Desire and the Self

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Abstract

This paper is the third of a series investigating the role of desire in philosophy; the first investigated semantic and cognitive aspects of desire, while the second sketched out a minimalist ethics. This paper develops some of the ideas discussed so far. In particular, the relation between desire and intrinsic tendency, the role of desire in creating the self or subject, and the possibility of a broader view of ethics are discussed.

1 Introduction

This paper is a continuation of a line of enquiry developed in the two preceding papers of this series. The first, *Some Semantic and Cognitive Aspects of Desire* (henceforth simply *Aspects*) examined desire in relation to other concepts such as will, need and value, while the second, *Desire as a Foundation for Ethics*, sketched out a minimal theory of ethics based on the assumption that the good is necessarily dependent on the realisation of desire. Here I propose to broaden the discussion to a more universal view of desire, before returning to the question of ethics in the light of these more metaphysical (and in some cases frankly speculative) considerations.

2 Pattern and awareness

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to establish some basic metaphysical concepts without which further discussion would be significantly more difficult. These concepts imply an ontological view which is by no means proven, but has a certain simplicity and utility which commend it.

The first of these concepts may be termed *pattern*. Whether the universe is composed of matter, energy, mathematical relationships or thoughts in the mind of God, the one thing that should be acceptable even to a radical skeptic is that it has some kind of structure. This is not to say—yet—that it has inherent order, but that it contains perceivable differences (black is not blue), similarities (a black cat is similar in some way to a black shoe) and regularities (whatever it is that we call a black cat occurs more than once). “Pattern”, so long as we do not assume that it implies a perfectly orderly pattern, thus seems a reasonable term to use, since it implies some degree of structure without making any claims as to what, if any, substance exhibits this structure.
Any part or aspect of this overall pattern is also a pattern, in that it implies some kind of structure or relationship, both internally and in the context of other patterns (to avoid confusion, I shall, despite my dislike of capitalisation, refer to the overall pattern as “Pattern” with a capital “P”, and patterns within this in lowercase). Thus a shoe is a pattern defined (physically and functionally) in space; the action of putting on a shoe is a more complex pattern defined in both space and time. If we adopt this view, there is no reason to assume that any one aspect of the Pattern is more inherently real than another. There is a tendency, at least in modern Western cultures, to assume that a physical object like a shoe is somehow more real than a quality like blackness, but this is a somewhat arbitrary distinction; we are prioritising one characteristic—“can be worn on the foot”—over another—“does not reflect visible light”. Conversely, if it were possible to prove conclusively that the entire “material” world were simply the dream of a giant turtle, it would still be a real dream, and no less real than the giant turtle in whose mind it existed.

There are thus an infinite number of patterns, including not only what we would view as material objects, but also what we would term events or qualities. It may be objected here that qualities are products of the human mind, but, as we have just seen, the same could be said of physical objects. If one language has a word for “tree” and “shrub”, and another has only one word for both, we would not then assume that there were no real trees or shrubs, or that, Berkeley notwithstanding, they would not exist if no one was around to name them.

Any recurring feature of the Pattern may be regarded as a quality; there exists a quality of “blackness” in the same way that there exists a quality of “shrubbiness”.

We may therefore posit an infinite number of recurring features of the Pattern, which are themselves patterns analogous to physical objects, and from which we identify certain ones which are both perceivable by our senses and useful or meaningful in some way. Berlin and Kay’s seminal work on colour terms provides the best example of this phenomenon: terms for colours vary across languages, to the extent that some languages only have two basic colour terms while others have dozens, but the selection of terms is not arbitrary; for example, there are several languages which have a word for red but not for purple, but none where the reverse is the case.

This does not explain, however, the relationship between patterns—whether they are objects, events or qualities—and the thoughts to which they are in some way related. My idea of blackness is not the same as the recurring pattern to which I apply the word “black”, any more than my idea of “shoe” implies that I have a shoe in my head. A

1Given that there are languages which do not draw the same distinctions between nouns, verbs and adjectives as English does (e.g. in Chinese all adjectives are verbs), a nominalist statement like “There is no such thing as ‘blackness’, only things which we call ‘black’” seems virtually meaningless. One might as well say “There are no black things, only events of blackness which we call ‘things’.”

