

An Assignment Theory of Desire (20180708)

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Introduction

The right act is the act that a person with good malleable desires and lacking bad desires would have done in those circumstances.¹

Ultimately, this is the thesis that I would like to defend.

I am not going to get there in this paper. However, I think that knowing the ultimate destination will help in understanding the route selected.

With respect to this destination, I expect that many potential readers will immediately reject the destination. “Hah! The idiot has *right act* on the left side of the equation and *good desire* on the right. No doubt I am going to find all sorts of question-begging and viciously circular claims as he goes back and forth between the two concepts. Sad.”

I can’t deny, that is a good point. I need a suitable account of a “good malleable desire”. It has to be an account that does not beg any questions. This means, first, giving an account of what a desire is, and then looking at the ways in which a desire can be “good” and “malleable”.

This document looks to answer the first question: What is a desire?

A desire is a propositional attitude - a mental state that that can be expressed in the form 'Agent desires that p', where 'p' is a proposition capable of being true or false, which assigns a value $V(D)$ to the proposition p representing the importance to Agent of p being made or kept true.²

Before going too much further, I would like to specify what seems to be a convention among those who debate these topics. When the object of desire is a state of affairs, theorists tend to use the phrase “desire that p ” where p is a proposition – something capable of being true or false. However, when we speak of desires, we often speak about agents wanting to do something. For example, one would not typically say, “I desire that I am eating chocolate cake.” We say things like “I want to have some chocolate cake”. When speaking about “desiring to” or “wanting to” rather than “desiring that”, the standard abbreviation is “desire to φ ” or “wanting to be φ -ing”. However, most (though not all) theorists

¹ This formulation is non-accidentally similar to that which Rosalind Hursthouse presents: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.” Hursthouse, 1999. This account of “good desire” will differ significantly from Hursthouse’s Aristotelian concept of “virtue”, but many of Hursthouse’s arguments are applicable here, *mutatis mutandis*.

² I have toyed with the idea that both beliefs and desires assign a value to a proposition being true. The value that it assigns to a proposition that is the object of a belief - $V(B)$ - represents the credence of that belief - the likelihood given whatever else the agent knows that the proposition is, in fact true. Whereas, as I said, the value it assigns to a proposition that is the object of a desires - $V(D)$ - represents the importance of that belief being made or kept true to the agent. However, I have not given the issue of belief in this regard a lot of thought. I toss that out here simply as something to think about.

assert that the latter can always be expressed, though often awkwardly, in the form of the former. A desire to have a soda is a desire that I be drinking a soda.

With this in mind, to explain this phrase further, I intend to look at the competing theories of desire. I am going to find problems with both major families of theories. Understanding those problems and what it will take to fix them will lead to the hypothesis I have given here.

Defining Terms

One is often told in philosophy to begin by defining one's terms, so that one will be less likely to be understood. That advice will be particularly relevant here, since I think that the ways in which philosophers generally talk about these issues is one of the major reasons we see confusion and slow progress. A clearer, more consistent set of concepts will clear up some of this confusion. Of course, I may be cautious. That impatient critic I mentioned in the Introduction will be all too happy to find that I have begged some questions in setting up these definitions.

Humean or Non-Humean

Many of those who are familiar with the philosophical debate concerning desires are going to try to understand this in terms of a classic debate between "Humeans" and "Non-Humeans". These labels carry with them a web of assumptions that provide those who use them with a quick way to summarize a set of ideas.

A Humean theory of desire is one that conforms largely to Hume's claim, "reason is the slave of the passions", or it is "not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (Hume, 1896). Basically, beliefs and desires are two different kinds of things. Reason or rationality applies to beliefs – a belief can be reasonable or unreasonable, as can the person who holds a belief. However, there is no rationality of desires. Desires simply are.

In the philosophy of desires, the group that tend to identify as "Humeans" propose what is called a "dispositional" theory of desires. Dispositionalism holds that desires are dispositional states – dispositions to act so as to realize certain ends or goals. Michael Smith (1987) provides a classic example of dispositionalism.

