

## **Desires, Motives, and Reasons: Scanlon's Rationalistic Moral Psychology**

T.M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other*<sup>1</sup> deserves to be widely studied for its innovative contractualist approach to moral theory. No less deserving of attention, however, are Scanlon's bold primitivism about reasons and his rationalistic moral psychology. Scanlon's views about reasons are foundational to his program in moral theory, since the latter rests on the idea of the reasonable rejection of principles, which he explains in terms of reasons (32-33). Yet Scanlon's ideas about reasons, motives, and desires are also interesting and important in their own right.

Scanlon's philosophical psychology involves several rationalistic theses. First, beliefs about reasons can motivate action without being accompanied by any "further motivating element," such as a desire (34-35). Second, Scanlon holds that desires are more akin to beliefs than we might have thought. He proposes a strikingly original theory of the nature of desire, the idea of desire in the "directed-attention" sense (39). According to this theory, our desires are partially constituted by our taking things to be reasons, where such "takings" crucially share some of the key characteristics of beliefs (7-8). Third, even though desires can motivate action, their power to do so stems from their having this belief-like component (41). And fourth, leaving aside minor qualifications, the common view that desires are a source of reasons is mistaken (8). In Scanlon's rationalistic psychology, moreover, the idea of a reason is taken to be primitive. We will resist all of these theses except the first, and even there we have qualms.

The best way to explain Scanlon's rationalism, we think, is to explore his views about the nature of rationality, reasons, and rational action. Once we have these views on the table, in section 1, we will be in a position to investigate, in section 2, Scanlon's views about the motivational power of beliefs about reasons. In section 3 we discuss why Scanlon is led to the directed-attention conception of desire. Once the directed-attention view is clear, and once Scanlon's reasons for it are understood, we will be able to

---

<sup>1</sup>T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998). Page references in parentheses are to this book.

see, in section 4, why Scanlon rejects the common view that desire is crucial to motivating action. In section 5 we discuss Scanlon's idea that desires do not justify action, and in section 6 we briefly discuss his primitivism about reasons. Before we begin, however, we want to underline the radical nature of Scanlon's proposals.

Scanlon tells us that he used to think "the idea of a desire to be clearer and less controversial than that of a reason." He now thinks, he says, that this initial assumption about reasons and desires "got things almost exactly backward" (7). "Desire," he says, "is not a clearer notion in terms of which the idea of having a reason may be understood; rather, the notion of a desire ... needs to be understood in terms of the idea of taking something to be a reason" (7-8). Indeed, Scanlon takes the idea of a reason to be primitive in his theory; he does not attempt to give a nontrivial explanation of what reasons are (17). And he explains the idea of a desire in terms of the idea of a reason. Desires are partly constituted, he proposes, by "seeming reasons" or by its seeming to a person that there are reasons for something (65). The proposal is the reverse of the more familiar approach of explaining reasons in terms of desire. It has implications for philosophy of mind as well as for the theory of action and practical reason. What is perhaps most surprising is that Scanlon seeks to explain the psychological notion of desire in terms of the normative notion of a reason. We agree with Scanlon that the idea of a desire needs much more attention in the theory of practical reason than it usually gets. Typically, philosophers who explain reasons in terms of desire have little to say about what a desire is, in effect taking the idea of a desire as primitive in their theories, and leaving the explanation of the difference between belief and desire to philosophy of mind. But Scanlon's primitivism about reasons is more radical than this typical kind of primitivism about desire, because rather than being motivated by the idea of a division of philosophical labor, it is motivated by the idea that it is not possible to give a nontrivial explanation of what reasons are.

Scanlon also tells us that he used to think it "unproblematic" that "a person who has a desire has a reason to do what will promote its fulfillment." Now, however, he thinks "it is almost never the case that a person has a reason to do something because it would satisfy a desire that he or she has" (8). Scanlon tells us:

Desires are commonly understood in philosophical discussion to be psychological states which play two fundamental roles. On the one hand, they are supposed to be motivationally efficacious: desires are usually, or perhaps always, what move us to act. On the other hand, they are supposed to be normatively significant: when someone has a reason (in the standard normative sense) to do something this is generally, perhaps even always, true *because* doing this would promote the fulfillment of some desire which the agent has. (37)

In this way, it has been thought, desires can justify action. We will refer to this common understanding of the two characteristics of desire as "Humean." Scanlon has come to believe that desires as conceived in the Humean tradition have neither of these characteristics.

One aspect of the Humean tradition is a widely held belief-desire psychology. Given the influence of this tradition, Scanlon's position about the power of desire to motivate action is quite radical. For on the Humean view, psychology involves at least two crucially different sorts of states with different "directions of fit." Beliefs have a world-to-mind direction of fit; a belief tends to go out of existence in the face of a perception that the world is not the way it represents the world as being. Beliefs "represent" the world as being one way or another; they have truth-values that are determined by the accuracy of the way they represent the world. Desires have the opposite direction of fit. A desire does not tend to go out of existence in the face of a perception that the world is not the desired way. Rather, in the face of such a perception, a desire tends to bring about the intention to change the world so that it comes to be the desired way.<sup>2</sup> Desires do not represent the world in the way that beliefs do, for, although they are either satisfied or not satisfied depending on whether the world accords with them or not, they do not have truth-values. According to Humean psychology, beliefs are motivationally inert; desire is needed in order to move us, because beliefs merely represent things as being a certain way whereas desires involve a "caring" about the way the world is, and caring can alone motivate us to act.

According to Scanlon's directed-attention conception of desire, however, desires do represent things as being a certain way, since they involve taking something to be a reason, and although such takings or seemings are not yet beliefs, they are *like* beliefs in that they can be correct or incorrect (59). Scanlon argues, moreover, that although desires in the directed-attention sense can motivate, they can do so only because they include the representational component of taking something to be a reason (41). This is a broad, bold claim, since it turns on its head the Humean view about the motivational relevance of belief and desire. Scanlon is holding, in effect, that the motivational power of desire is due to its belief-like or cognitive element, the seemings that are partly constitutive of desire. It is not due to any other element that might be present in desire, such as a conative element or a noncognitive "caring" about the way the world is.

A second aspect of the Humean tradition is "Humean subjectivism," the view that desires are the only source of reasons. Humean subjectivism is widely held, and it is perhaps compatible with Scanlon's account of

---

<sup>2</sup>See Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 115.

what desires consist in. Despite this, many philosophers would agree with Scanlon's idea that desires as such do not justify action and are not a source of reasons. This idea is therefore less radical than his idea that desires motivate action only because they include a belief-like component. Nevertheless, Humean subjectivism underlies a great deal of philosophical theorizing about normative reasons, both in moral theory and in the theory of rational choice. The view implies that desires "ground" our reasons or "give" us reasons in the sense that a person with a desire—or a certain kind of desire—has a reason to do whatever would promote its fulfillment, other things being equal. Scanlon tells us that he himself used to accept this idea. He says he never held that all reasons were grounded in desires, but he did think that desires were at least one source of reasons (7). This view has been very widely accepted to the point that Scanlon calls it a "truism" (37), but he has now abandoned it. As we will see, he thinks that desires are not "original sources of reasons" (45) even though they can be sources of "indirect" reasons (44).