2The best answer I have heard to the question of whether a tree can fall in a forest if no one is there to witness the event is “Yes, but it’s not a tree”.

3Lakoff and Johnson use this, and other examples, to posit an “experiential realism” which rejects both nominalism and metaphysical realism. While there is much potential in this cognitive approach, it does not significantly alter the fact that whatever qualities the mind/brain is neurally and experientially programmed to recognise or encode, such qualities have an objective existence; even if no human brains existed, the quality of being categorised by a human brain were such a thing to exist as “black” would still be present in the Pattern.
thought is also in some way a pattern, but it is different from the types of pattern we have discussed so far in two ways. Firstly, it is encoded, that is, while there is some kind of relationship between the neural events which correspond to the idea of a shoe and the physical object to which we give the name “shoe”, the mass of information in the “actual” shoe has been reduced and transformed through several extremely complex processes before arriving in my brain. This kind of encoding, though, is not limited to what we normally call “minds”; Gregory Bateson and others have shown that encoding (or semiosis) occurs at quite a “low” level in nature (for example, the genetic code).

The second factor which differentiates a thought from any other pattern is awareness. Awareness is almost impossible to define, but what we have here is reminiscent of substance dualism, assuming of course that by “substance” we do not mean some kind of “stuff”.

What distinguishes this model form Cartesian substance dualism is that thought is not a substance, but simply an encoded pattern which is somehow registered in awareness, or to put it differently, an aware pattern. Thought may thus be viewed as an epiphenomenon of pattern and awareness.

3 Intrinsic tendency and desire

Given that the Pattern is in a constant state of change, and that at least some of these changes are to some extent predictable, we may speak of certain patterns having an intrinsic tendency, that is, a way they will tend to develop if unconstrained by other patterns. To use the classic example, an acorn has an intrinsic tendency to become an oak tree. This is thus similar to Aristotle’s telos, but I prefer not to use this term, in order to avoid taking on some of the other features attributed to telos in Aristotelean philosophy.

The important question here is whether this kind of intrinsic tendency amounts to a purpose or function. John Searle, in one of his numerous arguments against the possibility of artificial intelligence, claims that purpose is unique to minds, which in turn are dependent on (carbon-based) brains; a computer appears to carry out algorithms, but in fact these algorithms only exist in the eye of an observer, since a computer can have no purpose in mind. In an answer to this paper, John Bolender argues that there are indeed “real algorithms” outside the brain, turning Searle’s example of the heart on its head (so to speak). According to Searle, it is meaningless to say that the function of the heart is to pump blood; all this sentence implies is “The heart pumps blood, and I think this is good” (which is why we do not say that the function of the heart is to become clogged by cholesterol, for example). Bolender’s reply is that we can—cautiously—make this claim, because the heart evolved for this reason: no blood, no heart.

This can, of course, lead us into the usual chicken-and-egg problems. Do acorns

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4 In fact, Bateson uses the term “mind” loosely to include such (presumably) non-conscious self-organising phenomena.

5 I have used this term rather than “consciousness”, since the latter is a much-debated concept, and I have no wish to enter into this debate here.

6 It is, in fact, quite similar to the dualism of Shakti (power) and Shiva (awareness) found in some schools of Tantra. Tantriks, though, would claim that this dualism is essentially illusory.
exist in order to grow into oak trees, or do oak trees exist to produce acorns? However, I see no reason here why the acorn/oak process cannot be united in a kind of mutual algorithm, in a way that acorns and pigs are not. Pigs may have an intrinsic tendency to eat acorns, but acorns do not have an intrinsic tendency, in this rather narrower sense, to be eaten by pigs. If all kinds of organism were granted conscious thought, we could imagine a heart saying to itself “Gotta pump that blood, boy,” and acorns thinking “Oh to be a mighty oak,” but we would not imagine a sentient acorn thrilling at the thought of being eaten by a pig.

