

Do Desires Provide Reasons?

An Argument Against the Cognitivist Strategy

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ABSTRACT: According to the *cognitivist strategy*, the desire to bring about **P** provides reasons for intending to bring about **P** in a way analogous to how perceiving that **P** provides reasons for believing that **P**. However, while perceiving **P** provides reasons for believing **P** by representing **P** as true, desiring to bring about **P** provides reasons for intending to bring about **P** by representing **P** as good. This paper offers an argument against this view. My argument proceeds via an appeal to what I call the *non-substitutability of perception*, the thesis that, given that there is no independent evidence for **P**, one cannot substitute something that fails to provide reasons with respect to **P** for the perceptual experience that **P**, without altering the rational permissibility of believing that **P**. By contrast, I argue that it is always possible to substitute something that fails to provide reasons for a desire without altering the rational permissibility of an intention based on said desire. I take this to show that a desire does not provide reasons in a way analogous to perceptual experience.

KEY WORDS: Desires, Perceptions, Cognitivism, Practical Reasons, Guise of the Good

1. Introduction

Do desires provide reasons? For example, does Hermione's desire to visit Diagon Alley provide her with *justification* for intending to visit Diagon Alley?¹ According to one theoretical approach to desire, desiring to bring about **P** provides a reason to intend to bring about **P** because the desire to bring about **P** represents **P** as good.² Call this the *cognitivist strategy*.³ In this paper, I will attempt to cast doubt on the cognitivist strategy. However, unlike David Velleman's highly influential critique of the cognitivist strategy, which attempts to show that desires do not provide reasons by impugning the claim that a desire represents the desired outcome as good, this paper argues that even if a desire does represent the desired outcome as good, it does not follow that desires provide reasons.⁴ This means that the arguments in this paper (unlike those offered by Velleman) may be adopted by those who remain convinced that a desire represents the outcome desired as good, but are sceptical about the claim that desires provide reasons.

¹ Henceforth, whenever I talk of reasons I should be understood to mean *justificatory* reasons.

² The *locus classicus* of this type of approach is Davidson (1980). See and Cf.: Quinn (1993).

³ Cognitivism, with respect to desires, is typically defined as the thesis that a desire represents its object as good. This need not entail the claim that desires provide reasons. For example, one may hold that a desire represents its object as good as a pretext for claiming that the good is the formal end of practical reasoning, without also being committed to the claim that desires provide reasons. (For an in-depth discussion and defence of a position along these lines, see Tenenbaum [2007].) In fact, the main arguments of this paper, though aimed at impugning the claim that desires provide reasons, are consistent with both the claim that desires represent their objects as good and the claim that the good is the formal end of practical reasoning. Nevertheless, cognitivism is commonly discussed in the context of the claim that desires provide reasons (See, for example, Velleman [1992]).

⁴ Velleman (1992). See and Cf. Setiya (2007; 2010).

2. The Cognitivist Strategy

The label ‘cognitivism’, as a philosophical term of art, has come to be identified with various versions of the claim that a certain item is truth-evaluable. For example, cognitivism about moral claims is the thesis that moral claims are in some sense truth-evaluable. Similarly, cognitivism about desire is the thesis that a desire, or its content, is truth-evaluable. There are a number of ways in which we may make sense of the idea that a desire has truth-evaluable content. For example, one may hold that the desire to give to charity has the propositional content: “I will give to charity”, and is true or false depending on whether or not one does in fact give to charity. Whatever the merits or demerits of such a conception of desire, it is not the version of cognitivism with which I will be concerned in this paper. Instead, my attention will be restricted to those versions of cognitivism commonly referred to as “guise of the good” theories.⁵ According to such approaches, the desire to give to charity represents giving to charity as good, and is true or false depending on whether or not it is in fact good to give to charity.

Velleman describes the cognitivist strategy for arguing that desires provide reasons in his influential paper, “The Guise of the Good,” as follows:

Proponents of this alternative strategy portray motivation itself as an inference, governed in part by action-justifying content to be found in the motivating attitudes. To this end, they incorporate the valence of desire into its content, by describing desire, not as a favourable attitude toward the representation of some outcome, but rather as an attitude toward a favourable representation of the outcome.... Here, then, is one way in which rational agency comes to be conceived as a capacity for pursuing value. Desires are conceived as value judgements, with *intrinsic justificatory force*, so that *the desire motivating an agent can be identified with the reason guiding him.*⁶ (*Italics mine*)

Significantly, in his characterisation of the cognitivist strategy, Velleman describes the cognitivist as being committed to the claim that a desire entails a value judgement. Hence, he takes the cognitivist strategy to involve an analogy between desire and a belief or judgement. This makes sense since a belief or judgement—such as the belief or judgement that a certain course of action is good—is typically seen as the paradigm example of the sort of attitude that may provide reasons for a given course of action. However, it is important to note that a belief or judgement is not the only type of attitude that is paradigmatically taken to provide reasons. Perceptual experiences are widely taken to be reason-providing as well.

