

Desires and Explanatory Reasons

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This paper has four aims and sections, the first two are positive or constructive and deal with the concept of ‘desire’, the latter two, discussing various concepts of ‘explanatory practical reason’, are negative or critical. (1) First a certain concept of ‘desire’ is explained, which lies broadly in a Humean tradition. (2) Then it will be shown that this concept is apt for the philosophy of action, or more specifically, that it is suitable as a central and fundamental concept in an empirical theory of action because it can be used in important psychological laws about the formation of decision and intention. (3) The third section shall show that the usual concept of an ‘explanatory practical reason’ is much less apt for this task because of the variety of things denoted with this concept. (4) The final section explains why fashionable concepts of ‘explanatory practical reason’, which are inspired by externalist theories of rationality, are much less useful because they have been designed without relation to any empirical theory of action.

1. A Concept of ‘Desire’ for the Philosophy of Action

In recent philosophical literature about desires often, e.g. by Don Locke [Locke 1982], Frederick Schueler [Schueler 1995, 29; 34f.] or Michael Smith [Smith 1987, 45; 51f.], two concepts of desire are distinguished: *i.* Desires in the narrow sense are phenomenological desires, i.e. some more or less intensely felt craving for something. *ii.* Desires in a broad sense are simply pro-attitudes or – defined a bit narrower – mental attitudes with a mind-dominant direction of fit (the world must fit the mind). But these two concepts of desires are not apt as fundamental concepts in the philosophy of action. The first one is too narrow: Only a small part of the desires which influence our decisions are emotionally felt desires; most of them are cold or not even conscious and present only in the form of a mental disposition. The second concept on the other hand is too broad and non-specific: Hopes and intentions are pro-attitudes too, and in some possible world even beliefs, e.g. about what is socially permitted, may have the defining direction of fit – where it seems to be obvious that all these things, according to some traditional understanding, are not desires. The broad concept of ‘desire’, therefore, does not capture what in Humean desire-belief theories of action usually is meant with “desire”, thus eventually trivializing these theories. Accordingly, Don Locke and Schueler infer that every Humean desire-belief theory is plainly false (with the narrow sense of desire) or rather empty (with the broad sense of desire) [Locke 1982, 243; Schueler 1995, 37f.; 50–52]. But this means drawing the false conclusion. The obvious solution is to define a medium concept of ‘desire’, which among others is apt to capture the main ideas of a Humean theory. This is what my following approach aims at. And my strategy is to define a rather specific and somewhat formal and functional concept of ‘desire’, which is open to several competing empirical interpretations as to which kind of mental state

really does fulfil this function; i.e. empirical research has to establish the extension of ‘desire’ defined in that way, in particular which kind of mental attitude its elements are belonging to.

Instead of a formal definition I will present the most important analytic features of such a concept.

1. *Pro- or contra-attitudes*: Desires are pro- or contra-attitudes, i.e. mental dispositions with a propositional content representing a state of affairs, which is welcomed or refused, or preferred to or put below another state of affairs.
2. *Quantitativity*: Desires have a quantitative dimension, they are strong or weak to varying degrees.
3. *Intrinsic and total desires*: There are at least two kinds of desires, intrinsic and total desires. Intrinsic desires aim at the desire’s object as such, for its own sake. Total desires are formed on the basis of intrinsic desires: The intrinsically desired potential implications c_1, \dots, c_n (first of all: causal consequences) of the object p of the total desire are attributed to this object as contributors to its total desirability. From all intrinsic desirabilities of the assumed implications c_1, \dots, c_n the total desirability of the object p is aggregated in some way. Because of this taking into account of the object’s implications, total desires have cognitive components.
4. *Nativistic basis of intrinsic desires*: Intrinsic desires have a nativistic basis; they emerge on the basis of natural inclinations. This means: the subject does not *decide* (in a narrow sense) to intrinsically desire which object to what degree, rather he has a natural disposition to desire it to a certain degree which he neither can control nor justify.
5. *Motivational function*: Desires have a motivational effect in that they influence or even determine the choice of an action. Together with the consequential belief – that an action a will imply (with a given subjective probability) the realization of some desire – usually they constitute some motive for or against the action a , the motive getting stronger with the strength of that desire and the probability of realization.