One purpose of this whimsical example is to illustrate the relationship of intrinsic tendency to desire. For an intrinsic tendency to become a desire, there must be some kind of awareness, however rudimentary. A good example of this is breathing. We do not, under normal circumstances, have a desire to breath because we are unaware of our breathing. However, if we fall in the sea and are prevented from breathing, the discomfort and fear this causes gives us a strong desire to breath, over and above our intrinsic tendency to breath; the lungs will attempt to breath even if a person is unconscious, but awareness seems to carry with it the advantage of bringing in other forms of action, such as climbing out of the water. Awareness, whatever it may be, seems to carry the advantage of uniting what would normally be separate cognitive and physical processes (e.g. the contraction and expansion of the lungs with swimming motions). We may therefore regard desire as the combination of awareness and intrinsic tendency.

4 Desire and the subject

In Aspects, I mentioned the possibility that desire creates the subject, a point to which I now, with some trepidation, return. It would be possible to simply take the idea of the self or subject as a given, like awareness, but this might close off certain fruitful avenues of inquiry.

We might approach this question by considering the possibility of a combination of pattern and awareness with little or no intrinsic tendency: a sentient rock, for example. While it seems to be the case that awareness requires a degree of complexity considerably above this level (at which there is no point in being aware, in any case), we might consider what would happen if such a peculiar state were to exist. Let us also, for the sake of argument, endow our rock with senses, even though there is no conceivable purpose to which they could be put. Would this rock then have a sense of self? Would these various perceptions create a subject able to differentiate between itself and its environment?

While it is impossible to pronounce with any certainty upon such a strange example, it seems unlikely that our creation would have a sense of “I, rock.” Without any intrinsic tendency to speak of, it has no reason to distinguish between “rock” and “not-rock”, so why would it be a subject in any meaningful sense of the word? Some psychologists argue that a baby has such a rudimentary sense of self that it is unable to distinguish between itself and the world; we may assume that a sentient rock would be even less capable of doing so.

It was stated earlier that awareness may provide the advantage of enabling the co-
ordination of normally unconscious processes. While it is premature to say whether awareness did in fact come into being for evolutionary reasons, self-awareness probably did, and probably at the point where parts of the brain became concerned with monitoring other high-level parts of the brain rather than sensorimotor functions. [add reference to Bickerton here]. If awareness of intrinsic tendency is desire, we might speculate that awareness of desire is the key factor in the sense of being a self or subject. Again, this may provide an evolutionary advantage. In the same way that awareness co-ordinates different low-level processes, subjectivity allows the management of different desires. With a sense of self, we are able to think of ourselves as “having” desires. It also allows the creation of second-order desires and values, as defined by Frankfurt and Watson respectively[1, 5].

This is not to say that there is actually some homunculus which “has” these desires; in fact we could equally say that the sense of self is produced by competition between desires (whether or not this has by some evolutionary process become established in our neural hardware). I see no reason here to distinguish between “self”, “sense of self” and “subjectivity”; they seem to amount to more-or-less the same thing, which is to experience the world from a specific point of view, which one is aware of as distinct from other points of view.

This raises the question of whether it is actually possible to lose this sense of self either temporarily or permanently. Clinical and anecdotal evidence does suggest that people can, quite literally, become selfless, at least for a limited time. We may assume, for a start, that a person in deep sleep or coma has no sense of self, and for reasons stated earlier, it would be surprising if a newborn infant had one either. At the other extreme, mystics frequently report a loss of self during meditation or religious ecstasy. The Buddhist view that extinguishing desire causes an extinguishing of the self seems quite compatible with the view put forward here; if there is no awareness of intrinsic tendency, there is no desire (unconscious desire here being better viewed as a form of intrinsic tendency), and if there is no desire, there is probably no self, since there is no reason for it to occur.

It may be objected here that a person who goes into and emerges from deep sleep or mystical ecstasy is still the same person, and therefore there must be some enduring self which persists whether or not the person is aware of it. While this is possible, there is, however, no need to propose it, since there is one thing which already provides such continuity: the body, including the brain. If it were possible to radically change the structure of a person’s brain while they were sleeping, the person who woke up would be, in a very real sense, a completely different person from the one who went to sleep. In fact, this is simply a more extreme form of what happens all the time; if some Buddhists are correct, reincarnation happens from moment to moment.