Moreover, in recent years it has become increasingly common for cognitivist to exploit an analogy between desire and perceptual experience, rather than an analogy between desire and belief.⁷ One reason for this shift is that there seems to be a salient disanalogy between a desire and a belief; a belief entails that the believing agent is committed to the truth of what is believed, while a perception does not entail that the perceiving agent is committed to the truth of what is perceived.

⁵ For a recent discussion of “guise of the good” approaches, see Tenenbaum (2010).

⁶ Velleman (1992: 6-7).

⁷ See, for example, Johnston (2001: 189), Oddie (2005), Tenenbaum (2007), Hawkins (2008), and Schafer (2013).

That belief is commitment-involving, while perception is not, is suggested by the fact that having beliefs with logically inconsistent contents entails irrationality, while having desires with logically inconsistent contents does not. For example, if I believe that **P** and I also believe that \neg **P**, then I am guilty of a basic form of irrationality. However, I may desire that **P** and desire that \neg **P**, without being guilty of irrationality. For example, suppose I adopt a New Year resolution to reduce the amount of cake I eat, cake being one of my favourite foods. At a department party, I am offered a large slice of cake. In keeping with my New Year resolution, I adopt the intention to turn down the offer. Moreover, my intention (let us suppose) is formed in response to a desire I have to turn down the offer to have a slice of cake. Even so, it is entirely conceivable that I may also desire to accept the offer to have a slice of cake. Indeed, the very reason I had to make a resolution to reduce my cake consumption in the first place is because I knew that in situations like the one I currently find myself, I would desire to have some. The upshot is that I find myself with desires with inconsistent contents: the desire that I have some cake and the desire that I do not have some cake.

Let us suppose that I do not give into my desire to have cake. Instead, I remain resolute in my intention not to have any cake and I ultimately turn down my co-worker's invitation. Under such circumstances, it seems wrong to say that the mere fact that I desire to have cake makes me guilty of irrationality, given that I both desire and intend not to have cake. Admittedly, if I adopted both the intention to have cake and the intention to not have cake, I would be guilty of irrationality. And this may be explained by the fact that the intention entails a commitment, on my part, to do what I intend. But the same does not seem true of my desires. Merely desiring to have cake does not mean that I am committed to having cake. And this explains why I am not guilty of irrationality for having desires with logically inconsistent contents.

In the preceding respect, a desire is very much like a perceptual experience, since I may perceive that **P** and perceive that \neg **P** without irrationality. For example, I may visually perceive a partially submerged stick as being bent, and tactilely perceive that very stick as straight. The fact that I continue to visually perceive the partially submerged stick as bent even after I tactilely perceive it to be straight (and vice versa) does not make me guilty of any irrationality. This reflects the fact that perception, unlike belief, does not entail a commitment (on the part of the agent) to the truth of what is perceived. Of course, were I to adopt the belief that the partially submerged stick is bent and the belief that it is straight, I would be guilty of irrationality. And this reflects the fact that beliefs, unlike perceptions, do involve a commitment (on the part of the agent) to the truth of what is believed.

The preceding considerations suggest that while intentions are best conceived of as the practical analogue to beliefs, desires are best conceived of as the practical analogue to perception. Hence, if we were interested in offering a cognitivist argument in support of the claim that desires provide reasons, it would be most charitable to see the cognitivist as committed to an analogy between desire and perception, rather than desire and belief. In light of this, my characterisation of the cognitivist strategy will depart from Velleman's in an important respect; namely, I will not be assuming that a desire is like a value-judgement or belief, both of which I take to be commitment-involving. Instead, I will be assuming that a desire is more like an evaluative perception, along the lines of that popularized by John

McDowell.⁸ McDowell has famously noted that it is possible for an agent to see that a certain course of action is the right thing to do in a certain situation. For example, I may see that giving a stranger, who is struggling with her grocery bags, my seat on the bus is the right thing to do. At present, I am neither interested in the ethical credentials of the perceptual experience in question nor in the moral particularism that accompanies McDowell's conception of such perceptions. All that interests me at present is the idea that a non-commitment-involving attitude may have content that is evaluative in nature. If we allow for such a possibility, then it becomes conceivable that a desire may include the evaluation of the outcome desired as good, even if desires do not involve a commitment to the outcome in question being good. On the present suggestion, if I desire to give a stranger my seat, this entails an appearance of a certain course of action—namely, my giving the stranger my seat—as good. In this regard, a desire is analogous to an evaluative perception, such as perceiving that a certain action would be the right thing to do in a particular situation.⁹

The cognitivist strategy is not the only way to argue that desires provide reasons. For example, Ruth Chang (2006) has urged that desires provide reasons, not because they represent the desired outcome as good, but due to their affective quality. According to Chang, the fact that I “feel like” wearing pink gives me a reason to wear pink, even if there is nothing to be said in favour of wearing pink apart from the fact that I feel like doing so. Hence, for Chang, a desire provides reasons in virtue of its felt quality. By contrast, the cognitivist strategy holds that a desire provides reasons not in virtue of its felt quality, but in virtue of its propositional content. On this view, the desire to give to charity has something like the propositional content “giving to charity is good.” Insofar as the fact that giving to charity is good constitutes a reason to give to charity, and insofar as the representational content of one's desire to give to charity puts one in touch with this fact, then the desire to give to charity puts one in touch with a reason to give to charity. It is in this way, according to the cognitivist strategy, that desires provide reasons.

