

Current Research:

What is the role of desire in practical deliberation? Does the desire to bring about a certain outcome provide us with justification for bringing about that outcome? Are desires salient to our rational or moral assessment of an agent? These are some of the questions that my current research seeks to address. According to the most widely discussed theoretical conception of desires—namely, the *Guise of the Good* theory of desires (*GG theory*)—a desire plays the same role in practical deliberation as the belief, judgement, or perception that the desired outcome is good. Insofar as the belief, judgement, or perception that some outcome is good is just the sort of thing that could provide us with a justification for bringing about that outcome, this suggests that a desire may provide us with justification for bringing about the desired outcome. Moreover, insofar as we typically assess the rational or moral standing of an agent in light of her justifications, *GG theory* seems to entail that we assess the rational or moral standing of an agent in light of her desires. Thus, *GG theory* seems to provide us with an answer to the three questions with which we began.

My current research seeks to cast doubt on the conception of desire suggested by *GG theory*. It does this by providing an alternative account of desire, according to which having a desire is more like being commanded to bring about an outcome, rather than like a belief, judgement or perception that a certain outcome is good. According to this alternative account, the desire to bring about some outcome plays the same role in our deliberation about what to do as being commanded to bring about that outcome. Furthermore, I argue that if one is commanded to perform an action, it is not the command itself that justifies performing the commanded action, but rather one's beliefs or judgements about the command (e.g., beliefs about the command's origin or goal).

This highlights an important disanalogy between a command and a perceptual experience. While having particular beliefs or judgements about one's perceptual experience may be sufficient to undermine the justification it would otherwise provide (e.g., the belief that one has imbibed a powerful visual hallucinogen may undermine any justification one's visual experience would otherwise provide), it is not the case that having particular beliefs or judgements about one's perceptual experience is typically necessary for said experience to be justifying. For example, an agent does not necessarily have to believe that a particular auditory experience is reliable in order for that experience to provide her with justification. Hence, merely having a certain perceptual experience (in the absence of any beliefs or judgements about said experience) may be sufficient for that experience to be justifying. By contrast, simply being commanded to perform an action (in the absence of any beliefs or judgements about the command) does not seem sufficient to justify performing the commanded action.

Similarly, I maintain that it is not action-desires, but rather our beliefs or judgements about them, which justify performing the desired action. Of course, the beliefs or judgements that justify obedience to a command may be very different from the beliefs or judgements that justify acting on an action-desire. For example, while obedience to a command is typically justified by beliefs about the trustworthiness or authority of the person issuing the command, acting on a desire is typically justified by beliefs about the action desired. Hence, it is evident that an action-desire is like a command in every respect. But ultimately, what action-desires and commands have in common is that neither can justify the relevant action in the absence of particular beliefs or judgements about the desire and command, respectively.

Future Research:

One advantage the desire-as-imperative thesis has over versions of GG theory that hold that a desire entails a belief or judgement about the goodness of what is desired is that the former seems to be consistent with the notion of a preference, implicated in recent decision theory and rational choice theory. David Lewis has persuasively argued that if we assume that an action-desire entails a belief or judgment that the desired outcome is good, then (given certain standard decision-theoretic considerations) inconsistencies result.¹ Since the desire-as-imperative thesis does not include the claim that desires entail beliefs or judgements of the good, it seems better suited for the task of assimilating the notion of a desire (implicated in the philosophy of action and moral psychology) with the notion of a preference (implicated in decision theory and rational choice theory). To date, there have been surprisingly few attempts to assimilate these two notions into a unified account of desire/preference.² Attempting to carry out such an assimilation, or at least trying to better determine if such an assimilation is possible, will be one of my long-term research projects.

Another line of research I hope to undertake will involve the exploration of the types of rational and/or moral commitments (if any) that are incurred by assent to an action-desire, and in virtue of what features of an action-desire (if any) are such commitments incurred. In my dissertation, I argue that the formal aim of an action-desire, and the correctness conditions based on that formal aim, correspond with the attainable. However, there is a widely held intuition that there is something inappropriate about adopting an intention in response to and in compliance with an action-desire if the desired action is not good. This suggests that the notion of correctness derived from the formal aim of an action-desire is not the only one that is relevant to action-desires. Identifying the other notions of correctness relevant to action-desires, and the source of their (supposed) normative binding-ness will be another of my long-term research projects.

¹ Lewis [1988; 1996]. For replies to Lewis see Price [1989] and Byrne and Hájek [1997].

² John Broome [1991] has argued that formal decision theory may be formalising something quite different from what concerns the GG theorist.

A third line of research I hope to undertake will involve the exploration of a two-valued imperative logic, in which the values in question correspond with whether or not the object of the imperative (e.g., the action commanded or requested) is attainable. It has long been noted that it seems possible to draw a valid inference from an imperative statement. For example, suppose that one were issued the following imperative from the university's provost office: "If the department chair thinks the candidate is competent, then make her an offer!" Suppose further that one knows that the department chair thinks the candidate is competent. It seems as though one may validly arrive at the imperative conclusion, "make her an offer!" However, given that an imperative is neither true nor false, it is not immediately clear in what sense such an inference is valid? Alf Ross has described this problem as "Jørgensen's dilemma".³ One response to Jørgensen's dilemma is to posit some kind of analogue to truth and falsity, which can serve as the Boolean values for an imperative. This is the sort of approach I wish to explore. Specifically, I wish to expand on the thesis, already introduced in my dissertation, that the analogue to truth and falsity, in the case of imperatives, is attainability and unattainability, respectively. On the present suggestion, two imperatives are consistent if and only if they are simultaneously attainable (i.e., the satisfaction of one does not preclude the satisfaction of the other) and are inconsistent if they are not simultaneously attainable (i.e., the satisfaction of one precludes the satisfaction of the other). I will attempt to articulate and formalise an imperative logic that builds on the preceding notions of consistency and inconsistency.

References:

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³ Ross [1941].