

Motivation to the Means

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ABSTRACT: Rationalists including Nagel and Korsgaard argue that motivation to the means to our desired ends cannot be explained by appeal to the desire for the end. They claim that a satisfactory explanation of this motivational connection must appeal to a faculty of practical reason motivated in response to desire-independent norms of reason. This paper builds on ideas in the work of Hume and Donald Davidson to demonstrate how the desire for the end is sufficient for explaining motivation to the means. Desiring is analyzed as having motivation towards making the end so, which is analyzed as engaging in mental activity aimed at facilitating that end. I conclude that it is constitutive of an agent's desiring an end that he is motivated towards what he believes to be means.

I desire a soda, so I feed a vending machine. What could be more mundane? But some perceive a difficult problem in explaining this motivation to the means: a problem for the orthodox Humean Motivation-by-Desire Principle, which holds that all motivation of action – causal influence towards activity exerted by minds¹ – requires and is produced by conative psychological states like desire and aversion. How does a desire for one thing motivate action of doing something else? If this motivational transfer cannot be explained satisfactorily there is license for attributing the motivation to sources other than desire, such as rational acceptance of imperatives of reason. Thomas Nagel, Christine Korsgaard, and others (henceforth 'rationalists') have thereby sought to find an Achilles heel in the Humean position.² Here I argue that the Motivation-by-Desire Principle is not vulnerable to this attack. I first explain the objection, which focuses on the role of normative reasons in instrumental motivation, then examine the Davidsonian response analyzing reasons in terms of desires and beliefs, finding it

¹ It is a matter of substantive dispute whether motivational explanations of action are causal explanations. I assume that the process of being motivated to act is a causal process, although I allow that some explanations in terms of motivation are constitutive rather than causal explanations.

² Nagel 1970: 33-5, Korsgaard 1986: 12-13, 1997: 220-21, see also Scanlon 1998: 38, Smith 2004. For Korsgaard reason legislates these norms, whereas for Nagel, Scanlon and Smith it *discovers* them. Smith's inclusion here may raise eyebrows, as he is considered the foremost *champion* of the Motivation-by-Desire Principle. But although Smith thinks the motivation to the means comes from a desire for the means, he argues that it must be practical reason and not desire for the end that generates this desire.

unsuccessful. Building on moves by Hume and Donald Davidson, I argue that a closer examination of what desiring is enables us to defeat the objection.

1. *The explanatory problem*

Suppose I am thirsty and desire soda. Believing that in order to satisfy this desire I must insert coins in the vending machine, I do so. Somehow the combination of desire for soda and belief about the means yields motivation to that means. The Motivation-by-Desire Principle requires that I am motivated to the means by some desire. The obvious candidate is already onstage: the desire for soda. But how does desire for the end motivate me to the means? Nagel writes

It must be realized that the case does require an explanation. Upon reflection, it can seem mysterious that *thirst* should be capable of motivating someone not just to drink, but to put a coin in a slot. Thirst by itself does not motivate such technical undertakings; an understanding of currency and the protocol of vending machines is necessary. But when these factors have been added to the explanation, we still lack an account of how they combine with the thirst to produce action. (1970: 33)³

The Motivation-by-Desire Principle seems to require that in the presence of a belief that the means to *E* is *M*, the motivational influence of desire for *E* is extended to *M*. But the interaction of belief and desire to yield such an output involves a mechanism that has yet to be explained.⁴

At first glance explanation seems easily accomplished, and at least the three following accounts can be offered. (1) Motivation to the means is produced by the desire for the end; human psychology happens to be so structured that the combination of end-desire and means-belief yields such motivation. (2) It is produced by a separate desire for the believed means; we are psychologically constituted such that the combination of

³ Thirst is perhaps not, as Nagel assumes, a desire to drink. Suppose rather it involves having dryness in one's throat and desiring it gone. There is still an end to which drinking is a means.

⁴ See also Davidson 1980: 79.

end-desire and means-belief motivates not (directly) action, but means-desire, which then motivates action directly. (3) We antecedently possess a dispositional desire to take the means to our desired ends, whatever those ends and means may be. Natural selection would favor creatures possessing this additional desire, so its prevalence would be unremarkable.

These options leave much to be explained, with their vague appeals to human psychological structure. But the missing details are for cognitive scientists, not philosophers, and are philosophically uninteresting. So what is the philosophical problem supposed to be? It is not the absence of a neurological or psychological story as such that troubles rationalists, but the absence of a story that makes room for *reasons* and normativity. Desiring an end is widely believed to provide or entail having a reason for motivation to the means. Recognizing such reasons doesn't entail being motivated to the means, but does (absent conflicting reasons) entail that one *ought* to be and would be if rational. Even some neo-Humean champions of the Motivation-by-Desire Principle concur; failure of motivational extension from ends to means is a (or *the*) manifestation of culpable practical irrationality.⁵ In being motivated to the means to our desired ends we therefore sometimes act as rational agents motivated by recognition of reasons.⁶ Rationalists contend that the Motivation-by-Desire Principle cannot accommodate this important dimension of motivation, and that therefore we need an alternative, *rationalist*, theory of motivation.

The natural Humean rejoinder pioneered by Donald Davidson and developed by Michael Smith is to reconcile motivation by reasons with motivation by desire by analyzing reasons in terms of desires and beliefs. Giving the reason why someone acted

⁵ E.g. Hubin 1996: 40, Joyce 2001: 57-8, Smith 2004.

⁶ Action merely in accordance with reasons is also considered 'rational,' but only reason-motivated action is relevant here.

is a form of explanation, and actions can be explained (according to the Motivation-by-Desire Principle) by citing desire-belief pairs: might reasons then simply be such pairs?⁷ The desire-based explanations (1)-(3) above would then qualify as instances of motivation by reasons. I shall argue that while this Davidsonian strategy cannot meet the objection, an alternative can.