Jennifer Hawkins summarizes the central motivation behind the cognitivist strategy as follows:

The primary appeal of the evaluative conception of desire lies in the fact that desire often seems to play the psychological role of reason for action. However, if something is going to play that

⁸ While the notion of evaluative perceptions (of a specifically moral character) was famously championed by John McDowell (1979/1998), there has been a resurgence of interest in the possibility of evaluative perceptions, in aesthetics, ethics, and normativity theory. Examples of theorists who discuss evaluative perceptions in the context of aesthetics include: Lopes (1996; 2005), Hopkins (1998), and Pettersson (2011). Examples of theorists who discuss evaluative perceptions in moral contexts include: Blum (1991), Fortenbaugh (1964), Harman (1977), Holland (1998), Jacobson (2006), McDowell (1978/1998), Nussbaum (2001), and Starkey (2006). This renewed interest in evaluative perception is in large part due to the emergence of the high-level view of the content of perception (e.g., Siegel (2006)) which has given credence to the idea that sophisticated forms of perception may be possible.

⁹ While I do not wish to take a stand on whether it is possible to have such evaluative perception, it seems to me that the analogy from evaluative perception just adumbrated is the most plausible way of understanding the cognitivist strategy. To be clear, the present suggestion is not that desires are themselves perceptual experiences. Rather, the suggestion is that desires and perceptual experiences share something important, which they do not share with beliefs: namely, both desire and perception do not involve the kind of commitment that entails irrationality in cases of logically inconsistent contents.

role, it must have a certain kind of psychological structure and content. Moreover, this content must be capable of rationalizing action. It is not enough to view desire as a propositional attitude (plus the appropriate motivating tug), as most contemporary theories do. Unless its conceptual content is evaluative, it is unclear how desire can make sense of our actions in the way it seems to.¹⁰

One upshot of the preceding account is that it allows the cognitivist to hold that a desire provides reasons in the same (or a very similar) way to a perceptual experience. For example, suppose that (in keeping with the evaluative conception of perception adumbrated earlier) perceiving that it is good to help an elderly woman who is struggling with her grocery bags gives one a reason to help her. It is in virtue of the attitude's propositional content—i.e., the kind of thing that could feature as a premise in an inference—that the attitude may be said to provide reasons. By contrast, the affective quality of an attitude is not the kind of thing that could feature as a premise in an inference. Thus, to conceive of a desire as providing reasons in virtue of its affective quality is to conceive of it as providing reasons in a very different way to that of a perceptual experience. The cognitivist strategy, by contrast, attempts to preserve the parity between the ways a desire, on the one hand, and a perceptual experience, on the other, provides reasons by claiming that the former also provides reasons in virtue of its propositional content. In short, the cognitivist strategy posits that desires provide reasons in a similar way to a perceptual experience.

3. Velleman's Criticism of the Cognitivist Strategy

Velleman rejects the cognitivist strategy because it makes the possession of an evaluative concept a necessary condition for having a desire, and therefore precludes the possibility that infants and animals—who lack the relevant evaluative concepts—have desires. He puts the point as follows:

If the cognitivist seriously means to characterize desire as an attitude toward an evaluative proposition, then he implies that the capacity to desire requires the possession of evaluative concepts. Yet a young child can want things long before it has acquired the concept of their being worth wanting or desirable.¹¹

Hawkins (2008) has met Velleman's objection head on, arguing that while the desires of infants and animals may fail to display full-blown evaluative concepts, they may nevertheless involve proto-concepts. I will not attempt to assess Hawkins's argument here. What I do wish to emphasize is that both Velleman and Hawkins share the assumption that the cognitivist is committed to offering a general theory of desire. However, I believe the cognitivist strategy is up to something quite different. Rather than offering a general theory of desire, the cognitivist strategy aims to explain how a desire may provide reasons, in the subset of cases in which they do. This means that the defender of the cognitivist strategy may see herself as offering a theory of a subset of desires—namely, those that provide reasons. On this score, it is important to note that the defender of the cognitivist strategy need not be committed to the claim that all desires

¹⁰ Hawkins (2008: 247).

¹¹ Velleman (1999: 7).

provide reasons. Thus, the defender of the cognitivist strategy may consistently hold that the desires of infants and animals fail to provide them with reasons because they lack the relevant evaluative concepts and also insist that the desires of an agent equipped with the relevant concepts may provide her with reasons. In fact, since there is agreement on both sides of the present debate that infants and animals are not the kinds of agents of whom talk of reasons (understood as *justificatory* reasons) is appropriate, this is precisely the sort of result we would expect.

