

Desire

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The notion of desire features prominently in debates in philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and ethics. Philosophers of mind usually start from the thought that desire is a mental state, and their aim is to explain how desire is similar to and distinct from other mental states, such as belief. Philosophers of action focus on desire as a motive to action, and their aim is to show how desires play a role in the explanation of action, in particular rational or intentional action. Moral philosophers are also generally concerned with desires as motives, but their focus is typically on the idea that motivation by desire can conflict with another kind of motivation, motivation by duty or principle. In reading through these literatures, it is important to keep in mind that they may not always share a common concept of desire or a common understanding of what a theory of desire must do.

One feature all discussions of desire do share is the assumption that whatever desire is, it is conceptually connected to wanting. To desire something is to want it. Beyond this, there are differences. Are desires necessarily motives to act so as to bring about the object of the desire? We can certainly want things that we could never bring about. I can want my favorite football team to win the World Cup, even though I have no power at all to make this happen. Considerations like this lead some to conclude that there is no essential connection between desire and action (Schroeder 2004; Brewer 2006). Whether or not these arguments are conclusive, the conception of desire that has in fact been most prevalent in both ancient and contemporary philosophy is one that does posit a close, if not essential, connection between desiring an object and having a motive to bring it about. What kind of motive is desire? It would be misleading to suggest that there has been one well-defined philosophical conversation about this over the centuries. At the risk of oversimplification, I will suggest that there are two primary conceptual frameworks within which the concept of desire has become the focus of philosophical attention. Each framework provides a conception of our motivational psychology, but each was developed in response to different concerns (*see* MORAL PSYCHOLOGY; MOTIVATION, MORAL). As such they are not direct rivals. The earlier framework, which I will call the Classical Picture, makes room for questions about whether or not we, as agents, are composites of two or more motivational sources (*see* ANCIENT ETHICS; PLATO; ARISTOTLE; REASON AND PASSION). The later framework, which I will call the Belief/Desire Picture, allows for questions about whether and how making reference to our desires helps to explain the rationale behind our actions (*see* MOTIVATION, HUMEAN THEORY OF). Cutting across both approaches is the further question whether desires are best conceived mechanistically, as states, dispositions, and processes, or agentially, as forms of purposive activity.

The Classical Picture starts from the observation that we are subject to motivational conflict. Plato's Socrates, in the *Republic*, considers the example of a thirsty person who nevertheless forbids himself to drink (Plato 1997b: 439, C1). To explain this conflict, he posits the existence of a division between reason and appetite. Reason pursues its own end, what is good on the whole, while appetite pursues its end, the pleasant. Later, Socrates cites a different sort of conflict as evidence of a further division in the soul. Leontius is torn between a desire to gaze at a pile of corpses and a sense of shame at his impulse to do so (Plato 1997b: 439, E5). Socrates interprets this as a clash between spirit and appetite, the end of spirit being honor. The result is the tripartite conception of the soul, famously portrayed in Plato's *Phaedrus* by the image of reason, the charioteer, driving two winged horses, one obedient and one unruly (Plato 1997a: 246, A5). Similarly Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) posits at least one division in the soul, that between the practically rational part, which pursues what is fine and noble, and the nonrational part, which by its nature does not share reason's end (*NE* 1102a27). Three features of the Classical Picture are important for our purposes. The first is that reason, at least as practical reason, is conceived as a motivational capacity. It is a faculty of desire, where "desire" is taken in the broad sense to mean any kind of motive (Schueler 1995). The second feature is that reason is not the only motivational capacity. It is one among others, where the others are conceived of as in some sense nonrational. For our purposes it does not matter how many nonrational faculties there are. What matters is that these might be called faculties of "desire" in a narrow sense, a sense that contrasts with "reason" (Cooper 1984). The third feature is that there is a hierarchical relationship between rational and nonrational motivational faculties, so that it is the job of reason to govern the others, and it is the job of the others to allow reason to rule.