Some further explanatory remarks may be useful. 1. As already mentioned this concept of ‘desire’ is still open to various empirical interpretations. It leaves open e.g. if the strength of the desire is something inside or outside of its propositional content, i.e. if it is some sort of felt strength of the attitude or if it is part of the propositional content (where some desirability is attributed to the object). 2. In contrast to the explanations given e.g. by Platts [1979, 236f.], Smith [1987, 51] or Dancy [2000, 78], ‘Desire’ here has not been defined in terms of the direction of fit, i.e. that desires are propositional attitudes to which the world should fit. For the existence of a positive desire does not imply that we want the desired state of affairs to be realized. We may know that this is impossible (e.g. if the time of the state of affairs is in the past) and above all we may think that there are totally better options than realizing this state of affairs. As Bratman

[15f.; 108] has stressed, simple desires do not imply that one has already made up one's mind about what to do. This rather is the task of intentions, so that at most '*intention*' may be defined in terms of the direction of fit. (But I am reluctant to do even this.) The function of desires would then be to contribute to the formation of intention. 3. But even this latter feature here has not been included in the *definiens* for 'desire' because there are belief-desire theories of action (e.g. of Davidson, Audi, Beardsley, Richard Brandt, the early Paul Churchland, Goldman, Lennon) which do not provide any role for intentions.

If in the following the expression "desire" is used without further specification, desires in the sense just explained are meant.

2. 'Desire' as a Central Notion in the Empirical Theory of Action

The big advantage and justification of the concept of 'desire' just explained is that it is a central notion in an empirical theory of action, where "theory" is meant in a strong sense. I.e. the core of the theory is composed of several general though statistical hypotheses which together with propositions about external and above all mental events and states are apt to explain the vast majority of human actions. I have developed such a theory [Lumer 2000, 128–240; 428–521; Lumer, forthcoming, ch. 5–7], which is called the "Cognitive Theory of Action". This section will give hints to some of the general features and hypotheses of this theory and to where the notion of 'desire' shows up in it. This is intended to prove my assertion that the above defined concept of 'desire' may serve as a central notion in a strong theory of action.

As already mentioned in the first section, the concept of 'desire' as it has been explained there is open for several empirical interpretations as to what type of attitude desires are in human beings. And the first step of my sketch of the empirical theory of desire is to explain which empirical interpretation of desires is assumed in this theory. According to the Cognitive Theory of Action desires are *value judgements*, i.e. a subtype of beliefs, in which some degree of desirability is attributed to the object of desire: 'My being hurt by this falling stone is rather bad, say at least as bad as ten hours of intense headache.' This means the intensity of the desire is part of its propositional content; and the subject knows about it. The attributed quantities of desirability usually are rather vague, they often are pseudo-quantities or degrees, which are not quantified more precisely. Nonetheless we have an idea of this degree which goes beyond comparative judgements.

The Cognitive Theory of Action assumes two very different types of intrinsic desires, firstly, hedonic desires which attribute a desirability to feelings according to the (positively or negatively) directed extent of these feelings (where "directed extent" means the integral of the, positive or negative, feelings' intensity over time) and, secondly, feeling-induced intrinsic desires. Rage e.g. induces an intrinsic desire to punish the person who we are furious with, pity induces the intrinsic desire to improve the lot of the being we sympathize with. (Feeling induced intrinsic desires explain what Rosalind

Husthouse [1991] has called “arational actions”.) All intrinsic desires are nativistic not in the sense that we dispose of an inborn list of such valuations but in the sense that, in case of the hedonic desires, we have a natural tendency to appraise feelings according to their assumed directed extent. This means what is inborn here is some, usually implicit, *criterion* that feelings are intrinsically good or bad according to their directed extent. This implies that even singular intrinsic desires have cognitive components; they are based on assumptions about the directed extent of the feeling. What is natural though and by no means cognitive or subject to our choice is the hedonic criterion (or the criterion for feeling-induced desires) itself. This natural basis provides the practical relevances for our choices, which pure cognitions cannot provide. It is important to notice that nothing else can have practical relevance for us if this relevance is not based on these nativistic intrinsic desirabilities.

