

**WHAT ARE THEORIES OF DESIRE THEORIES OF?**

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The aim of this paper is to clear ground so that I bring a puzzle into view. My topic, at the most general level, is human motivation. To be motivated is not simply to be moved. It is to be self-moved. What is that? My more specific topic is the role of desire in motivation. What is it to have a desire, and how does desire contribute to self-movement? Now I actually believe this question is ill posed, unless we say more about how “desire” is to be understood. But I also believe this question becomes deeply interesting, from a philosophical standpoint, when we take “desire” to refer to the motives Thomas Nagel called “unmotivated desires.”<sup>1</sup> Unmotivated desires are motives that arise in us spontaneously or automatically, without our having arrived at them as conclusions of practical deliberation. They are motives that we might call “passions,” to mark the fact that we are, in this respect, passive in relation to them.<sup>2</sup> The question then becomes: how is the concept of a passion even coherent? The concept of a passion combines two ideas—that of motivation, and that of passivity. But motivation is self-movement. How can we be passive with respect to our own self-movement? If my passion is my motive, then it cannot be like an ocean tide, something that simply carries me along. It must, somehow, be me moving myself. But then it looks as though I must be active in relation to it. So how is passion even possible? Call this “the paradox of passion.”

The reason I need to clear ground is that the recent philosophical literature on desire makes it hard to even acknowledge this puzzle, much less solve it. Contemporary philosophers, many of whom otherwise disagree with one another about a broad range of issues, have converged on a common conception of desire that I will call, following Talbot Brewer, “the evaluative outlook conception of desire.”<sup>3</sup> I will argue that the concept of “desire” at the center

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1. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, p. 29.

2. In section III, I will say more about the sense in which we are passive in relation to such desires. For now I leave it open how our passivity in relation to them is similar to or different from our passivity in relation to external forces, like ocean tides, or internal forces, like allergic sensitivities. I leave it open, because my aim in this paper is to argue that this is precisely the question that a theory of desire in the sense of “passion” has to address.

3. Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, p. 25.

of the evaluative outlook conception is deeply ambiguous, and that the persistence of the ambiguity makes it hard to see and confront the paradox of passion. Following G.F. Schueler, I will distinguish between two senses of “desire” that are often conflated in the philosophical literature.<sup>4</sup> I will call these the “placeholder” and the “substantive” senses of desire. Interpreted as a theory of desire in the placeholder sense, the evaluative outlook conception is, I claim, a relatively uncontroversial position that a broad range of philosophers can agree on. But so interpreted, it does not even purport to be a theory of the motives with respect to which we are distinctively passive. Interpreted as a theory of desire in the substantive sense, the evaluative outlook conception does purport to be a theory of such motives, but it fails to acknowledge, much less resolve, the paradox of passion.

I proceed here as follows. In section I, I lay out the main features of the evaluative outlook conception, and I suggest a way to understand the primary philosophical motivation behind it. In section II, the main section of the paper, I identify a tension internal to this conception. I claim that the philosophical worry that motivates the evaluative outlook conception in the first place reappears in a more local form within the conception itself, as a version of the paradox of passion. I also claim that proponents of the evaluative outlook conception do not fully recognize and confront this tension. This is so, I argue, because they tacitly rely on a mistaken assumption about the relation between the two senses of “desire.” In section III, I consider several ways in which proponents of the evaluative outlook conception might be interpreted as having at least implicitly acknowledged and responded to the tension I have identified. I claim these responses are unsatisfying, either because they simply push the problem back to another level, or because they make our relation to our feelings look too much like our relation to our actions.<sup>5</sup>

## I. The Evaluative Outlook Conception of Desire

The evaluative outlook conception of desire is best understood as a reaction against what might be called a “brute force” view of desire. Harry Frankfurt articulates a version of a brute force view in this and other passages:

However imposing or intense the motivational *power* that the passions mobilize may be, the passions have no inherent motivational *authority*. In fact, the passions do not really make any *claims* upon us at all. Considered strictly in themselves, apart from whatever additional impetus or facilitation we ourselves may provide by acceding to them, their effectiveness in moving us is entirely a matter of *sheer brute force*. There is nothing in them other than the

4. G.F. Schueler, *Desire: Its Role in Practical Reason and the Explanation of Action*, p. 29.

5. I make these claims in “The Nature of Inclination.” My aim here is to explain my dissatisfaction with contemporary theories of desire more clearly than I did in that article.

magnitude of this force that requires us, or that even encourages us, to act as they command.<sup>6</sup>

The evaluative outlook theorist rejects two features of this brute force view. The first is the claim that desires influence us by sheer power, rather than by engaging our practical thinking. To have a desire, the evaluative outlook theorist argues, is not to be pushed or pulled by a psychological force. It is to “see” features of our circumstances as directly appealing to us as practical thinkers. To have a desire for a drink of water, he contends, is not simply to have a “blind urge” to drink a certain substance, but rather to be aware of the unpleasant dryness in one’s throat, and the thirst-quenching properties of water, as together calling for, or counting in favor of, or as making appropriate, water-drinking.

The second feature of the brute force view that the evaluative outlook theorist rejects is its characterization of desire as something that influences or impinges on us, such that we have to respond or relate to *it*, rather than to the world. Positing the desire as a substantial thing that lies between us and our circumstances, the evaluative outlook theorist claims, is positing one entity and one thought too many.<sup>7</sup> If the desire is any sort of thing at all, it is a perspective on the world. The desire operates in the “background,” shaping our outlook such that the world appears to us in practically salient terms.<sup>8</sup>

Convergence on the evaluative outlook view is so broad as to make strange bedfellows. Proponents include T.M. Scanlon, a rationalist; Simon Blackburn, a Humean; Talbot Brewer, an Aristotelian; Stephen Darwall, a Kantian; and Sergio Tenenbaum, a defender of some features of scholasticism.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, there are important differences between these views. For one thing, their targets are not exactly the same. Scanlon argues against a kind of neo-Humeanism that takes desires to be brute psychological occurrences that, in themselves, count as reasons for action. Blackburn argues against the Kantian “mistake” of thinking that we can take up a desire-free perspective on our desires. Brewer argues against what he calls “propositionalism” about desire,

6. Frankfurt, “Autonomy, Necessity, and Love,” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 137. See also Frankfurt “Reply to T.M. Scanlon,” in Buss and Overton, *Contours of Agency*, p. 184: “Our most elementary desires come to us as urges or impulses; we are moved by them, but they do not as such affect our thinking at all. They are merely psychic raw material. A desire provides us not with a reason, but with a problem—the problem of how to respond to it. Impulses and urges have power, but they have no authority. They move us more or less strongly, but they make no claims on us.”

