case against ethical rationalism is not self-contained. Still, if I am right about the guise of the good, there is a serious challenge for rationalists to confront.²⁷

This raises two concerns. First, there is no obvious feature of the disposition to act on beliefs about what one is doing and why that would place constraints on one's use of other concepts, concepts not essentially involved in acting for reasons. Second, if we associate the standards of rationality with the dispositions involved in concept-possession, why not do so more directly, without the detour through ethical rationalism? If part of what it is to possess a concept is to be disposed to conform to or approximate the standards of rationality in the use of that concept, we can derive the standards of rationality from the conditions of concept-possession without appeal to rational agency, as such. For different versions of this approach, see Murdoch 1970 and Smith 2010.

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