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24.120 Moral Psychology
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VII *Akrasia* & Desire

Watson's criticisms of Davidson

Two aspects of desire: being motivated v. judging best

Are these both aspects of desire? What makes the second look desire like?

Humberstone's distinctions

In a television documentary about a beauty contest, the winner, newly crowned, wipes away the tears and says:
I never realized how much I wanted to win. Presumably she was reflecting not on how much effort she had put in—she already knew that—but on how good it made her feel to have won.

'Wanting, Getting, Having'

Desire is a cluster concept (cf. the notion of a game). A desire can be strong along three independent dimensions of assessment:

1. How strongly does it motivate you to act?
2. How happy would you be if it were satisfied?
3. How disappointed would you be if it were not satisfied?

So, according to Humberstone, there can, for instance, be two desires, of which the first is stronger on dimension 1, but the second is stronger on dimension 2. Likewise for dimensions 1 & 3, and for 2 & 3:

Get job (p = .5) — very pleased
 Successfully cook complicated meal (p = .5) — reasonably pleased
 Unsuccessfully cook complicated meal (p = .5) — very disappointed
 Fail to get job (p = .5) — indifferent

The dimensions are held together by *normative* principles (which can be violated) like:

GO FOR IT: Make your efforts at satisfying desires proportionate to the extent to which you'd be happy to have them satisfied.

Some more examples

A colleague is offered an attractive job elsewhere. He decides, after much agonizing, to decline the offer. He explains that, as soon as he had made the decision, he realized that it was what he really wanted.

Marcel wants Albertine; or at least, he expends much effort trying to get her to move in with him. But as soon as he knows that she will, he finds himself indifferent to the prospect. He concludes that in some sense he never really wanted her at all.

Problems with the second dimension

- (i) Is happiness too restricted a notion? Pleased that? Satisfied that? Glad that? Or a list: pleased, or joyful or relieved ...

- (ii) Can't we be pleased by things we didn't want, and made miserable by things we did want? The beauty queen a year on. The pleasure machine. The hot chilli pickle. Don't we think of desire as more *prospective* than this makes it?

Revisions of the second dimension

(A) X wants a more than b iff X *believes* that he would be more pleased if a happened (rather than b), than if b happened (rather than a).

Problems: the pleasure machine; doesn't help with the beauty queen example.

(B) X wants a more than b iff X would be more pleased *to learn* that a was going to happen (rather than b), than that b was going to happen (rather than a).

Problems with (B)

Imagine an old rationalist whose daughter wants to be a nun. He loves his daughter, and wants her to be what she wants to be. But he cannot bear the idea of her being a nun. Despairing of reconciling his basic wants, he just wants that she be a nun but he not know that she is.

Bernard Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism'

Henry wants his wife to organize a birthday party for him but only if it's a surprise, i.e. only if he doesn't know that she's going to. If he were to know that she was going to do it, he'd rather that she didn't do it at all.

Another revision

(C) X wants a more than b iff X is more pleased at the *prospect* of a happening (rather than b), than of b happening (rather than a).

To be pleased at the prospect of something is (roughly) to imaginatively entertain it, and be pleased at that. One can imagine it from an impartial viewpoint. One can thus imagine a situation in which p obtains but one doesn't believe that p (whereas one can't believe that that there obtains a situation in which p obtains but one doesn't believe that p).

Does this help with the beauty queen example? Perhaps sometimes one can only get full imaginative acquaintance if one actually believes that it is going to happen. And in the beauty queen case the belief only comes at the moment that the desire is actually realized. That is still getting clear on the prospect (unlike the question of how she feels a year later).

An alternative response

Watson's response distinguishes two aspects to desire. But there is an alternative response which trades on the distinction of intention from desire and belief. If intentions can be formed independently of one's desires and beliefs, then what is to stop someone forming an intention to act against their desires and beliefs? (NB this requires a strong separation thesis: intentions need not originate in beliefs and desires.)

Akrasia and Weakness of Will

Traditionally the two are identified. But isn't weakness of will more to do with failing to follow through on one's intentions?