

**Summary:**

Let us refer to the desire to bring about some outcome as an *action-desire*. My dissertation argues that an action-desire is like a command in at least three respects:

- (I) We do not ordinarily conceive of an action-desire or a command as truth-evaluable.
- (II) We assent to both an action-desire and a command by adopting an intention in response to and in compliance with it.
- (III) The formal aim of an action-desire and a command is the attainable.

I refer to the conjunction of (I), (II) and (III) as the *desire-as-imperative thesis*. Strictly speaking, the desire-as-imperative thesis is not incompatible with the claim that action-desires aim at the good. However, if it has greater intuitive and theoretical plausibility than GG theory (as my dissertation argues), then the fact that the desires-as-imperative thesis does not entail that action-desires aim at the good removes at least some of the motivation for thinking that they do.

**Elaboration:**

(I) *We do not ordinarily conceive of action-desires as truth-evaluable.* There are at least two things we could mean when we say that action-desires are not ordinarily seen as truth-evaluable. We could mean that we ordinarily believe that action-desires are not truth-evaluable. Call this the *strong reading*. On the strong reading, our quotidian conception actually takes a stand on whether or not an action-desire is truth-evaluable; to wit, it denies that it is. On the other hand, we could mean that we do not ordinarily believe that an action-desire is truth-evaluable, but neither do we believe that it is not truth-evaluable. Call this the *weak reading*. According to the weak reading, our quotidian conception does not take a stand on whether or not an action-desire is truth-evaluable; it is agnostic on the issue.

The strong reading suggests that any theory of action-desires that depicts such desires as truth-evaluable is revisionary with respect to our quotidian intuitions. The weak reading suggests that any theory of action-desires that depicts such desires as truth-evaluable is an addendum to our quotidian intuitions. Such a revision or addendum may seem necessary in the absence of a theoretical account that does not require that we conceive of action-desires as truth-evaluable. However, since the account of action-desires offered in my dissertation does not entail that they are truth-evaluable, it does not require such a revision or addendum to our quotidian conception.

(II) *We assent to an action-desire by adopting an intention in response to and in compliance with it.* I offer a theoretical notion of assent, according to which adopting an intention in response to and in compliance with an action-desire is both necessary and sufficient for assenting to it. Saying that the adoption of an intention is a necessary condition for assent to an action-desire distinguishes it from Harry Frankfurt's notion of identifying with a desire. According to Frankfurt [1992], to identify with a desire is to have an endorsing higher-order desire; it is to desire to have the desire.<sup>1</sup> However, since one can desire to have a certain desire without adopting an intention in response to and in compliance with it, identifying with a desire falls short of assenting to it.<sup>2</sup>

Saying that the adoption of an intention in response to and in compliance with an action-desire is sufficient for assent to it distinguishes assent, as the term is currently being employed, from the notion of satisfaction. The desire to bring about some outcome is satisfied only if one successfully brings about the desired outcome. However, one may adopt an intention in response to and in compliance with an action-desire and yet fail to successfully perform the desired action. (Example: if one were interrupted or otherwise prevented from completing the action.) Thus, assenting to an action-desire does not require that one successfully bring about the desired outcome.

(III) *The formal aim of an action-desire is the attainable.* To say that an attitude has a formal aim is to say that having that aim is a property or feature of the attitude, irrespective of the context or goals of the agent with the attitude. To say that action-desires aim at the attainable is to conceive of action-desires as a member of a class of attitudes—including wishing and hoping—that reflect the way an agent wants things to be rather than the way things are. However, while some members of this class—such as wishing one could perform an action—may be appropriately directed at actions an agent cannot perform, action-desires cannot be appropriately so directed. For example, while one may appropriately wish that one were never born (even if undoing one's birth is not something that is attainable) one could not appropriately action-desire that one were never born. Saying that action-desires aim at the attainable is one way to register that an action-desire, unlike a wish, is only appropriate if the desired outcome is attainable.

One way to make sense of the notion of “appropriateness” at play here is to say that it would be incorrect, in some non-moral sense, to assent to an action-desire (i.e., to adopt an intention in response to and in compliance with it) if the desired action is not attainable. Thus, there seems to be a non-moral sense of “correctness” according to which an action-desire is correct if and only if the desired action is attainable. Moreover, the notion of correctness currently at play is fundamentally tied to the formal aim of an action-desire; to wit, an action-desire has correctness conditions corresponding with the attainable because action-desires aim at the attainable. The present account of the formal

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<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt [1992].

<sup>2</sup> Gary Watson [1975] offers a similar account of identification to that of Frankfurt, according to which one identifies with a desire to A if A is favoured by one's valuational system. According to Michael Bratman [1996], one identifies with a desire when one decides to treat the desire as reason-giving. All three accounts of identification fall short of assent, as the term is currently being employed, since none entail the adoption of an intention.

aim of an action-desire stands in contrast to the GG theorist's claim that desire aims at the good. Contra GG theory, the desire-as-imperative thesis entails that both the formal aim of an action-desire, and the correctness conditions based on that formal aim, correspond with the attainable.

### **References:**

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