The central controversies regarding the Classical Picture focus on Plato's argument from the fact of motivational conflict to "parts of the soul," and on how to understand the nature of the "parts" being posited. As for the argument itself, it is not clear why it is necessary to posit distinct motivational capacities in order to explain motivational conflict. When ordering ice cream dessert, I may feel torn between a desire for chocolate and a desire for vanilla. But arguably this is a conflict within appetite, and even Plato would not posit the existence of two motivational faculties to account for it. Is it only conflicts of a certain sort that drive the argument for division? As presented in the *Republic*, the argument depends on Socrates's "Principle of Opposites" (Plato 1997b: 436, B8). This principle states, roughly, that "the same thing cannot at the same time do or undergo the same thing with respect to and in the same relation to the same object" (Lorenz 2009:10). So perhaps the idea is that when I am torn between chocolate and vanilla, I am simultaneously attracted to two different objects, but I am not simultaneously attracted to and repelled by either one of them. Even when I am leaning towards vanilla, I still find chocolate attractive. By contrast in the case of Leontius, he is attracted and repelled at the same time. Socrates claims, on the basis of the principle of opposites, that we cannot explain Leontius' conflict unless his attraction and his repulsion issue from

different parts of his soul. It is less clear how the argument regarding the thirsty person is to fit into this model, since even when he resists his desire to drink, we can still imagine that he finds the water attractive. And more fundamentally, it is not clear why we should accept the principle of opposites in the first place.

A detailed interpretation of the text might vindicate Plato's argument in his own terms (Lorenz 2009). But it is worth asking whether a revised version of the argument might be vindicated as well. This revised argument would start not from our awareness of motivational conflict as such, but rather from our awareness of our distinctive passivity with respect to some of our motivational impulses (Schapiro 2009). The thirsty man can decide not to drink and can thereby refrain from drinking, but he cannot decide not to want to drink and thereby cease wanting to drink. Leontius can decide not to gaze at the corpses and can thereby refrain from gazing, but he cannot decide not to want to gaze at them and thereby cease wanting to gaze. His desire to gaze, we might say, has an influence *on* his will, as something to be taken into account in determining his choice, without being a state *of* it (Quinn 1995: 200, n.31). Kant, who espoused a variant of the Classical Picture, recognized this fact when he distinguished between "practical" and "pathological" motives (1996a: 4:399, 413; 1996b: 5:20; 1996c: 6:399; *see* KANT, IMMANUEL; KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS). Pathological motives, he claimed, come from feeling and so cannot be commanded. We can be obligated to cultivate them by indirect means, but we cannot be required simply to have them. Practical motives, by contrast, are determinations of the will and so can be the object of command. Kant held, accordingly, that the duty to "love thy neighbor" is not properly interpreted as requiring us to have a certain feeling. It is, rather, a duty to adopt others' ends as our own (1996c 6: 449–50).

There are echoes of a similar division, between motives with respect to which we are active and those with respect to which we are passive, in more contemporary work as well. Thomas Nagel (1979) distinguishes between "motivated" and "unmotivated" desires, where the former are conclusions of practical reasoning and the latter arise independently of any process of reasoning. But Nagel does not go so far as to posit distinct motivational sources. Indeed talk of motivational sources has nearly disappeared from the contemporary philosophical scene. Gary Watson, in his influential criticism of Harry Frankfurt's notion of second-order desires, argues that there must be a distinction in kind between our valuing system and our desiring system. On Watson's (1975) view, the valuing system has to be conceived as a governing system, in the sense that it has to have the authority to determine whether or not a given desire speaks for the agent. But Watson does not explicitly endorse a bipartite motivational psychology to explain the difference between these systems. Michael Bratman (2000), too, posits a distinction in kind between desires and intentions, the role of the latter being to govern the agent. But his aim is to account for this distinction precisely without appealing to the existence of motivational sources of the kind Plato envisioned (*see* INTENTION).