Velleman anticipates something along the lines of the preceding response to his objection:

Of course, the young child may not be susceptible to rational guidance, either, but this point hardly counts in Davidson's favour. When Davidson characterises belief-desire motivation as equivalent to rational guidance, he leaves no room for agents who are moved by desires without being guided by reasons. The fact that children, who pursue desired ends, can nevertheless be too young for rational guidance is therefore a point against Davidson, on a par with my point that they can be too young for the concept of the desirable.¹²

The above passage suggests that Velleman takes Davidson to be committed to the claim that all desires constitute value judgements.¹³ As such, the observation that we do not ordinarily expect infants to possess mentally-grasped justification is as much an objection to Davidson as Velleman's original criticism.¹⁴ I will not attempt to settle the exegetical question of whether or not Velleman has accurately characterised Davidson's view here. Rather, I am interested in the more philosophically substantive question of whether or not the defender of the cognitivist strategy must be saddled with such a view. I believe that the answer is no. To see why this is so, the following analogy from belief may be helpful. There are things we take to be true of the beliefs of rational agents that we do not take to be true of the beliefs of animal and infants. For example, the fact that a rational agent believes **P** entails that she is rationally committed to the logical consequences of **P**. This means that a rational agent is liable to rational criticism if she believes **P** and **Q**, and also believes that **P** entails \neg **Q**. However, the same cannot be said of non-rational agents since part of what we mean when we say that an agent is non-rational is that the agent is not subject to rational appraisal. As such, if a non-rational agent believes **P**, it does not follow that she is rationally committed to the logical consequences of **P**. Consequently, there is something we take to be true of the beliefs of rational agents that we do not take to be true of the beliefs of non-rational agents.

The preceding disparity between the beliefs of rational and non-rational agents stands in need of explanation. One explanation of this disparity is that there is a difference in kind between the beliefs of rational agents and the beliefs of non-rational agents. On this view, our ordinary concept of a belief picks out two different metaphysical kinds—the beliefs of rational agents and the beliefs of non-rational agents—which are to be distinguished based on their different normative properties—e.g., the fact that the former generates rational commitments while the latter does not. Admittedly, there are theorists—most notably, Davidson—who insist that only the beliefs of rational agents are deserving of the title. Such theorists seem happy to

¹² Velleman (1999: 22, note 12).

¹³ A similar view is defended by Price (1989) and Humberstone (1987).

¹⁴ See, for example: Davidson (1978: 102).

take a revisionist approach to our ordinary concept of a belief by substituting a much more narrowly circumscribed theoretical concept in its stead. However, once one grants that there is a difference in kind between the beliefs of rational agents and those of non-rational agents, the question of whether or not the latter still deserves the label “belief” turns out to be largely terminological. It basically amounts to the question of whether or not we are willing to have the term belief applied to two different metaphysical kinds (thereby ensuring that the technical usage of the word “belief” corresponds with the quotidian usage) or only one (thereby ensuring a technical usage that is more restrictive than the quotidian usage).

I do not wish to either endorse or impugn the claim that there is a difference in kind between the beliefs of rational agents and the beliefs of non-rational agents, here. There may be other possible explanations of why there are things we take to be true of the beliefs of rational agents that we do not take to be true of the beliefs of non-rational agents, explanations that do not require that we say that the ordinary concept of belief picks out two distinct metaphysical kinds. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to note that the explanation which posits two distinct metaphysical kinds is included in the logical space of possibilities, is one that many theorists have taken seriously as a candidate explanation, and is one that remains a live option in contemporary philosophical debates. Moreover, an analogous strategy may be adopted by the simple cognitivist vis-à-vis desire. To this end, the simple cognitivist may hold that our ordinary concept of a desire picks out two distinct metaphysical kinds: the desires of agents equipped with some set of salient evaluative concepts and the desires of agents that lack said evaluative concepts. Moreover, the simple cognitivist may see herself as only offering an account of the former. On this view, it is no criticism of the cognitivist strategy to show that it fails to apply to the desires of agents that lack the relevant evaluative concepts since the theory was never intended to provide an account of the desires of such agents.

