

**IS DESIRE NECESSARY
FOR THE EXPLANATION OF ACTION? ***

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It is a commonplace, and indeed a sort of dogma, of contemporary philosophy of mind and action that any appropriate explanation of an action must invoke two sorts of psychological states of agents: beliefs and desires. According to the so-called "belief-desire" model of the explanation of action, to give the reasons why an agent has acted is to provide a desire and a belief so that the action can be understood as the outcome of a practical syllogism of the following form:

X desires that p

X believes that doing A will be a means of bringing about that p

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Therefore X does A

This schema is supposed to be well entrenched in our ordinary way of speaking, and in our “folk psychology”. But the schema is, as it is well known, ambiguous and incomplete in many ways (see for instance Papineau 1993). Two problems in particular interest us here. First, in so far as the desire and belief involved are conceived as reasons why the agent did A, are they reasons which *causally explain* why the agent acted as he did, by specifying the psychological states which led him to act? Or are they reasons which *justify* the agent's action, i.e which make it rational or reasonable by his own lights? In other terms an agent may have had reasons to act, which explain his action, but these might not be good reasons, even by his own lights. Famously, Davidson has argued that reasons for actions are also causes, but there is an obvious sense in which citing the psychological causes of an action need not be giving the reasons for it.

Suppose, however, that we grant that reasons may also be causes. And suppose also that the above schema gives us conditions which are sufficient for an action. A second question is whether it gives us necessary conditions. The commonplace about the explanation of action tells us that it does. Could there be action if there were no beliefs? No, for a creature only endowed with desires would not be able to see how it can satisfy her desires in a particular situation. Could there be action if there were no desires? Apparently no, since a creature only endowed with beliefs could not be able to move: desires are, it seems, the only locus of motivation. To paraphrase Kant, desire without belief would be blind, and belief without desire would be empty. This is why the belief-desire schema seems so obvious: only beliefs *together with* desires, and desires *together with* beliefs can produce actions. The doctrine that motivation has its source in the presence of a relevant desire and of a means-end belief is deeply entrenched in our common sense notion of a reason, and it has perhaps its origin in Aristotle (in particular in

the doctrine of the practical syllogism, hence the characterisation above). But it is more properly called, in the contemporary literature, "Humean". Hume held it in a particularly strong form, as the view that "reason" (belief) is "the slave" of the passions"(desires). According to Hume, beliefs as well as desires, are necessary for action, but desires are the driving force. Without desires, no motivation, hence no action. The Humean doctrine, however, does not pertain only to actions, but also to values. The ultimate source of our values lies in our desires; it is because we desire certain things that we value them. But this doctrine seems to be very objectionable. Is it correct to say that whenever I act there must always be a desire of mine which leads me to do what I believe will satisfy this desire? Opponents to the Humean doctrine claim that it is not, for I may act, instead of act out of desires, out of principles, moral obligations, categorical imperatives, and the like. And there need not be any desire present in my motivations nor in my deliberations. This is the classical issue opposing Kantian and Humeans in the theory of reasons for acting and in the theory of value. But there is another issue too, which opposes Humeans to another sort of theorist, who claims that in order to value something, and for this valuing to constitute a motivation, there need not be any *non cognitive* state, such as desire. According to that kind of theorist, the "cognitivist", only a certain sort of cognitive state is necessary for acting, namely the state of *believing that something is good*. Hence desire is not necessary for action. But now the previous question posed about belief arises again: how can a belief, which is a mere cognitive state, have motivational force?

This is the problem that I want to address here. We can formulate it under the form of a dilemma (Smith 1992). On the one hand, if to value something is to believe that it is good, then it is difficult to see how a mere belief can produce an action, for there are many things that we value, without, so to say, putting those values into practice, and without acting according to them. On the other hand, if to value something is a matter of desiring it, then it seems that our values can never be

independent from our desires, while they obviously are: we often fail to desire what we value, and fail to value what we desire.

As one sees, these questions do not pertain only to the nature of reasons and motivation, but also to issues about moral epistemology and ethics. But here I shall try to concentrate only upon the former.