This strategy conflates two different senses of ‘reasons’.⁸ Appealing to my desires and beliefs as the states causally responsible for my action is to provide *explanatory reasons* or reasons why I acted, just as observing metal fatigue can provide an explanatory reason for why a plane crashed. But citing these psychological states does not provide *normative reasons* or reasons why I *should* act;⁹ we can have normative reasons where we lack relevant belief (and arguably desire), and we can lack them where we have both belief and desire. Smith responds that with regard to the motivation of action, the relevant kind of reasons must be *motivating* reasons (1987: 37-41, 1994: 100). Motivation involves causation of action, and can occur in the absence of normative reasons. Motivating reasons are thus causes of action,¹⁰ and the Davidsonian solution is back in business, as the causes of action are plausibly desire-belief combinations. However this fails to parry the thrust of the rationalist challenge. Nagel’s point is that as rational agents we are capable of being motivated by *normative* reasons. Normative reasons are sometimes also motivating reasons, when we recognize and respond to their authority.¹¹ This is impossible for Smith, who places normative and motivating reasons in distinct ontological categories: ‘motivating reasons’ are psychological states, whereas

⁷ Davidson 1980: 3, Smith 1992: 327.

⁸ The tension is evident in Davidson 1980: 10, 84. Dancy (2000: ch. 1) provides excellent criticism. See also my 2006.

⁹ By a ‘reason’ we generically mean an explanation, or answer to a ‘why?’ question. The bifurcation into (nonnormatively) explanatory and normative results from there being two sorts of ‘why?’ questions: ‘Why *is* p the case?’ and (approximately) ‘Why *ought* p to be the case?’ In my 2006 I observe that the normative question is better framed in terms of value than ‘ought’, since we can have reasons that are outweighed.

¹⁰ Davidson maintains this, while Smith is more circumspect (1987: 44), although he clearly favors this view.

normative reasons are propositional (facts), as is widely agreed.¹² Therefore while an agent ‘may have a motivating reason to do what he has a normative reason to do,’¹³ the normative reason can never be his motivating reason. Rationalists find this gulf between motivation and normativity unsatisfactory; surely we can be motivated *by* normative reasons. I think we must concede this.

We might concede that motivation of action is a form of causation and that normative reasons cannot by themselves cause or explain action.¹⁴ The causally relevant psychological state is that of *accepting* the normative reason. It might seem then that what motivates is this psychological state and not the reason, its content. But the concept of motivation can accommodate both claims; both the state and its content motivate us, in different but related ways. To say that the content (reason) motivates can be to say in part that cognition of it causes certain behavior. This provides an answer to Smith’s objection that we can be motivated by reasons even where no relevant normative reasons exist; given what it means to be motivated by a reason, it is possible to be motivated by a reason that doesn’t exist.

Smith’s error is to identify the motivating state as the motivating *reason*. Insofar as something motivates us *qua* reason, it does so by appearing at least minimally normative to us.¹⁵ Motivating reasons thus belong in the category of normative rather

¹¹ Smith attributes the distinction between motivating and normative reasons to Nagel (1987: 38n). But on the cited pages (1970: 4, 18) Nagel only distinguishes *explanatory* and normative reasons.

¹² Originally (1987) he simply calls them normative requirements, but in 2004 he observes ‘the considerations that justify do indeed seem to be propositions’.

¹³ Smith 1987: 39, also 1992: 329, see also Davidson 1980: 9.

¹⁴ Care is needed here. Being motivated to act in the success sense involves causation of action, but motivation towards action is merely a causal factor, as I shall argue.

¹⁵ Not all normative reasons are *good* reasons. See my 2006, and also Davidson 1980: 9, Smith 1987: 38-9, Millar 2002, Mele 2003.

than explanatory reasons.¹⁶ The rationalist challenge retains its force: rational agents are disposed to be motivated to the means by recognition of normative reasons.

This failure of the Davidsonian solution does not, however, entail the failure of all Humean analyses of motivation by reasons in terms of desires. Rationalists maintain that ‘acceptance of reasons’ is a belief-like yet intrinsically motivational state. But if normative reasons are true propositions, they could be the contents of the relevant beliefs, while the source of their normativity (status as reasons) is their connection with desires.¹⁷ The motivation might then derive entirely from those desires. Motivation by reasons would then be identical with a form of desire-belief causation.¹⁸

The rationalist case against this strategy invokes the contingency of psychological causation. In each desire-based explanation (1)-(3) above, motivation to the means is accounted for by hypotheses about human psychology. But psychological facts are contingent and so, Korsgaard writes, ‘it is perfectly possible to imagine a sort of being who could engage in causal reasoning...that would point out the means to her ends, but who was not motivated by it.’¹⁹ Worse, we can imagine beings with *alternative* motivational connections, extending (e.g.) motivation from ends to actions believed counter-productive to them. We might say that these people have reasons that are different from ours, but rationalists reasonably contend that this is counter-intuitive. Means-end motivation is self-evidently rationally appropriate, whilst these alternatives are not.

¹⁶ See also Dancy 2000: chs. 4, 5. A complicating factor is that we can give explanatory reasons for actions by citing motivating reasons. The explanatory reason is the fact that the person accepts that motivating reason, not the motivating reason itself.

¹⁷ Williams 1981, and my 2006, 2007. Velleman suggests this ‘noncognitive’ account of reasons is implausible because the normativity of reasons is intrinsic to their content (2000: 101). However reasons are ordinary facts, and the same fact can count as a reason for and against one and the same action, indicating that their normativity is external to their content.

¹⁸ It cannot be any causation by belief plus desire, because of ‘deviant causal chains’ – see Davidson 1980: 79. Trembling may be caused by a desire-belief combination, but is not action for a reason. Davidson pleads ignorance regarding the right kind of causal connection for motivation, but the word itself suggests causation by *providing a motive* (end).