7. See, especially Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, pp. 254–55.

8. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, “Backgrounding Desire,” p. 574.

9. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, esp. pp. 37–41, and “Reasons and Passions,” in Buss and Overton, *Contours of Agency*; Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, esp. pp. 250–56; Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, esp. pp. 24–34; Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, esp. pp. 5, 160, and 216; Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good*, esp. pp. 21–51. Another contemporary philosopher who appears to endorse the essentials of the evaluative outlook view is Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, p. 157, n. 11. Important predecessors are G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, pp. 70ff., Warren Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place,” in *Morality and Action*, and Dennis Stampe, “The Authority of Desire.”

the view that desires have purely descriptive (i.e., nonevaluative, nonnormative) content. Darwall argues against a “naïve first-personal” account of moral reasons and moral obligation. Tenenbaum argues against a “separatist” conception of reasons, according to which justifying reasons are completely independent of motivating reasons.

In addition to differences in their targets, there are differences in their positive accounts of the type of thinking or awareness involved in having a desire. Scanlon maintains that having a desire involves seeing considerations as reasons for action, which amounts to seeing features of our circumstances as counting in favor of acting in certain ways. Brewer claims having a desire involves thoughts of the goodness of the object of desire. Blackburn seems to hold that having a desire involves awareness of certain objects as attractive or aversive, or perhaps simply as appropriate or inappropriate, in ways that reflect our particular, context-dependent needs, tastes, and interests.

Do the differences matter? I think it is important to notice that the main differences between the positive accounts can plausibly be explained as reflections of prior differences in their respective conceptions of action, rather than as differences in their conceptions of desire per se. Scanlon holds that desiring involves thinking about reasons, and he also thinks acting involves thinking about reasons. Tenenbaum and Brewer believe desiring involves thoughts of goodness, and they also think action involves thoughts of goodness. Blackburn thinks desiring involves thinking about the attractiveness or appropriateness of a certain action, and he thinks action involves the same. Why the correspondence in each case?

The philosophical motivation for such a correspondence is clear. If “having a desire” were wholly unlike engaging in action—if, for example, having a desire were analogous to being pushed or pulled by an external force, and engaging in action were a matter of taking considerations as reasons—then it would be very hard to see how having a desire could, in principle, make a motivational contribution to action or figure in its explanation. If my desire pushes me around like an ocean tide, then it is hard to see how its effects can, in principle, count as my actions, unless action is just a way of being pushed around.

I believe this worry is one of the main philosophical considerations that drives these very different philosophers to reject the brute force view in favor of the evaluative outlook conception. Evidence of this is the fact that nearly all evaluative outlook theorists cite Warren Quinn’s seminal article, “Putting Rationality in its Place,” as inspiration. As I read him, Quinn is motivated by just this concern. He presents his argument as a development of Elizabeth Anscombe’s remark that one could not “want” a saucer of mud unless one saw something good or worthwhile about getting it.<sup>10</sup> The position he opposes is a “noncognitivist” or “subjectivist” view characterized by two claims: (i) actions are explained by functional states that dispose the agent to behave in certain ways and (ii) the same functional states that explain a given action also rationalize the action—they constitute or otherwise generate reasons for the

10. Anscombe, *Intention*, pp. 70ff.

agent to do what they dispose him to do. Quinn's official claim is that such a functional state cannot in principle rationalize action in the way the subjectivist claims it can. To make the argument, Quinn asks us to imagine that he is in a functional state that disposes him to turn on every radio he sees. When he sees a radio that is turned off, he is reliably, causally disposed to turn it on. There is nothing more to this functional state. In particular, this state can be characterized without attributing to him any purportedly rationalizing thoughts, thoughts about why it makes sense to turn on every radio (e.g., in order to hear music or the news). But it is not in any way lacking, simply *qua* functional state. It takes certain conditions as input and it reliably and predictably produces behavior as output. Quinn remarks: "I cannot see how this bizarre functional state in itself gives me even *prima facie* reason to turn on radios, even those I can see to be available for cost-free on-turning."<sup>11</sup> The functional state may explain his behavior in some causal sense, but this explanation fails to amount to a rationalizing explanation.

Why does the state fail to rationalize? It fails, according to Quinn, because the explanation it provides does not characterize the action as something that even purports to make sense to the agent, from his own point of view, as something answerable to standards of rationality in even a thin sense. What is missing is the agent's own recognition of, or commitment to, a standard of action. Quinn has in mind a standard involving evaluative concepts, concepts of good and bad. But the argument goes through even if we conceive them as involving the normative concept of a reason for action, or perhaps even a primitively evaluative concept of the attractive or the appropriate. "I cannot see how," Quinn remarks, "in the absence of objective prior standards for evaluating ends or actions as good or bad in themselves, a state disposing one to act can be any more rationally criticizable than a state disposing one to sneeze."<sup>12</sup> Quinn's point, I take it, is not really that such standards of action must exist, but rather that the agent has to take his action to be subject to such standards. So interpreted, the claim is that unless the agent sees himself as subject to standards of action, whether normative or evaluative, his action can neither make sense nor fail to make sense as an intelligent, self-guided response to the way he conceives his circumstances. And if it can neither make sense nor fail to make sense in this way, then it cannot be the agent's action. It can only be something that happens through or despite him, on par with a sneeze.