I. The Humean view of motivation

Let us call (following Smith 1987) the view according to which any action must be caused at least by a desire the *Humean theory of motivation* or simply the *Humean view*. In its purest form, the Humean theory is simply Hume's. Hume's famous thesis is that the cognitive psychological state — the belief— which figures, together with the non-cognitive state— desire— among the minimal causes of an action — is necessarily subjected to this non cognitive state. Reason, famously, is the "slave" of the passions, belief is the slave of desire. By this Hume does not mean that we always engage into wishful thinking, that the contents of our beliefs are determined by the contents of our desires. On the contrary, he wants to say that beliefs and desires necessarily play a different role. Beliefs are states which represent the world, whereas desires are states which produce certain things in the world. But they cannot exchange their roles: a belief can never produce anything in the world, and a desire can never represent anything in the world. According to Hume's terminology, beliefs belong with the side of reason, which is only concerned with relations of ideas, whereas desires belong with the side of passion. A desire, or a passion, cannot represent anything about the way the world is, since it is a mere feeling, as Hume says "an original existence". (A belief too, for Hume, is a sort of feeling, but it has in addition the power of representing to us the ways things are). That belief, or reason, is the slave of the passions, or desire, means that reason has not role to play in action. It can only represent to us the means-end

relations which we need to understand in order to satisfy our desires. There cannot be any *practical* reason as such. Hence the moving force of an action can never be a belief. It is always a desire. As Hume notoriously writes:

It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human action can never, in any case, be accounted for by *reason*, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer *,because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires to keep his health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible that he can never give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object.

Perhaps to your second question, *why he desires health*, he may also reply, that *it is necessary for the exercise of his calling*. If you ask, *why he is anxious on that head*, he will answer, *because he desires to get money*. If you demand *Why? It is the instrument of pleasure*, says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress *in infinitum*; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment or affection." (*Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Selby-Brigge, Third Edition, Nidditch, Oxford 1975,p. 293)

This is the basis of what is sometimes called Hume's "sentimentalism": any human action has always to be referred to an ultimate "end" (which we may also here call a cause), which is a feeling, a sentiment, or a desire. As it stands, the Humean view is open to at least two *prima facie* objections. The first one is that it misrepresents our actual reasons for acting, by reducing reasons to mere psychological states which have a causal role, whereas reasons are not simply causes of actions, but also

justifications of them. The second one is that it misrepresents the actual phenomenology of acting for a reason. Let us consider them in turn.

II. Two objections against the Humean View

1) First objection. The Humean View according to which desires must necessarily figure among our reasons for acting is incorrect, because it captures only one possible meaning of the term "reason". When we say that an agent has acted for a given reason, we may mean two things: we may mean either that the reason *explains* the action, or that the reason *justifies* it. In the first sense, we simply cite a relevant psychological state which, in Davidson's term, *rationalizes* the action. In the second sense, we do not simply cite a relevant psychological state. We also want to say that the reason was rational for the agent, that it was for him a *good* reason, or that, in the light of this reason, it was for him the rational thing to do. We may call it a *normative* reason (Smith 1987, 1992). But, the objection goes, the Humean view simply reduces normative reasons to explaining ones. To take an example given by Bernard Williams (1979), suppose that I now desire to drink a gin and tonic and that I believe that I can do so by mixing the stuff before me with tonic and drinking it. Suppose now that, unbeknownst to me, my belief is false: this stuff before me is not gin, but petrol. I certainly have a reason to drink it, because I desire to drink a gin and tonic, and believe that this is a gin and tonic. But this reason only explains my drinking, it does not justify it. For if I were to know that what I am about to drink is petrol, I would certainly not drink it. In this sense, I have *no reason* to do so, either from my own perspective or from the perspective of an external observer. But the Humean view is silent upon whether my reason is a good or a bad one. It simply says that I have reasons to drink the stuff in question, and that my reasons are constituted by the relevant desire and belief. This, however, is not completely right as it stands, for the Humean view allows us to say

nevertheless that my reasons for drinking this stuff can be criticized. But it can be criticized, according to Hume, only on the basis of the belief that I have, because my belief is false. According to Hume the only norms of reason that we can invoke here pertain to beliefs, not to desires (Smith 1988, 244). There are no norms of reason which prevent me from desiring to drink gin and tonic, and there are no such norms which prevent me from drinking petrol, if I want to drink petrol. The only norms of reasons are theoretical ones: I should not believe what is false. Provided that I have a given desire, the only reason that can be given from my action is this desire, which is a motivating reason. It can further be asked whether I am justified to act, but only in so far as I have the correct beliefs. As Hume says "it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger."