The Humean could stipulate that motivation arising from abnormal causation doesn't count as reason-based, so that I only qualify as acting on my reasons if my action is normal (i.e. if in light of my belief I can reasonably expect it to satisfy my desire.) But what he apparently cannot do is accommodate the role of this unique rational appropriateness in his tale of the motivational connection:

If [such psychological devices] do not yield adequate explanations in the peculiar case [of deranged behavior], there is reason to believe that their analogues are not the basis of intelligibility in the normal case. The analogous hypotheses seem to fill the motivational gap in the normal case only because they are not actually *needed* to make the behavior intelligible, whereas in the abnormal case, where something more obviously *is* needed, they do not succeed. That leaves us, if we do not wish to be arbitrary, with the task of dividing the intelligible connections from the unintelligible ones and explaining why the former work and the latter do not. (Nagel 1970: 34)

The proper motivational outputs are not rendered 'intelligible' (or, more appropriately, 'rational')²⁰ simply by being normal; they are privileged in some other significant way. While motivation theory has no obligation to explain the normativity or rationality of this connection, it is obliged to accommodate its role in instrumental motivation, which is where rationalists contend that the Motivation-by-Desire Principle fails. If our disposition to means-motivation is merely a contingent psychological fact, on a par psychologically with alternative dispositions, then it is merely a fortunate accident. A person might recognize the rational appropriateness of end-means motivational transfer, yet be psychologically constituted so as to be unable to effect it. But surely *we* are not so impaired. It is not merely a fortuitous accident that we are disposed to be motivated to the means; as rational agents we are capable of being motivated by the recognition of the rational appropriateness of such motivation.

¹⁹ Korsgaard 1986: 12-13. See also Nagel 1970: 34, Korsgaard 1997: 220-21, and Smith 2004: 86-87.

²⁰ We might have no trouble *understanding* irrational behavior.

The alleged failure of the Motivation-by-Desire Principle is thus to explain motivation to the means in a way that accommodates our status as rational agents who can act in response to our cognition of normative requirements such as those from instrumental reasons. Rationalists exploit the problem as a vulnerability in the Humean conception of agency, pushing for a substantive faculty of practical reason, cognizant of desire-independent rational principles and yielding motivation in response. On this account a rational agent is sometimes motivated to the means *not* by the desire for the end or by any other desire, but directly by recognition of a normative requirement. This is an audacious attempt to beard the lion in his den; if *even* action aimed at satisfying desire draws its motivation from a source other than desire, then the Motivation-by-Desire Principle must be rejected and there is good reason to suspect that moral, prudential, and other kinds of actions can also be motivated without desire.

2. Hume and Davidson on motivation to the means

Can we find any trace of an answer to the rationalists in the classic exponents of the Motivation-by-Desire Principle? Hume and Davidson seem both to adopt positions from which a response can be constructed; they appear to deny the existence of any gap between desire for the end and motivation to the means. This is the solution I shall defend after examining these precedents.

In discussing the 'love of gain,' Hume maintains that anyone who desires this end necessarily has motivation to the believed means. Because of the superior force of this passion, he writes,

There is no passion...capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection; since 'tis evident, that the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty... (1978: 492)

By 'direction' of a passion he means its 'tendency to action' (1978: 382) or motivational effect. For a passion to 'alter its direction' is therefore for it to acquire a different motivational effect: towards the means. This alteration is brought about by beliefs about means, since it is reason that 'discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion.' (1978: 459).²¹ Hume therefore looks to the desire for the end as a sufficient source of motivation to the means rather than postulating any further desire. What is provocative here is the claim that this alteration 'must necessarily' occur; Hume denies the very possibility of failure in motivational extension to the means. However he says nothing to clarify the grounds or nature of this alleged necessity, so refraining from speculation I turn to Davidson.

Davidson states as a necessary condition for a 'primary reason' (both a cause and justification for action) the following principle:

C1. *R* is a primary reason why an agent performed the action *A* under the description *d* only if *R* consists of a pro attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that *A*, under the description *d*, has that property. (1980: 5)

He desires to turn on the light, so performs an action he believes a means to this end, flipping the switch. Is there any need for further explanation of how this action was motivated? No, because the action, which can be given indefinitely many veridical descriptions, is performed under the description, 'turning on the light'. The desire is for actions possessing a certain property, and the relevant belief is that the action in question possesses that property. The end and the means are in fact identical and hence the desire for the end is simply a desire to perform the means.

I will appropriate two elements of this story: the focus on intensionality and the strategy of making constitutive claims about desire. But Davidson's account is

²¹ Note the desire is 'exerted,' not merely 'satisfied': i.e. it is motivationally active. Hume further writes that 'aversion and propensity towards any object...*extend themselves* to the causes and effects of that object, as

insufficient to counter the rationalist challenge, because it considers only desires that take actions as their ends. The means it considers are therefore all *constitutive* means, inseparable from the end itself. Many desires do not take actions as their ends – Davidson observes that desires ‘are often trained on physical objects’ (1980: 6). I may desire soda, a ’67 Ford Mustang, the delightful person across the room, etc. He seems to suggest that such desires can be reduced to or entail desires to act in some way towards those objects;

‘I want that watch in the window’ is not a primary reason and explains why I went into the store only because it suggests a primary reason – for example, that I wanted to buy the watch. (1980: 6)

Clearly an object itself cannot be the end or *goal* of desire. My desire for soda has to be distinguished from desires to *hold* or *see* soda; it is rather the desire to *drink* soda. But it doesn’t follow that all desires properly have actions for ends. A desire for a ’67 Mustang, or for the watch in the window, is typically a desire not to *buy* it, but to possess it (consider that the desire signifies unwillingness to give away the object once purchased). And despite the infinitive, this is not a desire to act, but a desire for the obtaining of a state of affairs: that I possess that object. Many if not all desires have states of affairs as their ends, which may involve no actions by the agent and sometimes in which the agent does not figure: e.g. that the Chicago Cubs win the next World Series. A distinction can therefore be drawn between *desire-to* and *desire-that*.²² Davidson’s strategy will not work with *desire-that* (or with *desire-to* in the case of merely instrumental means), as the actions that satisfy it are not constitutive means, identical to their end, but rather instrumental means only causally related to the end. Desiring these ends therefore

they are pointed out to us by reason and experience.’ (1978: 414, my emphasis).