I believe most, if not all, evaluative outlook theorists are sensitive to some version of Quinn's worry. They are concerned that the brute force view shows how we could be overpowered by our desires, but not how we could act on them. It shows how our desires can move us, but not how they can motivate us. For now, I want to grant that this worry is coherent and legitimate. But as I will show in the next section, simply endorsing the evaluative outlook conception is not enough to put Quinn's worry to rest. The worry reappears in a more local form when we press the evaluative outlook theorist to disambiguate the concept of desire he purports to explain. When "desire" is understood in a familiar

11. Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place," p. 237.

12. Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place," p. 244.

sense, to refer to a type of motive with respect to which we are distinctively passive (along the lines of Nagel's "unmotivated desires"), the more local version of Quinn's worry arises. Even if such desires are perspectives on the world, to the extent that we are distinctively passive in relation to them, it makes sense to ask how they can motivate us, instead of just moving us. To be moved by a perspective, as such, is not necessarily to move oneself. The perspective has to be one's own.

## II. Tensions within the Evaluative Outlook Conception

As G.F. Schueler has very helpfully shown, there is an ambiguity in the way we use the concept desire, both in ordinary life and in the philosophical literature.<sup>13</sup> There is one sense of "desire" or "want," such that whenever you act (where the idea of action implies that it was in some sense free, intentional, voluntary, etc.), we can say you had a "desire" to do what you did. In this sense of "desire," it is logically impossible to do something without "having a desire" to do it. To attribute a "desire" in this sense is just to attribute motivation to the agent, as the conceptual correlate of action. But there is another sense of "desire" or "want," that allows for the possibility of doing something without having a desire to do it. When you take out the garbage even though you do not feel like taking out the garbage, you do something even though you have no desire, in the second sense, to do it. You lack a certain kind of motivation. But we can still attribute to you a desire to take out the garbage, in the first sense. Nothing forced you to take out the garbage. You made yourself do it, but you did that of your own accord.

It is important to notice that the first sense of desire is actually a "placeholder," a dummy concept.<sup>14</sup> It is true as a conceptual matter that every action, insofar as it is attributable to the agent and not to a force external to the agent, is motivated by the agent's "desire" in the first sense. But "desire" here simply takes the place of an explanation of how the agent, rather than something external to the agent, is its source. Positing a desire in this sense does not commit us to any determinate account of what this sort of explanation looks like. The standard view seems to be that to explain an action is to identify a mental state that causes the behavior. But there are alternatives. Explaining an action might involve reference to an incentive and a principle of choice with which the agent identifies herself. "Desire" in the placeholder sense is a placeholder for action explanation, whatever form it may take.

By contrast, the second sense of "desire," according to which it is logically possible to do something without having a desire to do so, cannot just be a placeholder for an explanation of action. You had no desire to take out the garbage, so whatever explains what you did makes reference to something other than this absent desire. And presumably in a different case, where you take out the garbage because you feel like taking out the garbage (say, you are

13. Schueler, *Desire: Its Role in Practical Reason and the Explanation of Action*, p. 29.

14. Schueler, pp. 34–35. Whereas he uses the term "pro-attitude" to refer to desire in this sense, I prefer to use, "desire in the placeholder sense."

enjoying purging your closet), that desire would play a determinate role in the explanation of what you do. I will call the second sense of desire, the “substantive” sense, because that concept does pick out something that plays a distinct, determinate role in the explanation of action.<sup>15</sup>

Which concept of desire is the evaluative outlook conception a conception of? This turns out to be a difficult question. Since most versions of the view take Quinn’s article as inspiration, they tend to inherit his concept. Quinn, in turn, inherits his concept from Anscombe, and from the neo-Humean functionalist view he opposes. I believe it makes the most sense to read all three as using “desire” in the placeholder sense. Indeed, the logic of Quinn’s argument makes sense on this reading. For Quinn is making a point about what it takes to explain action *qua* action. The negative part of his claim is that a functional state, as such, cannot explain action because it represents the agent as simply being moved from without, rather than as guiding himself from within. The positive part of the claim is that any explanation of action has to characterize the agent as guiding himself according to standards of action that he takes to be genuinely binding on him. Read in this way, Quinn’s argument simply claims to identify a necessary (if not sufficient) condition on action explanation. It does not purport to give an explanation of desire as a determinate element in that explanation, let alone one with respect to which we are distinctively passive.

But defenders of the evaluative outlook conception of desire routinely appeal to Quinn’s argument for support. To that extent, we should ask whether these inheritors of Quinn are claiming to defend a conception of desire in the placeholder sense or in the substantive sense. The worry is that they illegitimately slide from a conception of desire as action explanation itself to a conception of desire as a determinate element in the explanation of action.

Talbot Brewer’s theory, though unique in some respects, is illustrative of a tendency common to many versions of the evaluative outlook approach. The tendency is to rely on the placeholder sense of desire when making the core argument for the evaluative outlook view, and then to claim that the same view accounts for the substantive sense of desire, modulo certain minor qualifications. The substantive sense of desire is thus treated as if it were a special case of the placeholder sense of desire. Later I will argue that this is problematic. The relation between the placeholder sense of desire and the substantive sense is not that of genus to species. But first let me simply make clearer the tendency I find problematic.