The first objection to the Humean view is not simply that it is silent on the normative meaning of "reason", when we talk about the reasons for an action, as if normative reasons were an optional extra added to the mention of our motivating reasons. It is that appeal to motivating reasons alone is not sufficient to account for our actual reasons for action, which at least *can* be normative. The point is this. An agent may have reasons to act which do not only pertain to his present desires and beliefs, but also to his *future* desires and beliefs. In acting we do not only consider what we actually desire and believe, but also what we *should* desire and believe, or what a rational agent has to desire and believe. We put ourselves in the place of what an ideal agent would do in such and such circumstances. But the ideal beliefs and desires that motivate us in this case are not desires and beliefs in Hume's sense. They are not feelings or "original existences". In so far as they are ideal desires and beliefs that *any* agent should have, or which an agent should have if he considers his future self, they are not simply motivating reasons, but also normative reasons. And we can act upon them. Take the case of a man who would like to drink petrol and tonic instead of gin and tonic. Hume would say that there is nothing irrational in the desire of such an agent, for he may well, if he pleases, have

this reason or act. According to Hume, as we saw, the agent can be criticized in his beliefs: he should believe what is true. So Hume is able to recognize that there are norms of reasons governing beliefs, so he can grant that the belief-part of our reasons are normative and ideal in this sense. But he refuses to acknowledge that the desire-part can be normative and ideal: the desire-set of reasons is only normative or rational in the sense that *he*, for his own part, has such desires. So they cannot be criticized. But this seems just wrong. First his desires can be criticized by the agent himself. He can be able to recognize that he *should not desire* to drink petrol, on the ground that it would damage his health, and also on the ground that it would damage any human health. So there seems to be, after all, rational and irrational desires. And it is false, in this sense, that only *actual* desires enter into the picture of our acting for reasons.

The Kantian here may want to press this point: rational desires are rather to be conceived as *requirements, principles* and *imperatives*, indeed *categorical imperatives*. For rational desires are such that they *should* be desired by any human agent, in whatever position, from a point of view which necessarily transcends the particular perspective of a single agent. So we would better not call them "desires".

Even if we do not go as far as the Kantian, the point can still be made against the Humean that his account of practical reasoning fails to account for an essential part of our acting for reasons: the fact that we do not act out of desires, but also out of what Tom Nagel (1970, 29) has called "motivated desires". Unlike "unmotivated" desires, motivated desires are not "original existences": they are desires *arrived at* through the process of a deliberation or of a decision. What is wrong, then, in the Humean view, is that it seems to reduce our desires to these simple, unmotivated desires, or to claim that the primary and ultimate causes of our actions are always desires of this kind (as the quotation about the man who exercises shows). The Humean view may be correct for the simplest of our actions, those which are caused by such desires as hunger, thirst, or various physiological needs. But we are reflexive creatures, not simply desiring ones. So in that sense

desire is not only insufficient for the explanation of action. It may not be necessary. This can be seen from the fact that we do not only have desires, in the simple form, but also *desires about our desires*. The smoker, for instance, may desire to smoke, but he may also desire not to desire to smoke. In this sense, he does not *value* smoking, although he desires it (see for instance Frankfurt). Conversely, there are cases where one values something, in the sense of desiring to desire it, although one fails to desire it. For instance, the coward may value courage and sense of duty, but fail to have, in the relevant circumstances, the proper motivation for being courageous and dutiful, and indeed find himself to be neither courageous nor dutiful.