[A]ccording to this conception, we should think of the desire to φ as that state of a subject that grounds all sorts of his dispositions: like the disposition to φ in conditions C , the disposition to φ in conditions C' , and so on.

Sabine Doring and Bahadir Eker (2017) express this position as follows:

Necessarily, for any agent a , any proposition p , any time t , and any act type φ , if, at t , a desires that p , then a is disposed at t to φ in circumstances where a takes her φ -ing to be conducive to p 's being the case.

Standing up against the dispositionalists, we see a diverse set of non-Humean philosophers who hold that there is something to be said for the rationality of desires. These are known as Evaluativists. This represents a broad and diverse family of theories, chief among them being the hypothesis that a desire is a form of belief. Specifically, a "desire that p " is to be understood as "a belief that p is good".

Whereas beliefs can be held to be reasonable or unreasonable, so can desires.

There are many different versions of this hypothesis under discussion. In addition to the form discussed above, there are those who take a 'desire that p' not to be belief, but a perception, that p is good. Other theorists hold that a desire that p is either a belief or a perception that p ought to be the case, or that φ -ing ought to be done. What all of these have in common is the idea that there is something about p or that φ -ing that makes it an appropriate object of desire, something that deserves to be desired, or at least this seems to be the case whether it is actually the case or not. Reason tells us whether p or φ -ing deserves its status as an object of desire.

Here is where I am going to run into my first problem.

I consider myself to be a Humean, insofar as I think that "reason is the slave of the passions" and, in a sense, "not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."

At the same time, the hypothesis that I gave above is not a dispositional theory of desire. It explains the desire that p in terms of p having a value. What I will argue reconciles these two positions is that the value assigned to p is not determined or discovered by reason. Nor is it the case that recognizing the value of p something that is determined through anything like perception. Consequently, the value of p is something about which an agent, at the most fundamental level, cannot be mistaken. It is not contrary to reason to have a higher negative value assigned to there being a scratch on one's finger than to the destruction of the whole world.

My point here is that attempts to pigeon-hole this account as either a Humean/dispositional or a non-Humean/evaluativist is account going to get confused. I want to warn against this attempt. Otherwise, the reader, familiar with these categories risks getting confused when I, for example, defend a Humean theory of desire while criticizing dispositionalism.

Perhaps the confusion is mine. Either way, we will see which direction the confusion goes when I evaluate dispositional theories in Section 3 and evaluativist theories in Section 4.

"There Is" vs. "She Has" a Reason

Another area where talk about desires is unnecessary complicated is exemplified by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External."

The entry ultimately provides this account of the Humean Theory of Reasons:

[Humean Theory of Reasons] (revised): If there is a reason for someone to do something, then she must have some desire that would be served by her doing it, which is the source of her reason.³

On a plausible interpretation of this, it is easily proved false, even within a Humean framework of desires.

³ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External", First published Thu Sep 4, 2008; substantive revision Fri Aug 18, 2017, 7/8/2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasons-internal-external/>.

Simply imagine a community made up of two people, Alph and Bet. Each person has an aversion to their own pain. Because of this aversion, each person has a reason to avoid their own pain.

Two reasons exist in this imaginary universe; Alph's reason for avoiding his own pain, and Bet's reason for avoiding her own pain.

In this situation, there are conditions where this the antecedent is true, but the consequent is false. Specifically, there is a reason for Bet to refrain from putting Alph in a state of pain. There is a reason that exists. It is Alph's reason to avoid pain, which is grounded on Alph's aversion to his own pain. However, the claim that Bet has a reason to avoid putting Alph in a state of pain is false (or, at least, it could be false). There is a reason (the reason that Alph has), but Bet does not have a reason. A true antecedent with a false consequent means a false conditional.

We can avoid this problem by taking the antecedent to mean "there-is-a-reason-for-Bet" to simply mean "Bet has a reason." Now it becomes true that "if there-is-a-reason-for-Bet," then "Bet has a reason". However, this is trivially true, since we have defined "there is a reason for Bet" as just another way of saying "Bet has a reason".