### 1. Scanlon on Rationality and the Judgment-Sensitive Attitudes

We have various attitudes, such as beliefs and intentions, that Scanlon describes as "judgment-sensitive attitudes." He says,

These are attitudes that an ideally rational person would come to have whenever that person judged there to be sufficient reasons for them and that would, in an ideally rational person, "extinguish" when that person judged them not to be supported by reasons of the appropriate kind. (20)

An ideally rational person would come to believe what she judged there to be sufficient reason to believe, and she would cease to believe what she judged not to be supported by the right kinds of reasons. Similarly, she would come to intend to do what she judged there to be sufficient reason to (intend to) do, and would cease to intend to do what she judged not to be supported by the appropriate kinds of reasons.

Scanlon appears to favor a kind of functionalist account of the nature of these judgment-sensitive attitudes. He says, "*Having* a judgment-sensitive attitude involves a complicated set of dispositions to think and react in specified ways" (21). So, to intend to do A involves, among other things, "being on the lookout for ways of carrying out this intention." But Scanlon muddies the water in saying, "An attitude is judgment-sensitive if it is part of being the attitude it is that this complex of dispositions *should* be sensitive to a particular kind of judgment" (21, our emphasis). Scanlon does not explain what he means by this. He might intend to say that, for instance, it is essential to beliefs being what they are that they rationally ought to be

sensitive to judgments about evidence. He does say that “[t]he connection with action, which is essential to intentions, determines the kinds of reasons that are appropriate for them” (21). But if this is the kind of thing he means to say, then he is apparently departing from any standard kind of functionalism. For he is saying that “it is part of” a belief’s being the attitude it is that the relevant complex of dispositions ought rationally to be sensitive to judgments about evidence, and “it is part of” an intention’s being the attitude it is that the relevant complex of dispositions ought rationally to be sensitive to judgments about reasons for action. That is, as we might say, norms of rational responsiveness are partly constitutive of belief, intention, and the other judgment-sensitive attitudes. Belief, intention, and the rest are essentially normative in nature.

It would be circular to hold that “it is part of” a belief’s being what it is that it rationally ought to be sensitive to *beliefs* about evidence. These beliefs would in turn be such that “it is part of” their being what they are that they rationally ought to be sensitive to yet further beliefs. Hence, on this proposal, we would lose our grip on what beliefs consist in. But perhaps Scanlon can distinguish the “judgments” about reasons, to which he is saying beliefs rationally ought to be sensitive, from beliefs about reasons.<sup>3</sup> If so, he could escape the charge of circularity.

In any event there is a more interesting issue. On the present interpretation, Scanlon is committed to holding that ordinary psychological explanations of people’s behavior in terms of their beliefs and desires are not empirical explanations, and he is committed to holding that psychology of this ordinary intuitive kind—“folk psychology” as it is often called—is not empirical: it is essentially normative and rationalistic.<sup>4</sup> Scanlon could escape this consequence if he thought that normative claims about rational requirements, such as the claim that beliefs rationally ought to be sensitive to judgments about evidence, were empirical or naturalistic claims. That is, if he were a naturalist about normative claims regarding rational require-

---

<sup>3</sup>He might for instance adopt a “special-attitude” interpretation of judgments about reasons similar to the views proposed by Allan Gibbard and others. He discusses such views and seems somewhat sympathetic to them (58-59). However, this move would simply relocate the problem of circularity. This is because judgments about reasons would still be judgment-sensitive attitudes, even if they were not beliefs, and, on the current interpretation of Scanlon’s views, he would say that they therefore rationally ought to be sensitive to judgments about reasons. The circularity would reappear in this location.

<sup>4</sup>Nick Zangwill defends a view of this kind in “Direction of Fit and Normative Functionalism,” *Philosophical Studies* 91 (1998): 173-203. We argue against his position in David Sobel and David Copp, “Against Direction of Fit Accounts of Belief and Desire,” *Analysis* 61 (2001): 44-53. Nishi Shah proposes a special attitude or expressivist view about belief in “Discovering the Ethics in Belief” (unpublished). According to Shah, to ascribe a belief to someone is to assert that the person is in a certain state of mind and to express one’s acceptance of a norm requiring that the state of mind be sensitive to the evidence.

ments, he could hold what he does about the nature of judgment-sensitive attitudes without being committed to the thesis that folk psychology is nonempirical. But Scanlon is no naturalist. He holds that something like Moore's open-question argument rules out explaining reasons in naturalistic terms, or viewing reasons as natural properties, relations, or entities (57-58, 96-97). He says that the proposition that something would be a good reason for an action "resists identification with any proposition about the natural world" (57). It appears that this position commits him to holding that propositions about rational requirements also cannot be identified with propositions about the natural world. And this seems to commit him to the view that propositions about judgment-sensitive attitudes also are not propositions about the natural world. That is, he seems committed to the view that judgment-sensitive attitudes are at least partly non-natural, since he appears to hold that they are partly constituted by the fact that the corresponding complex of dispositions is subject to certain rational requirements.

Scanlon does not develop or explain his puzzling remark that it is part of a judgment-sensitive attitude's being the attitude it is that the corresponding complex of dispositions should be sensitive to a particular kind of judgment about reasons. Because of this, we doubt that he intended anything like the radical consequences we have been discussing. That is to say, we doubt that he intended to take a view that would commit him to holding that folk psychology is essentially normative and non-natural. In any event, there is another reading of his puzzling remark. On this second reading, what he means to say is, roughly, that an attitude is judgment-sensitive if it is a *normative consequence* of its being the attitude it is—rather than constitutive of its being what it is—that it should be sensitive to a particular kind of judgment.<sup>5</sup> Scanlon's view, so understood, is a rather standard kind of functionalist account of judgment-sensitive attitudes. On this second reading, it would be a consequence of a judgment-sensitive attitude's being what it is that, in a rational person, it *would* be sensitive to a particular kind of judgment about reasons. To understand what this might mean, we need to consider Scanlon's account of rational personhood.

Scanlon maintains that rationality merely consists in an appropriate responsiveness of one's judgment-sensitive attitudes to one's beliefs about relevant reasons. "A rational creature," he says, is "one that has the capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons, and hence to have judgment-sensitive attitudes" (23). And he says, the judgment-sensitive attitudes of a rational creature are responsive to her judgments about reasons in a number of ways. For example, he says, "when a rational creature

---

<sup>5</sup>See our discussion of Zangwill's normative conception of propositional attitudes in Sobel and Copp, "Against Direction of Fit Accounts of Belief and Desire."

does make a conscious reflective judgment that a certain attitude is warranted, she generally comes to have this attitude" (23). For instance, if she judges that she has sufficient reason to form a given intention, she generally forms the intention and the intention is then manifest in her behavior unless she revises this judgment (24). Moreover, says Scanlon, "when a rational creature judges that the reasons she is aware of count decisively against a certain attitude, she generally does not have that attitude, or ceases to have it if she did so before" (24). And for a third example, even when a rational creature forms an attitude unreflectively, Scanlon says, "the formation of these attitudes is generally constrained by general standing judgments about the adequacy of reasons" (24). What all of this means is that rational creatures are characterized by a cluster of dispositions to think and respond in specified ways in the formation and maintenance of judgment-sensitive attitudes given their judgments about reasons. And judgment-sensitive attitudes in turn are such that it follows from their being what they are that, in a rational creature, they would be sensitive to the creature's judgments about reasons. In short, Scanlon can be read as offering a complex functionalist account both of the judgment-sensitive attitudes and of the rationality of creatures like us. This is important because, if this is the view that Scanlon intends to propose, it is at odds with antifunctionalist positions he takes about motivation and desire, as we will explain in section 3.