(Note in passing that this argument can be made not only against the standard Humean view of desires, but also against the standard Humean view of beliefs. For according to the standard belief-desire model of the explanation of action, beliefs, as well as desires, are passive states that we cannot help having. This again, may be true of our simplest beliefs, those which are caused by our perceptions and experiences, but this is not true for the most sophisticated of them, which we have because they are arrived at through inference, deliberation and decision. Just as there are desires that we arrive at through motivation, it may be argued that there are beliefs which we have through some form of deliberation and decisions. The latter should rather be called, according to Jonathan Cohen's terminology, *acceptances* rather than beliefs (Cohen 1992). The point here is that just as we may be moved to act from *goals* instead of desires, we can be led to think from *acceptances* rather than beliefs. In other terms there are many more motivational states and doxastic than the official Humean view seems to allow, and motivational and doxastic states of a greater complexity than mere unmotivated, simple desires, or unmotivated or simple beliefs.

As we shall see, this objection against the Humean theory is not necessarily damaging, since motivated or rational desires are still supposed to be *desires*. But if one understands the term "desire" in the Humean sense of a *feeling*, affection or passion, the objection is indeed a serious one.

2) This first general objection to the Humean view of motivation can be backed by a second, related, one, which is that it misrepresents the phenomenology of desires. According to Hume, a desire is a passion, and a passion is a certain kind of feeling that we experience. This seems to imply that when an agent acts out of a desire, he feels it or experiences it in a certain way. Again that may be true for certain desires, such as thirst or hunger, which we cannot fail to feel when we have them (if I do not experience thirst when I am thirsty, it is dubious that I am thirsty, unless my attention is distracted by another feeling or thought of mine, for instance if I experience also a severe bodily pain, for instance a toothache). But there are plenty of desires which do not have this phenomenological character. Suppose that I desire to be a good philosopher, and that this causes me to try to write philosophical papers. When I attempt to write one, I may act out of this desire, but I certainly do not need to experience the desire in question, not even to *believe* that I desire to be a good philosopher. But the Humean view seems to be committed to the idea that my desire is always present in the phenomenology of my acting, or at least to the idea that it need to be consciously believed by me to be a desire of mine. This seems wrong on two counts. First it is wrong on the view that my psychological state is a desire, for a desire is not like a sensation or a feeling. Unlike these, most desires have a propositional content: one desires *that p*, or *that q*. And desires as propositional attitudes do not necessarily have a phenomenological content. In this respect they are rather like beliefs: just as I do not need to have a particular phenomenological experience to believe, say, that *Nyer is in the South of France*, I do not need to have a particular experience to desire *to go to Nyer*. I need not even think of it, and nevertheless go to Nyer just for this reason, that I desire to go there. Second it is wrong *a fortiori* on the view that my psychological state is a rational desire, a desire that I take to be a desire that I should have. For such a normative desire certainly needs not be associated to any particular feeling or belief about this desire, not even a memory of it.

Unlike the first, this second objection, which bears on the phenomenology of desiring, can, I think, be easily answered by the Humean. In fact Hume answers it when he says that not all of our passions are like emotions or feelings that one experiences, so to say, in the short term of our minds. There are, he says, some passions which are not "passionate" in the ordinary sense, but *calm* ones (Hume,) . A calm or cool passion is one that we need not experience as such, but which nevertheless leads us to act in just the same way as a "hot" one. To take an example from Austin, I may have always desired to eat ice cream, and when at the High Table I am presented some, I quietly empty the plate, without passing it over to you, to your stupefaction. In other—familiar—terms, a desire, for the Humean, need not be an *occurrent* state of mind. It may well be a *dispositional* one, a disposition to act in certain ways in certain circumstances. (The same is true of beliefs, although it is not always clear in Hume's own discussions of beliefs.) In other terms, the Humean view is not necessarily committed to the claim that desire is short-lived experienced psychological state, which is always present to the mind. It may be a long-lived one, which is not conscious. In Smith's and Pettit's terms (1993) , the Humean may not hold that desire is always present in the *foreground* of deliberation leading to action. He may simply hold that it is always present in the *background*. But the Humean will nevertheless claim that it is always present, not necessarily in the sense of being possibly conscious on reflection, but at least in the sense of being an unconscious motivational state. This answers the second objection, although it does not answer the first.