Brewer’s main argument for the evaluative outlook approach is exactly Quinn’s. Brewer writes:

We cannot provide a rationalizing explanation of an episode of agency simply by tracing it to some class of performances that the agent is disposed to produce, since the agent might see no more point in these performances than in obsessions or nervous tics. This is what lies behind Anscombe’s claim that desiring requires that the desirer see something desirable in that which

15. Schueler calls this “desire proper” (p. 35). I prefer “desire in the substantive sense” because it contrasts more clearly with “desire in the placeholder sense.”

is desired. Ordinary usage of the term ‘desire’ is perhaps ample enough to encompass merely obsessive urges. However, tracing behavior to such a bare urge . . . does not suffice to make the behavior intelligible as something the person saw fit to choose. No conception of desire can play a central role in rationalizing explanations of action—that is, in making behavior intelligible as action—unless it takes desiring to consist at least partly in appearances of desirability.<sup>16</sup>

Notice that what Quinn had referred to as a “functional state,” Brewer (following Anscombe) refers to as a “desire.” But the role of the concept in the argument is the same. It is a placeholder for the explanation of the action in question. Let us agree with Anscombe, Quinn, and Brewer that this explanation must reveal the agent to be guiding himself according to some conception of what is valuable or reasonable or attractive. The question is whether Brewer sees this as a claim not only about action explanation as such, but also about desire in the substantive sense, as a determinate element that plays a distinctive role in the explanation of action.

At the end of the chapter in which this main argument appears, Brewer does acknowledge the distinctiveness of desire in the substantive sense. The issue comes up almost as an afterthought:

I conclude, then, that desires are best understood as consisting not just partly but wholly in appearances of reasons or values. It must be noted, however, that not just any such appearance will constitute a desire. It is an article of common sense that we sometimes decide that we have good reason to do something, and proceed to do it, even though we have no desire whatsoever to do it. It can hardly be said in such cases that it in no way appears to us that there is reason to do what we’ve chosen to do. We must have seen and acted on *some* reason for doing it—otherwise there would be no sense in thinking of it as something we’ve done. Such an appearance, however, need not count as a desire, since it might come into focus only with sustained deliberative effort. Desires are appearances with respect to which we are in some significant measure passive. Their occurrence is not wholly dependent upon our active efforts to bring into view the appearances of goodness in which they consist, and their persistence and vividness does not depend entirely on our deliberate efforts to discern the putative goods they call to our attention.<sup>17</sup>

Is Brewer claiming to have offered a conception of desire in the placeholder sense or in the substantive sense? On the one hand, the Anscombe/Quinn line of reasoning leads to a conclusion about action explanation as such. The fact that we sometimes act without having a desire in the substantive sense is entirely compatible with the central claim that whenever we act, we see something good, or reasonable, or attractive, or appropriate in doing what we do. When you take

16. Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, p. 24. Later, when referring back to this main argument, Brewer cites Quinn explicitly (p. 55, n. 11).

17. Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, p. 34.



out the garbage even though you don't feel like taking out the garbage, you are still guided by your conception of what makes taking out the garbage worthwhile. The question is whether this claim tells us anything about the desire that you happen to lack in this case—namely a desire, in the substantive sense, to take out the garbage. Since you do not have this desire, it presumably plays no role in the explanation of your taking out the garbage. Does the Anscombe/Quinn line of reasoning have any implications for the question what you lack in this case? Does Brewer think it does?

In the passage above Brewer seems to be saying that whereas all desires, in some general sense, are evaluative outlooks, the kind of desire you lack when you do not feel like taking out the garbage has a further differentiating property. It is an evaluative outlook with respect to which you are in some distinctive respect passive. It is a perspective on the good, or on reasons, that you simply find yourself occupying, whereas other desires are perspectives that you occupy because you make a deliberate effort to do so. Brewer does not elaborate. But we can imagine how his account would inform our understanding of the case at hand. Suppose you are aware that you ought to take out the garbage now, but you have no “desire” in the substantive sense to do so. What you want to do, in the substantive sense, is to curl up on the couch. No matter how you act, whether you take out the garbage now or curl up on the couch now, the explanation of your action will refer to your occupying a perspective from which you are aware of the goodness or reasonableness or attractiveness or appropriateness of what you are doing. If pushed to give a more fine-grained explanation that allows us to see the difference between these two cases, what we should say is this. In the scenario where you take out the garbage now, the perspective that guides you is one you actively inhabit through “sustained deliberative effort.” In the scenario where you curl up on the couch now, the perspective that guides you is one you happen to find yourself occupying.

But the explanation in the second case raises a local version of the same worry that motivated the Anscombe/Quinn line of thought in the first place. If the desire to curl up on the couch is a perspective you simply find yourself occupying, rather than one you actively inhabit, how is that perspective your own, and how does being guided by it count as you guiding yourself? On Brewer's view, your thoughts of how good it would be to curl up on the couch are not thoughts you have arrived at actively, by deliberating. But then how are you related to them? Are you in any sense doing the thinking? If not, then in being guided by these thoughts, why haven't you simply been hijacked or possessed? Granted, the model of alienation here is not that of being pushed or pulled by a “blind” force. It is that of being infiltrated by something more agential, a way of seeing and responding to the world. But it is still a model of alienation.

I am not claiming Brewer could not develop his view in such a way as to resolve this problem. My point is that he does not acknowledge it as a problem. He does not recognize that since what is distinctive about desire in the substantive sense is our passivity in relation to it, desire in that sense cannot explain action without raising a local version of the general problem that motivated the evaluative outlook view in the first place. I believe other versions of the evaluative outlook conception are insufficiently developed in exactly the same

respect. But to make that case, I want to turn to T.M. Scanlon's theory, which is arguably the most detailed contemporary articulation of the evaluative outlook conception.

Like Brewer, Scanlon cites Quinn's radio man example approvingly in order to motivate his own version of the evaluative outlook conception of desire.<sup>18</sup> Later, in a direct reply to Frankfurt, Scanlon worries explicitly that if desires are merely brute forces, then the agent who is motivated by a desire "is thus not acting on a reason at all, but only being overpowered by an impulse."<sup>19</sup> On Scanlon's view, by contrast, desiring involves normative thinking:

When I feel a desire for a piece (or a second piece) of rich chocolate cake, its delicious taste and the pleasure it would give me seem to me to be reasons for eating it. When I feel a desire for revenge against my rival, the fact that something I could do would cause him embarrassment strikes me as a reason to do it.<sup>20</sup>

Scanlon believes this account of desire does a better job of showing us how desire leads to actions done on the basis of reasons, while better capturing the phenomenology of desiring. When you act on your desire to eat the piece of chocolate cake, you are acting on what you were already taking to be reasons to eat it.