There is much more to say about intrinsic desires and the criteria for them. E.g. even some criteria for intrinsic valuations are subject to cognitively induced changes; i.e. some new insights may induce us to change these criteria. But the line of this change is naturally traced out and the changes are rather small. So the later criteria are not inborn or natural but nativistic in Chomsky’s sense. Then there are intrinsic desires which originally were total desires; but the subject has forgotten this so that for him they have become intrinsic. Further specifications here have to be omitted.

The next part of the Cognitive Theory of Action deals with the aggregation of intrinsic desires to total desires. Only relatively few objects are intrinsically relevant and can have intrinsic desirabilities different from zero. This is different with total desirabilities which are “designed” to encompass all what is intrinsically desired and an implication of the totally desired object. In the empirical interpretation of utility theory it is assumed that this aggregation is done via the subjective expected utility of the desired object (i.e. the sum of the products of the intrinsic desirabilities of the possible consequences c_1, \dots, c_n of that object and their subjective probabilities conditional on that object). Empirical research has shown that this assumption is only very roughly correct and has revealed that people in different situations use different modes of aggregating intrinsic desires for possible implications of a given object to a total desire for that object. These modes differ even intrapersonally from situation to situation, in particular they are different for important and unimportant decisions respectively. In a certain sense people decide how to decide taking into account even the decision costs, and they are very inventive in finding optimal modes of aggregation. According to the Cognitive Theory of Action, the only thing which is stable in this manifoldness are some intuitively followed adequacy conditions that the use of preferable modes of aggregation in the long run should lead to the realization of the highest sum of intrinsic desirabilities. Further details about total desires have to be left out here.

The next part of the Cognitive Theory of Action deals with decisions and the forming of intentions. The central hypothesis in this respect says that intentions are optimality beliefs, i.e. beliefs that a certain action has the highest total desirability among all the options taking into account. Though optimality beliefs speak of total desirabilities and

thus presuppose the concept of ‘total desire’ they do not presuppose that we have to form total desires (obviously with different strengths) for all options taken into account; the overall comparative judgement (i.e. the optimality belief) is sufficient. This kind of economy seems to be rather realistic.

We have to distinguish several concepts of ‘intention’. The intentions spoken of so far are *implementation intentions* [Gollwitzer 1999], their function is to hallmark a certain action as the one to be done. Other types of intentions are e.g. *goal intentions*, which hallmark some goal as a state of affairs to be realized via deliberation and action, and *comprehensive intentions*, which include all the considerations which justified or influenced the final optimality belief, e.g. considerations about the alternatives at hand, their consequences and so on.

Optimality beliefs have both directions of fit – in contrast to Smith’s exclusiveness hypothesis [Smith 1987, 56], according to which mental attitudes can have only one direction of fit. Firstly, the optimality belief shall be true (world-dominant direction of fit), where the truth of optimality propositions is defined relying on the criteria for intrinsic desires and on the most exact way of aggregating intrinsic desirabilities to total desirabilities. This possible truth allows for many cognitive components and criticisms of our intentions – which has led to the name “*Cognitive Theory of Action*”. Secondly, the believed optimality is the hallmark of an action to be done (and the command for the executive system), so that the world should correspond to the represented action. One and the same mental attitude having both directions of fit is possible because the mental sides of the two correspondences are different: In the world-dominant correspondence it is the complete proposition ‘*a* is optimum among the considered options’; in the mind-dominant correspondence it is only the description ‘*a*’ of the valued object, namely the action held to be optimum.

This sketch of a strong empirical theory of action should suffice for proving my positive thesis that the defined notion of ‘desire’ is a central concept in such a theory. This concept in each case occurred in important places of all the hypotheses of all the three sketched parts of the Cognitive Theory of Action. That this theory itself is explanatory fruitful and empirically confirmed cannot be shown here. But the reader at least may have got an idea of it for being able to say that it is a relatively elaborated empirical theory.

