

Desires, Reasons, and Causes

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Jonathan Dancy's *Practical Reality* makes a significant contribution to clarifying the relationship between desire and reasons for acting, both the normative reasons we seek in deliberation and the motivating reasons we cite in explanation. About the former, Dancy argues that, not only are normative reasons not all grounded in desires, but, more radically, the fact that one desires something is never itself a normative reason. And he argues that desires fail to figure in motivating reasons also, concluding that neither the fact nor the state of desire is ever a motivating reason for acting. I am in significant agreement with Dancy about these matters, but I want to register some reservations nonetheless. Dancy is certainly right to reject the DBR (desire-based reasons) thesis that all normative reasons are grounded in desires.¹ Desires, he points out, call for reasons no less than do actions. But I think he insufficiently appreciates a way in which facts about the agent's desires and related practical psychic states can provide normative reasons. Not that this gives away anything to Dancy's Humean opponents. What gives an agent's desires, values, and moral convictions normative weight, I shall suggest, is her dignity and integrity as an individual person.

With regard to motivating reasons, I argue that the issue between Dancy's "anti-psychologism" and psychologistic approaches is to some extent verbal, depending on whether we take 'motivating reason' to be synonymous with 'agent's reason' or not. Humeans about motivation, like Michael Smith, can consistently use 'motivating reason' for the state that plays a certain role in teleological explanations while using 'agent's reason' in ways that agree more or less with Dancy. Even here, however, I argue that Dancy's analysis rightly emphasizes an important distinction that Humeans appreciate insufficiently, namely, between having a goal and taking something as a reason, and that Dancy is right that the latter is centrally involved in action in ways the Humean account fails to bring out.

¹ For some earlier arguments against the DBR thesis, see my *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 25-82.

Let's start with normative reasons. Humeans hold that all normative reasons have their source or ground in the agent's desires. If p is a normative reason "for A to Φ , this is because there is some e such that A actually desires e and, given that p , Φ -ing subserves the prospect of e 's being realized (or continuing to be realized)." (28) This is the DBR thesis.² Dancy points out that it does no good to argue against it that if a desire to Φ can give us no reason to Φ , as Humeans agree, it can give us no reason to do anything that would subserve Φ -ing either. That simply denies the DBR thesis, and so begs the question against Humeanism, as one can confirm by making the relevant substitutions in the formulation just given.³ Dancy's own argument is complex and doesn't seek to proceed from premises that Humeans would accept.⁴ It attempts to show, moreover, not just that the DBR thesis is false, but that the fact that one desires something is never a normative reason.

The argument starts from the contra-Humean premise that desires generally are based on reasons. ("[W]e can in general understand desire as a response to a perceived reason." (38)) In these cases, reasons for acting are supplied entirely by the reasons to which the desire responds—"a desire that is based on reasons does not add to the reasons on which it is based." (38) Desires that are to any extent *non*-reason-based are either "inclinations" or "urges." Inclinations are based on reasons to some extent, but inconclusive ones for acting. (Were they conclusive, they would support an action or intention, not just a desire.) Again in these cases, however, the fact that one is inclined (desires) cannot provide an additional reason; the reasons associated with the desire are supplied entirely by those to which the inclination

² For a somewhat broader formulation, see *Impartial Reason*, pp. 25-32.

³ Substituting 'I desire to Φ ' for ' p ' and ' Φ ' for ' e ' yields (following the 'because'): there is some Φ such that A actually desires Φ and, given that he desires Φ , Φ -ing subserves the prospect of Φ -ing's being realized. This seems, at best, misleading since Φ -ing subserves the prospect of Φ -ing's being realized, whether or not A desires that Φ . On the other hand, substituting ' Φ -ing subserves the prospect of θ 's being realized', yields: there is some e such that A actually desires e and, given that Φ -ing subserves the prospect of θ 's being realized, Φ -ing subserves the prospect of e 's being realized. Where θ is something A desires, this is straightforwardly true.