What kind of motivational sources did Plato envision? This is another central area of controversy among interpreters of the Classical Picture. On the face of it, Plato described the parts of the soul as subpersonal agents, semi-autonomous

sources of purposive activity. To what extent was this language simply metaphorical? At one extreme are those who argue that Plato was simply positing different kinds of mental states, distinguished in terms of their contents, causes, and effects, but not in terms of anything like subpersonal agents. These interpreters point out that taking Plato literally would generate serious problems. First, there is the problem of infinite regress. What prevents us from having to posit sub-agents within sub-agents ad infinitum? And second, there is the problem of unity. If we are composites of two or more sub-agents, in what does our unity as individual agents consist (Bobonich 2004)? At the other extreme are those who argue that there are good philosophical reasons for taking the idea of subpersonal agency seriously, and that the problems of regress and unity can be avoided (Lorenz 2009). To some extent this is a purely interpretive debate. But to the extent that it is a debate about what Plato should have meant, it may touch on a deeper question about what it takes to give a philosophical account of motivation of any kind. Some believe that such an account should be reductive in the sense that it should show how motivation can be understood in terms of psychological mechanisms and processes. Others believe that to explain motivation as a mechanism or process is to leave opaque the sense in which motivation is self-movement, activity on the part of the agent herself. This methodological divide will reappear later, in the context of a debate between those who conceive of desire as a state or disposition, and those who conceive of it as an evaluative outlook.

A further debate within the terms of the Classical Picture is about how to conceive of the distinction between rational and nonrational motives. The crux of the problem is how to maintain both that there is a deep difference between rational and nonrational parts of the soul and that they can oppose one another. It would seem that direct opposition is only possible if the two parts have the same capacities. If both are able to reason, then they can disagree. If neither can reason, then they can simply clash. But if one can reason and the other can only clash, it is hard to see how to describe this as a conflict. Plato's images of the nonrational parts as nonhuman animals suggest that the conflicts are not direct disagreements, while still allowing that the nonrational parts have minimally evaluative perspectives of their own. Whether Aristotle shares the same conception is a matter of debate. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he claims, ambiguously, that the nonrational part "in a sense shares in [reason]," and to some extent "listens to and obeys it" (*NE* 1102b30–1). Some take this to show that Aristotle accords the nonrational part a greater capacity for reasoning than Plato did.

While elements of the Classical Picture are still evident in some modern and contemporary theories of action and morality, most current discussions of desire presuppose the Belief/Desire Picture. Hume laid the groundwork for this picture when he revived the problem of the possibility of conflict between reason and desire. Embracing one horn of that dilemma, he maintained that reason and passion cannot oppose one another, because they have entirely different functions (1978 [1739–40]: II.iii.3; see HUME, DAVID). But in a departure from the ancients, Hume denied reason any power to motivate action at all. On Hume's view, reason has the power to discover

matters of fact and “relations of ideas,” but it does not have the power to initiate action. The products of reasoning are beliefs, and beliefs are motivationally inert unless supplemented by a distinct, nonrational, conative mental state, generically called “passion” or “desire” (see also Hobbes 1996 [1651]).

The contemporary Belief/Desire Picture was informed by Hume’s belief/desire distinction but developed in response to very different questions from the ones motivating the Classical Picture. Whereas the Classical Picture emerged in an attempt to explain motivational conflict, or perhaps to explain our passivity in the face of certain motives, the Belief/Desire Picture was developed in order to explain how the events we call “actions” are different from other events. Following Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Anscombe (2000 [1957]) argued that intentional actions are events for which we can demand and offer a certain kind of explanation, an explanation that cites a reason. “Why did you turn on the coffee machine?” “Because I wanted to have a cup of coffee.” Such explanations cite the agent’s reasons for action, in the sense that they explain why, from the agent’s point of view, the action had a point or purpose. Anscombe did not explicitly specify a particular form that such explanations take, but Davidson (1963), developing Anscombe’s point, held that these “rationalizing explanations” have a certain structure. He held that rationalizing explanations always cite a combination of a “pro-attitude” and a belief. In response to the question, “Why did you turn on the coffee machine?” the full rationalizing explanation would be: “Because I wanted to drink a cup of coffee, and I believed that the way to get a cup of coffee to drink was by turning on the machine.”