Which concept of desire is Scanlon attempting to capture? Scanlon is well aware of the difference between desire in the placeholder sense and desire in the substantive sense. And while he certainly holds that his account is true of desire in the placeholder sense, his primary aim is to show that it is true of desire in the substantive sense as well. In other words, he realizes that there is a trivial sense of "desire" according to which, every time a person acts, he does what he "wants" to do. And he also believes that every time a person acts, the explanation of that action makes reference to the agent's having taken considerations as reasons. So he would not deny that his account is true of desire in the placeholder sense. But he also recognizes that someone like Frankfurt might argue that his account fails to capture what is distinctive about desire in the substantive sense. Notably, we do not generate the desire to eat the cake by first arriving at a judgment that there are reasons to eat it. The desire simply arises in us, spontaneously. Moreover, the desire to eat the chocolate cake has a motivational power that seems to be independent of what we take to be the strength of the justification for eating it. For we often want to do what we judge we should not do, all things considered. The challenge for a view like Scanlon's is to do justice to these features of desire in the substantive sense.

18. *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 38 and 43. I should note that although Scanlon refers to Quinn's argument approvingly, he does not, in these passages, directly appeal to Quinn's considerations about action explanation as grounds for embracing his version of the evaluative outlook view. Instead he seems to appeal directly to the phenomenology of desiring. The considerations about action explanation are more clearly operative in his reply to Frankfurt, "Reasons and Passions," in Buss and Overton, *Contours of Agency*, pp. 165–183.

19. Scanlon, "Reasons and Passions," in Buss and Overton, *Contours of Agency*, p. 177.

20. Scanlon, "Reasons and Passions," p. 178.

Scanlon explicitly addresses this challenge when he writes:

I might seem to be saying here that there is no such thing as an unmotivated desire. Taken in Nagel's sense this would entail that all desires arise from prior evaluative judgments of some kind, a claim that seems clearly false. What I am claiming, however, is not that all desires arise from prior judgments but rather than having what is generally called a desire involves having a tendency to see something as a reason. Even if this is true, however, this is not all that desire involves . . . I might see something good about drinking a glass of foul-tasting medicine, but would not therefore be said to have a desire to do so . . . Reflection on the differences between these cases leads me to what I will call the idea of desire in the directed-attention sense. A person has a desire in the directed-attention sense that P if the thought of P keeps occurring to him or her in a favorable light, that is to say, if the person's attention is directed insistently toward considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P.<sup>21</sup>

Scanlon is not claiming that beliefs about reasons or goodness are motivationally inert without something further, called "desire." He rejects this Humean view. Rather, his point is that in some cases we act without having a desire in the substantive sense. He believes his account of desire, in a very general form, does tell us something about even those cases. Even when we drink the foul-tasting medicine without "wanting to" in the ordinary sense, it is the case that we are taking considerations, for example that the medicine will alleviate our symptoms, as a reason to do what we do. So in that respect, Scanlon is offering an account of desire in the placeholder sense. But he is more interested in offering an account of desire in the substantive sense. And like Brewer, he assumes that the way to do this is to add differentia to his general conception of desire. That is, he tacitly relies on an assumption that desire in the substantive sense is a species of desire in the placeholder sense.

We can ask whether the differentia he adds are the right ones, or we can ask the more fundamental question whether adding differentia is the way to meet the challenge. As to the first of these questions, it is not entirely clear, as a phenomenological matter, that what is distinctive about desires in the substantive sense is their insistence. Suppose you are procrastinating. You are relaxing on the couch instead of taking out the garbage, and you are aware of yourself as acting against your better judgment. In these cases the guilty conscience can be very insistent. That is why doing what you feel like doing as a way of procrastinating is so much more painful than doing what you feel like doing when you are not procrastinating. But we would not say that the insistent prickings of conscience are desires in the substantive sense.<sup>22</sup>

21. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 39.

22. Scanlon remarks that desires in the directed attention sense can take any object, including "to do the right thing" (*What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 39). So a person with an active conscience "has a strong desire to do the right thing." But it would still be odd to say that the procrastinator is pained by his insistent conscientious desire, if we are trying to capture what is distinctive about desire in the substantive rather than the placeholder sense.

Even if it is unclear that the phenomenological mark of desire in the substantive sense is insistence, we can consider Scanlon's apparently independent claim that what distinguishes desires in the substantive sense is the way in which they arise.<sup>23</sup> They track Nagel's notion of unmotivated desires because they are thoughts about reasons that simply "assail us, unbidden," instead of being conclusions we arrive at through active deliberation.<sup>24</sup> Here the differentia is the same one Brewer notes, namely our passive relation to desire in the substantive sense. But as we saw in connection with Brewer's account, this move raises the worry about how desire in this sense is supposed to lead to action. If certain thoughts about reasons simply arise in you and cause you to act in accordance with them, why haven't you been hijacked or possessed? If desires in the "directed-attention sense" indeed "direct" your attention insistently toward their objects, who or what is doing the directing? How is this source both *you* and someone (or something) with respect to whom (or to which) you are distinctively passive? And to whom or to what are we to attribute the actions that issue from such desires?

As with Brewer, the worry that leads Scanlon to reject a brute force view of desire in the placeholder sense arises in a local form when he is pushed to explain how desire in the substantive sense is a distinct form of motivation. And like Brewer, Scanlon does not acknowledge this as a problem. He does not ask how desires in the directed-attention sense can play a role in action explanation, given that they simply assail us. He does argue, in the next section of the chapter, that having a desire in this sense almost never gives us a reason to act in accordance with it. But there he is using the notion of a "reason" in a stronger sense than is required by Quinn's notion of a rationalizing explanation. Granted, the fact that you wanted to do so now is not in itself a conclusive reason (or maybe not even a reason) for you to do so now, instead of taking out the garbage now. But Quinn's worry about dispositional accounts is a worry about a less controversial aspect of a neo-Humean view. It is not a worry about how having a desire can justify an action. It is a worry about how having a desire can lead to an action.