²² Alternatively: *action* vs. *state* desires (e.g. Mele 2003), *performative* vs. *optative* desires (Green 1986: 120).

doesn't entail desiring the means,²³ and it is possible to desire an end without desiring to perform any of the believed means.

A successful execution of such a defense of the Motivation-by-Desire Principle requires more; we must show that an agent's desire for some state of affairs necessarily provides that agent with motivation towards believed instrumental means to that state of affairs. The bizarre motivational failures described by rationalists would then be impossible, and the motivational behavior they deem 'rationally appropriate' would acquire that appearance by being necessary. So I shall argue, but how could the motivational output of a psychological mechanism be necessary? Further, isn't it possible to desire an end while not recognizing any means to it?

3. An argument from the constitutive nature of desire

To make my case we must explore the concept of desire.²⁴ Rather than investigating what 'a desire' is, my focus will be on what it is *to desire*. I shall argue that on the conception of desiring that my rationalist opponents share with me, their challenge to the motivational efficacy of desire is incoherent, and there is no difficulty in explaining how desire for an end motivates us to the means. While there is a wide array of competing philosophical views about desire, the rationalists like Nagel and Korsgaard who push this challenge seem to accept a *motivation* theory of desire: desiring an end

²³ Davidson may appear to concur: 'Why insist that there is any *step*, logical or psychological, in the transfer of desire from an end that is not an action to the actions one conceives as means? It serves the argument as well that the desired end explains the action only if what are believed by the agent to be means are desired.' (1980: 7) But the context is an account of how we can explain an action by providing just part of its causal etiology, so I read Davidson as claiming that an action is adequately explained by citing desire for a state of affairs although this assumes the (contingent!) derivation of desiring the action (means). The passage then has the opposite signification.

²⁴ Here I controversially assume without argument that we have one univocal concept of desiring. A distinction is commonly drawn between a substantive/ narrow conception of desire and a formal/ broad conception. In my view the evidence for a 'formal conception' of desire can be explained away as pragmatically licensed loose talk.

essentially involves *having motivation towards it*.²⁵ After all, their challenge is to explain how motivation is *transferred* from the end to the means: how ‘desire could extend its motivational influence beyond the scope of its immediate, spontaneous manifestations, through connection with certain beliefs’ (Nagel 1970: 35). Nagel’s question is not ‘How can the desire to drink motivate *drinking*?’ but rather ‘How can the desire to drink motivate *inserting coins in a slot*?’ This motivation view of desiring has implications that these rationalists have not fully thought through.

‘Motivation towards the end’ is significantly opaque. Partly this is because the very notion of motivation is unclear, but for now I focus on clarifying what it means for motivation to be ‘towards an end’. To be motivated is always to be motivated towards some kind of behavior or activity. (Causation of such activity is neither necessary nor sufficient, however. Not every kind of causation of activity is motivation, and motivation need not be causally efficacious; it can be defeated by opposing motivation.) Nagel recognizes a limited range of behaviors that are directly and nonproblematically involved with desiring – its ‘immediate, spontaneous manifestations’²⁶ – but rationalists deny these include pursuit of means.

The puzzle here is: what kinds of activity could motivation *towards an end* be towards? Given that they apparently see no problem in the desire to drink’s capacity to motivate drinking, the rationalists’ answer is presumably that the immediate manifestation of desiring *E* is attempting to do *E*, and hence that motivation towards *E* is motivation towards doing *E*. We confront an immediate and obvious problem when we restrict the immediate manifestations of desiring like this; they are only possible for *desire-to* and not for *desire-that*. Suppose I desire that my children are happy. *That my children are happy* is not something I can *do*; it is not a kind of behavior. It is not

²⁵ See also Nagel 1970, Darwall 1983, Audi 1986, Schueler 1995, Lenman 1996, Dancy 2000.

plausible that (following Davidson) this is really a misdescribed desire *to make my children happy*, because it may be just as well satisfied if my children make themselves happy. Like others,²⁷ Nagel embraces the conclusion that desires are largely *impotent*: ‘what they can explain is limited, and...even in simple cases they produce action by a mechanism which is not itself explicable in terms of desires’ (1970: 27). However on a motivation view of desiring this is incoherent. If motivation towards an end is nothing but motivation towards *doing the end*, then ‘desires’ whose ends are not the kinds of things that can be performed cannot be desires at all. It is absurd to suggest that we cannot desire states of affairs, and so rationalists must either abandon motivation theories of desiring, or allow that the ‘immediate manifestations’ of desiring include more than we have hypothesized.

The only viable solution for a motivation view of desiring is that motivation towards an end *E* is motivation towards *making E so*. Desiring that I drink involves having motivation towards *making it so* that I drink; desiring that my children are happy, towards *making it so* that my children are happy.²⁸ Desiring an end does not necessarily involve motivation towards doing the end, but rather towards facilitating the end. While this account of desire is open to serious objections (to be addressed) my point here is that no *other* version of a motivation theory could be correct, because there is no other behavior that is feasibly the direct output of that motivation. It might be suggested that the ‘immediate manifestations’ of desiring an end might include ancillary behaviors like reflecting on the merits of the end (Scanlon 1998: 38), seeking to know whether the end has obtained (Mele 2003: 22), or fantasizing about the end obtaining (Audi 1973: 4). However none of these are plausibly direct manifestations of motivation *towards the*

²⁶ In Hume words, its ‘first and most natural movements’ (1978: 492) and ‘direct expressions’ (1978: 598).

²⁷ See also Marks 1986: 141, Scanlon 1998.