3. ‘Explanatory Reason’ as a Secondary Concept in the Philosophy of Action

In the course of the last twenty years in practical philosophy in general, in ethics, in the theory of practical rationality as well as in the philosophy of action, there has been much talking about practical reasons in a way that uses this term as expressing a fundamental and mostly undefined notion. (This is in contrast to e.g. Davidson’s approach, which defined practical reasons as desire-belief pairs.) This trend is largely inspired by externalist, often Kantian, approaches in ethics and in the theory of practical rationality, which in this way, after some heavy attacks from the internalist camp, try to establish

some substantiating connection to the philosophy of action. In the following critical part of my contribution I want to show that the concept of ‘practical reason’ is much less fundamental than the concept of ‘desire’ and that for providing a substantiating connection to the philosophy of action one has to rely on an elaborated theory of action and not only on mysterious practical reasons which provide motivation for everything the externalist wants.

But first, normative and explanatory practical reasons have to be distinguished. *Normative reasons*, which have to be differentiated into rational or prudential and moral reasons, are good reasons which serve to choose between actions (and to justify them later on) in a rational, prudential or moral way. Ethics and the theory of practical rationality imply theories about normative reasons. *Explanatory reasons* are reasons for which someone acted; they explain why the subject acted as he did; they are dealt with in the philosophy of action. (This is a usual distinction (see e.g. Nagel [1970, 4; 18], Smith [1987, 38f.], Dancy [2000, 1–4]), though the explanatory reasons sometimes are called “motivating reasons”. Because I think that normative reasons should be motivating, too, I have chosen a more suitable expression for that notion.) The rest of my contribution deals with explanatory reasons only. Whereas normative reasons have an objective form – ‘that the shares of Daimler-Chrysler will increase in price tomorrow is a normative reason to buy them today’ –, explanatory reasons are presented in a subjective as well as in an objective form: ‘She bought Daimler-Chrysler because she thought these shares would increase the following day’ versus ‘She buys Daimler-Chrysler because these shares will rise tomorrow.’ The classical explanation of this discrepancy is: The correct and primary form of explanatory reasons is subjective; but we can and should use the objective form when we have a justified belief that this reason is true; the speaker thereby gives an additional information. Explanatory reasons are subjective because they report the considerations from which the agent decided and acted.

What has been sketched so far, I think, is the ordinary and usual concept of ‘explanatory reason’. The thesis of this section now is that this concept is an important but not a fundamental notion in the philosophy of action because it covers too heterogeneous considerations in deliberation with different functional roles. At least the following types of considerations can be and in our daily talk are cited as *explanatory reasons* – I ignore the difference between the subjective and the objective form for a while:

1. *positive or negative desires*: he gave her the present for the reason that / because he very much desired to make her happy;
2. *(beliefs about) means-ends-relations*: he gave her a ticket for the film for the reason that / because (he believed that) this would make her happy;
3. *(beliefs about) other types of implications of the action*: she did not buy the house for the reason that / because (she thought that) it was too expensive;
4. *(beliefs about) the set of alternatives*: she gave him all the money for the reason that / because (she thought that) she had no choice;

5. *comparative valuations*: she did *a* for the reason that / because she thought it to be better than *b*;
6. (*beliefs about*) *events which have caused certain desires*: she shot him for the reason that / because (she believed that) he had killed her brother;
7. (*beliefs about*) *circumstances that constitute particular occasions for (e.g. preventive) actions*: he safeguards his house with sandbags for the reason that / because (he thinks that) this night the water level of the river will rise to ten meters;
8. (*beliefs about*) *all kinds of facts by which considerations of the already mentioned types may be justified*: she did not use the car for the reason that / because (she thought) the brakes were not in order (this is a circumstance which may cause undesired consequences);
9. (*beliefs about*) *all kinds of authority arguments by which considerations of the already mentioned types may be justified*: she bought the shares for the reason that / because (she thought that) they were recommended by Kostolany.

This list is already impressive but probably not exhaustive. Simply saying that all these kinds of considerations etc. may be explanatory reasons for actions means to blur important functional differences which have been elaborated in the theory of action. So the best explanation of the concept of ‘explanatory reason’ is this: ‘explanatory reason’ is a comprehensive notion for all kinds of considerations which have influenced the implementation intention, which finally caused the corresponding action; or even shorter: an *explanatory reason* for an action *a* is a (self-contained) part of the comprehensive intention for *a*, which has caused *a* in the right way. The various parts of such an intention then have to be clarified by means of other concepts, in particular by the notion of ‘desire’.