At first pass, the above argumentative strategy may seem ad hoc. However, depending on how we fill in the details of the view, the simple cognitivist may turn out to have a principled reason for the preceding restriction. For example, suppose that the simple cognitivist was committed to the view that only agents equipped with the relevant evaluative concepts are liable to rational criticism for their actions and intentions. Suppose further that only agents that are liable to rational criticism for their intentions or actions are correctly regarded as rational actors, while agents that are not liable to rational criticism for their intentions or actions (e.g., animals and infants) are non-rational actors. Assuming that the simple cognitivist had reasons for holding the preceding views—both of which strike me as plausible—she seems to have a principled basis for distinguishing between the desires of rational agents and the desires of non-rational agents. Moreover, since the cognitivist strategy is being appealed to in order to explain how desires may provide *justificatory* reasons, and given that justification is only relevant in the case of rational agents, then the desires of rational agents are the only desires that are relevant to the simple cognitivist’s aims.¹⁵

¹⁵ The suggestion that the desires of an agent equipped with the relevant concepts may play a justificatory role that the desires of an infant cannot is not as strange or novel as it may initially seem. It is widely held that the perceptual appearances of an agent equipped with the appropriate concepts may provide her with justification that could not be had by someone who lacked the concepts in question. For example, an agent who is equipped with the appropriate concepts may come to justifiably believe that there is a fire truck nearby after hearing a blaring siren even though an infant or animal (that lacked the appropriate concepts) could not come to have the same justified belief under similar

Since I do not hold that desires provide rational support, it goes without saying that I do not take the preceding considerations to speak decisively in favour of the idea that desires provide reasons. What I take the preceding considerations to show is that Velleman has not established that the cognitivist strategy is mistaken or moribund. There are still a number of philosophical/rhetorical moves open to the defender of the cognitivist strategy that Velleman has failed to forestall. As such, there is still work for Velleman to do if his objections to the cognitivist strategy are to succeed.

4. Conformative versus Confirmative Verdicts

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to formulating an argument against the cognitivist strategy that does not share the limitations of Velleman's arguments. Indeed, the argument that follows should prove effective even if one finds Hawkins's formulation of the cognitivist thesis plausible or entirely convincing.

I take as my point of departure a distinction between what I shall call a "conformative verdict" and a "confirmative verdict." Let us say that something (such as an attitude, procedure, or process) offers a verdict just in case it takes a stand on an issue. For example, if I perceive that it is raining outside, my perceptual experience may be said to offer the verdict "it is raining outside" since it takes a stand on the issue of whether or not it is raining outside. In other words, my perceptual experience is not neutral between the propositions "it is raining outside" and "it is not raining outside." It favours the former over the latter. A verdict, as I am currently using the term, may be the result of a completely non-evidential process (i.e., a process that does not involve the weighing of considerations for or against something). For example, if I employ the "eeny-meeny-miny-moe" nursery rhyme as a selection procedure for choosing between three alternatives—A, B, and C—and my use of the rhyme culminates in the selection of option C, then option C constitutes the verdict of my use of "eeny-meeny-miny-moe" as a selection procedure. This remains true even though my selection of option C was not based on the weighing of the relative merits of each of the three options.

There are two broad classes of verdicts that are relevant to the present discussion:

Conformative Verdict:

X offers a conformative verdict with respect to **P** if and only if X offers a verdict that coincides with **P**.

Confirmative Verdict:

X offers a confirmative verdict with respect to **P** if and only if X offers evidence that corroborates **P**.

circumstances. If there were a theory of perception that aimed to explain how the perceptual experiences of an agent equipped with the appropriate concepts could provide her with justification for adopting certain beliefs, it would be no objection to such an account to argue that it failed to apply to agents who lacked the ability to conceive of reasons as such. A similar argument may be advanced on behalf of the cognitivist strategy.

The distinction between a conformative verdict and a confirmative verdict may be illustrated by contrasting guessing that **P** based on “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” and perceiving that **P**. Suppose I am in a windowless room, in an unknown location and time of year, and that I am asked if it is rainy, overcast, or sunny outside. If I employ “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” to arrive at the answer “it is overcast outside”, then the verdict of my non-evidential selection procedure coincides with but does not corroborate the proposition: “it is overcast outside”. As such, my use of “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” offers a conformative verdict, but fails to offer a confirmative verdict. Contrast this with perceiving that it is overcast outside. Like my use of “eeny-meeny-miny-moe,” my perceptual experience offers a verdict that coincides with the proposition “it is overcast outside.” As such, perceiving that it is overcast outside offers a conformative verdict. However, perceiving that it is overcast outside also offers evidence that corroborates the proposition “it is overcast outside.” As such, perceiving that it is overcast outside does not only offer a conformative verdict, but a confirmative verdict as well.

The fact that some attitude, procedure, or process, *X*, offers a conformative verdict with respect to **P** is not sufficient for *X* to provide reasons with respect to **P**. For example, the fact that my use of “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” offers the conformative verdict that it is overcast outside does not provide me with any reason to believe that it is overcast outside. This means that if the cognitivist is going to establish that desires provide reasons, she must do more than show that a desire represents the outcome desired as good. After all, there remains a possibility that a desire only offers a conformative verdict (i.e., the kind of verdict that fails to provide reasons), rather than a confirmative verdict (i.e., the kind of verdict that does provide reasons). In the next two sections, I present considerations that I believe strongly suggest that a desire fails to offer a confirmative verdict. At best, desires offer conformative verdicts.