⁴ Dancy does mention one further internal argument against Humeanism, which he attributes the "seeds of" to Brad Hooker. Humeans believe that we have no reason to have the desires we do, only reasons to do what is necessary to satisfy the desires we have. But that must mean, Dancy says, that we have no reason not to abandon our desires, that abandoning them is rationally permissible. And if that is so, then the mere fact that we have a desire cannot give us a reason to do what is necessary to satisfy it. I don't believe this argument works. It is true that, according to Humeans, whether I should have or not have a given desire is not something on which practical reason pronounces. But that doesn't mean that Humeans think, or should think, that if I have a desire then I have no reason not to *abandon* it. Abandoning a desire is taking steps that are at odds with acting to satisfy it. So while the Humean would agree that if I were transformed from a person who had the desire into one who didn't, I wouldn't have gained or lost any capacity to respond to practical reasons, they would by no means grant that if I have a desire, I have no reason not to abandon it.

responds. Non-reason-based desires are urges (although some things we normally count as urges respond to reasons, in which case, see “inclinations”). If, however, we can see no reason to which an urge responds, Dancy argues, “we have made it hard to say that we see or have some reason to act that way all the same [that is, because of the urge].” (36)

To sum up, to the extent that desires are based on reasons, the fact of desire is not an additional reason. It is something like the agent’s correctly registering reasons, where these are facts about the desire’s object. These reasons warrant the desire (and, if conclusive, the action), but, so far as the desire is concerned, they are all the reasons there are. The desire does not provide an additional reason. On the other hand, if a desire is to some extent or other not based on reasons—if it is an urge, or an inclination that is stronger than warranted by the reasons to which it responds—then here again the desire supplies no additional reason. For Dancy, desire is thus normatively *transparent* with respect to reasons. When it is associated with reasons for acting at all, it is as a form (or consequence) of epistemic access to reasons, rather than a source of them.

Now I agree with Dancy that desires are generally based on reasons and that, as against the DBR thesis, these provide reasons for acting that are independent of facts about our desires themselves. In wanting to understand the nature of normative reasons, for example, I see this understanding as something worth having, something there is reason for me to want, whether or not I actually want it. Moreover, I *used* to think, as Dancy does, that facts concerning one’s actual desires (or preferences, or values, or moral convictions) provide no additional reasons whatsoever.⁵ However, I have come to think that this is mistaken and that it analogizes practical reason too closely to theoretical reason.

It will help to clarify my disagreement if I first mention another area of agreement. In response to “the advice point,” that we frequently advise one another on the most rational way to pursue an end even when we think the end is unsupported by reasons, Dancy notes that we can explain these cases by supposing that rationality enjoins *combinations* of end and means-seeking, as in, ‘You ought, if *e* is your end, to pursue *e* in way *w*.’ (43) We can suppose this without having to hold that the fact that one has *e* as end or desire gives one any reason whatsoever to act in way *w* (as a means to *e*). I agree with Dancy that something like this is the right way to think of “hypothetical,” means/end reasoning, but I nonetheless think there are ways in which the fact of desire (and other practical psychic states) can provide normative reasons.⁶

⁵ This was the general thrust of my position in *Impartial Reason*, pp. 25-82.

⁶ In *Impartial Reason* and elsewhere, I argue that we should regard the relevant rational requirements as “relative rationality” or consistency requirements. The sense in which it

For Dancy, an agent's desires (and other practical psychic states, such as her will, values, and moral convictions) play a role in practical reasoning that is similar to that of beliefs in theoretical reasoning. Desires and beliefs are normally "backgrounded" in practical and theoretical reasoning, respectively.⁷ In the standard practical case, we don't deliberate from the fact that we desire or value or think we morally should do something. Rather we reason from the supposed facts to which we take our "subjective" desires, values, and moral convictions themselves to respond. So far, this seems fully analogous to the theoretical case. We don't standardly reason theoretically from the fact that we believe p or q , but from what we believe, namely, p and q .