4. Concepts of ‘Explanatory Reasons’ in Externalist Practical Philosophies

“There are more sorts of reasons around than consequentialists can even dream of.” [Jonathan Dancy]

The concept dealt with in the third section is the ordinary concept of ‘explanatory reason’. It is a useful concept though not a fundamental one. I now have to tackle notions of ‘explanatory reason’ which are inspired by externalist conceptions of normative reasons. By now there is some variety of such notions. 1. The original version is Kant’s idea of acting from objective and *a priori* reasons given by Reason. 2. Next we have purely cognitivist conceptions – proposed e.g. by Don Locke, McDowell, Platts – of explanatory reasons, according to which beliefs alone can be motivating. 3. And a third group consists of objectivist conceptions – proposed e.g. by Bittner, Dancy, Iorio or Stoutland – of explanatory reasons, according to which normative and explanatory reasons are of the same ontological kind, namely objective facts. Most of these conceptions have been developed for providing some substantiating connection for the conception of ‘normative reason’ to the philosophy of action. The genuine interest of these theoreticians in an

empirical theory of action is minor. None of them tries to take into account results of empirical psychologies of action like motivation psychology or empirical decision theory; and none of them tries to develop a real *theory* of action (with hypotheses about empirical laws) which goes beyond simple assertions about the explainability of certain facts and which could really explain actions; i.e. all their hypotheses are methodologically *ad hoc*. The resulting conceptions of explanatory reasons are of a corresponding quality.

Here is neither the place nor is it worth while to show this for all the theories just mentioned. What I would like to do in the rest of this paper is to prove my assertions for one exemplary theory, that of Jonathan Dancy in his book *Practical Reality* [Dancy 2000]. I have chosen his theory because it is a particularly interesting case insofar he has proceeded from pure cognitivism to objectivism in the theory of explanatory reasons.

The essential of Dancy's central argument for pure cognitivism, i.e. the hypothesis that explanatory reasons are beliefs (about the nature of certain objects), is this:

- P1*: If there is to be an action there has to be desire, i.e. a motivation.
P2: But this desire or motivation is not something that motivates; it is a state of being motivated, a motivatedness.
P3: This motivatedness must be explained in terms of the supposed nature of the thing desired – which would be to appeal to belief to explain desire – or in terms of a further desire.
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- L*: Either way, if motivation is to be eventually explained, it will be in terms of the (supposed) nature of that which motivates.
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- T*: All explanations of action and motivation are purely cognitivist. [Dancy 2000, 85]

This argument is not valid because what may follow is only that motivation can be explained only in a cognitivist way and not that desires are beliefs. But this is a minor problem because the thesis and pure cognitivism may be weakened in this respect. I hold the first two premises to be false; but even they are minor problems. The main problem however is premise *P3*, which is plainly false and because of its proximity to the thesis is begging the question. Firstly, we can imagine *a priori* possible types of mental attitudes with the mind-dominant direction of fit, which do not require any belief about the nature of the object (the action) in question, e.g. believing that some authority has ordered to do *a* – which does not require any belief about the nature of *a*. But this is only a weak objection, saying that *P3* cannot be *a priori* true – as Dancy holds. It may nevertheless be empirically true. But secondly, in certain versions of theories of action which rely on desires in a stronger sense than that used by Dancy, like the Cognitive Theory of Action, even the forming of an intrinsic desire really presupposes some belief about the nature of the desired object (namely a belief about the directed extent of the desired feeling). And insofar the explanation of this desire is cognitive. But this is only *one* part of the explanation of the intrinsic desire. For proving his thesis Dancy must have shown that the remaining parts of the desire's explanation are cognitive too. As I have exposed in section 2, the other essential cause of the intrinsic desire is the nativistic

tendency or implicit criterion to value e.g. feelings according to their directed extent. And this tendency or criterion is not cognitive. It is worth to be noticed that Dancy here overlooks exactly that part of the explanation which raises problems for externalist conceptions of normative reasons, namely our subjective reactions towards assumed features of the desired object, i.e. the conferring of practical relevance. – The deeper methodological fault of Dancy’s argument is that the question about the nature of motivating states, i.e. states that cause our actions, is an empirical question, whereas the argument is intended to be *a priori*. *A priori* arguments cannot establish the nature of motivating states or of desires; for this aim we need empirical arguments.