To recap: Brewer and Scanlon start out doing action theory. They are responsive to Quinn's worry that actions, as such, cannot be explained as the effects of brute forces. In response to this, they endorse Quinn's positive view that action explanation involves reference to an evaluative outlook. They put this forth as a "general" conception of "desire," where what they are referring to is desire in the placeholder sense. They then note that this conception of desire is not extensionally equivalent to our "ordinary" notion of desire, that of desire in the substantive sense. In order to develop an account that does track this ordinary notion, they add a qualification to the original account. A desire in the substantive sense is an evaluative outlook with respect to which we are passive, in the sense that the outlook is not a conclusion

23. I actually think there is a more generous reading of Scanlon on this point. By "insistence," I think he may be referring to the immediacy with which desires in the substantive sense present their objects to us in practically salient terms. But even so, we need more than a description of this feature. We need an explanation of it.

24. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 39, referring to Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, p. 29.

we have arrived at through active deliberation. But they do not take on the burden associated with this claim, which is to confront the paradox of passion. Grant that some evaluative outlooks simply “assail us, unbidden.” How is our passivity in this respect compatible with the claim that when we are moved by these outlooks, we count as moving ourselves?

If what Scanlon, Brewer, and other evaluative outlook theorists are offering is a theory of desire in the substantive sense, then this is *the* central question they have to address. Resolving the paradox of passion is, I claim, the main task of such a theory. If the theory does nothing more than note the fact that we are distinctively passive in relation to desires in the substantive sense, then all it does is identify the relation that requires philosophical explanation.

Granted, the evaluative outlook theory is presented as doing more than this. It purportedly shows us that desires, *in general*, are, or involve, evaluative outlooks. In that case we should assess its merits not as a theory of desire in the substantive sense, but as a theory of desire in some more general sense. But what is this more general sense? As I noted earlier, Quinn’s main point, which the evaluative outlook theorists reiterate, is about “desire” only in the placeholder sense. “Desire” in this sense is a placeholder for action explanation as such. The radio man argument purports to show that any explanation of action *qua* action has to represent the agent as seeing a point in his action, such that he undertook it. Granted, this makes a lot of sense. Assume that whatever else human action is, it is at least an agent’s purposive response to his representation of the circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Then it is intuitive that any explanation of action has to appeal to the agent’s way of looking at the world in practically salient terms. It seems relatively uncontroversial that an evaluative outlook has to play some role in the explanation of any action. But to call this a theory of “desire,” and then on this basis to suggest that it helps us to understand what is distinctive about desire in the substantive sense, is a mistake. Desire in the placeholder sense simply is not a genus of which desire in the substantive sense is a species. Desire in the placeholder sense is a placeholder for whatever it takes to explain an action. Desire in the substantive sense is a distinctive element that plays a role in some explanations of action. The evaluative outlook theory is most plausible as a relatively uncontroversial claim within a larger theory of action explanation, or desire in the placeholder sense. It does not even pose the central question to be addressed by a theory of desire in the substantive sense.

### III. Responses on Behalf of the Evaluative Outlook Conception

Let me now consider two replies on behalf of the evaluative outlook theorist. The first appeals to an analogy between desire, in the substantive sense, and

25. I am stating this idea in an admittedly vague way, so that it can accommodate various more precise formulations. See, for example, Harry Frankfurt, “The Problem of Action,” and Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, esp. sections 5.4–5.6, pp. 93–108.

perception. The second calls into question the claim that our passivity in the face of such desires is philosophically significant, or generates an important philosophical problem. I will address these in turn.

An article that has been nearly as influential as Quinn's in the development of the evaluative outlook view is Dennis Stampe's "The Authority of Desire." There, Stampe writes:

Desire is a kind of perception. One who wants it to be the case that *p* perceives something that makes it seem to that person as if it would be good were it to be the case that *p*, and seem so in the way characteristic of perception. To desire something is to be in a kind of perceptual state, in which that thing seems good . . .<sup>26</sup>

Although Stampe uses "desire" in a way that is ambiguous between the placeholder and the substantive sense, I take it the appeal of this language comes from tacit recognition that there is an analogy between our passivity in relation to our perceptions and our passivity in relation to our desires in the substantive sense. Later evaluative outlook theorists, who likewise use "desire" ambiguously, draw the same analogy.<sup>27</sup> Scanlon, for example, distinguishes between "seeing" and "judging" considerations as reasons, or, equivalently, between "seemings" and "assessments."<sup>28</sup> Suppose you judge that you have no reason to be anxious about what others think of you, but you still find yourself wanting to act in ways that you believe will please them and arouse their approval of you. In that case, Scanlon claims, it is as if you are perceiving something to be a reason that you judge is not actually a reason. The experience differs from straightforward indecision, because you have made up your mind about what you ought to do. You already side with your judgment, as a conclusion you have arrived at through active deliberation. But you are still susceptible to the motivational force of reasons that simply "appear" to you, independent of your deliberation. The experience is like that of an optical illusion.

We can read the appeal to perception in one of two ways. On one reading, the claim is that desiring (in some unspecified sense) just is a form of perception, one that literally involves "seeing" reasons or goodness. This reading is compatible with a view that denies the distinction between practical and theoretical employments of reason. Practical judgment, on this view, is actually a species of theoretical judgment. On another reading, the claim is that desiring is analogous to perceiving. Desiring is related to practical judgment in the way that perceiving is related to theoretical judgment. In general, when evaluative

26. Stampe, "The Authority of Desire," p. 359.

27. See, for example, Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good*, Karl Schafer, "Perception and the Rational Force of Desire," Christine Tappolet, "Emotions and the Intelligibility of Akritic Action," in Stroud and Tappolet, *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, and Jessica Moss, "Akrasia and Perceptual Illusion."