²⁸ This does not collapse desiring that *E* into desiring to (or that I) make it so that *E*. These desires may involve the same activity, but are responsive to representation of different goals.

end, which is essential to desiring on the motivation theories under consideration. It would be peculiar if desiring an end could directly motivate these behaviors but not behavior of pursuing means.

The rationalist claim, that motivation towards the means cannot be explained by appeal to desire-provided motivation towards the end, can now be shown to be incoherent. To believe some action *M* to be a ‘means’ to an end *E* is simply to believe that *M* is an action (or part thereof) of making *E* so, or a *facilitating condition* for *E*. (Strictly speaking the notion of a ‘means’ is narrower than this, and doesn’t include all facilitating conditions, just as ‘causes’ don’t include every element in a causal chain. I use ‘means’ here for economy). The motivation involved in desiring *E*, we have seen, must be motivation towards making *E* so. In other words, motivation towards the end *just is* motivation towards means to that end. If desire involves motivation towards the end, then it involves motivation towards the means. Within the framework of a motivation theory of desire, the rationalist objection to the Motivation-by-Desire Principle is incoherent.

It doesn’t *seem* incoherent that I could be motivated towards drinking a soda without being motivated towards inserting a coin in the slot of a vending machine, even though I believe it is a means to my end. The key here is to note that desire, belief, and motivation are all *intensional* with regard to their content, or sensitive to particular descriptions or aspects of that content. In Davidson’s example, he flicks a switch thereby illuminating a room and thereby inadvertently alerting a burglar. These are three descriptions of one action, involving one bodily motion, bending a finger. But to call his intentional action ‘bending his finger’ is inappropriate. Rather his action is better described as ‘turning on the light,’ a less unwieldy way of saying ‘making it so that the light is on.’ Any activity can be described in an indefinite number of ways. Because of

this, an action can be made to look peculiarly disconnected from the motivational reach of the desire that prompts it, if it is inappropriately (albeit correctly) described. It can seem puzzling how a desire to drink could motivate me to insert coins in a vending machine. But when I insert those coins, from the intentional standpoint I am *not* in the first instance inserting coins in a machine, any more than I am pushing small metal disks through a plastic slot or redistributing wealth. If asked what I am doing, I will not reply 'Inserting coins in a vending machine,' but more likely 'Getting a drink'. I am motivated to perform this action under the aspect of *making it so that I drink soda*. As I have argued, desiring to drink soda essentially involves motivation towards making it so that I drink soda.

Nagel's rationale for restricting the 'immediate manifestations' of desiring so as to exclude motivation towards the means seems to be that performance of means requires a 'connection with certain beliefs,' which must be mediated by something other than desire.²⁹ Two interpretations are possible here. On the broad reading Nagel's claim is that *any* collaboration of desire and belief is beyond the explanatory resources of the Motivation-by-Desire Principle. On the narrow reading it is only for particular kinds of belief that this interaction is problematic: pertinently, instrumental beliefs. The broad reading has at least the following to commend it; beliefs and desires are supposed to be distinct mental states, so it may seem reasonable to suspect a global problem in accounting for their interaction. Suppose therefore that the 'immediate manifestations' of desiring are motivated behaviors that involve no contribution from belief. This divorce of the normal operation of desire from belief is absurd. Even the 'immediate manifestations' of desiring where the means and the end are identical are unimaginable without interaction with belief. Being motivated to drink (swallow liquid) requires first

²⁹ Also Korsgaard 1997: 220-21.

believing that there is liquid in one's mouth. While behavior can be caused as a direct reaction to sensation, this is not motivation by desire but mere reflex.³⁰ The paradigm case for motivation by desire is when belief 'excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it.' (Hume 1978: 459) No fuss is raised about such goings-on, but clearly here too desire's motivational effects are dependent upon belief.

It is *constitutive* of desire to involve belief-guided motivation.³¹ 'It is by means of thought only that any thing operates upon our passions,' Hume writes (1978: 662), hence 'the moment we perceive the falseness of any supposition...our passions yield to our reason without any opposition.' (1978: 416) The supposition that in their natural element desires operate without interaction with belief is on closer inspection inconceivable nonsense and incompatible with the concept of desire. Particular desires are possible in the absence of particular beliefs, but not in the absence of belief altogether.

We must suppose that Nagel and Korsgaard mean to question only the interaction between desire and beliefs of a particular kind: those concerning causal relations and instrumental means. Granting that desiring can motivate action only in conjunction with belief, it may still remain a problem how desiring an end (e.g. drinking) can motivate action that is not identical with that end (e.g. inserting a coin in a slot). But I have already argued that these scruples are misconceived. Desiring involves motivation towards making its end the case, and that just is to be motivated towards believed means. This account can accommodate the rationalists' story about the reason-responsiveness involved in instrumental motivation. The instrumental 'reason' on which we act when we are motivated to perform some particular means to our desired end is

³⁰ See Mele 2003: 7.

³¹ Velleman rejects the suggestion (2000: 262), but is working with narrower conceptions of desire and belief. There may be some ('arational') desires to act that can be immediately executed without instrumental beliefs proper (e.g. to hum), but even these require at least *knowing how* to act so; see pp. [18-19].

simply the content of the means-belief (e.g. that inserting coins in a vending machine is a way to get a soda), and on a motivation theory it is constitutive of desiring an end that we have motivation towards means to that end.

4. *Desires as causes and the nature of motivation*

It may be thought here that if I am correct, I have inadvertently undermined the Motivation-by-Desire Principle I am trying to defend. Indeed this is what most proponents and critics of motivation theories alike take them to accomplish.³² If desiring to ϕ is simply *being motivated* to ϕ , then the desiring like the action is what gets motivated, and therefore cannot be what does the motivating: something else such as 'reason' or normative belief can claim the title of being the source of motivation. Explanations of action in terms of desire would be trivial, claiming that a person acted because he was motivated to act.