Scanlon appears to face a choice. On the one hand, his view could be that judgment-sensitive attitudes are essentially normative and non-natural, at least in part, and that for this reason folk psychology is essentially normative and non-natural. This would be quite a radical view that we think he would have emphasized more, if he had intended it, yet we cannot dismiss the possibility that it is actually Scanlon's view. We will refer to it as the "normative psychology view." On the other hand, Scanlon's view could be that judgment-sensitive attitudes are functional states that interact in characteristic ways with the complex functional state that characterizes rational creatures. We will refer to this as the "functionalist psychology view." It would be a standard kind of functionalism because the functional states in question would be ordinary empirical states even though we use the normative term "rational" in referring to the kinds of creatures that are in the states. Scanlon's choice is therefore between a radical and counter-intuitive normative psychology and a mainstream functionalist psychology that conflicts with other aspects of his view.

## **2. The Motivational Power of Beliefs About Reasons**

Scanlon claims that the judgment that there is compelling reason to do A is

sufficient explanation for a rational person's doing A. As he says, "There is no need to invoke an additional form of motivation beyond the judgment and the reasons it recognizes, some further force to, as it were, get the limbs in motion" (34). This position is supported by the accounts of rational agency and the judgment-sensitive attitudes that we discussed in the preceding section, and Scanlon argues that it is also supported by "the phenomenology of judgment and motivation" (34). Scanlon concedes of course that the recognition of a reason can have different effects under different conditions, depending on a variety of factors. However, Scanlon says that this is no evidence that when a person is moved to act by her recognition of a reason there is some "further motivating element in addition to that recognition—something appropriately called a desire." He adds, "On the contrary, when I examine [such] cases it seems to me that in all of them the only source of motivation lies in my taking certain considerations—such as the pleasures of drinking, of eating, of hearing from a friend—as reasons" (35).

Scanlon views himself as here opposing the standard Humean psychology. He describes "the contrary view" as the view "that the recognition of a reason cannot motivate except by way of something else, a desire" (377 n. 16). We think that it is crucial to distinguish three issues. First, can a rational agent's recognition of a reason be the full psychological explanation of her action, without invoking something else? Second, if something else must be invoked in a full psychological explanation of action for a reason, is this something else a desire or a desire-like psychological state? Third, if something else must be invoked, must it be a "source of motivation" or a "motivating element"?

The answer to the first question is clear. Even in Scanlon's own view, something else must be in the background to explain the agent's acting, namely her rationality and the dispositions that are constitutive of her rationality.<sup>6</sup> Interesting problems arise, however, when we attempt to answer the second question, which is whether having these dispositions is best viewed as equivalent to having a set of desires. On a functionalist view, desires are complex sets of dispositions to act and respond, but not just any set of such dispositions qualifies as a desire. Even in Scanlon's view, beliefs about reasons do not motivate except in a person with the right kind of dispositions, dispositions that have the same "direction of fit" as those that constitute desires, at least on a functionalist view of the nature of desire. Scanlon's plausible claim is that in most ordinary cases, this additional set of dispositions does not constitute a desire or set of desires, but instead constitutes a broad condition of the agent, the condition of being

---

<sup>6</sup>For example, a rational person is disposed to act on her beliefs about her reasons.



rational. But it seems to us that it would be similarly plausible to claim that the condition of being rational includes certain desires. In particular, one might claim that a rational agent would *want* or *desire* that her judgment-sensitive attitudes be responsive to her judgments about reasons in all the ways that Scanlon brings to our attention. This latter view is congenial to conventional Humean psychology. It permits the Humean to insist that when a rational person does something because she believes she has compelling reason, there is a background desire—namely, the desire to do what she thinks she has reason to do—that is a part of the complete explanation.

Indeed, it seems to us that the Humean does not need to insist that the dispositions that are constitutive of rationality include any that count as desires. The Humean could accept that the complete explanation of a rational person's doing something because she believes she has compelling reason might not include reference to a desire—as long as it were agreed that the complete explanation would include reference to a desire-like dispositional state. This would amount to no more than a trivial verbal amendment to Humean belief-desire psychology. It would be a trivial amendment because it would retain the idea that a full explanation of action requires reference to states with both belief-like and desire-like directions of fit.

One might object that Humean subjectivism, the Humean view about reasons, must not allow that there could be desires or desire-like states that are rationally mandatory. But this is not so. A Humean could surely say that insofar as a person is rational, she must want to take the means to her ends. Similarly a Humean could allow that any rational agent must want to get her judgment-sensitive attitudes to conform to her beliefs about reasons. We agree that Humean subjectivism must resist the thought that there are any *substantive* concerns that are rationally mandatory, but the idea that a rational person must desire to do what she thinks she has compelling reason to do strikes us as innocuously formal.

This brings us to the third issue, which is whether the background element that Scanlon and the Humean agree must be invoked in a full psychological explanation of action from a belief must be a “motivating element.” Scanlon says that, when he acts on the basis of his recognition of a reason, it seems to him that “the only source of motivation” lies in his taking certain considerations as reasons (35). In such cases, he says, no “further motivating element” beyond the recognition of a reason needs to be cited or is to be found. Given the preceding argument, this means that, in his terminology, not all elements in a full psychological explanation of a person's action count as “motivating elements.” Unfortunately, it is not clear what he means by a “motivating element.” He might have in mind,

first, factors that the agent would naturally cite in explaining her action, or, second, factors that she would need to cite in order to rationalize her action. Or, third, he might have in mind judgment-sensitive attitudes that, as he would say, are “expressed” by intentional actions (21). These three readings tend in the same direction, for in explaining an action, we normally try to rationalize it, and we tend to cite judgment-sensitive attitudes that Scanlon would perhaps take our action to have expressed. Hence, we think, the “motivating factors” lying behind our actions might be, for Scanlon, the judgment-sensitive attitudes that they “express.”

Suppose that I phone a friend for the reason that I anticipate the pleasures of conversation with him. How might I rationalize my action? If I were asked to explain myself, it would be enough to say “I phoned in order to speak with my friend,” or, in a more long-winded way, “I phoned because I anticipated the pleasure of talking with my friend and I took this consideration as a reason to phone.” It would be odd to add, “and I am rational.” Adding this would not help to rationalize or to explain my action because my rationality is a standing condition that would have been present even if I had decided not to phone my friend. We agree with this thought, but it is not at all clear what to make of it. If I break off a conversation with my wife and rush from the room, I could explain myself to her by saying that I rushed away in order to help our child avoid falling down the stairway. It might be odd for me to add that I love our child since this is a standing condition that would have been present even if I hadn’t noticed the need to rush from the room. But this does not mean that my action does not spring in part from my love. Similarly, the fact that it would not help to rationalize my phoning my friend to cite the fact that I am rational does not mean that my rationality was not an explanatory factor standing behind my action. We might say that my phoning “expresses” my taking the anticipation of pleasure as a reason to phone, and Scanlon might think that my phoning does not in the same way “express” my rationality. But this is not clear, especially in the absence of an explanation of this concept of expression. It seems to us that we might view my phoning as expressing my rationality, given that I take the anticipated pleasure of the conversation as a reason to phone.

Despite our quibbles, however, we agree with Scanlon that our rationality is not something that motivates actions in ordinary situations. We are willing to say that it is not a “motivating element,” even though it is not entirely clear what Scanlon means by this. And we are willing to say, in agreement with Scanlon, that in ordinary cases in which a person acts on the basis of the recognition of a reason, there is no *further* motivating element. That is, as Scanlon might say, the action “expresses” the recognition of a reason and does not “express” in the same way any other judgment-

sensitive attitude. Even though Scanlon does not explain what he means by this form of words, Scanlon does appear to have put his finger on a plausible thought.