III. The Revised Humean view

It begins to emerge, from our discussion so far, that the Humean view is threatened by the two objections that I have presented only if it is reduced to its simple form, with a particular construal of the notions of "desire" and of "reason".

For allow that in the standard belief-desire scheme of action explanation the term "desire" (or, for that matter, the term "belief") need not designate a particular occurrent state, but only *may* designate such a state. And allow that in this schema "desire" can also refer to any attitude or motivational state such that the agent *values*, in one way or another, something, then it seems that we can avoid the previous difficulties. Suppose in particular that we define the fact that an agent does something for a reason in the following way:

- 1) He has some sort of pro-attitude towards actions of that kind
- and
- 2) He believes that his action is of that kind

where the term "pro-attitude" is a sort of place-holder which covers not only:

- a) desires, wantings, urges, promptings

but also

- b) moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, public and private goals or values.

then it becomes true analytically or as a matter of conceptual necessity that if an agent did something for a reason, she did it because of a particular desire of his: whatever she did, and whatever was her reason, be it rational or not, good or bad by his standards or by ours), she did it because she had a particular motivation for doing A, and because she valued, in whatever way, a certain thing or goal that A, she believed, was supposed to lead to. In particular this characterisation leaves it open whether the action was the outcome of a deliberation on the part of the agent, where she reached her goal on the basis of a range of alternatives, or whether her action was the output of a psychological state that acted upon her as a brute force.

The characterisation, and the terminology just used, is of course Davidson's well known one, in his seminal essay "Actions, reasons, and causes"(Davidson

1963). In that paper and elsewhere, Davidson uses precisely the term "pro-attitude" to cover any sort of attitude that the agent may have and which may be a motivating reason for doing something. In so far as "desire" is understood in this very broad and neutral sense, it seems that Davidson's view can both keep the spirit of the Humean view and accommodate the difficulties that we have raised for it. So let us call it, in contrast with the former simple Humean view, *the revised Humean view*. In fact this revised view is the one that is most of the time referred to when philosophers talk of "the standard belief-desire" thesis. It seems to be so general that it can account for any sort of motivation that we might have, be it rational or not, be it based on simple desires or on sophisticated desires to desire, i.e. rational desires.

But is it so? We have seen that one main defect of the Humean view in general is that it does not distinguish *explaining* (causal) reasons from *normative* (justificatory) reasons, and thus that it fails to tell us whether the agent's reason is the product of a rational deliberation or the product of a mere psychological state which acts in a causal way. The revised view tells us that this difference does not matter for the general truth of the thesis, provided we construe "pro-attitude" in a sufficiently broad way, to denote any sort of valuing. But now the thesis seems so broad that it is either empty or that it begs the question at issue. For suppose, as the revised thesis says, that "desire" is just a place-holder for "value". Then what does "value" mean here? Presumably it means: any *motivational* state which is apt to cause action. but is precisely what is at issue in the first objection above. For when we talked about values, rational desires, imperatives, principles or normative reasons, we were precisely talking about reasons which need not act in the causal way in which simple desires were supposed to act. This was precisely the point of distinguishing explaining, causal reasons, from normative, justificatory ones. But now the revised Humean view faces a dilemma:

a) *either* it is compatible with the claim that valuing something or

having a "pro-attitude" may not be a motivational state of the desire-kind, and can be a *cognitive* state, like a belief that something is good, or desirable, or valuable; but then it ceases to be a "Humean view", for the essence of such a view is that desires, as *non cognitive* states, cause actions;

- b) *or* it reduces all kinds of pro-attitudes and valuings to states of the desire-kind, in which case it is indeed Humean, but then it encounters precisely the same objections as the simple Humean view.

I shall in one moment consider the first option. But in so far as what I have called the revised Humean view is largely Davidson's, we can see how his reduction of valuing to desiring faces the same difficulties as the simple Humean view. Davidson's well known thesis in "Actions, reasons and causes" is that

"R is a primary reason why an agent performed the action A under the description *d* only if R consists in a pro-attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under the description *d*, has that property"

and

A primary reason for an action is its cause.