7 The distinction between these was discussed in the first paper of this series.
8 Nirvana literally means “extinguishing”.
9 This also makes sense of the Buddha’s apparently paradoxical statement that while reincarnation occurs, there is nothing to be reincarnated. [Dig out this reference!]
5 Happiness

The relationship between happiness and desire is, to put it mildly, complex. While it is clear that a continual frustration of desire generally leads to unhappiness, it is by no means so obvious that “the lineaments of satisfied desire” are always indicative of happiness. The positions put forward by various philosophies may be summarised as follows.

Epicureanism

Happiness is a by-product of pleasure. A rational person will desire pleasant states, and avoid unpleasant ones. Pleasure is only to be avoided if its consequences will produce unpleasant events. Desires can be divided into those which are natural and necessary (e.g. food), natural but unnecessary (e.g. sex) and unnatural (e.g. fame).

Stoicism

Happiness is the result of the acceptance of what necessarily occurs. A rational person will realise that some events are inevitable, but his/her reactions to them or within his/her control. It is thus possible to be happy under all circumstances.

Aristotelianism

Happiness arises from the exercise of one’s natural faculties, and is thus not dependent on desire except for the desire to realise one’s potential as a human being.

Buddhism

Desire is the cause of suffering; the happiness which seems to arise from satisfied desire is temporary and therefore illusory. Elimination of desire leads to happiness, through elimination of the self.

Taoism

Desires can be divided into natural and unnatural desires, the former including bodily desires for food, sex or sleep, the latter including desires for power, fame or even goodness. Happiness can be achieved through following only natural desires and attuning oneself to natural processes (Tao), but a certain amount of misery has to be willingly accepted as part of the human condition. This has some similarities to both Epicureanism and Aristotelean teleology (though Taoists have a radically different view of the human telos).

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10 This comes from the commonly-held position in Indian philosophy that only that which is permanent is real.
11 Stick in a quotation from Laozi here
**Monotheistic religions**

Happiness arises from doing, not one’s own will, but God’s. Supreme happiness comes from the soul’s union with, or complete subordination to, God (which is not dissimilar to Stoicism).

**Hobbes**

Happiness comes firstly from the satisfaction of desires, but more importantly, from the expectation that our desires will continue to be fulfilled.

Given this profusion of happinesses, it is hardly surprising that some confusion arises. We might perhaps simplify this by looking at happiness, like other emotions, as a kind of message. Just as, in an unmodified natural state, fear tells us that we are in danger, and lust tells us that we have an opportunity to copulate, happiness is a message that things in general are going pretty well. From this point of view, any of the philosophies mentioned above provide a reasonably good account of at least one type of happiness, despite their radical differences.

At first glance, Hobbes’ perspective seems closest to the observable facts. I have noticed that the times when I am happiest are usually those when I am in good health, I have a stack of good books to read, my work-life is free from complications, there are a few pleasant events to look forward to, and, most importantly, no unpleasant event is looming on the horizon. In other words, some desires are being satisfied, others are likely to be satisfied, and no undesirable events are in the offing.

However, while Hobbes offers a good practical description of a basic form of happiness, he fails to provide any method for attaining happiness under adverse conditions, or accounting for its occurrence. If Hobbes were entirely correct, Buddhist monks would be miserable creatures, and Stoics who cheerfully undergo torture would be simply deranged.