It is important, however, not to lose sight of the fact that our actions appear to express a wide variety of judgment-sensitive attitudes including desires, hopes, fears, concerns, ambitions, and so on—all of which a Humean would clearly view as desires in a broad sense—as well as intentions and beliefs about reasons. Indeed, it strikes us as much more typical to act from a desire or a fear than to act from the recognition of a reason. In the example of the telephone call, for instance, it would be natural for me to explain myself by saying, “I phoned because I wanted to speak with my friend,” or, “I phoned because I anticipated the pleasure of speaking with my friend.” It would actually be strained and quite unusual to explain my phoning by saying that I recognized that the pleasure I anticipated was a reason to phone. In fact, we think, in typical cases of this kind, a person would act without actually forming the judgment that the consideration on the basis of which she acts is a reason. For example, a person might say he phoned his friend because he wanted to speak with him and deny that any thoughts of reasons crossed his mind.

We are contending, then, that rational agents can act without forming the judgment that the considerations on the basis of which they act are reasons. They act on the basis of desires, broadly understood, such as the desire to speak with a friend, and their actions express such desires without expressing judgments to the effect that they have a reason. So far we have not seen any reason why Scanlon would need to disagree with us. Yet, as we will explain in what follows, on Scanlon’s conception of desires in the directed-attention sense, desires are partly constituted by “takings” that there are reasons, and Scanlon thinks that even when a person acts in accord with a desire in the directed-attention sense, “what supplies the motive for this action is the agent’s perception of some consideration as a reason, not some additional element of ‘desire’” (40–41). In other words, says Scanlon, motivation by a desire in the directed-attention sense is still motivation by the thought of something as a reason, for a desire is simply “one way in which the thought of something as a reason can present itself” (41). We find this idea quite implausible, as we will explain. Scanlon seems to be contending that *all* action is motivated by the thought of something as a reason. We think, however, as we have already said, that “the phenomenology of judgment and motivation” supports the idea that desires quite typically motivate action, and we think that the phenomenology of desire is not congenial to Scanlon’s idea that desires involve the thought of something as a reason. It is time, therefore, to explore Scanlon’s arguments for the directed-attention conception of desire.

### 3. Desires in the Directed-Attention Sense

In contemporary discussions in moral theory and the theory of action, the term “desire” is often used to refer to “pro-attitudes” of any kind, including not only desires in the familiar colloquial sense, but also hopes, fears, wishes, and the like. We have referred to this as the “broad sense” of the term. Scanlon remarks that, in the broad sense of the term, the thought that I have a reason to do something would qualify as a desire (50). He says, “It is uncontroversial that desires in this broad sense are capable of moving us to act, and it is plausible to claim that they are the only things capable of this, since anything that moves us (at least to intentional action) is likely to count as such a desire” (37). Scanlon’s directed-attention conception of desire is intended, however, to be a theory of the nature of desire in the familiar colloquial sense (39). When Scanlon denies that desires are “a special source of motivation, independent of our seeing things as reasons,” he means to deny that states of mind that fit “the commonsense notion of desire,” or that “correspond to the ordinary notion of desire,” are a special source of motivation, independent of our seeing things as reasons (40). He thinks that the conception of desire in the directed-attention sense captures this ordinary notion. In short, Scanlon is theorizing about desires in an ordinary intuitive sense, whereas Humean belief-desire psychology is a theory about desire in some wider sense. This makes it unclear to what extent Scanlon’s discussion conflicts with Humean psychology.

As we saw, Scanlon describes the Humean view he opposes as holding “that the recognition of a reason cannot motivate except by way of something else, a desire” (377 n. 16). This view comes out as nonsensical if, in this context, “desire” is intended to refer to desire in the broad sense sketched by Scanlon, and if Scanlon is correct that the recognition of a reason can qualify as a desire in the broad sense. It would be nonsensical to say that the recognition of a reason cannot motivate unless it is accompanied by a desire if the recognition of the reason would itself qualify as a desire. There is a problem, then, in seeing how best to formulate the Humean view that Scanlon opposes.

The way around this problem is to recognize that although the Humean uses the term “desire” to refer to many states of mind that are not desires in the ordinary intuitive sense, he would not use the term to refer to a belief that one has a reason to do something. Roughly speaking, the Humean would use the term “desire” to refer to any “pro-attitude” or “con-attitude” that lacks truth-value. From here on, we will use the term “wide-desire” to refer to such states. Desires in the ordinary intuitive sense qualify as wide-desires, for, as we assume Scanlon would agree, they are pro-attitudes that are neither true nor false. Similarly, hopes and fears are wide-desires, since

they are also pro- or con-attitudes that lack truth-value.<sup>7</sup> The category of wide-desire is narrower than the category of “pro-attitude,” however, for it excludes pro attitudes that can be assessed as true or false, such as the thought that I have a reason to do something, or my taking it that I have a reason. If by “desire” we mean to refer to wide-desires, we can make sense of the view that the belief that one has a reason “cannot motivate except by way of something else, a desire.” It is the view that motivation requires the presence of a wide-desire.

We will speak of wide-desires as “Humean desires” when we are discussing the Humean conception of their nature. Now of course Scanlon means to attack Humean views of the nature of wide-desires. He certainly means to attack Humean views of the nature of desires in the ordinary intuitive sense. For although he presumably admits that desires do not strictly speaking have a truth-value, he claims that one component of any desire is the thought of something as a reason, and such thoughts *do* have truth-values. This claim would be rejected, we take it, by any Humean account of the nature of desire. And although the Humean thinks that desires are both “motivationally efficacious” and “normatively significant” (37), Scanlon holds that desires motivate because they involve seeing something (else) as a reason. And he holds that it is these (other) things that we see as reasons that actually do give us reasons when our desires are well taken, not the desires themselves.

These claims are radical and striking, but the argument that Scanlon offers for them is reasonably simple to describe. He first looks for clear examples of desires in the Humean sense that are not “the motivational consequences of something else” (37). He takes thirst to be a clear example. He then argues on intuitive grounds that in cases in which it might seem that thirst motivates someone to drink, “the motivational work” is actually done by the agent’s taking something to count as a reason for drinking, something such as the pleasure of alleviating the thirst (38). Scanlon here invokes Warren Quinn’s example of “a man who feels an urge to turn on every radio he sees.”<sup>8</sup> He argues that Quinn’s example shows quite clearly that Humean desires can neither motivate nor justify

---

<sup>7</sup>We here ignore certain complexities. The content of a desire is perhaps best taken to be a proposition. Even if I want some water, it is perhaps best to take the content of my desire to be that I have water. So understood, the content of a desire does have a truth-value. Desires are representational in this sense. But whereas beliefs are properly evaluated on the basis of the truth-value of their content propositions, this is not so in the case of desires. A belief that *p*, when *p* is false, is defective. We call it “false” as well. But a desire that *p* is not necessarily defective if *p* is false and we would not describe it as “false.” Similarly, a hope that *p* or a fear that *p* is not necessarily defective if *p* is false.

<sup>8</sup>See Warren Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place,” in Quinn, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

action and that they fail to include something essential to desires in the ordinary sense, namely a tendency to see something good or desirable about the thing that is desired (38). Scanlon then announces that reflection on the examples leads him to the idea of desire in the directed-attention sense, and he goes on to explain why he finds it plausible that this idea captures the intuitive commonsense idea of desire.