In denying this consequence, I shall not deny that beliefs and reasons can appropriately be said to motivate us. But I will insist (a) that desire is a causal antecedent of overt action, (b) that motivational explanations of action in terms of desire are informative and nontrivial, (c) that explanations of motivation in terms of desire are informative and nontrivial, and (d) that the activity of being motivated is itself produced by desire, in some sense.

Desiring that E essentially involves having motivation *towards* (making it the case that E), not being motivated *to* (make it the case that) E . Having motivation towards E is not a matter of being *caused* to (make it the case that) E , because motivation can be defeated; we can fail to act on our desires, by resisting them or because they are outweighed by conflicting motivations. Consider Jason, who desires (to have an intimate

³² Nagel 1970: 29, Platts 1979: 256, Locke 1982, Darwall 1983: 42, Staude 1986, Dancy 2000: 86-7.

relationship with) his brother's wife, Libby. Jason is a good brother and a decent person. He never acts on his desire, keeping it suppressed his whole life. He never makes a pass at Libby, flirts with her, makes any effort to undermine his brother's marriage, or casts her lascivious looks. Nobody knows about Jason's desire, or has any way of knowing about it, except Jason himself who is painfully conscious of it. What is it that Jason is conscious of? The notion of motivation is rather mysterious: we speak metaphorically of the 'push' and 'pull' of desire, but this needs cashing out. Motivation in the 'success' sense doesn't seem as hard to explain; to be motivated *to* ϕ is to ϕ for a motive. But desiring entails motivation only in the non-success sense. What is it to be motivated *towards* something: to have nonefficacious motivation? Answering this question will help us rebut the charge of triviality.

The solution to this puzzle lies in the distinction between overt activity and *mental* activity. Desiring or having motivation does not entail any overt behavior, but I shall argue that it does essentially involve mental activity, which is frequently overlooked. Whenever an agent acts on motivation, his (overt) action is always preceded or accompanied by mental activity. Such activity often occurs where there is no resultant overt action. It is here that I believe we can find the behavior of desiring.³³

What kinds of mental activities are these? As manifestations of desiring *E*, what they have in common is that they satisfy the rough description, 'seeking to make it the case that *E*.' This needs care, however. To seek to make it the case that *E* is to take steps that you think facilitate its being the case that *E*. These need not be 'means' in a strict sense, but merely facilitating conditions. Intending to *E*, for example, may not be a means to *E*-ing, but it is a facilitating condition.³⁴ This highlights a further need for

³³ I have also explored this idea in my 2007: 223-28. It is apparently the theory of motivation favored by psychologists (Mook 1987: 53, discussed in Mele 2003: 5-6).

³⁴ But see Harman 1976.

caution. It is unlikely that an agent engages in any such mental activity because she *believes the proposition* that it facilitates the end. Our knowledge of the facilitating mental steps to action is more plausibly a matter of *know-how* than of propositional knowledge. The relevant notion of means-belief must be interpreted broadly enough to include this.

What are the mental activities that constitute facilitating an end? They lie on a spectrum. On one extreme we find the exercise of volition, the necessary mental component of overt action, and at one (temporal) remove, the formation and maintenance of intention. Intending some action *M* is one manifestation of desiring some end *E*. A further remove from overt action we find calculation of means; plotting the best course to an end is often a manifestation of desiring it. Deciding or forming the intention to bring about the end is another mental step of facilitating the end. Of course often desiring does not involve any of these mental activities, as in Jason's case. But there are other, sub-intentional activities of facilitating an end.

In deliberation about whether to act (overtly) to promote an end (i.e. in forming our *plans*), one looks to see whether pursuit of that end is compatible with one's other values and ends, and can be fitted into one's plans without unacceptable cost. This exercise is itself a form of seeking to facilitate the end, even if the end is not taken up in intention. If Jason's desire manifests as *temptation*, it will take this form. He may weigh a relationship with Libby against his relationship with his brother, or he may scheme how he might have both. But desires may not even develop this far. Motivation towards *E* may take the form of choosing between other ends and means to them with an eye to minimizing or avoiding *harming* the prospects for *E*. This activity of *protecting* the end is a form of facilitating it. Even if Jason never deliberates about whether or how to seduce Libby, he may seek to avoid courses of action that might lessen her esteem of

him, or that would be detrimental to his access to her. (Perhaps he refuses to marry, or turns down career opportunities that would take him abroad, because they would harm the prospects of such a relationship.) These mental activities need not be deliberate or prolonged; they can be fleeting, unbidden, and even unwelcome. Deliberating over a foreign job offer, Jason may momentarily weigh the separation from Libby as a reason not to accept it. Although he immediately recoils from the thought as irrational and contemptible, this weighing is an activity aimed at facilitating the end, and a manifestation of desire.

Perhaps the most primitive form that motivation towards an end may take is the activity of (mentally) looking for means or facilitating conditions. Again this need not be deliberate or sustained, and it may even be 'irrational'. We may automatically do this in a rudimentary way, even where we know full well that bringing about the end is impossible for us (e.g. if the desire is directed at the past); after all, there must be some process of thought that makes relevant and thereby activates that knowledge. This thought process also satisfies the description, 'seeking to facilitate the end', and offers a reply to what may be the most threatening objection against motivation theories: that we can desire states of affairs that we believe to be completely out of our control.³⁵

If an agent is engaged in no such form of mental activity, he cannot be occurrently desiring the end. (He may still have a 'desire' in the dispositional sense). The difference between being motivated *towards* an end and being motivated *to* it is simply that the former involves taking mental steps towards but not all the way to the end. This allows us to explain how an agent can be motivated towards proper means to an end

³⁵ This objection is pressed in Marks 1986: 140, Mele 2003: 22-27, Schroeder 2004: 16. For discussion see my 2007: 226n. Dancy (2000: 85-89) argues similarly, pointing out that the sense of frustration that arises in cases of desiring the unattainable shows that there is 'motivation looking for an outlet and not finding it.' However he thinks this can be accommodated by a dispositional clause, which I think is insufficient and incompatible with a pure motivation theory.

even without having identified any proper means; searching for means is taking a step towards them.