But Davidson does not only say that a primary reason in this sense acts as the cause of the action: it also rationalizes it, in the sense that it justifies it. In other terms, for Davidson, an explaining reason *is* a normative reason. But, as it well known, this conception encounters difficulties in the case of irrational actions,

such as *akrasia* or weakness of the will. In such cases, the agent values, *prima facie*, something, but fails to desire what he values. So there is something that he finds rationally desirable, without being motivated in the appropriate way towards it. In such cases, says Davidson, the reasons why he acts are not rational causes: his own reasons fail to be intelligible and normative to him. We could say the same of the cases alluded to above of the smoker who does not desire what he values or of the coward who does not value what he desires. But then there cannot be the connexion between explaining reasons and normative reasons that Davidson says there is. Like any Humean view, his view faces the problem of accounting for the gap between valuing and desiring.

IV. Desire as belief

So let us turn now to the first alternative in the dilemma. It suggests that we can understand the desire-part of the standard belief-desire schema in the following way: to desire that p is to believe that p is good, or valuable, or desirable. But believing that p is desirable is not itself a desire. Precisely, as we just saw, we can believe that something is good without desiring it. The suggestion, therefore, is that after all we do not need the desire-part in the belief-desire pair of reasons: only belief that something is good would suffice. This is what David Lewis (1987) has called the *desire as belief* thesis. But this view can be construed in two ways.

First it can be construed in a typically cognitivist or realist way, in the sense in which these terms are understood in contemporary moral epistemology (see for instance Platts 1981, 1990). It means then that valuing is not a non cognitive state, such as a desire, or a pro-attitude in Davidson's sense, but a genuinely cognitive attitude, towards independent entities, real objective values, such as the Good. We need not quarrel here the ontology implicit in such claims. The standard objection that such views encounter are precisely the Humean one: how can a mere cognitive

attitude, such as a belief — even a belief about what is desirable— constitute a motivating reason to act? How can the mind be *moved* simply by beliefs? Beliefs are not the proper thing to constitute motivations, for conceptual reasons. The point can be formulated in terms of a familiar metaphor, initially proposed by Anscombe (1958) and popularized later by Searle (1981) and others: beliefs are states which purport to represent the world, that is to *fit* the world— they have the "world to mind direction of fit", whereas desires are states which purport to make the world appropriate to them— they have the "mind to world direction of fit". To say that valuing just is a species of believing would be to reverse their direction of fit, and this seems just (conceptually) impossible.

But we need not understand the desire as belief thesis in the full cognitivist sense. We could understand it in a second sense, as the thesis that *in addition* to a desire the source of our motivation can be a belief that something is good. In this case, the desire is identified, or necessarily connected, to the belief in question. Such a view can find some help from the fact, already noted above against the simple Humean view, that desires, after all, share some characteristics with beliefs, in particular the characteristic of having propositional content, and hence of representing in certain ways certain states of affairs (precisely the desirable ones).

This seems promising. But it does not cease to be mysterious by Humean standards, for we still have to understand how such beliefs, or *quasi-beliefs*, can have a motivating force if they are essentially cognitive states. And the beliefs-as-thesis thesis faces a difficulty which Lewis and others (Collins 1987) have noticed. I cannot here spell out completely Lewis's argument. (see also the discussion by Price, and Lewis 1995) But in a nutshell, it is the following. Suppose, as Bayesian decision theorists do, that beliefs as well as desires, are not full or categorical states, but that they can have degrees, which are degrees of subjective probability and of utility. Suppose further, with the Bayesians, that change of belief goes through conditionalisation upon evidence. Lewis's argument is that if there were mixed states such as "beliefs as desires" (or, as they are sometimes called, "besires") which