Before we look in detail at Scanlon's argument, we want to introduce Scanlon's idea of desire so that we can see where the argument is meant to lead. Scanlon says,

A person has a desire in the directed-attention sense that P if the thought that P keeps occurring to him or her in a favorable light, that is to say, if the person's attention is directed insistently toward considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P. (39)

Unfortunately, we need to point right away to three possible sources of confusion in Scanlon's formulation.

First, in this official introduction of the notion of a desire in the directed-attention sense, Scanlon writes that a person's having such a desire that P involves the thought that P occurring to the person "in a favorable light," which, he says, means that certain considerations "present themselves" to the person "as counting in favor of P." In virtually every other context, however, although there are slight variations in the way he formulates the idea, he writes that a person's having a desire in the directed-attention sense that P involves the person "taking something to count as a reason for P" (7-8, 39-45, 50, 55, 59) or its "seeming to be a reason" (65) or the like. This change in formulation appears to be simply stylistic. Scanlon wants to argue that desires in the familiar ordinary sense involve taking something to count as a reason. Remember, he wants to show that even when a person acts in accord with a desire in the ordinary sense, "what supplies the motive for this action is the agent's perception of some consideration as a reason, not some additional element of 'desire'" (41). Accordingly, we shall assume that Scanlon means to specify that a person has a desire in the directed-attention sense if she "has a tendency to think of certain considerations" often and "insistently" and "a tendency to see them as reasons for acting in a certain way" (40).

Second, Scanlon writes that a person with a desire in the directed-attention sense has a tendency "to take" certain considerations as reasons. In other words, he says, desires involve "seemings": to a person with a desire in the directed-attention sense it *seems* that there is a reason (65). Scanlon's idea of a "seeming" or a "taking" is difficult and important. There are three important points to bear in mind. In the first place, to take a consideration to be a reason is, for Scanlon, not necessarily a matter of *believing* that it is a reason (65). Rather, for Scanlon, to take something to

be a reason is to have a *thought*, if not a judgment, that it is a reason (41). A person can have a desire for something even if she believes and is quite confident that there is no good reason to seek it. An ex-smoker can desire a cigarette even if she does not believe there is any good reason to have one. We can desire against our better judgment. Despite our better judgment, something can seem to us to be a reason for action (40). Scanlon says that “seemings” arise “independently of our judgment” and can persist despite our judgment (65). In the second place, Scanlon writes that such seemings are not “preconceptual,” but involve “at least a vague appeal to some evaluative category” (65). In fact, Scanlon wants to say that seemings of the relevant kind involve a tendency to take certain considerations as *reasons*. Finally, taking a consideration as a reason is not a matter of having the occurrent thought that it is a reason, although it presumably involves a tendency to have such thoughts (41).

The third possible source of confusion in Scanlon’s formulation is that Scanlon specifies that it is *sufficient* for a person to have a desire in the directed-attention sense that the person has a tendency to think of certain considerations often and insistently and to take them to be reasons for P. This is a mistake. Recall that Scanlon’s idea of a desire in the directed-attention sense is not intended as stipulative; he is trying to explain what we mean by a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense of the term. But it is not true, in the ordinary intuitive sense, that a person with the tendencies specified in Scanlon’s account must necessarily have a desire. Scanlon gives the example of a man who finds himself eagerly looking at computer advertisements in the newspapers. The man keeps thinking about the new models and their features and he takes these features to count in favor of having a new computer. Scanlon says that this man has a desire in the directed-attention sense to have a new computer (43). We agree of course that the man’s thought process is evidence that he has a desire for a new computer, but we think that Scanlon’s description of the case has not ruled out the possibility that the man has no desire at all in the ordinary intuitive sense. If we asked the man how he felt, he might describe himself as having a compulsive preoccupation with new computers and their features. He might insist that although he keeps seeing these features as reasons to have a new computer, he has no desire whatsoever for one and wishes he could rid himself of his preoccupation. This example illustrates why we believe Scanlon was mistaken to write that frequent and insistent thoughts of “considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P” are sufficient for having a desire in the directed-attention sense that P.

What, then, should Scanlon have said? To answer this question, we need to return to Scanlon’s account of the nature of judgment-sensitive attitudes, because desires in the directed-attention sense are among the

judgment-sensitive attitudes that we can have. According to his account of such attitudes, he is committed to regarding desires as consisting in a “set of dispositions to think and react in specified ways,” where this set is subject to a given requirement of responsiveness to judgments about reasons (21). Given this background, we think that Scanlon’s account of desires in the directed-attention sense should be seen as a partial specification of the set of dispositions that is partly constitutive of such desires. Hence, to have “a tendency to think of certain considerations” often and “insistently” and “a tendency to see them as reasons for acting in a certain way” is, we think, only one among the dispositions in the set of dispositions that is partly constitutive of a desire in the directed-attention sense.

With these points of clarification in mind, we are ready to consider Scanlon’s arguments for his account of desire. There are some obvious concerns. Most obvious, perhaps, is that very young children are quite capable of having desires in the ordinary intuitive sense, yet it seems that they are not capable of having desires in the directed-attention sense until they begin to have the concept of a reason. A very young child can have a desire to be picked up and comforted by its mother, for instance, long before it would be plausible to attribute to the child anything more than a preconceptual longing. For Scanlon, one cannot have a desire unless one has the concept of a reason, or at least some evaluative concept or other, but a very young child surely can have desires well before it has any such concepts. It is also possible for an animal, such as my pet cat, to have a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense, yet my cat surely does not have any evaluative concepts. Now Scanlon concedes that there are preconceptual urges, but he argues that the idea of a mere urge “does not in fact fit very well with what we ordinarily mean by a desire” (38). In light of the example of the young child and my cat, we find it difficult to agree. Why, then, does Scanlon believe this?

Scanlon puts a great deal of weight on Warren Quinn’s example of “a man who feels an urge to turn on every radio he sees” (38). Scanlon writes that “It is not that [the man in the example] sees anything *good* about radios’ being turned on; he does not want to hear music or news or even just to avoid silence; he simply is moved to turn on any radio that he sees to be off” (38). We might well ask, “What is the point of the example?” Scanlon writes that “Quinn’s point is that such a functional state lacks the power to rationalize actions.” This idea, however, is not our present concern. Our present concern is with Scanlon’s idea that desire involves an evaluative element. Scanlon goes on to say that, as Quinn points out, “although we may sometimes have such urges, the idea of such a purely functional state fails to capture something essential in the most common cases of desire: desiring something involves having a tendency to see something good or



desirable about it." He adds, "The example of the urge to turn on radios is bizarre because it completely lacks this evaluative element" (38). Quinn's example has been very influential in the literature in leading people to think that desires include an "evaluative element." It is important, then, to take the time to consider Scanlon's use of the example.

