

On the traditional picture of desire, desire just is a disposition to behave in certain ways, given certain beliefs about the world. For example, Stalnaker:

To desire that p is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that p in a world in which one's beliefs, whatever they are, were true. (1984, 15)

Problem: How could desires, so conceived, rationalise action?

Quinn's Radio Man.

Parfit:

An irresistible impulse is not a normative reason. Nor is an impulse made rational by its ability to survive reflection on the facts. Even after carefully considering the facts, we might find ourselves irresistibly impelled to act in crazy ways. (2012, vol.2, 291)

The worry is this: a bare disposition to act cannot contribute to the rationality or reasonability of an agent. We need a better account.

Railton suggest that the place to start is to think about how desire is *created*. Think about advertisements: they present something you antecedently have no interest in, in the most appealing, attractive light, aiming to elicit a desire for them in you.

Desire that p (first version): A degree of positive affective interest (attraction, liking) toward a representation of p elicits and guides a degree of positive motivational energy (striving, wanting) toward bringing about what p represents. (25)

Some features of desires:

1. Desires are creative: they involve "focused motivational energy". And which intrinsic desires we have varies over the course of our lives.

2. Desires are teleological. When agents act on a desire they are motivated under a favourable idea of what she is attempting. She has an aim and hence some degree of intelligibility. This is an important contrast to mere urges.

Contrast two cases:

Eating because one is hungry, no intentional object or goal involved.

Eating because one wants to go home and will be discharged from the hospital only upon gaining weight – despite finding food distasteful.

Railton suggests that while the motivational system involved in desires may well have originated in drives and urges, it is now redeployed in the service of ideas, aims, and ideals.

3. Linguistic point. We happily say that the hamster wants out of the cage or that it likes carrots. But saying that the hamster desires to get out sounds odd.

Desire: from Latin desidero, "to long for", de + sidus = of, or toward a star

Want: from Old Norse vanta, "to lack"

Like: from Middle English liken, "to please"

When desiring, we are aiming at something that we are picturing, that guides our action. Wanting and liking does not have any of these implications.

Railton:

"Desire," then, contrasts with "wanting" and "liking." Nor is it, so to speak, a mere conjunction of them. Instead, I would claim, "desire" picks out a structured relationship between these two kinds of attitudes, mediated by contentful representations or ideas of absent, to-be-realised states."

4. Desire and Deliberation

Means-ends reasoning is an elaboration of a favourable image. It takes place within a pro-attitude. It involves working backwards from the end to the means of realising it. In the course of it, the initial pro-attitude is put into practical shape, one that identifies and motivates the next step.

5. Phenomenology:

Desire is not a simple state; it's a compound with two aspects: positive affective attraction along with focused appetitive striving.

This accounts for the dual nature of its phenomenology. On the one hand, there is pleasure in contemplating the object of desire. On the other hand, your attention focusses on its lack, which can be painful.

6. Desire and Preference

Desire differs from mere preference – a disposition to choose A over B. Such a preference can come about as a result of habit, phobia, disgust, addiction, etc.

Mere disposition to F in C need not manifest any favourable attitude toward F – i.e. no mode of presentation of F under which it is interesting, appealing, likeable, etc.

7. Role of Desire

Desires have a much wider role than mere dispositions to choose. They shape our perception (what we attend to, what is salient), what we imagine, our inferences and associations, memories, what one finds rewarding, what one is surprised or disappointed by.

Fine-tuning the Account

Desire not only sets up a favourable representation of our action but also with expectations of how things will be. Depending on how things turn out, our desires are shaped or modified accordingly. Desire is a dynamic functional state, it involves feedback loops.

Desire that p (second version): A degree of positive affect (attraction, liking) toward a representation p functions to elicit and regulate a degree of positive expectation (affective forecast) and positive motivation (striving, wanting) toward maintaining or bringing about the act or state of affairs that p portrays; and this degree of positive affect is subsequently modulated by whether the actual experience of performing, realizing, or moving toward p is better than, worse than, or in conformity with, the affective expectation of it. (Railton, 36)

Desires do have a "mind-to-world" fit. They cannot be true or false but they can be more or less proportional, warranted, based on experience, sensitive to experience, etc.

How is this implemented in our psychology?

Arpaly & Schroeder argue for a Reward Theory of Desire.

Reward Theory of Desire: To have an intrinsic desire regarding it being the case that p is to constitute p as a reward or a punishment.

Intrinsic desires come in two sub-types: appetites and aversions.

To have an intrinsic appetitive desire that p is to constitute p as a reward.

To have an intrinsic aversion to p is to constitute p as a punishment.

Note that reward and punishment here do not refer to feelings, self-conscious stances, judgments or intentional evaluations. Rather, they refer to technical terms: causal signals that take place within two distinct cognitive systems.

Things are rewards or punishments because of the way representation of them disposes us to learn.

Thus, what makes a conceivable state of affairs p count as a reward or punishment for a given person is constituted by the contingent power of that person's representation that p to contribute to the calculation of a reward or punishment signal.

To produce reward learning, an organism must be doing three things. It must have an expectation regarding the net amount of reward to be found in the world, it must be evaluating the actual net amount of reward found in the world, and it must at each moment be taking the latter and subtracting the former from it.

Readings:

Arpaly, Nomy & Schroeder, Timothy (2013). *In Praise of Desire*. OUP.

Railton, Peter (2012). That Obscure Object, Desire. Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 86 (2):22-46.