

The Nature of Desire

abstracts by alphabetical order

Daniel Friedrich, 'Desire and Evaluation'

Desiring p involves evaluating p in a positive way. How should we explain this evaluative dimension of desire? According to the standard view, desire involves a positive evaluation of its object because desire entails believing that the desired object is good. A variation of the standard view holds that desire involves a positive evaluation of its object because desire entails a belief-like state that represents the desired object to be good. I argue that both the standard view and its more sophisticated cousin are mistaken. Indeed, I argue that ultimately such cognitive accounts have seemed compelling only because of the difficulty of providing an intelligible non-cognitive alternative and I proceed to make such an alternative account explicit in broad outline, arguing that it promises a more faithful understanding of the phenomena.

Alex Gregory, 'Might Desires Be Beliefs About Normative Reasons?'

In this paper I examine the view that desires are beliefs about normative reasons. I describe the view, and briefly sketch three arguments for it. But the focus of the paper is defending the view from objections and showing how it is superior to rivals. I argue that the view is consistent with the distinction between the direction of fit of beliefs and desires, that it can account for appetites, addictions, weakness of will, and other supposed counterexamples, and that it can make good sense of the mental lives of animals. I argue that it is superior to the desire theory, to Nagel's theory of desire, and to the view that desires are appearances of the good.

Federico Lauria, 'On the Intentionality of Desires. Motivating a Deontic Account.'

In this talk, I address the issue of the intentionality of desires. After having sketched some desiderata a promising theory of desires should meet, I examine two standard views of desires, namely the evaluative view and the motivational view. It is argued then that those views can't make sense of important desiderata, in particular the direction of fit of desires and the explanatory relations desires bear with regard to other attitudes. An alternative view of desires is then sketched, namely the deontic view. According to the deontic view, to desire that p is to represent p as what ought to/should obtain. The presence of the deontic feature in the mode provides then resources to meet the desiderata on direction of fit and explanatory relations, or so it is argued.

Ronald de Sousa, 'Muses, Fluffers, and the Curse of Satisfaction' Religion, philosophy, and poetry have all too often taken a dim view of desire. On one model which goes back to Plato and is at the core of Buddhism, desire is essentially suffering, and its satisfaction brings relief only because it dies. According to Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, matters are even worse: sexual desire, in particular, is "th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame." Much the same is true of the sort of desire associated with addiction. At the same time, to imagine a life quite without desire is not very different from imagining death. In this talk, I will speculate about what these truisms might have to tell us, from an evolutionary point of view, about the nature of desire. I will address two puzzles: first, why there is frequently a disconnect between desire and pleasure, and second, what might be the function of the correspondence, or lack thereof, between the experience of desire and the neurological mechanisms that underlie it. Finally, I will again borrow from Plato (though not quite in the spirit he intended) the idea that we are most productively energized if we can manage to cheat desire out of its intrinsic goal. By aiming always a little off target, as when the artist turns her attention from Muse to canvas, one gets something done while avoiding the curse of satisfaction.

Graham Oddie, 'Desire and the fitting attitude analysis of value'

What is the relationship between desire and the good? One answer is given by the Fitting Attitude (FA) analysis of value. The FA schema is this:

S has a value V if and only if it is fitting for one to respond to S with attitude A.

As stated there are some explicit variables in the schema (S, V, A), but fittingness is also effectively a placeholder for some as yet unspecified notion. The schema holds for a particular value if there is some suitable attitude that is (in the appropriate sense) a fitting response to the bearers of that value. Many value theorists find this idea compelling for the so-called thick values (like the disgusting, the funny, and the awesome), and at least plausible for thin values, like the good. As Broad put it:

'X is good' could ... be defined as meaning that X is such that it would be a fitting object of desire to any mind which had an adequate idea of its non-ethical characteristics.

If Broad's right the relation between desire and the good is simple: the good just is that which it is fitting to desire. Furthermore, if all values can be given an adequate FA analysis along such lines, then value would be reducible to fittingness and a bunch of attitudes.

I outline three notions of fittingness that might serve the purposes of the FA reductionist – the deontic, the axiological and the representational. I state and refine some well-known objections to the FA schema (the wrong kinds of reason

problem, and a refinement of the problem of solitary goods) and argue that the only really plausible notion of fittingness that can save the FA schema is a representational one: in particular that the fitting response to what's good is that it seems or appears or presents itself as good. Unfortunately, at least for those who can't stomach the idea that value is ontologically basic, the representational notion of fittingness won't help the FA reductionist. (I myself have a strong stomach.) But, in conjunction with the thesis that the fitting response to the good is desire, it does provide an interesting argument for what happens to be my favorite analysis of desire: namely, that desires are simply appearances of the good.

Peter Railton, 'Rationality in Desire and Belief'

Can dynamic learning models that seem to illuminate rationality in belief formation and revision--e.g., Bayesian models--also be used to make sense of a notion of rationality in the formation and revision of desires? Such models do not assume that any particular starting point is intrinsically rational or justified, rather, they assess the rationality of the responses of the individual or group to new evidence or experiences--process is the central theme. It then can be shown that following certain processes of "updating" has a number of key virtues as potential learning and action-guiding systems. Even if no beliefs or desires are intrinsically rational, then, rationality in belief and desire might be possible. I look present both philosophical and empirical grounds for such a conclusion.

Timothy Schroeder, 'The Neuroscience of Moral Motivation'

According to Tim Scanlon, motivation to act stems from judgments about reasons. However, an investigation of the neuroscience of action strongly suggests that this is not correct. Action involves the integration of two sorts of information: cognitive (and perceptual) information from a broad range of sensory and cognitive regions of the brain, and conative information from the reward (and punishment) system(s). In this talk, I show that there is no way to dismiss or reinterpret the conative component so as to save Scanlon's thesis. On the contrary, the most reasonable interpretation of the conative component is that it contributes information about desires, which must be conjoined with information about what is perceived and believed, to generate action.

George Frederick Schueler, 'Deliberation and Desire'

We sometimes act on the basis of deliberation. At the same time those actions, or at least some of them, seem to be explainable in terms of what we want to do. This paper explores the question of how desires figure into explanations of actions done on the basis of deliberation. The natural idea, embodied in some accounts of the practical syllogism, is that we reason from what we want to a conclusion

about how we should act so as to get it. I argue that if we understand desires as involving purposes, goals, intentions, or the like then there are at least two problems with understanding deliberation as being done on the basis of desires. For one thing, such reasoning is fallacious. But just as seriously, it is unclear that an account of deliberation that bases it on desires is even a possible account of a process of reasoning, since it seems to violate an essential condition of reasoning as a norm-governed process.

David Wall, 'Desiderative Inconsistency, Moore's Paradox and Norms of Desire'

What is wrong with desiderative inconsistency, having essentially conflicting desires that cannot possibly be satisfied at the same time? It has recently been argued (Marino 2009, 2010, 2011) that attempts to explain this in terms of things such as logical inconsistency (e.g. Brink), preventing action (e.g. Blackburn), or a failure of rationality (e.g. Smith) are unsuccessful and that, in fact, having such desires is no worse than having desires that merely contingently conflict if it is bad at all. But in fact having either essentially conflicting or contingently conflicting desires involves violating norms of desire, in particular, a norm of avoiding frustration. Appealing to a counterpart of Moore's paradox for desire shows us that this is a genuine norm, and failing to meet it when forming desires is a mistake of sorts. Furthermore, having essentially conflicting desires violates this norm and makes this mistake necessarily. Therefore it is especially bad to have essentially conflicting desires.