Of course, we may not be talking about the same kind of happiness. Daniel Haybron claims that it is non-contradictory to say that a person is happy in an Aristotelian (“prudential”) sense but unhappy in a hedonic (“psychological”) sense, just as “one could consistently hold Jones to be at the (First National) bank whilst denying that he is at the (river) bank... psychological and prudential happiness are not different theories, or conceptions, of happiness; they are different concepts altogether”[2, 211]. However, he may be overstating his case in claiming that these uses of the word “happy” are merely homonymic. It is a commonplace that Aristotle’s *eudaemonia* is not the same as what we would normally understand by the word “happiness” but also has connotations of “fortunate”, “blessed” and “virtuous” (though of course Aristotle’s virtue is not exactly the same as ours either). Similarly, while “apathy” is a famously bad translation of Stoic *apatheia*, “happiness” is not entirely adequate either, but our view of Stoicism has perhaps been overly influenced by the dour Epictetus and the gloomy Marcus Aurelius; most early Stoics seem to have been happy in the normal sense of the word, and some, like Cleanthes, seem positively bubbly. What we seem to have here is not homonymy or bad translation but a radial category[3]. We may regard as central or prototypical to this category a person who is happy in the psychological sense (hedonic...
happiness) but who is also living “the good life” in the Aristotelian sense of exercising his or her human faculties, and is also unmoved by adverse circumstances—someone like the Dalai Lama, perhaps. However, rather than a simple prototype category where membership and centrality could be assigned according to the criterion of “resemblance to the Dalai Lama”, the category radiates in different directions to give us Aristotelean happiness, hedonic happiness, mystical happiness and so on.

One factor distinguishing these different views of happiness is the degree of contingency. What we have may be classified as follows:

1. a happiness related to the fulfillment of specific desires and the expectation that our desires will continue to be fulfilled;
2. a happiness related to the exercise of our faculties (which for the most part is desirable in itself, or leads to desirable states);
3. a happiness related to desiring whatever happens.

All of these have at least some element of happiness in the normal hedonic sense of the word, though we might argue that they manifest different “flavours” of hedonic happiness. The first type is necessarily contingent on events, and, as Hobbes points out, is necessarily restless, since however many of our desires are fulfilled, there is no possible guarantee that this state will continue. Epicureanism attempts to avoid this problem by concentrating on desires which are easily realised and adopting a carefree attitude towards future events, particularly painful ones; Taoism is similar in this respect (though it also contains some Stoic elements, perhaps).

The second, Aristotelian, view is more inner-directed. It seems to entail a transference of desire from the results of an action to the performing of the action itself. Thus an ignorant person will perform a virtuous act if it results in a desirable state/event (pleasure, love, fame or whatever), while a virtuous person will do the same thing for the satisfaction of performing the act itself. Platitudes about virtue being its own reward aside, this view has much to commend it. Firstly, it reduces the tension between wants and needs I mentioned in Aspects: the more we desire what we need to do in order to achieve our other desires, the happier we are likely to be [4]. Secondly, the more we desire to exercise faculties we already possess, the more likely it is that we will continue to enjoy the satisfaction of our desires; if, for example, I solve mathematical problems for the pleasure of exercising my mental faculties rather than the pleasure of getting the answer right, I will not be so disappointed when I fail to solve one. Although this is not what Aristotle in all likelihood intended, the effect of an Aristotelean view of happiness is to make life a game in which, as the sporting cliche has it, it is not the winning, but the taking part, that matters. This is in fact strikingly similar to the Stoic view, which leads us to our third perspective.

Most Stoics would actually say that what is ultimately good or desirable is not whatever happens, but to act rationally, whatever happens. However, in practice this comes down to more or less the same thing; as Epictetus put it, “if the foot were rational, it would want to get muddy.” This is not very different from Spinoza’s advice to see things from the perspective of eternity; in both cases one desires what must happen. Again, there are parallels with traditional religious mysticism, since if one wants
whatever it is that God wants, and the universe is governed through divine providence (a big assumption, admittedly), one will want whatever happens. In other cases, God him/herself is the object of desire, as exemplified by the mysticism of Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, Sufism, or Bhakti Yoga. All these views have the effect of making the realisation of desire independent of particular external circumstances; all that matters is consistently to desire the right thing.

Whatever view we adopt, it seems that Hobbes was correct in saying that happiness is the result of the expectation of a continued satisfaction of desire, and wrong in assuming that this expectation could only be achieved through the accumulation of power over our circumstances.