28. For "seeing" and "judging," see *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 39–40. Scanlon uses the terminology of "seemings" and "assessments" to mark the same distinction in "Reasons and Passions," p. 176.

outlook theorists make reference to perception, they do not state clearly which version of the appeal they are making. But I doubt they all share the same view of the relation between practical and theoretical reasoning. For my purposes, it will be more helpful to read the reference to perception as an appeal to an analogy between practical and theoretical reasoning, conceived as distinct employments of reason.

The analogy between desire and perception is indeed very close. Like “desire,” “perception” can be used in a placeholder or a substantive sense. In the placeholder sense, whenever an agent believes that X is P, we can say, trivially, that he perceives that X is P (or perceives X as P). But “perception” in that sense is just a stand-in for whatever explains his belief. It is not an element that plays a distinct role in that explanation. In the substantive sense, by contrast, it is possible to believe that X is P without perceiving that X is P (or perceiving X as P).

Perception in the substantive sense is something with respect to which we are distinctively passive. We do not arrive at our perceptions through deliberation. Rather, they “assail us, unbidden.” This raises the question: when I believe what I see, simply because I see it, is my belief an exercise of my cognitive agency, or is it just the effect of a process that causes me to experience an impression with a certain degree of “force and vivacity”? How is our passivity in relation to our perceptions compatible with the idea that those perceptions can, at least in principle, make genuinely cognitive contributions to our theoretical judgments? The theorist of perception has to confront this question, just as the theorist of desire in the substantive sense has to confront the analogous question.<sup>29</sup> But the evaluative outlook theorist cannot point to this analogy as if it counts as an answer to either question.

Let me turn now to the evaluative outlook theorist’s second reply, which I think is more significant. The claim here is that there really is no paradox of passion, because we simply are not completely or importantly passive in relation to the desires that “assail us, unbidden.” True, we do not arrive at those desires as conclusions of deliberation. And we often feel that they are not under our full control. But, the evaluative outlook theorist argues, this does not mean they are not “ours” in the sense required for full-fledged motivation and action. In particular, this phenomenological feature of unmotivated desires should not be taken as evidence that they, or the thoughts they involve, are attributable to some source “outside” us, or even to a capacity “in” us that is external to our capacity to act on reasons. Indeed, he would argue, there is no good philosophical reason to slide from the description of

29. For a rich and historically illuminating discussion of recent debates about how perception can play an epistemological role, see Michael Friedman’s, “Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell’s *Mind and World*.” It should be clear that one of my aims is to encourage evaluative outlook theorists to think deeply about whether and in what sense there is a *practical* faculty of receptivity and, if so, how it is related to that of spontaneity. I share Friedman’s misgivings about the way McDowell appropriates Kant in developing his own, idealist position on a version of this question that does not clearly distinguish between theoretical and practical receptivity.

our felt passivity to an elaborate metaphysics of independent motivational sources or faculties.<sup>30</sup>

In support of this claim, the evaluative outlook theorist will point out that we are not *entirely* passive in relation to our unmotivated desires. For even those desires, like our beliefs and like our decisions, are, to use Scanlon's phrase, "judgment-sensitive attitudes."<sup>31</sup> To deny this, the evaluative outlook theorist maintains, amounts to assimilating unmotivated desires to morally irrelevant features of a person, like allergic sensitivity. It is to claim, for example, that a person's proneness to, say, lazy impulses (independent of whether he acts on them) is no more a reflection on him than is his sensitivity to pollen.<sup>32</sup> And it is to claim that our attitude toward our own lazy impulses (independent of whether we act on them) should likewise not differ from our attitudes toward the purely biological processes that affect our functioning. We might wish they were otherwise, and we might try to change them by means of medications or nonrational techniques, but it would make no sense to feel pride or shame because we have them, or to try to reason ourselves out of them.

That there is some difference between our relation to our allergic sensitivities and our relation to our unmotivated desires is entirely plausible, as is the idea that the latter have something to do with reason that the former do not. But these are not the only intuitions to be accounted for. There are also intuitions about how our relation to our unmotivated desires differs from our relation to the motives that we do arrive at as conclusions of deliberation, and how each is, ideally, judgment-sensitive. Suppose you are prone to aggressive impulses, especially when driving in traffic jams. The sheer fact of being obstructed by other cars tends to make you angry and hostile. Suppose your aggression takes the form of thoughts such as, "the fact that there are so many cars obstructing me is a reason for me to yell at other drivers." Despite these feelings, you judge that you have no reason to yell at other drivers. You recognize that the fact that there are a lot of other cars on the road may be disappointing, but it does not show that any of the other drivers has wronged you. Nor will yelling at anyone change anything for the better. Because you have arrived at these conclusions, you have a motive to refrain from acting on your hostile impulses. Nevertheless, you are still prone to feeling them.

Are your hostile impulses, in the ideal case, judgment-sensitive and attributable to you in the same way that your motive to refrain from yelling is judgment-sensitive and attributable to you? The evaluative outlook theorist denies that your unmotivated desire is external to you in any important sense. So the picture cannot be that your aggressive impulses, like powerful tides, set in motion a brute causal process with respect to which you are a spectator, a process that it is up to you to interrupt before it leads to certain effects. Rather,

30. I take it this is Scanlon's main point in *What We Owe To Each Other*, 39–41. See esp. p. 40: "... we should not take 'desires' to be a special source of motivation, independent of our seeing things as reasons."

31. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, pp. 20ff.

32. Scanlon stresses this general point in "Reasons and Passions."



the picture has to be that you are both the one who is doing the restraining, and the one who is restrained. So perhaps the idea is this. Your aggressive impulse to yell at the other drivers is simply you beginning to yell at them, on the basis of what you take to be reasons from the perspective of your unmotivated desire. Your feeling is your action is at a very early stage, a stage at which it does not yet have behavioral manifestations. Unless you stop yourself, you will complete it. So when you restrain yourself, you are aborting an action you have already begun to undertake.