5. The Non-Substitutability of Perception

Saying that perceiving that **P** provides reasons for believing that **P** means, *inter alia*, that it plays a normative role that cannot be played by an attitude that does not provide reasons. This is easily illustrated by considering the non-substitutability of “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” for a perceptual experience. For example, suppose I am looking out my office window and it perceptually appears to me as if it is raining. Suppose further that I have no reason to think my perceptual experience unreliable. *Ex hypothesi*, this perceptual experience provides me with a reason to believe that it is raining. By contrast, consider the case in which I am in a windowless room and I arrive at the conclusion that it is raining based on “eeny-meeny-miny-moe.” *Ex hypothesi*, my use of “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” does not provide me with a reason to believe that it is raining. Part of what this means is that my perceptual experience of it raining cannot be replaced by my guessing that it is raining based on “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” without altering the rational standing of my belief that it is raining. Building on this intuition, and combining it with the preceding distinction between conformative and confirmative verdicts, I propose the following principle:

Non-substitutability of Perception:

Given that there is no independent evidence for **P**, one cannot substitute something that only offers a conformative verdict with respect to **P**, for the undefeated perceptual experience that **P**, without altering the rational permissibility of believing that **P**.

The basic idea is this. While it would be rationally permissible for me to believe that **P** based solely on my undefeated perceptual experience that **P** (i.e., something that provides me with a confirmative verdict with respect to **P**), it would not be rationally permissible to believe that **P** based solely on “eeny-meeny-miny-moe” (i.e., something that only offers a conformative verdict with respect to **P**). In short, something that offers a conformative verdict with respect to **P** cannot be substituted for something that offers a confirmative verdict with respect to **P**, without altering the rational permissibility of the belief that **P**. The upshot is that if desires are to provide reasons in a way analogous to perceptual experience, then something like the non-substitutability of perception must also be true of desire. However, this does not appear to be the case. In fact, I shall argue that it is always possible to substitute something that only offers a conformative verdict for a desire without altering the rational standing of an intention based on said desire. Hence, while perceptual experiences provide reasons in a way that precludes substitution by something that offers a conformative verdict, the same is not true of desires. I will take this to show that desires do not provide reasons in a way analogous to perceptual experience.

6. The Substitutability of Desire

All cases of practical decision-making may be sorted into two broad categories: *basic cases* involving the choice between action and inaction, and *non-basic cases* involving the choice between two or more courses of action. Let us begin by considering the basic case, one in which an agent is confronted with a practical decision involving only one course of action. In such a case, an agent may either adopt an intention to act, or adopt an intention not to act. (Of course it is also possible for an agent to simply fail to adopt any intention whatsoever. However, since in such a case there is no intention that stands in need of rational support, it fails to provide us with a test case for determining if desires provide reasons. We may therefore safely ignore such cases.) We can easily imagine a non-evidential selection procedure—such as a coin-flip—being substituted for a desire in the basic case without changing the rational standing of the relevant intention. For example, suppose I am sitting under a tree and that I notice a small half-broken branch that is about to fall, within arms reach of me. I can reach out and catch the branch as it falls, or I can refrain from doing so. Suppose further that I desire to catch the branch, and that I adopt the intention to catch the branch based solely on my desire to do so. (Let us also assume that I have no independent reasons for or against catching the branch, so that catching the branch would be in no way advantageous or disadvantageous.) I take it to be uncontroversial that I would not be guilty of irrationality for adopting the intention to catch the branch based solely on my desire to do so.

Now, let us change the example slightly. Suppose that I did not have a desire to either catch the branch or refrain from catching the branch. In the absence of a desire, I decide to flip a coin. Let us suppose that my coin-flip favours catching the branch, and that I adopt the intention to

catch the branch based solely on my coin-flip. (Let us continue to assume that I have no independent reasons for or against catching the branch.) Again, I take it to be uncontroversial that I would not be guilty of irrationality for adopting the intention to catch the branch based solely on my coin-flip. If this is right, then it seems as though a coin-flip (i.e., something that only offers a conformative verdict) may be substituted for a desire in the basic case, the case in which one is confronted with the choice between action and inaction.

All other (non-basic) cases involve a choice between two or more courses of action. I believe we can easily imagine something that only offers a conformative verdict being substituted for a desire (without altering the rational standing of an intention based on said desire) in non-basic cases as well. For example, suppose I were presented with the choice between throwing a stone in a pond, throwing a branch in a pond, or doing neither. Suppose further that I had a desire to throw a branch in the pond, and that I adopted the intention to throw the branch in the pond solely based on my desire to do so. (Let us assume that I have no independent reasons for or against any of the courses of action.) I take it to be uncontroversial that it would be rationally permissible to adopt the intention to throw the branch in the pond based solely on my desire to do so. Now, let us alter our example so that I lacked the relevant desire, and that I resorted to using “eeny-meeny-miny-moe.” Again I take it to be uncontroversial that it would be rationally permissible to adopt the intention to throw the branch in the pond based solely on my use of “eeny-meeny-miny-moe.” This suggests that something that only offers a conformative verdict may be substituted for a desire in non-basic cases as well.