Looked in terms of the metaphysical schema outlined earlier, we can perhaps view happiness as the result of our desires—intrinsic tendencies—being compatible with each other and with the tendencies (intrinsic or not) of the patterns around us. This may happen through chance, manipulation of our environment, or acceptance of our environment. In either case, there is a certain compatibility or harmony between internal and external patterns.

Can desires have inherent value?

In Aspects, I mentioned how all of us have some kind of hierarchy of desires, however fluid or even chaotic. The position of any one desire in that hierarchy depends upon its strength, its compatibility with other desires, and also our attitude towards the desire: whether we want to have the desire or value it in general terms. Valuation of a desire tends to push it up the ladder, so to speak, since the valuation is itself a kind of desire.

Up till now, I have proceeded on the assumption that such valuation of desires is purely subjective. I desire to smoke but do not value it; I value hard work but do not desire it in itself. Theoretically, I could do the opposite; that is I could value smoking and not work, but this seems counter-intuitive. Could we then say that some desires are inherently valuable, and if so, what would it mean to say this?

From an ethical point of view, we can ascribe value to desires according to the consequences that they entail. This, however, seems to be a kind of metonymy. We say that it is good to want to help people and bad to want to harm them, but this may well be shorthand for saying that it is good to help people, and therefore the realisation of the desire to help people is good, which is pretty much a tautology. Would there be any sense in which a desire to help people could be good, even if it were never to be realised?

At first glance this is just a restatement of the argument between consequentialism and virtue ethics: from a consequentialist point of view the desire could not have moral significance; according to virtue ethics it would be good because it is a virtue (though it would presumably be a greater good if it were realised). In terms of the ethics of desire, however, it would be possible for the desire to be good regardless of its consequences, if such a desire were in itself desirable. If we value helping people, then we may desire to have the desire to help people, even if it may never be realised, simply because it makes us feel good when our desires and values coincide. We also generally feel the same about other people’s desires; that is, we not only want people to things we like,
but want them to want to do them.

One valuation of desire may thus depend on this “feel-good factor.” We may add to this the factor that while not all desires have external consequences, all desires have internal consequences, no matter how slight. Unfortunately, there is no simple correlation between the two. We might guess that on the whole, desires which, if realised, would have good consequences, will also have beneficial internal effects even if not realised, but this does not follow automatically. My desire to help people, if continually frustrated by external circumstances, may make me a twisted and bitter person, while my desire to seduce my neighbour might, if I have no intention of putting it into practice, may be a pleasant thing to contemplate while waiting for a bus.

Conclusion: ethics reconsidered

In *Desire as a Foundation for Ethics*, I proposed a minimal system of ethics in which a state/event is good for some person or persons to the extent that it is desired in itself or helps to realise a desired state/event. Similarly, one “ought” to perform some action if that action will significantly increase the likelihood of a desired state/event occurring (and does not frustrate other desires). An action can be said to have moral significance if it affects the desires of people, and this leads us to a kind of preference utilitarianism.

This crude consequentialism seems very remote from the metaphysical speculations at the start of this essay. However, we may be able to retrace our steps. If desires can have inherent value, and this value is related to the intrinsic tendency of a person (or their Aristotelian “flourishing”) then we introduce a very flexible kind of teleology. The problem with teleological ethics is less that it assumes that there is something which is right for a being dependent on what it is, but on the Aristotelean view of categorisation, which holds that all things have an essence (*ousia*) which can be described in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. This view has been repeatedly criticised (most eloquently by Wittgenstein and most thoroughly by Lakoff). Post-Aristotelean categorisation requires a post-Aristotelean teleology, if such a thing is possible. I cannot define my intrinsic tendency simply by checking off a list of essential attributes (“I have existence, growth, movement and reason; therefore I am a rational animal; therefore I must behave in such-and-such a way”). However, I cannot ignore what I am either: Sartre notwithstanding, existence does not precede essence, but is pretty much the same thing. Desire cannot exist in a vacuum; if, as I have proposed, desire is in some way an awareness of an intrinsic tendency, an intrinsic tendency comes from pattern, then desire is inseparable from what we are and, importantly, what we have a tendency to become.

References