We do not think it would seem at all bizarre to describe a young child as having a desire to be cuddled by its mother even in a case in which everyone would presumably concede that the child had no tendency to think of being cuddled as good or desirable. This example suggests to us that intuitions about the radio man are being affected by the fact that the bare urge to turn on radios is so unusual, as well as by the fact that we are imagining that a mature adult has the urge. Normally, we think, a mature adult can control acting on mere urges of this kind and would not let himself be dominated by them. Moreover, it is bizarre that a desire for something like turning on radios should be a basic, unmotivated desire. People are generally expected to be able to rationalize a desire by showing how it is connected with other things that they want. Scanlon gives the example of a person who has a compulsion to wash her hands. He suggests that this compulsion might constitute a desire, but only if, for example, the person is constantly thinking that her hands are dirty (39, 378 n. 22). In such a case, we would say she could rationalize her desire to wash her hands by connecting it with her presumed desire to have clean hands. Similarly, a person with a desire to turn on radios would be expected to be able to rationalize it by connecting it, say, to the desire to avoid silence or to hear music (38). But it is not bizarre to have basic, unmotivated desires. Sometimes we just "feel like" doing things (47). And in many cases, we find ourselves unable to articulate any reason why we desire what we desire. The desires to be healthy, to be clean, to avoid silence, are all candidates for basic desires. We agree that it would be bizarre if a person's desire to wash her hands or to turn on radios were basic in this way. We would call either of these desires compulsive, especially if they interfered with the person's achieving things more important to her. But there are trivial basic unmotivated desires. These are whims and urges. The bizarre nature of the desire in the radio example, and the fact that it is unmotivated, do not seem by themselves to show that the man in the example lacks a genuine desire.

We think that intuitions about the radio man example are also being affected by a *façon de parler*. In cases in which we have an urge that we wish we could get rid of, we often will say we have no desire to do the thing we have an urge to do. For example, ex-smokers often have the urge to smoke, and when experiencing such an urge they often will say that they have no desire to smoke. Similarly, then, if we imagine the radio man to be a mature adult who wishes he were not affected by the urge to turn on ra-

dios, we might well imagine the man to insist that he has no desire at all to turn on radios, he simply finds himself impelled to turn them on. But this seems to us to be a misleading feature of the example. The example of the child shows that the ordinary intuitive conception of desire allows us to categorize mere preconceptual urges as desires. Moreover, in a case in which a person with an urge to smoke or to turn on radios wishes he did not have the urge, the person's remark that he has "no such desire" is, we think, best understood as a way of saying that he does not endorse his urge. As evidence of this, imagine that we confront the radio man and say to him, "Why on earth do you have this desire to turn on radios?" He might reply, "I have no desire at all to turn on radios!" We think that we would not accept this reply at face value, for after all we are imagining that the man goes around turning on radios. What could explain his going around turning on radios if he had no desire whatsoever to turn on radios? Of course, Scanlon would say that the radio man merely has an urge. But even though we might call the man's state a mere urge, it would be entirely appropriate to respond to his denial, "I have no desire at all to turn on radios!" by saying "What do you mean? You go around intentionally turning on radios, one after another, and you tell us you have no desire at all to turn on radios? I understand why you might wish you could resist your desire, but what on earth are you doing going around turning on radios one after another if you have no desire at all to turn on radios?"

As we saw, Scanlon wrote, "the idea of such a purely functional state [as the urge that the radio man experiences] fails to capture something essential in the most common cases of desire: desiring something involves having a tendency to see something good or desirable about it" (38). What does Scanlon mean by saying that the idea fails to capture something essential in *the most common cases* of desire? If there are other cases of desire in the ordinary intuitive sense, cases in which there is no evaluative element, then even if such cases are not "the most common," then seeing something as a reason is not essential to desire. And if so, there is no barrier to classifying the radio man's urge to turn on radios as a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense. Scanlon at least seems committed to there being cases of desire that do not include an evaluative element. And even if the evaluative element is essential to those more common cases of desire in which there *is* an evaluative element, Scanlon's admission—if it is one as opposed to an inadvertent remark—that there are the less common cases in which a person desires something without seeing anything good or desirable about it means that an evaluative element is not essential to desires *as such*.

There is another point that needs to be made about Scanlon's remark that "the idea of such a purely functional state fails to capture something

essential in the most common cases of desire.” For as we saw, although Scanlon faces a choice between the normative psychology view of the nature of the judgment-sensitive attitudes and the functionalist psychology view, there is at least one reading of his own position according to which he himself views judgment-sensitive attitudes as purely functional states. Of course, one might take this sentence in Scanlon’s discussion of the radio man example to be evidence that Scanlon favors the normative psychology account of the judgment-sensitive attitudes, but we are not inclined to do so for three reasons. First, there is already reason to think that Scanlon was not being as careful as he could have been in formulating his thoughts about the radio man example. Second, the normative psychology view is so radical that we continue to think Scanlon would have made it clear that he intended to adopt it, if he really had intended to adopt it. And finally, there is, we think, a better reading of what Scanlon intended to say.

Functional states can be more or less complex. On any plausible view, having a desire to do something is normally much more complex than simply having a disposition to do it. We do not normally desire to blink, although we are disposed to do so. Normally a desire to do something involves a tendency to think about doing it, a tendency to plan ways to do it, a tendency to object when obstacles are put in the way of one’s doing it, and so on. In Quinn’s example, for all we have been told, the radio man has merely a tendency to turn on radios in the immediate vicinity. Are we to imagine that whenever the man walks near a radio, his arm shoots out, his fingers close on the radio’s knob, and his wrist executes a clockwise twist, in the way that some people salivate whenever they pass a hotdog stand? A bare tendency of this kind to blink would not qualify as a *desire* to blink. Perhaps Scanlon had something like this in mind when he said that “the idea of such a purely functional state”—one that consists simply in a disposition to do something like turn on radios—fails to qualify as a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense. If this is what Scanlon meant, and if Scanlon is construing the radio man to have a very thin disposition to turn on radios, we might agree with him that the radio man does not have a desire to turn on radios. But on a very thin construal of the state that the radio man is in, even a Humean could agree with Scanlon that the radio man’s “urge” is too barren to qualify as a “desire” to turn on radios. He does not want to turn on radios. He just finds himself impelled to turn on radios. But it does not follow that what is missing from the radio man example is an element of evaluation, a taking something to be a reason for turning on radios. Perhaps what is missing is a thick enough set of dispositions to constitute a desire—a set that includes dispositions of the kind we sketched earlier in this paragraph.

To Scanlon, however, Quinn’s example shows that to see the radio man

as *desiring* to turn on radios, we must suppose him to see something *desirable* in turning on radios. Accordingly, Scanlon's "directed-attention view" holds that desiring something involves a "tendency to see something good or desirable about it." But imagine that we merely add to the radio man's psychology as described above a tendency to see something desirable in turning on radios. The radio man feels impelled to turn on radios, and he keeps finding himself having the thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if all radios were turned on right now." This sounds to us more like an obsessive thought process than a desire. The man might intelligibly deny wanting to turn on radios and seek professional help to get rid of the obsessive thought. As we are construing Scanlon's view, his proposal is that a desire that P is partly constituted by "a tendency to think of certain considerations" often and "insistently" and "a tendency to see them as reasons for acting [to bring about P]" (40). But this can also sound like an obsessive thought process. Suppose that Quinn's radio man feels impelled to turn on radios and finds his attention being insistently directed toward putative reasons for turning on radios. Even when no radio is in sight, he finds his attention directed toward the silence, the absence of music, the absence of recorded talk. He keeps thinking that these conditions are reasons to turn on radios, and his repose is repeatedly interrupted with the thought, "Wouldn't it be pleasant if every radio in the vicinity were turned on right now." One might naturally suspect that such symptoms are the consequence of an underlying desire. But while this would be a sensible suspicion, it might be instead that something like a brain tumor is the correct diagnosis. The man might insist that although he has this insistent thought, he does not even really believe it would be pleasant to have the radios on, that he has no *desire* to turn on radios, that he is not even *tempted* to turn on radios. In short, it seems possible to combine the feeling of being impelled, which we are imagining is experienced by the radio man, with the condition of finding oneself often and insistently overtaken with the thought that there are reasons for turning on radios, without having any relevant desire at all.