While in this example the pro-attitude is what we have been calling “desire” in the sense of appetite, on Davidson’s view pro-attitudes include “desires, wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values” (1963: 686; *see* PRO-ATTITUDES). Hence a pro-attitude is a “desire” in the broad sense that includes the motives Plato would have associated with the ruling part of the soul, including the sense of obligation and the principle of doing what is best on the whole. And because Davidsonian explanations have come to be called “belief/desire” explanations rather than “belief/pro-attitude” explanations, contemporary philosophers by and large tend to use the term “desire” to refer to what Davidson called a “pro-attitude.”

The central controversies about desires as they figure into rationalizing explanations of action are about how explanations that cite reasons are related to explanations that cite causes. Anscombe had maintained a distinction in kind between reasons and causes, though she allowed that the boundary might not be sharp in every case. Davidson argued that this sort of view leaves it mysterious how reasons are related to the actions they explain. Against Anscombe, he tried to show that reasons explanations are a species of causal explanation by showing that the belief/desire combinations that figure into rationalizing explanations of our actions likewise figure into causal explanations of the same actions. These belief/desire combinations are, he claimed, both reasons and causes (*see* REASONS, MOTIVATING AND NORMATIVE).

Davidson's claim about the relation between reasons and causes has been the focus of much debate, the details of which would take us too far afield. For our purposes, two features of his view are important. One is that Davidson conceives of desires (and beliefs) as psychological states and dispositions that can be individuated in terms of their functional roles, construed more or less broadly as causal roles. A desire for a cup of coffee, on this view, is a psychological disposition that tends to be caused by a certain physiological-cum-psychological condition, and that tends to cause agents to have thoughts about drinking coffee, to take actions to bring it about that they drink coffee, and so on (see also Smith 1994; *see* DIRECTION OF FIT). The second feature is Davidson's claim that belief/desire combinations play the role of reasons in rationalizing explanations. The idea is that in answering the question, "Why did you turn on the coffee machine?" we cite such mental states as our reasons: "because I wanted ... and I believed ...". Both claims have come under attack from those who hold what has been called an "evaluative outlook" conception of desire (Brewer 2006; see also Stampe 1987, Pettit and Smith 1990, Quinn 1995, Scanlon 1998). The evaluative outlook conception does not necessarily deny that desires can be described as psychological states with certain causal roles. But it argues that we do not generally cite our desires, so conceived, when offering rationalizing explanations. Rather, we cite the features of the world that become practically salient to us when seen from the perspective provided by our desires. The idea is that when you turn on the coffee machine, your reason for doing so is not, strictly speaking, that you take the fact that you want coffee as a reason to turn on the machine, but that you take the delicious taste and the stimulating effects of the coffee to be reasons to drink it, and to take the means to drinking it. On this view, to have a desire is to view the world from a certain perspective, a perspective from which certain features of the world appear as practically salient. And it is these features that constitute our reasons, not our own mental states.

Underlying this debate is a deep question about how reflection figures into human agency. The Davidsonian view would seem to suggest that when I claim, "I want a cup of coffee," the object of my reflection is a psychological state or disposition in me, an object that I individuate causally, in the same way that any observer would. The evaluative outlook suggests that when I claim, "I want a cup of coffee," I am not reflecting on my own mental activity at all. I am simply seeing certain features of the world as attractive or as good or as grounds for action. Which view properly characterizes our relation to our desires? Warren Quinn (1995) offered an influential argument to show that one cannot hold both the conception of our desires as dispositions we observe in ourselves and the claim that desires (combined with beliefs) function as reasons in rationalizing explanations. Quinn describes a man with a rather odd desire, a desire that consists in a disposition to turn on every radio he sees. He stipulates that the man does not see any point to turning on radios; he does not find doing so either pleasant or worthwhile in itself or useful as a means to anything he finds pleasant or worthwhile. His disposition to turn on radios is not informed by any judgment or sense that doing so would be good. Quinn's claim is that if this man were to cite his desire in his explanation for his actions, he would not