But are there not cases where I reasonably take the fact that I believe something as a reason, namely, where I warrantably regard my belief (that is, my believing) as evidence? I may find myself believing something, be unable to recall my reasons, but reasonably think I should continue to believe it because my beliefs are generally reliable, or reliable in this particular area. In a case of this kind, the fact that I believe that p appropriately plays some role in my reasoning about whether to believe p . Clearly, something similar can happen with desire. I may find myself with a desire but have lost track of the reasons on which it is based. Here again, I might take the fact that I desire Φ as shedding favorable light on the question of whether to bring Φ about. Even so, although the fact of desire can figure in practical reasoning in this way (analogously to belief in theoretical reasoning), it is not because desire is a source of independent reasons or provides any additional weight, anymore than belief is or does. To the contrary, it is because the fact that I desire something is evidence that there are desire-basing reasons, even if I can't now reconstruct what they are.

That this is as far as it goes with belief and normative theoretical reasons seems clear enough. If there are no reasons to believe something to which my belief responds, the fact that I believe it cannot give me a reason. And if there are reasons to believe something, the fact that I believe it cannot give me an additional reason. I doubt, however, that the analogous thing holds in the practical case. Ultimately, I want to argue this for desires, but let me begin with another practical psychic state that Dancy treats analogously, namely, the holding of a moral conviction. Here also, Dancy holds that the fact that one is, say, deeply morally opposed to something is not itself a normative

is irrational not to take the necessary means to one's ends is that not taking the means is irrational relative to (the assumed) rationality of pursuing the end. Since adopting an end commits one to the rationality of realizing it, it is irrational to both adopt an end and be unwilling to take the necessary means. See *Impartial Reason*, pp. 15-17, 43-50; also John Broome, "Normative Requirements," *Ratio* 12 (1999): 398-419; and Stephen Darwall, "Because I Want It," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 18 (2001): 129-153, and in *Moral Knowledge*, ed. by Ellen F. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷ On this point, see Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Backgrounding Desire," *The Philosophical Review*, 99 (1990): 565-592. See also *Impartial Reason*, pp. 28-42.

reason not to do it. If, there are reasons that support one's moral opposition, then these, of course, are reasons. But the fact that one has deeply held moral reservations against doing something, is not itself a reason. Now I agree with Dancy that there are not two kinds of duties, "subjective" and "objective." (49-60) And I agree also that sometimes the way moral convictions enter into objective moral duties is via an "enjoined" or "banned" *combination* that does not permit detachment. Some cases seem fully analogous in this way to hypothetical, means/end reasoning (as mentioned above). The moral duty against hypocrisy, Dancy says, is an injunction not to *both* believe that others should do something, but be unwilling to do it oneself. (54) Hypocrisy, so defined, is a kind of moral inconsistency that can seem on all fours in relevant respects with the practical inconsistency of means/end irrationality. And just as we can accept the injunction against means/end irrationality without supposing that having an end gives one reason to take the means (as we can accept a ban against theoretical inconsistency without supposing that the fact that one believes *p* is, in itself, a reason not to believe not-*p* (see the remarks on "backgrounding" above)), so also can we accept the injunction against hypocrisy (defined as thinking that others should do something but not doing it oneself) without supposing that the fact that one thinks others should do something is itself a reason for one to act likewise.

But not all cases are like this. Suppose that you have deep moral reservations about abortion that I do not share. You believe that abortion is tantamount to murder, but I believe that at very early stages of pregnancy it is morally permissible. Suppose you come to me for advice about whether to abort a very early fetus. You are convinced it is morally wrong, but wavering about what to do since carrying the fetus to term will create serious hardship in your life. You don't think this consideration *justifies* an abortion, either morally or even all things considered. To the contrary, you are sure it does not, but your will is weak. For my part, I think your moral convictions are mistaken, and I may try to say why, especially if I sense that your weakness is a symptom of incipient uncertainty or that I can put forward my case in a respectful way. Suppose, however, that although you consider my arguments, you are unmoved by them. You are still convinced that abortion is tantamount to murder. Would I make a mistake if, in such circumstances, I were to suggest that, if you really feel that way, then you shouldn't have the abortion?⁸ That is, that the fact that you have this deep conviction gives you a