Given that the basic cases (i.e., those involving a choice between action and inaction) and non-basic cases (i.e., those involving a choice between two or more competing actions) exhaust the logical space of possibilities as far as practical decisions are concerned, and given that something that only offers a conformative verdict may be substituted for a desire in both basic and non-basic cases without changing the rational standing of the relevant intention, it follows that something that only offers a conformative verdict may always be substituted for a desire without altering the rational standing of an intention based on the desire.

7. An Objection to my Argument

The aim of the preceding argument has been to underscore an important disanalogy between desire and perceptual experience, one that entails that the desire to bring about **P** does not provide reasons for intending to bring about **P** in the way that perceiving that **P** provides reasons for believing that **P**. This point is worth emphasizing since it forestalls one possible objection to my argument. The objection goes as follows: It may be argued that the only reason that my coin-flip may be substituted for a desire in cases like those described in the previous section is because I have a prior, standing desire to perform either of the actions.

Consider an agent who is confronted with the choice between bringing about **P** and bringing about **Q**, and who has equal evidential support for both options. While it may be conceded that the agent is free to rely on a coin-flip in such a situation, this is only because we are assuming that the agent has a desire to bring about **P** or **Q**. In other words, while it may be true that the agent does not have a desire to bring about **P** or a desire to bring about **Q**, we must assume (if the case is to be intelligible) that she has a desire with the disjunctive content, bring about **P** or **Q**. Absent such a disjunctive desire, it would make little sense for the agent to flip a

coin, much less act on one of the coin flip. Moreover, it may be argued that it is the disjunctive desire—i.e., the desire to bring about **P** or **Q**—which provides the agent with a reason in cases in which she employs a coin-flip to settle on one of the options.

According to the present objection, my examples only seem compelling because I am implicitly presupposing the existence of such a disjunctive desire. By contrast, there is no need to presuppose that there is a disjunctive desire in standard cases in which I merely act on a desire to perform a particular action. For example, if I have the option of bringing about **P** or **Q**, and I desire to bring about **Q**, there is no need to posit an additional disjunctive desire in order to make sense of my decision to bring about **Q**. The upshot is that while we can only make sense of my acting on a coin-flip (when confronted by two practical options) by presupposing that I have a disjunctive desire to perform either option, there is no need to presuppose a disjunctive desire to perform either option when trying to make sense of why I acted on a desire. This suggests that a coin-flip (i.e., something that offers a conformational verdict) cannot truly be substituted for a desire since such a substitution is only possible because there is a prior desire in the background, doing all of the justificatory work. Let us call the present objection to my proposal the *disjunctive desire objection* (henceforth, the *DD-objection*).

I wish to grant that the disanalogy between a desire and a coin-flip described in the DD-objection exits. However, I do not think it has the implication that the DD-objection suggests; namely, that a desire has a rational or justificatory significance that coin-flips lack. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that we indeed can only make sense of an agent's acting on a coin-flip if there is some disjunctive desire in the background. According to the DD-objection, the agent's intention to bring about **Q** is justified by her disjunctive desire to bring about **P** or **Q**. This requires that we assume that a desire with disjunctive content—i.e., the desire to bring about **P** or **Q**—may provide reasons for intending one of the disjuncts—i.e., intending to bring about **Q**. However, this would immediately introduce a disanalogy between the way in which a perceptual experience and a desire may provide reasons, since it is not possible that a perceptual experience with disjunctive content—e.g., perceiving that **P** or **Q**—may provide reasons for believing one of the disjuncts—e.g., believing that **Q**. Or at least so I shall now argue.

Suppose that I am looking out a window that is obscured by a thin curtain. Thanks to the curtain's thinness, I can tell that there is one of three possible forms of precipitation taking place outside: it is raining, snowing, or ice-raining outside. However, I cannot perceptually ascertain which; my perceptual experience is consistent with all three possibilities. Thus described, my perceptual experience may be ascribed the disjunctive content: it is raining, snowing, or ice-raining. Suppose further that I decide to employ the eeny-meeny-miny-moe nursery rhyme as a selection procedure, and that this yields the (conformational) verdict that it is snowing. Would it be rationally permissible for me to believe that it is snowing based on my disjunctive perceptual experience and employment of eeny-meeny-miny-moe? The answer is clearly no. It is not rationally permissible to believe that it is snowing based on my disjunctive perception that it is raining, snowing, or ice-raining. This remains true even if I use eeny-meeny-miny-moe (i.e., something that offers a conformational verdict) to bridge the gap between my disjunctive perceptual experience and my belief.