I conclude that motivation towards *E* involves engaging in mental activities that one thinks facilitate *E*. These mental activities are causal antecedents of overt action, if any eventuates, and therefore it is true on this motivation theory that desiring causes action, although it need not. (I have here offered no defense of the claim that *every* action is caused by desire. This will be the case if every action must arise from such mental activities, as is highly plausible; see my 2007.) Some will grant this, however, and maintain that explanations in terms of desire remain trivial and uninformative. I agree that it is trivial to explain a person's action with the claim that the person had a desire. But it is not trivial to explain an action by appeal to a *particular* desire (i.e. with a specified object). Some proponents of motivation theories simply identify being motivated towards something with desiring it, but this is a mistake. It doesn't respect the platitude that we can be motivated to do things intentionally that we don't desire to do. While some think that this platitude is incompatible with the Motivation-by-Desire Principle,³⁶ this also is a mistake. Given my identification of desiring/having motivation towards *E* with mental activity seeking to facilitate *E*, desire for *E* can motivate us to (and towards) the means to *E* without any need for a desire for the means. Indeed, I believe (although I shall not argue for it here) that strictly speaking desiring *E* only ever involves *intrinsic* motivation towards *E*, or motivation towards *E* for its own sake.³⁷ It is nontrivial to explain an action by appeal to a particular desire, therefore, because any action can result from any number of distinct desires, and it is informative to be told the motive with which a person acted.

³⁶ For example G. F. Schueler writes, 'Since it is possible to do apparently very sensible things that one has no proper desire to do, it is very implausible to say that having a proper desire of some sort is a necessary condition of having a good reason to perform an action.' (1995: 59).

³⁷ Finlay 2007: 224-5. See also Audi 1986: 20-21, Marks 1986: 144, Staude 1986: 177, Chan 2004.

Even if desiring is a cause of the action, it can be denied that it *motivates* it (Dancy 2000: 85-86). If desiring is to *be motivated* towards action, it is argued, then that which does the motivating of the action must be something else. However this argument seems to assume that if A is motivationally antecedent to B, and B is motivationally antecedent to C, then it can only be A and not B that ‘motivates’ C. I see no reason to accept this; the parallel does not hold, for example, between proximate causal connections and being a ‘cause’.³⁸ Desiring causes overt action in a motive-involving way, and this is sufficient for us to maintain that desiring motivates action, even if this isn’t the whole story.

The objection re-emerges with regard to the realm of mental activity, however. If desiring or having motivation towards an end is constituted by engaging in facilitating mental activities (planning, deliberating, searching, rehearsing) then it cannot be what motivates or causally explains those activities themselves. Something else must explain both those activities and the desiring, and this must be the source of motivation for the desire (and the ultimate motivator of action). I have four replies.

(1) An explanation of motivation in terms of a specific desire need not be a *causal* explanation at all; it can be an informative *constitutive* explanation, enabling us to understand the motivation *as* a desire for *E*. Analogously, attributing a killing to suicide is not a causal explanation, but is an informative explanation nonetheless.

(2) I have been careful to speak of desiring as involving ‘*having motivation*’ rather than ‘being motivated’. The intended difference is that the former suggests being *motive-oriented*, while the latter suggests being *motive-caused*. To be *motive-oriented* is an active rather than a passive state, and doesn’t entail being *motive-caused* by anything.

³⁸ Dancy seems to make this assumption, although he may rather be conflating motivation towards action with being motivated to act: ‘if we explain an action by specifying what motivated it...what motivated it cannot be the desire, for this only consists in the agent’s being motivated to do it. (Though it may be partly

It is consistent with this motivation theory to maintain that desire is the fundamental motivator.

(3) Granted that desire or motivation is not a ‘first cause’ or *causa sui*, it doesn’t follow that whatever causes desire *motivates* it (and thereby action). Dancy writes, ‘if [desires] cannot be explained, then neither can the action that, in desiring as we do, we are motivated to perform’ (2000: 85). We are caused to desire in various ways, but because I am skeptical about our ability to commence desiring at will, I grant that episodes of desiring are never caused or motivated by further desires. The ultimate springs of desire are the territory of neuroscience and psychology, and do not ‘motivate’ us but merely *cause* us to have motivation. An inability to trace the etiology of actions beyond desires hardly entails that we are unable to explain how those actions were motivated. Rationalists claim that we can be motivated to desire by reasons. I have here argued at least that *instrumental* reasons do not motivate desires, but merely give them direction (I argue for the general thesis in my 2007).

(4) There are two senses in which ‘desire’ does cause us to have motivation towards our desired ends. (i) Desires as *dispositions* are relevant to the causal (and possibly motivational) explanation of our occurrent desiring activity. Explanations of our being motivated towards certain actions by appeal to the disposition to desire particular ends is nontrivial for the same reason that explanation of action by appeal to occurrent desire for particular ends is. (ii) In a sense desiring is after all a *causa sui*. Once an episode of desiring has commenced, earlier activities constituting desiring are causal antecedents of later ones. Identifying a means is a cause of intending it, for example. An episode of desiring consists in a causal chain, so even these mental activities can be

caused by this.) What motivates must therefore be that which underpins the desire.’ The parenthetical remark is inconsistent with such a conflation.

causally explained by appeal to desiring, which is a self-motivating (though not self-initiating) process.

5. *Defending the account: loose ends*

In this final section I briefly address three important remaining questions. (i) Should we accept the motivation theory of desire? (ii) Does the account have the resources to explain motivation *to the means*? (iii) Might the account be compatible with rationalism?

(i) If motivation theories of desire are mistaken then my explanation of motivation to the means fails, and the rationalist objection to the Motivation-by-Desire Principle may succeed. We might now wonder whether rationalists err simply in assuming motivation theories of desire. In particular it may be judged implausible, in spite of my efforts, that desiring always involves behavior aimed at facilitating the end (especially where we believe the end to be unobtainable). But then what is going on when we are desiring something? Opponents of motivation theories often offer no account at all, but there are many rival accounts available. There is no space here for a critical investigation of the alternatives so I will merely register my skepticism that any of them could be right, hopefully eliciting concurring intuitions.