Our discussion of the radio man example has been complex, so we would like to summarize it. The example is under-described. On one understanding of the radio man's psychology, we think it is just as plausible to view him as having a desire to turn on radios as it is to view an infant as having a desire to be cuddled by its mother. We agree that the radio man might deny that he really desires to turn on radios just as an ex-smoker might deny that he really wants a cigarette, but we submit that this way of speaking is a way of saying that the desire in question is not endorsed. On this first understanding of the radio man's psychology, then, we disagree with Scanlon's claim that the radio man's urge is not something that would

ordinarily and intuitively be counted as a desire. On a second way of understanding the radio man's psychology, however, it is simply that the radio man is impelled to turn on radios. He has merely a tendency to turn on radios in the way that a person who tries not to blink would feel impelled to blink. We agree with Scanlon that on this understanding of the situation, the radio man would not intuitively qualify as desiring to turn on radios. Nevertheless, we do not agree that what is missing is the "evaluative element" of a recurrent and insistent pattern of taking there to be reasons for turning on radios. On the contrary, we think that adding such a thought pattern to the radio man's impulsion to turn on radios would not manage to turn the impulsion into a desire. It would merely add a second aspect to the man's obsession with radios. On this second understanding of the radio man's psychology, we think that what is missing is a thick enough pattern of dispositions of the right kind to constitute a desire.

Apparently Scanlon takes it that a dispositional or functional understanding of desire is his opponent's best option, as he focuses on it as the main alternative to his directed-attention view. But if, for example, a Humean borrowed a page from Scanlon and advocated a primitivism about desire, it would seem she could avoid the force of Scanlon's argument. It needs to be remembered that there are alternatives to functionalism. Despite this, however, we will follow Scanlon and focus simply on functionalist alternatives to the directed-attention view. This is reasonable to do, for, among the few philosophical theories of the nature of desire, the most familiar is perhaps a contemporary functionalist account according to which desires are states that have a certain "direction of fit."<sup>9</sup> Yet functionalists do not need to restrict themselves to the notion of direction of fit. A more fully articulated functionalist account of desire in the intuitive sense might view the desire for coffee ice cream, for example, as a disposition to seek coffee ice cream, to plan how to get some, to notice it when it's available in ice cream stores, to eat it, to think about it, and so on. And a functionalist could follow Scanlon and add that a rational person's desire that P would extinguish if the person took there to be good reason for her not to seek P, where a rational person is one with a distinctive range of dispositions, including the disposition not to desire things that there is good reason to avoid. A functionalist account of this kind would be much more complex than the account that is criticized by Scanlon. Scanlon characterizes dispositional accounts as treating a desire as a "mere urge to act, separated from any evaluative element" (38). As we have seen, however, and as the example of a desire for ice cream suggests, the characterization

---

<sup>9</sup>We argue against the view that differences in direction of fit can explain the difference between belief and desire in Sobel and Copp, "Against Direction of Fit Accounts of Belief and Desire."

of “mere urge” is oversimplified. Functionalist accounts have available to them a wide range of options. A plausible functionalist account would not construe a fleeting urge-like disposition as constituting a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense.

Indeed, a functionalist about desire would presumably also be a functionalist about belief and other psychological states, including the state of taking something to be a reason for action. In fact, as we have seen, Scanlon might himself be a functionalist about judgment-sensitive states.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Scanlon cannot plausibly be arguing that the problem in the radio man case is that the radio man’s state of mind is construed as functional. He thinks the example shows that desires include a cognitive and evaluative element, namely, the thought that something is a reason (39). He does not tell us what thoughts are. But on a contemporary functionalist view, thoughts and beliefs are dispositional states just in the way that desires are dispositional states. This means that if there is a problem viewing desires as dispositional states, it will not be solved simply by proposing that a desire includes a cognitive element. For if all mental states are treated as dispositional, then this cognitive element will also be treated as dispositional.

#### 4. Desire and the Motivation of Action

Scanlon holds, as we saw, that action is motivated at a fundamental level by agents’ beliefs or takings about reasons to act. He holds that the ability of desires in the ordinary intuitive sense to motivate action is due to their belief-like element. The power of desires to motivate is not due to the fact that desire involves a noncognitive pro- or con-attitude. This view turns on its head the common belief-desire psychology that we have termed “Humean.” It is necessary, now, to ask why Scanlon believes it.

In his views about the motivation of action, Scanlon follows Donald Davidson. Davidson argued that an intentional explanation of an action must *rationalize* it by revealing “something the agent saw or thought he saw in the action.”<sup>11</sup> In Quinn’s example, the radio man feels impelled. He does not see anything attractive in turning on radios. And because of this, Scanlon thinks that the man’s state of feeling impelled is not a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense and it cannot motivate him to act. As we saw, Scanlon argues that desires in the ordinary intuitive sense can motivate action only because they are partly constituted by the agent’s taking there to be a reason to act.

---

<sup>10</sup>Scanlon himself flirts with a functionalism about belief (p. 35).

<sup>11</sup>Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 3.

It follows from Scanlon's view that when the radio man is brought to turn on radios by his urge to turn on radios, he is not "motivated" by his urge. And given Scanlon's view about action, this presumably means that the radio man is not acting, or at least that he is not acting intentionally. For if the radio man does not take there to be a reason to turn on radios, then, according to Scanlon, he cannot qualify as intentionally turning on radios. Certainly the radio man's urge to turn on radios could not motivate him, in Scanlon's view, since, *ex hypothesi*, his urge lacks any evaluative component. To us, this position is quite implausible. We agree that if we imagine the radio man simply to feel impelled to turn on radios, his behavior in turning on radios might not qualify as action. It might be analogous to the ravings of a lunatic who simply feels impelled to rave. But if instead we imagine the radio man as having a thicker set of dispositions to turn on radios, so that we can describe him as feeling an urge to turn on radios or an attraction to turning on radios or even as wanting to turn on radios in the way that a child might want to be cuddled, then we have no hesitation in counting the radio man's behavior as genuinely intentional even if he lacks the thought that there is something good about turning on radios. Scanlon must apparently reject our view, however, because he thinks that action must be motivated by a belief or thought that there is a reason to act.

What is the argument for this claim? On our best attempt to reconstruct Scanlon's reasoning, it depends on the premise that any psychological state that is capable of motivating action must involve or consist in part in thinking or taking it that one has a reason. It is only thanks to this evaluative element that such a state can motivate action rather than merely cause behavior. We will call this proposition Scanlon's "key premise." What is Scanlon's argument for this premise? We cannot find one that is persuasive.

To be sure, as we saw, Scanlon argues that the judgment that there is a compelling reason to do A can be the only motivating element lying behind a rational person's doing A. It does not follow from this, however, that *whenever* a person acts, her action is motivated by her believing or taking herself to have reason to act. That is, it does not follow that *any* state that is capable of motivating action must involve thinking that one has a reason.

We argued in section 2 that our actions express a wide variety of judgment-sensitive attitudes, including intentions, desires, hopes, fears, concerns, ambitions, and so on, as well as beliefs about reasons, and that we would often cite such attitudes to explain or rationalize our actions. We contended that rational agents typically act on the basis of desires, broadly understood, such as the desire to speak with a friend, without forming judgments to the effect that there is a reason so to act. Even in cases in

which an agent acts from a consideration that she would agree to be a reason to act, such as anticipated pleasure, we argued that she typically would not actually form the *judgment* that the consideration is a reason to act.<sup>12</sup> As far as we can see, Scanlon has no argument to the contrary. That is, we see no argument for the idea that intentional action *must* be motivated by a judgment or taking about reasons for action. We have not seen any reason why Scanlon would *need* to disagree with us, but he certainly appears to disagree with us.