Let us return to the DD-objection. Recall, according to the DD-objection, it is my disjunctive desire to bring about **P** or **Q** that justifies my intention to bring about **Q** based on the coin-flip. However, this requires that we buy into the idea that something that only offers a conformative verdict may bridge the rational gap between a disjunctive desire (e.g., the desire to bring about **P** or **Q**) and an intention to perform one of the disjuncts (e.g., the intention to bring about **Q**). But this would introduce an important disanalogy between the way in which a desire provides reasons for an intention and the way that a perceptual experience provides reasons for a belief. The former (allegedly) provides reasons in a way that allows one to logically transition from a disjunction to a particular disjunct (with only something that offers a conformative verdict to bridge the gap), while the latter does not. Hence, the DD-objection fails to pose any real challenge to the central thesis of this paper; namely, that a desire fails to provide reasons for an intention in a way analogous to how a perceptual experience provides reasons for a belief.

Indeed, the way I have just put things, while sufficient for defending the thesis of my paper, significantly understates the problematic nature of the DD-objection. The most serious problem with the DD-objection is not that it introduces a disanalogy between the ways in which a desire and a perceptual experience provides reasons (and therefore ultimately comports with my claim that desires do not provide reasons in a way analogous to a perceptual experience), but that it claims that a desire provides reasons in a way that violates the classical notion of logical validity. From the point of view of classical logic, the following would be an invalid argument:

(A): It is raining, snowing, or ice-raining outside.

(C): It is snowing outside.

One cannot validly infer a specific disjunct from a disjunction. In order for the preceding argument to be valid, we must add a further premise, like (B):

(B): It is not raining or ice-raining outside.

In the absence of some further premise, like (B), (A)-(C) remains an invalid inference. Moreover, employing *eeny-meeny-miny-moe* is insufficient for bridging that rational gap between (A) and (C). This is because *eeny-meeny-miny-moe* only offers a conformative verdict. As such, it makes no rational or justificatory contribution to the transition from the disjunctive perceptual experience to the belief in one of the disjuncts. Hence, employing *eeny-meeny-miny-moe* as a selection procedure adds nothing new, from a justificatory standpoint. It is rationally tantamount to believing (C) based solely on my perceiving (A).

The preceding observations tell us two things about the way perceptual experiences provide reasons. First, perceptual experiences provide reasons in a way that conforms to classical logical validity. One cannot rationally believe that **Q** based solely on the disjunctive perception that **P** or **Q**. Second, something that only offers a conformative verdict (like a coin-flip or *eeny-meeny-miny-moe*) cannot bridge the gap between rational support for a disjunction and rational support for one of the individual disjuncts. Hence, if my perceiving (A) is to give me a

reason to believe (C), we must not only add an extra premise, like (B), but the extra premise must have confirmative, as opposed to merely conformative, force. If a desire provides reasons for an intention in a way analogous to how perception provides reason for a belief, then the preceding two points should also be true of desires. However, by the lights of the DD-objection, they are not. Since something that only offers a conformative verdict has no justificatory force, then the only justification an agent has for intending to bring about **Q**, when confronted with the choice between **P** and **Q**, can come from the disjunctive desire to bring about **P** or **Q**. This means that the DD-objection is committed to saying that a desire provides reasons for an intention in a way that violates classical logical validity. Evidently, something has gone wrong.

The mistake the DD-objection makes is that it assumes that the role played by the disjunctive desire is normative rather than merely psychological. If we assume that the support the disjunctive desire provides for intending one of the disjuncts is normative, then we would expect it to conform to the principles of logical validity. However, if we hold that the relationship between the disjunctive desire and the intention to bring about one of the disjuncts is merely psychological, then there need not be any such expectation. Motivational force, unlike rational force, need not conform to logical validity. Hence, rejecting the DD-objection's assumption that the significance of the disjunctive desire is rational or justificatory frees us from the need to buy into a conception of justification that is at odds with classical validity. The upshot is that we may grant that the DD-objection is correct when it claims that we can only make sense of someone acting on a coin-flip if we assume that there is a disjunctive desire in the background. However, the explanatory work done by the disjunctive desire is psychological or motivational rather than rational or justificatory. It therefore fails to show that a desire can do some rational or justificatory work that a coin flip is unable to do. At most, it shows that a desire can do psychological or motivational work that a coin-flip cannot.

8. Conclusion

Insofar as perceptual experiences provide reasons, they do so in a way that precludes substitution by something that offers a conformative verdict. We saw this when we considered the attempt to replace a perceptual experience with "eeny-meeny-miny-moe." By contrast, insofar as desires provide reasons (though I am, of course, not suggesting that they do), they do not do so in a way that precludes substitution by something that offers a conformative verdict. We saw this when we observed that it is possible to substitute a coin-flip or "eeny-meeny-miny-moe" for a desire in both basic and non-basic cases. Given this disanalogy between desires and perceptual experiences, I conclude that (contra the cognitivist strategy) desires do not provide reasons in a way analogous to a perceptual experience.¹⁶

¹⁶ I will like to thank audiences at the *Eight European Congress of Analytic Philosophy*, held at the University of Bucharest, Romania, and the 50th Annual Meeting of the *Western Canadian Philosophical Association*, held in Winnipeg, Canada, for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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