are *both* beliefs and desires, then these states would not obey the rules of Bayesian decision theory nor the conditionalisation rule. For when a system of attitudes changes under the impact of new information, beliefs evolve in one way, and desires in another. But the "besire" thesis would mean that people could change both their opinions and their desires in the same way. But they don't. I may change my opinion on the basis of a certain piece of evidence, and my desires on the basis of something different from that that piece of evidence. Suppose for instance that I believe, to degree n , that there is beer in the refrigerator, and that I desire, to degree n , to drink beer. Upon inspecting the contents of refrigerator, I come to believe, to degree n , that there is no beer in the refrigerator. I may, of course, change my desire for beer and not desire to drink beer any more. But I need not have such a desire. I may still desire to drink beer to degree n . There is no reason why I should adapt always my desires in the same way as the way by which I adapt my beliefs on the basis of evidence. So the thesis is bound to collide with decision theory in its current form. The argument is powerful only in so far as one accepts the idea that practical reasoning as well as theoretical reasoning go by change in degrees of beliefs and desires. There are many theorists which doubt it, and I am myself tempted to think that the radical Bayesian thesis (e.g. Jeffrey 19) that we always act always on the basis of partial, rather than full, beliefs and desires, is incorrect (for reasons similar to those given by Harman 1986). However, be it as it may, Lewis's argument raises a serious challenge to the belief as desire thesis.

V. Rational desire and the idealised Humean view

Let us take stock, by representing the difficulties that we have encountered about motivation in the following way (inspired by the discussion in Smith 1989, p.90). The following propositions seem to be plausible, but they also seem to be inconsistent:

- (1) Value judgments of the form "It is valuable for me to do A" express beliefs, in this case a belief that doing A is good.
- (2) There is some sort of necessary connexion between being in the state that the judgment "It is valuable to do A" and having a motivating reason to do A.
- (3) Motivating reasons are constituted, at least, by desires.

There is an inconsistency between (1) on the one hand, and (2) and (3), on the other. The Humean view, simple or revised, accepts (2) and (3), and rejects (1). The moral realist or cognitivist accepts (1) and (2), but rejects (3). There also some theorists who accept (1) and (3), but who reject (2). They claim that the connexion between valuing and desiring is only contingent, not necessary. I have left out such views here, and I have concentrated only upon the conflict between the Humean and the cognitivist, or the rationalist who holds that desire is neither sufficient nor necessary for motivating action.

We have granted that for having a motivating reason to do A, it is sufficient to desire to do A, simpliciter, but that it is not necessary. Something more is needed, which would account for the fact that the agent can have rational reasons to do A, rather than simply reasons which may fail to be rational by his own lights. So we come back to the argument already spelled out above that what is missing in the Humean view is the normative element contained in the concept of a reason. The revised Humean view certainly tries to account for this element, by including, so to say, the normative reasons in the motivational ones. It thus grants proposition (2). But, as we saw, it fails to account for it. So what the Humean needs seems to be another revision, or another sophistication of his theory, which accounts for (2) in a better way. I have already suggested above (in § II) such a revision. It is that we should say not only that an agent who rationally acts upon a reason desires to do A, but also desires to desire to do A. This is Lewis's proposal (Lewis 1989). This

seems, on the face of it, to capture the proper meaning of "having rational desires", understood as desires about one's desires. And it can account for the failures of rationality where we (second order) desire to desire that p , but fail to (first order) desire that p (or conversely). But consider the following case (Smith 1992, p.340). Suppose someone values A (say being a philosopher). Then he not only desires to be a philosopher, but also desires to desire to be philosopher. But suppose also that he desires to be a musician. If he is supposed to be rational in the intended sense, he should get rid of the desire to be a musician. But is he irrational if he *also* desires to be a philosopher? He is irrational only in so far as the two desires are, let us suppose, impossible to satisfy (for instance because the amount of time needed for both activities is not available to the agent during a certain span of time). Let us suppose, then, that our agent realises this. Should he drop his desire to be a musician, if he desires to desire to be a philosopher? But why would he be irrational in keeping the former? Why should he not drop the latter? The proper Humean response would seem to be here that he should adjust his set of desires, and value *more*, or desire more the one rather than the other. But this seems to beg the question, by identifying valuing to desiring to a degree, and not to desiring to desire. As Smith (1986,p. 342) points out, the problem which those who want to identify valuing with desiring to desire, is to spell out at *what level* of higher-order desires the identification is to be effectuated. For I may desire to desire that p , and still not value my desire to desire. Then we ascend to the third order: I value p if I desire to desire to desire that p . But suppose that I do not value my desire to desire to desire. Where should we stop?