Furthermore, this option leaves us with a massive hole in our language. How are we supposed to talk about the reasons that Alph has that Bet does not have?

It would be much clearer if we went with the following formula instead:

If there is a reason for someone to do something, then somebody must have some desire that would be served by her doing it, which is the source of that reason; and if she has a reason for doing something, then she must have some desire that would be served by her doing it, which is the source of that reason.

This formulation matches "there is a reason" with "there is a desire" and "she has a reason" with "she has a desire," instead of matching "there is a reason" with "she has a desire". We could leave the question open whether "there is a reason" implies "she has a desire." Perhaps there is a way in which every desire that exists creates a reason that everybody has. While this remains a possibility, I am doubtful that it is in any way true.

By the way, I take this alternative formulation to be true. However, it does not imply SEP's account of the "Humean Theory of Reasons (revised)", which I take to be false anyway.

This runs into a discussion of what is considered a problem with the Humean Theory of Reasons as described in the SEP. This is the idea that, when it comes to moral reasons, "there exists a moral reason for A to do X" is supposed to imply that "A has a reason to do X". This is relevant to what Smith (1987) discussed as a potential counter-example to his theory of desire.

Suppose that I am standing on someone's foot so causing him pain, and that I know that this is what I am doing. Surely we can imagine its being appropriate for an outsider to say that I have a reason to get off his foot even though I lacked the relevant desire, and, indeed, even if I desired to cause him pain.

I am uncertain about the significance of being able to imagine its being appropriate for an outsider to say that Smith has a reason to get off of his foot even though he lacked the relevant desire. However, I do hold that it would be false for anybody to say this.

This is a case in which there is a reason for Smith to get off of this person's foot. This is the person's own aversion to pain – an aversion that gives the person who has it reason to threaten, bribe, or violently force Smith off of his foot. However, the appropriateness of saying "there is a reason" does not imply the appropriateness of saying Smith has a reason.

Besides, I am going to argue that this, too, is false. What is true is that Smith should have a reason to get off of the man's foot, in the sense that there are reasons to cause Smith to have a reason to get off of the man's foot. However, the claim that he should have a reason does not imply that he does have a reason, in the same way that the fact that President Trump should tell the truth does not imply that he does tell the truth.

The Picasso Case

Smith has two other examples that, I think, illustrate the way in which the language that philosophers use to discuss desires is unjustifiably confusing.

The first case is one in which Smith wishes to purchase a Picasso painting. A stranger offers him an opportunity to purchase a Picasso at a quite reasonable price. However, Smith is suspicious and believes that the painting is not a genuine Picasso painting, so he refuses to buy it.

Does Smith want to purchase this painting?

Smith says, "No."

I say, "Yes".

Smith's says:

[T]he reason that I have to buy the painting in front of me is a normative reason. For it suffices for the truth of the claim that I have such a reason, that there is a requirement-in this case, in the broad sense, a requirement of rationality"-that I buy the painting in front of me.

More generally, Smith seeks to distinguish between motivating reasons (those that cause action) from normative reasons (those that justify action). On Smith's account, it makes no sense to say that he has a motivating reason to purchase the painting, since he wasn't motivated to purchase the painting. However, he does have a normative reason to purchase the painting. This normative reason is grounded on the requirements of rationality and the fact that purchasing the painting would have fulfilled his desire to own a Picasso.

Remember, my objection is not that Smith is wrong, or that he fails to capture normal ways of speaking. My objection is that this way of speaking leads to confusion and error. Smith is saying that there is a rational requirement that calls for buying the painting. However, in refusing to purchase the painting, Smith may be acting in a perfectly rational manner. His desire to purchase a Picasso is not irrational, and his belief that this art seller is offering him a forgery may be perfect rational as well. Indeed, it may be more rational than believing that the painting is an original Picasso.

To explain my "yes" answer, I ask the question of whether Smith has a desire that would be fulfilled if he purchased the painting. He does. Therefore, he wants to purchase the painting.

But he does not purchase the painting. In fact, Smith asserts quite emphatically that he does not want to purchase the painting.