⁸ Richard Price makes this point with his distinction between "abstract virtue" and "practical virtue." The former concerns what agents should do, irrespective of their actual beliefs and motives, the latter, what they should do in light having these (although, not necessarily in *their* light). This distinction is different, moreover, from that between subjective and objective rightness. "Abstract virtue is, most properly, a quality of the external action or event. It denotes what an action is, considered independently of the sense of the agent; or what, in itself and absolutely, it is right such an agent, in such circumstances,

further reason, in addition to any to which it might respond. It is hard to see why I would. Couldn't I reasonably take your deeply held (if somewhat practically ineffective) conviction as a reason for you? After all, I might think, your integrity is on the line. And integrity, in a case like this anyway, seems not just to enjoin the combination of conviction and action, without licensing a detachable injunction to act, if one has the conviction. In a case like this, where a timely change in moral conviction is not in the offing, and there are no moral reasons against the action, the fact that one has a deeply held moral conviction seems to add a normative reason for action, additional to whatever reasons it might respond to.⁹

Such reasons arise from our nature as moral agents, which seems to involve more than accurately and consistently registering normative reasons and acting on them. This reflects, I think, a fundamental difference between theoretical and practical reason. In theoretical reasoning, an individual's point of view is simply one perspective on the world—an appearance—and it can be discounted as mere appearance if we have some reason to think it is illusory. In the practical realm, however, an individual's perspective is the stand-

should do; and what, if he judged truly, he would judge he ought to do.—Practical virtue, on the contrary, has a necessary relation to, and dependence upon, the opinion of the agent concerning his actions. It signifies what he ought to do, upon supposition of his having such and such sentiments.—In a sense, not entirely different from this, good actions have been by some divided into such as are materially good, and such as are formally so.—Moral agents are liable to mistake the circumstances they are in, and, consequently, to form erroneous judgments concerning their own obligations. This supposes, that these obligations have a real existence, independent of their judgments. But, when they are in any manner mistaken, it is not to be imagined, that then nothing remains obligatory; for there is a sense in which it may be said, that what any being, in the sincerity of his heart, thinks he ought to do, he indeed ought to do, and would be justly blameable if he omitted to do, though contradictory to what, in the former sense, is his duty." (*A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, in L. A. Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897), reprinted in one volume, with a new introduction by Bernard H. Baumrin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1964), v. ii, p. 175.)

⁹ It might be asked what the real difference is with hypocrisy. Dancy defines hypocrisy as believing that others should do something that one does not do oneself. But what is magic about the belief being about others? After all, our moral convictions are fundamentally about what *people* should do. If a belief about what one should do can generate a normative reason for action, then why not a belief about what others should do? Or, alternatively, if a belief about what others should do cannot generate a normative reason for one, then how can a belief about what one should do? This is an attractive line of thought and yet I am inclined to agree with Dancy that, as he defines it, hypocrisy is a prohibition on a combination that does not license detachment. Perhaps the relevant difference between hypocrisy, so defined, and compromising integrity is that the latter really does essentially concern a belief about oneself. Or perhaps it is that hypocrisy is *not* in fact a failure of fit between one's moral convictions (about others) and one's own action, but a dissimulating self-presentation, *saying* one thing and *doing* another. If the latter were the case, it would always be possible to conform to an injunction against hypocrisy, by now changing one's tune as well by now changing one's behavior. This is precisely what does not seem to be involved, however, when our moral integrity is on the line.

point from which she leads her life and that helps to define her as the particular individual she is. We seem, in the moral and practical sphere to be called, not just to respecting or being true to some independent reality, as in reasoning about what to believe, but also to respecting and being true to ourselves and others in ways that can make our will, desires, values, and moral convictions themselves a source of normative reasons.