The problem exists because there always seems to be, even on the view that valuing is desiring to desire, *further* desires which may defeat our original ones. The obvious suggestion at this point is to say that an agent who really values something and has appropriate desires of the higher-order about what she values should not let further desires defeat her previous ones. In other terms, valuing must be desire to desire *up to a limit*. The limit is fixed by the coherence of the set of desires that

the agent has, and by her normative, rational reasons. Thus we do not need to reach the higher order desires. It suffices to say that what we value is what we would desire *if we were rational*.

What does “rational” mean here? It cannot mean “rational according to our own standards”, nor “rational according to what we desire”, for this would amount just to the simple Humean view that whatever we desire constitutes for us a reason for acting, and a good, rational reason. The rationality of our reasons has to be non subjective, and non-relative to a given subject. It must be a reason which is transsubjective, and such that our desires are those of an agent who is ideally placed, that is who has a maximally consistent set of desires.

According to Michael Smith (1986, p.344), the connexion between belief and desire in practical reasoning is this :

If an agent believes that he has a normative reason to do X he rationally should desire to do X.

This, as he points out, amounts to a requirement of what is called, in moral theory, a form of *internalism* in the sense of (2) above: there is a necessary, internal connexion between what we *believe* to be valuable, and what we *desire* to do in a given circumstance. Therefore our actions are governed, as (1) says, by our beliefs. But these are beliefs about what we rationally should desire. Hence this view, according to Smith, is also compatible with (3), the Humean view that at least desires must figure within our motivating reasons. We may call this *the idealised theory of Humean motivation* : we must be disposed to act according to our best beliefs about what we should desire. As Smith (1986, p.358) says: “When we deliberate, we concern ourselves with our normative reasons, and, to the extent that we are rational, our underlying desires will match our beliefs about the normative reasons that we have.” It is essential, in such a view, that the rational desires that we have be *dispositional*, i.e that they concern our dispositions to act in certain ways, and not

our present actual desires. This view is a sort of development of a platitude: a rational agent is one who has rational control over his desires, and who acts according to the best possible view of what he should desire, not only by his own lights, but but also by the lights of an idealised agent.

It seems to me that there is much to say in favour of such a view, for it purports to reconcile the conflicting intuitions (1)-(3) that we have about motivation. But it also faces obvious difficulties. One is that it is not easy to spell out what “rational” means. Another is that it is not easy either to spell out what “ideally rational” means. Let us, however, suppose that the view is correct, and that we can spell out what such an idealised rationality can be. The question is: will it be enough to give us the appropriate motivation for acting? In other terms, even if we suppose that an agent has the best motivating reasons (normative, rational ones) to do X , will it follow that he will do X ?

It is not obvious that he will. To see this consider a practical analogue of Lewis Carroll celebrated parable of Achilles and the Tortoise. Achilles proposes to the Tortoise two premisses of the form:

- (1) A
- (2) If A, then B

But the Tortoise refuses to infer the conclusion

- (3) B.

Then Achilles proposes her to accept the truth of

- (4) If A, and if A then B, then B

which she does. But she still does not accept the conclusion. She does even accept it when Achilles proposes her to accept the truth of :

(5) if (1) and (2) and (4) are true, then (3) true

and the regress never stops. We can, as Blackburn (1995) points out, construct a similar case for practical reasoning.

Suppose I say :

(1') I prefer A to B

(2') the moment of decision is at hand.

Will I infer

(3') let me choose to do A ?

No. Suppose then that I am presented the following extra premiss:

(4') It is rational for me to prefer A to B.

Will it be enough for me to infer (3')? No. Suppose I am presented the extra premiss :

(5') It is *ideally rational for me* to prefer A to B.

This will not move me any more. The regress is the same as in (1)-(5).

Logic cannot make the mind move. Rational reasons cannot either.

I do not present this as an argument, but as an illustration of the difficulty: reasons, even rational, and even ideally rational, do not by themselves make us

move, nor act. The idealised Humean view still does not show how our best beliefs about what we should best desire could have the internal and intrinsic power to make us act. Something else is needed, which acts on us as a brute force. The conclusion is simply Humean. So the Humean theory of motivation is still with us.

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