The main contenders are *phenomenological* theories (on which desiring *E* essentially involves some kind of sensation like pleasure or pain upon representation of *E*)³⁹, *judgment* theories (on which it involves a normative judgment about *E*)⁴⁰, *reward*

³⁹ For example Shaw 1989; 1992, Staude 1986: 182. This view is epitomized by many of Hume's claims. Rationalists hint at such views by focusing on particularly visceral desires like hunger, thirst, and lust (which are not in my view purely desires). Phenomenological views are comprehensively criticized in Smith 1987, 1994: 104-11.

⁴⁰ Judgment theories are given by Anscombe 1957, de Sousa 1974, Davidson 1980, Quinn 1995, Millgram 1997, Scanlon 1998. For compelling arguments against judgment theories see Stocker 1979, Velleman 2000. Relatedly, *perception* theories link desiring with perceptions rather than judgments with normative content; see Stampe 1986, 1987, Hurley 2001.

theories (on which it involves having a representation of *E* function as a reinforcer of behavioral dispositions)⁴¹, and *disposition* theories (it involves being disposed to behave in certain ways)⁴². All deny that motivation is essential to desire, and substitute something else in its place. But this something else seems neither necessary nor sufficient. Intuitively we can desire *E* without feeling any particular sensations towards *E*, or judging *E* good, or being disposed to act in certain ways (other than in *motivated* ways), or representation of *E* reinforcing our behavioral dispositions. But intuitively it is inappropriate to ascribe occurrent desire in the presence of these sensations, judgments, dispositions, or behavioral modifications, if there is no motivation at all. It is most plausibly motivation that is essential to our concept of desire, and rival theories are inadequate precisely because they make the motivational role of desire a mysterious, seemingly accidental property.

(ii) I have preserved the causal efficacy of desire by restricting my constitutive claims about desire to mental rather than overt activities. In doing so, it may be suggested that I have impaled myself on another horn of a dilemma: the constitutive account is too weak to account for *rational* motivation *to* the proper means. Engaging in many of the mental activities I have described falls far short of overt action aimed at some sufficient means, or a believed necessary means. But, it may be argued, desiring an end provides a *reason* to perform some sufficient means, or any necessary means, which other things being equal is thus required by *rationality*. There must therefore be a rational norm requiring this, and we still need a substantive faculty of practical reason that responds by extending motivation to the *performance* of means.

⁴¹ Schroeder 2004.

⁴² Smith 1987, 1994, Stalnaker 1984: 15, Heuer 2004. Often when we ascribe a 'desire' we are ascribing a disposition of some kind. But active *desiring* involves something going on. Most plausibly, the disposition we ascribe as a 'desire' is the disposition *to desire*, just as the disposition we ascribe as a 'belief' is the disposition to believe.

Rationalists will typically agree, however, that we are not rationally required to pursue the satisfaction of our mere desires. If there is a rational instrumental norm (in my 2008 I argue there is not), it addresses *intending* rather than merely desiring an end. So long as I intend to drink a soda, I will (if not irrational, some will insist) do whatever I believe necessary for that end. But I may desire to drink a soda and yet reasonably fail to do something I think necessary for that end – if, for example, I prefer to retain my prized commemorative quarters rather than exchange them for a drink. To be motivated by an instrumental *reason*, on the picture I have drawn, is just to have one's desiring activity channeled by a particular means-belief.

Even if there is no viable rationalist challenge here, an explanation may still be demanded for how desire for an end is sufficient to motivate performance of sufficient means to that end. The answer is that the activity of seeking to facilitate an end is *progressive*: it entails trying to advance towards an end from your current position. Before you know how to *E*, you are facilitating *E* by looking for sufficient means. But once you've found satisfactory means, you are only continuing to seek to facilitate *E* if you are doing something to take additional steps towards *E*. Hence desiring an end can be a sufficient source of motivation to performing sufficient means. This is its natural manifestation when a sufficient and satisfactory means has been identified and there are no inhibiting or competing motives.⁴³

(iii) Finally, it may be thought that I have not *rejected* the rationalists' norm-responsive motivational faculty of practical reason so much as shown how it may be found operating *within* desire, rather than as something that operates on desire as raw

⁴³ The motivational manifestations of desirings are often limited as a result of their interactive rather than independent operation. Desire aims at its end within the boundaries established by other desires. Like the current of water or electricity, it seeks the path of least resistance. Other desires close off paths, and sometimes may stem the flow, reducing a desire merely to activities such as surveying the scene for some new or unnoticed path. Even if I believe that giving up my quarters is the necessary means to drinking a

material (Nagel 1970: 31). This result would be compatible with my primary goal of defending the Motivation-by-Desire Principle against the argument from motivation to the means. But the implications for rationalism are more severe. On this account of instrumental motivation, the motivation is provided by the desire. In following instrumental reasons and seeking means, desire is not obeying any authoritative normative principles but simply acting according to its essential nature. There is no place in this account for rational norms or a motivational susceptibility to any.

I have argued that if we take seriously the idea that motivation is essential to desire, then the Motivation-by-Desire Principle faces no genuine problem in explaining motivation to the means. I have further argued that we can and should take a motivation theory of desiring seriously. We can, because once we pay attention to mental activity we find resources for solving the most pressing objections. We should, because there really doesn't seem to be anything else that desiring plausibly could be.⁴⁴

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soda, my desire need not be snuffed out by my preference to retain them: this belief does not preclude hope that it might be false, and so the desire may live on in the form of 'keeping an eye out'.

⁴⁴ I thank Aaron James, David Chan, Gideon Yaffe, Janet Levin, Autumn Winters, and audiences at conferences in Southern California and Wisconsin for their helpful comments.

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