This is true. However, Smith also asserts, just as emphatically (and not coincidentally), that he believes that the painting is not a Picasso. He is wrong about the painting. I would argue that, just as his claim that the painting is not a Picasso is false, his claim that he does not desire to purchase the painting is false.

I am not denying that Smith would say that he does not want to purchase the painting in these circumstances, or that his claim is not a sincere utterance. Instead, I am arguing that, in spite of what he would say, the claim that he does not want to buy the painting is false.

At this point, one can say that I am either arguing for a significant change in our use of language. As evidence that this is not such a radical change, let us change the example slightly. The art seller convinces Smith that this is a genuine Picasso, and then invites him to play a game. The seller takes a black stone and a white stone, puts his hands behind his back, and puts a stone in each hand. Then, holding his closed hands out, asks Smith to choose one. If he chooses the hand with the white stone, he gets the painting. Otherwise, he does not.

Alph clearly wants to choose the hand with the white stone. He does not know which hand it is, but that is beside the point. The clear answer to the question, "Which hand do you want?" is "The one with the white stone." What is important here is that we do not ask what Alph believes to answer the question of what he wants. The answer to the question, "What does Alph want?" is "That which will serve his desire to own a Picasso painting."

The Gin and Tonic Case

Smith presents a second case, similar to the first, in which he desires to drink a gin and tonic. Believing that the glass in front of him contains gin, he wants to pour some tonic into it and drink it. However, the glass actually contains petrol. The objection to Smith's theory says that he has a desire to pour tonic into the glass and drink the contents. He also has the requisite beliefs. However, he has no reason to pour the tonic into the glass and drink its contents.

Here, too, I would say that the statement that he has a desire to pour the tonic into the glass and drink the contents is false. He has no such desire. He thinks he does. However, this is a false belief, just as the belief that the glass contains gin is a false belief.

Imagine that Smith is with a companion. The companion sees Smith pour tonic into the glass and begin to raise it to his lips to drink the contents. She puts his hand over the top of the glass to stop him and says, "You don't want to do that."

Smith's response is unlikely to be, "Your statement is so clearly false that it is clear that you have no understanding of the English Language because, if you did, you would understand that the claim that I have a desire to drink the contents is true." If Smith had any sense, he would ask, "Why not?" This response allows that his companion's claim, "You don't want to do that," is true and Smith is asking for evidence that it is true. When she provides him with convincing evidence, Smith could be expected to

say, “You’re right. I don’t want to do that.” This statement, “I don’t want to do that,” did not become true the instant he acquired the true beliefs. It was true from the start. Meaning that the assumption that he had the requisite desire then he thought the glass contained true was false from the start.

The Pluto Proposal

If these arguments are not convincing, then I still have one additional card I can play.

These arguments have not discussed some deep meaningful truth about the world. This has been a discussion of the language that we should use in talking about those truths. Ultimately, I am saying that our discussion will be easier to understand if we adopt these proposals.

One way to conceive of this argument is to consider the case of the planet Pluto. When astronomers discovered additional bodies beyond Neptune that were comparable in size to Pluto, they considered changing their language. Scientists like to classify like things with like. Pluto had more in common with the other Kuyper Belt Objects than it did with the eight other planets. Consequently, under the principle of classifying like with like, they proposed that Pluto is no longer a planet. Instead, it is a Kuyper Belt Object.

What they did is propose a change in the language to make that language more efficient. They were well aware of the fact that this went against traditional uses. If somebody had performed a conceptual analysis, then the proposition that Pluto is a planet would have passed without question. However, they selected convenience over tradition.

What I am proposing here may be considered a change in language. Does Smith have desire to buy the painting? The answer is that he does. He thinks that he does not, but the fact of the matter is that he does. This is because buying the painting would fulfill a desire of his. Does he have a desire to put tonic in the glass and drink its contents? No. He thinks he does, but he does not. He is as mistaken about the fact that he has such a desire as he is about the fact that the glass contains gin.

And is it the case that “There is a reason for her to do φ imply that she has a desire that would be served by doing φ ?” Not necessarily. Not unless the desire being served is hers.

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