be specifying any reason *for* doing what he did, any more than citing his allergy would specify a reason *for* sneezing in the presence of pollen. The explanation would not reveal why it made sense to him to do what he did.

One reply on behalf of those who maintain that the relevant conception of desire is that of a mental state or disposition is that dispositions surely can include dispositions to have evaluative thoughts (Copp and Sobel 2002). Presumably a sophisticated version of the dispositional view would refrain from calling radio man's disposition a desire unless it did involve such thoughts. But it is not clear that this modification would avoid the problem Quinn identifies. Suppose radio man's disposition includes a tendency to have thoughts that it is good to turn on every radio he sees. It might be argued that if radio man simply regards these thoughts as effects of a psychological disposition individuated in causal terms, then he is precisely not regarding them as evaluative claims that he makes about the world. He is observing thoughts that happen to appear in his consciousness as effects of psychological processes, but he is not regarding them as claims he actively endorses. Hence when he acts, he acts in the presence of thoughts the content of which makes reference to the good, but he does not thereby act on the basis of his judgments about the good.

Part of what motivates the evaluative outlook conception of desire, then, is the thought that desires, insofar as they contribute to rationalizing explanations, are not mental states that we observe in ourselves. They are, rather, forms of activity in which we engage. Our desires define our perspectives as agents, and these perspectives in turn reflect our conceptions of what is valuable or worth doing, if only in a minimal sense. Quinn's version of this view holds that desiring involves making an evaluative judgment that the object of desire is good or worth promoting, if only in a minimal sense. T. M. Scanlon's version of the view places emphasis on the notion of a reason for action, rather than goodness. According to Scanlon (1998), desiring an object involves taking there to be a reason to act in certain ways with respect to it. In general, the evaluative outlook approach tends to fit naturally with a broad construal of the traditional "guise of the good" thesis, the thesis that whenever we desire an object, we implicitly take that object to be good in some sense (Velleman 1992; Tenenbaum 2007, 2010; *see* GUISE OF THE GOOD). But just how active are we when we desire? If "desire" is construed in a narrow sense as appetite, then it would seem to be a feature of desiring that we are distinctively passive with respect to it. This is most obvious when what we desire conflicts directly with what we value. But if "desire" is identified with the kind of motives that Plato attributed to the rational part, then it does not seem to be characterized by the same sort of passivity. Here it begins to matter that the contemporary, Davidsonian conception of "desire" was developed independently of the questions that concerned the ancients. The various theories about rationalizing explanations are silent on the question whether there is a division between higher and lower motivational faculties. That question is at best orthogonal to contemporary concerns. And yet if what is at stake between the dispositional conception and the evaluative outlook conception is the sense in which desiring is an activity, this question cannot be thoroughly addressed without taking into account the concerns that motivated the ancients to posit divisions in the soul.

An example from Scanlon will serve to illustrate the issue. He holds that desires are, in some sense, conclusions of practical reasoning, rather than brute experiences that somehow constitute reasons or constitute starting points for reasoning. To cite his example, a desire to buy a new computer involves “a tendency to judge that I have reason to buy a new computer” (Scanlon 1998: 43). Moreover on this view, even primal appetites like thirst involve the same structure. Being thirsty involves a tendency to take the present unpleasant sensation of dryness in one’s mouth and throat, along with the belief that drinking water in the near future would relieve the unpleasantness, as a reason to drink (Scanlon 1998: 38). But what happens in cases of temptation, as when Plato’s thirsty man is tempted to drink but restrains himself? If desiring is just a kind of reasoning, how can we have desires that are contrary to the conclusions we have drawn about what we ought to do, all things considered? Scanlon holds that in these cases, we have both a tendency to “see” these considerations as reasons to drink, and a tendency to “judge” that they are not really reasons to drink (1998: 39). Other advocates of the evaluative outlook view, when faced with questions about motivational conflict and passivity, make appeals to something like the same distinction. The idea is that the kinds of motivational conflicts that Plato was concerned with can be construed as something like perceptual illusions, or as conflicts between perceptions and considered judgments (Stampe 1987; Brewer 2006; Tenenbaum 2007; Moss 2009).