This is a position available to the evaluative outlook theorist. But it does not come without a cost. It sits uncomfortably with the following feature of our thought and talk about feelings. You can decide to act, but you cannot decide to feel. You can decide not to yell at other drivers and, on that basis, make yourself refrain from yelling at them. But you cannot decide not to feel like yelling at them, and on that basis make yourself not have those feelings. If the appeal to decision here seems too voluntaristic, substitute the idea of becoming convinced. You can become convinced that you ought not to yell at other drivers and, on that basis, make yourself refrain from yelling. But you cannot become convinced that you ought not feel like yelling at them and, on that basis, make yourself not feel like yelling at them.

This is entirely compatible with the equally obvious fact that we can indeed cultivate and shape our feelings over time. We do this through imaginative and behavioral techniques. Convinced that you would like to be a person who does not even feel like yelling at other drivers, you can indeed change. You can do this by cultivating new habits. You can learn to breathe deeply during traffic jams, and you can use your imagination to practice “seeing” other drivers as fellow victims, rather than as persecutors. The point is that whereas we can change our actions by deciding to act differently, or by becoming convinced we should act differently, we can only change our feelings by using indirect techniques to cultivate new ones over time.

This observation supports the idea that as agents, we are simply not related to our feelings in the same way that we are related to our actions. It likewise supports the idea that our feelings are simply not, even ideally, judgment-sensitive in the same way that our actions are. The fact that these impulses can in some way reflect on our character, whereas our allergic reactions cannot, need not imply that they reflect on us in the same way that our conduct does. If the evaluative outlook theorist wants to grant that there is a difference here, he has to make a commitment that goes beyond phenomenological description. He has to say something about where we stand in relation to our unmotivated desires, as compared with where we stand in relation to our motivated desires.

Here is a further fact that supports the idea that our feelings do not reflect on us in the same way that our actions do. Our reactive attitudes toward ourselves differ in kind, depending on whether we are critical of our own conduct or whether we are critical of our feelings. We hold ourselves directly accountable to ourselves for having acted against our better judgment. It is far less clear that we hold ourselves directly accountable to ourselves for having had feelings that conflict with our better judgment.

The difference here bears analogy, I think, with the difference between reactive attitudes toward an adult and reactive attitudes toward a child. I have argued elsewhere that it is a fixed point in our practice toward children that we do not take them to be proper objects of direct resentment and blame.<sup>33</sup> We do not straightforwardly resent children when they do wrong. Instead we are disappointed in them. The response is not that of an equal but that of a superior. This is reflected in the idea that children are to be disciplined, where discipline is not exactly the same as punishment. Discipline is a more forward-looking response. The aim is to educate, train, reform, rather than to exact a debt and so to right the scales of justice. And the background assumption is that children are not fully responsible for what they do in the same, direct way that adults are responsible for what they do. Similarly, I want to claim, our response to ourselves when our feelings fail to support our better judgment is not that of an equal but that of a superior. We are disappointed in ourselves as sources of feeling, and we resolve to discipline and train ourselves better in that capacity. But we do not resent and blame ourselves as we would if we had acted badly. I take it this is simply a retrospective reflection of our prospective awareness that we can decide to act, but we cannot decide to feel.

Notice that this picture does not imply that feelings are brute pushes and pulls, any more than it implies that children are mere objects. The cultivation of feeling, like the raising of a child, is a matter of shaping an intelligent perspective on the world, and is not just a matter of instilling predictable responses to stimuli. That said, there is obviously a limit to the analogy. The children we raise are separate people, with lives of their own. Our feelings are not separate from us in this sense. Even if they start out having lives of their own, their proper role is to contribute to our lives.

Does the evaluative outlook conception recognize what I have taken here to be a fixed point in our thought and talk about feeling? Does it acknowledge that our feelings are not identifiable with us (either from our own perspective, or from that of others) in the same, direct way that our conduct is? On this point, again, the view is deeply ambiguous. Scanlon holds that desires, even in the unmotivated sense, are judgment-sensitive attitudes. In this respect, he claims, they are like beliefs and decisions. But this does not tell us whether having unsupportive feelings is *our* failure in the same sense that refusing to act on our better judgment is *our* failure. The notion of judgment-sensitivity is too coarse-grained to register this distinction. Granted, there surely is some coarse-grained sense in which both our feelings and our deliberative conclusions are “internal” to us, or are “up to us,” or are motives for which we are responsible. But in order to articulate what is distinctive about unmotivated desires as specific elements in the explanation of action, the evaluative outlook approach needs to appeal to a more fine-grained conceptual vocabulary. And that vocabulary has to reflect a substantive theory of how the basic normative relation in which we stand to our feelings is different from the basic normative relation in which we stand to our actions.

33. See my “Childhood and Personhood” and “What is a Child?”

## IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to undermine complacency with a predominant conception of desire, for the sake of refocusing attention on a philosophical problem. I have argued that it is not clear what the evaluative outlook theory of desire is a theory of. If it is a theory of desire in the placeholder sense, then it is at bottom a theory of action explanation. So construed, its claim is relatively uncontroversial, and falls far short of being a full theory of action explanation. The claim is simply that the agent's way of looking at the world in practically salient terms must play a part in the explanation of his action. If, on the other hand, the evaluative outlook conception is a theory of desire in the substantive sense, then it does not even go so far as to acknowledge the central problem such a theory has to answer. That problem is how we can be passive in relation to our own self-movement. I have suggested that the evaluative outlook theorist's appeal to an analogy desire and perception, though not misguided, simply pushes the question back. Moreover, his assertion that desires, like beliefs, are judgment-sensitive, is too coarse-grained to account for important differences between merely feeling like doing something and doing it. What we need is an account of our relation to our feelings, one that takes seriously our passivity with respect to them without assimilating them to external forces. Ultimately, I believe this relation is *sui generis*. We cannot fully capture it by analogy with other relations, such as that of a charioteer to his horse, or an adult to a child, or even a State to its citizens. But that is what makes it so worthy of philosophical attention.

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