Dancy is not satisfied with pure cognitivism; he holds it to be only the best psychological hypothesis about explanatory reasons. In a second step he tries to advance from pure cognitivism to objectivism, i.e. the hypothesis that normative and explanatory reasons are of the same ontological kind, namely objective facts. His main, and in the end only, argument for this step has two premises. The first premise is the assertion that normative reasons are objective facts. And the second premise is some sort of adequacy condition for a theory about explanatory reasons, a condition which he calls “*explanatory constraint*”: A theory about explanatory reasons has to “show that and how any normative reason is capable of contributing to the explanation of an action that is done for that reason” [Dancy 2000, 101]. This, somewhat cryptic formulation is meant by Dancy in this way: If the action is executed for a good reason, the normative (and therefore objective) reason has to be identical with the explanatory reason, or in other words: the description of the normative reason has to be a part of the *explanans* of the action’s explanation. From these two premises rather easily follows objectivism.

But the explanatory constraint in the given interpretation is rather problematic. Firstly, it is false *ab ovo*. As even Dancy says [2000, 2; 132], explanations of action shall expose *in the light* of which reasons the agent has decided to do what he did. That he has decided “in the light” of certain states of affair means that he has decided from some *subjective reflection* of these states of affairs; this subjective reflection e.g. may be his belief that this state of affair obtains. This implies that an explanation which shall fulfil the mentioned task first of all has to expose the *beliefs* about the normative reasons. Secondly, Dancy’s explanatory constraint is rather *ad hoc*. Dancy does not provide a real justification for it. But perhaps something similar to his constraint is really desirable. However there may be a somewhat weaker versions of this condition, e.g. a requirement that the explanation of an action that is executed for a good reason has to give a normative reason *or the subjective reflection of such a reason* as its causes. Setting up precise adequacy conditions for theories is a difficult task. In a first step they should be formulated only tentatively; then it should be inquired if all adequacy conditions together can be fulfilled and to what degree; then the initial adequacy conditions may be modified, in particular when they cannot be fulfilled; etc.; finally, the adequacy conditions should be brought in an axiomatic form. Dancy, however, sets up only *one* adequacy condition instead of a complete system; what is missing e.g. is a condition saying that explanations of actions have to be explanations in the usual sense. And

Dancy does not re-examine his adequacy condition in the light of its consequences though these consequences are rather devastating, as I want to show now. Thirdly, Dancy's explanatory reasons cannot explain the action. One central type of objectified explanatory reasons are states of affair of the type that a certain action will have certain implications. This kind of state of affair cannot be a cause of the action, firstly, because it has to do with things occurring later than the action and, secondly, because it is a causal relation and not an event. In addition, sometimes the considerations which lead to the decision are false; objectivations of such considerations are unfulfilled states of affair or nonfacts; but nonfacts cannot explain anything. Dancy accepts all this and replies that explanations with the right sort of explanatory reasons are not causal explanations; rather they are "non-factive", "normative explanations" [Dancy 2000, 132f.; 137; 159]. Unfortunately, Dancy has little to say about these explanations. They shall lay "out the considerations in the light of which [the agent] determined to do what he did" [Dancy 2000, 132]. But this can be done also by action explanations along the lines of the Cognitive Theory of Action exposed in the second section; so there is no need of Dancy's "normative explanations". Dancy does not provide validity conditions for such explanations. Again the assumption of a new type of explanation is methodologically *ad hoc*. After all what remains clear is that Dancy's explanatory reasons cannot explain actions in the usual sense of "explaining". If they do explain anything in another sense is more than questionable. Most philosophical theories are false; this in a certain sense is human. Dancy's theory is worse, it does not meet minimal methodological standards.

So Dancy's theory of explanatory reasons has completely failed. I fear that the other externalistically inspired theories of explanatory reasons do not perform much better. For providing an action-theoretic underpinning for a theory of normative reasons we need a real and strong theory of action – like the one sketched in the second section. Such a theory cannot be developed by some quick *a priori* considerations but has to be psychologically well informed. Though our explanatory reasons for action leave room for freedom and rationality they are more bound by psychological laws than externalists dare even dream of.

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