Consider, for example, how a person's desires and will figure in claims she can make on others. Parents may reasonably treat the desires of their very young children as having no intrinsic weight. The mere fact that their one-year old daughter doesn't want to eat a healthful food is not a reason *in itself* for them to desist in efforts to get her to do so. Of course, her desire may be related or responsive to relevant normative reasons, but that doesn't make *it* a reason. When, however, she is full grown, her desires do acquire intrinsic weight for them. Indeed, in areas like this, they become positively governing. Now her desires figure in *claims* of respect she can reasonably make of other persons, her parents included.¹⁰ Dancy notes this kind of case in a footnote, but argues that although a person's desires might generate reasons for others through concern for their autonomy, these "are hardly at issue in my own case." (40n) But I think they frequently are. Suppose you are a middle-aged daughter whose parents are trying to get her to eat "her broccoli." You might well think that the fact that you don't *want* to eat your broccoli is a reason why you should be allowed not to do so (thank you, very much!), and, indeed, that it is a reason why you should *allow yourself* not to do so. Simply deferring to your parents' wishes at this point might well be a failure to respect yourself as an equal. Something similar is true, I believe, with personal values, preferences, desires, moral convictions, and practical psychic states more generally, although the details vary in complex and interesting ways. Giving deliberative weight to preferences, values, and so on, because they are mine, is a form of respect for myself as an independent moral person.¹¹ Unlike theoretical reason, the practical standpoint is not simply a perspective *on* something—the way normative reasons appear. It is the standpoint *of* a free and rational agent.

We should turn finally to motivating reasons. Dancy says that motivating reasons are objective facts, whereas Humeans like Michael Smith take them to be psychic states having a distinctive role in teleological explanation. What is really at issue? "Motivating reason" in Dancy's pen means the agent's reason, the (believed, putative) fact in light of which the agent acted. Smith, however, uses "the agent's normative reason" to refer to this and

¹⁰ Of course, parents might treat, proleptically, the will of even a very young child as entitled to respect as a way of aiding her development into a person with genuine claims to respect.

¹¹ I argue for this claim in "Because I Want It."

“motivating reason” to refer to the desire/belief combination necessary to explain behavior teleologically.¹² This point is sometimes obscured by Dancy as, for example, when he says that psychologism is “the claim that the reasons for which we act are psychological states of ourselves.” (98) But clearly the reasons *on or for which* an agent acts are the agent’s reasons, the considerations that, in her view, bore favorably on so acting and on which she acted. And Smith doesn’t say that these are supplied by the agent’s psychic states.¹³ Rather he thinks, like Dancy, that these are facts the agent takes as normative reasons for acting.

Smith’s view is that we must attribute an appropriate desire/belief pair to the agent if we are to explain his action teleologically, from the intentional perspective. Dancy doesn’t deny this. He agrees that “desire must of course be a necessary part of whatever complex *led* to *A*’s Φ -ing,” but insists that “it cannot be what *motivated* that action.” (86) Desire, as Dancy understands it, is the state of being motivated, where being motivated includes taking something as a reason and being inclined to act on account of it. But someone like Smith could agree to use ‘motivating reason’ in Dancy’s sense and still say that the explanation of intentional action requires a desire (as Dancy seems to agree). So is the issue entirely verbal? Perhaps not. Smith takes the state of desire to be roughly the same as that of having a goal; that is why “reason explanation [is] a species of teleological explanation.”¹⁴ But agents’ actions are only a subset of the things that admit of teleological explanation, so an explanation of this kind may not yet be sufficient to explain them *as actions*. It seems possible for behavior to be goal-directed in some broad sense without being done *for reasons*. The psychic state we need to attribute to agents to make sense of their behavior as actions is taking something as a reason, that is, motivation in Dancy’s sense. It is a virtue of Dancy’s approach, consequently, that it keeps this deliberative perspective front and center.

¹² Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 92-3, 131-3.

¹³ See note 12 and Pettit and Smith, “Backgrounding Desire.”

¹⁴ Michael Smith, “The Humean Theory of Motivation,” *Mind* 96 (1987): 52.