Scanlon connects this argument to a larger claim that sounds like an explicit rejection of the Classical Picture. He argues that because these conflicts involve conflicting tendencies to take features of the world as reasons, they have to be regarded as conflicts within reason, and not as conflicts between reason and a distinct motivational faculty called “desire.” Indeed his explicit view is that there is no division between higher and lower motivational faculties. Whereas Hume had denied this distinction from an empiricist direction, on the grounds that reason alone cannot motivate, Scanlon denies this distinction from a rationalist direction, on the grounds that insofar as desires motivate, it is because they are conclusions of reasoning. But this is not the only route for the advocate of the evaluative outlook view to take. One could hold that cases of temptation involve something analogous to perceptual illusion, while also holding that in order to account for perceptual illusion as such, we need to posit a division within our cognitive faculties. Do our perceptions have the same source as our judgments, or do we need to posit a division in our cognitive capacities in order to explain, for example, our distinctive passivity with respect to our perceptions? Whereas proponents of the evaluative outlook conception of desire converge on the idea that motivational conflict is something like perceptual illusion, they tend to stop short of developing their views far enough to make it clear whether or not they would account for such illusion by positing something like the divisions of the soul that characterized the Classical Picture (but see Schapiro 2009).

I have suggested that a point in favor of the evaluative outlook conception of desire over the dispositional conception is that thinking of desires as evaluative outlooks helps to explain how desires contribute to rationalizing explanations. But one might argue that the purpose of a philosophical theory of desire is to explain the nature of desire as such, regardless of whether this explanation sheds light on

the role of desire in practical reasoning. One version of this approach takes desire to be a natural kind, and tries to reveal the more fundamental causal mechanisms that underlie belief/desire explanations, construed as causal explanations (Schroeder 2004). Another type of naturalism purports to show that, as an empirical matter, we do have two motivational systems (Haidt 2006). This view purports to be agnostic on the normative question whether the so-called “higher” motivational capacity ought to govern the “lower,” but it nevertheless tends to slide into a prescriptive mode, suggesting that an agnostic perspective may be hard to maintain once we have drawn the distinction. Indeed my suspicion is that the tendency to think of ourselves as having higher and lower motivational capacities is an inescapable feature of the deliberative standpoint, a standpoint from which we face the task of governing ourselves. While there may well be an empirical explanation of why creatures like us are forced to confront the task of self-government, such an explanation cannot tell us what self-government consists in or how to achieve it.

When doing philosophy, it is probably best to approach the term “desire” with caution. Conceptions of desire tend to be interwoven with detailed assumptions about our motivational psychology, along with assumptions about whether motives are best conceived as processes or activities. The Classical Picture and the Belief/Desire Picture provide two different starting points for conversation about desire. It remains to be seen whether those different conversations can be integrated into one well-defined line of inquiry.

See also: ANCIENT ETHICS; ARISTOTLE; DIRECTION OF FIT; GUISE OF THE GOOD; HUME, DAVID; INTENTION; KANT, IMMANUEL; KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS; MORAL PSYCHOLOGY; MOTIVATION, HUMEAN THEORY OF; MOTIVATION, MORAL; PLATO; PRO-ATTITUDES; REASON AND PASSION; REASONS, MOTIVATING AND NORMATIVE

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