One problem for Scanlon's position, we think, is that an agent can be moved to act intentionally for reasons of which she is unaware. Michael Smith discusses a case in which a vain person walks out of his way in order to get his daily newspaper at a newsstand where he can look at himself in a mirror. Smith claims, and we agree, that the person might be motivated to go to this newsstand by the desire to see himself in the mirror even though he would honestly deny that this is why he is going to this particular newsstand, and even though he would deny that it seems to him that there is a reason for him to look at himself in the mirror.<sup>13</sup> Since we are imagining the man to be vain, he must presumably have a tendency to think often of his appearance, but, despite this, it seems to us that he might lack any tendency to think of his appearance as a reason to look in mirrors. What are we imagining, then, when we describe the man as motivated by his desire to see himself in the mirror? The man is characterized by a cluster of dispositions of the standard kind but he does not admit that he is. He is "attracted" to mirrors, for example. He would not himself cite the desire to see himself in mirrors in order to explain why he goes out of his way to buy his newspaper at the newsstand in question, since, we are imagining, he is not aware that he is moved by any such desire. Yet, we are assuming, the man's action is *actually* brought about by his desire, and, except for the man's lack of awareness, his action is brought about by his desire in the way in which actions are generally brought about by motivational factors. As Scanlon might say, the example is meant to be one in which the man's actions "express" his desire to see himself in the mirror.

Scanlon might respond that a person can take something to be a reason without having "consciously decided to give it that status" (47). He might claim, then, that the mirror man does take it that there is a reason to look at himself in the mirror even though he is not aware that he does. But it is less plausible that the man has *repeated* and *insistent* thoughts of his ap-

---

<sup>12</sup>Perhaps it will be replied, as Nishi Shah suggested to us in correspondence, that in cases in which a person does not act from the judgment that a consideration is a reason, the person's motivations must be sensitive to considerations that she would take to be a reason if she considered the matter. Even if this is correct, however, it does not seem to help Scanlon.

<sup>13</sup>See Smith, *The Moral Problem*, p. 106.



pearance as a reason to look at himself in the mirror given that, as we have imagined the case, he is unaware of having *any* such thoughts. Moreover, in this context, where the issue is the plausibility of the conception of desires in the directed-attention sense, Scanlon is not entitled to use this conception to argue that since the mirror man wants to see himself in the mirror, he must take himself to have a reason to do so. Rather, Scanlon needs to provide evidence or a reason to think that the mirror man takes there to be a reason to look at himself in the mirror even though he sincerely denies that he sees any reason to look at himself in the mirror.

A second problem for Scanlon's position is that people can be motivated by urges or whims, or by what they "just feel like doing." Suppose that a woman stops to smell a rose as she takes a shortcut to the office that leads through a rose garden. She might say that she did this for no particular reason, and insist that she simply felt like smelling the rose. Bernard Gert proposes that a rational person can sometimes do something simply because he felt like it.<sup>14</sup> This claim strikes us as intuitively quite plausible. Scanlon does discuss cases of this kind in which a person does something just because he feels like it. He says, "these are special, rather trivial cases, not central examples that provide the pattern on which all other cases of doing something for a reason should be modeled" (48). To be sure, in this context, Scanlon is discussing whether such feelings or urges give us reasons "in the standard normative sense"; he is not focused on the issue of whether intentional action can be motivated by states of mind that do not involve seeing something as a reason. But he does concede in the passage that a person can be motivated to do something by an urge to do it. His response is that these are not central examples.

This response to our objection is broken-backed. We have conceded that actions can be motivated solely by beliefs to the effect that one has a reason to act, provided there is a background state that is desire-like. This is no objection to belief-desire psychology. What we are now considering is Scanlon's idea that motivation by desire is actually motivation by a taking that one has a reason. In the passage we have just quoted, Scanlon appears to concede that the idea is false. We agree that motivation by an urge is not a suitable model for *all* intentional action, but Scanlon appears to agree in the passage we just quoted that, in effect, motivation by beliefs about reasons also is not a suitable model for all intentional action. Of course, when challenged in this way, Scanlon could retrench and claim that motivation by urges and feelings is actually motivation by seeming reasons. He does seem to say that *many* cases of motivation by urges and

---

<sup>14</sup>Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 60.

feelings are like this (47-48), so he might try to argue that *all* such cases are like this.

We agree, of course, that the woman in the garden must have noticed the rose and felt attracted to the prospect of smelling it, and Scanlon might argue on this basis that she must have taken there to be a reason to smell the rose. But, to us, it seems that this is to over-intellectualize matters. Intuitively, to have a desire is not merely to be disposed to choose, but it is also not necessarily to have a tendency to judge that there is a reason to act. It is rather to be “drawn” to something, or to be “attracted” to something, or to “care” about something. Scanlon seems to over-intellectualize this idea of an attraction in thinking of it as involving a kind of judgment. Moreover, intuitively, an insistent thought, involving an insistent drawing of attention to reasons, need not be involved in desire. We argued before that infants and many of our pets have desires. There are unconscious desires. There are desires of which we are calm and confident. My desire to go home at the end of the day involves no insistent drawing of my attention to the pleasures of the hearth. Yet surely I can be motivated to go home by my desire to go home.

As we said in the preceding section, Scanlon appears to think that he has shown that mere dispositions to act cannot motivate. For in discussing the radio man example, he explicitly talks about the implausibility of thinking that a person is motivated by a “pure” functional state (38). But he cannot mean this. First, any functionalist about desire would likely also be a functionalist about belief, and a functionalist about belief would almost certainly be a functionalist about takings, such as takings that there are reasons. But if we are functionalists about the state of taking it that one has a reason, then the problem in seeing wide-desires, as the Humean conceives of them, as motivating cannot lie in the idea that such states are functional in nature. Second, as we said before, Scanlon himself speaks as though he is a functionalist about all judgment-sensitive attitudes, and if he is, then he is committed to functionalism about desires in the directed-attention sense. Given this, then either Scanlon must give up functionalist psychology in favor of normative psychology of the kind we discussed before, or he must give up the argument that the problem with the Humean account of desire is that it treats desires as functional states. He must say that the problem lies in viewing desire as a certain kind of functional state. Yet, third, Humean belief-desire psychology is not wedded to any particularly crude kind of functionalism about desire. Indeed, it is not wedded to functionalism at all. Nothing would prevent a Humean from being a primitivist about desire who held that the notion of desire is not one that can be given an informative analysis. Scanlon’s argument would be ineffective against a primitivism about desire. Moreover, since Scanlon is a primitivist

about reasons, he cannot have a principled objection to primitivism. To be sure, as we will see, he associates primitivism about reasons with a kind of non-naturalism according to which beliefs about reasons are not beliefs about the “natural world” (60-61), but Nicholas Sturgeon has argued that it is a mistake to confuse primitivism with non-naturalism, and we agree.<sup>15</sup>

We agree with Scanlon, however, that motivation by desire does not seem to the agent to be motivation by a disposition to act nor by a complex set of dispositions. For this picture seems to leave out the intentional aspect of motivation. Moreover, even though we said before that desire intuitively involves being drawn to something or feeling attracted to something, motivation by desire does not seem to the agent to consist merely in being drawn or attracted, for this picture also seems to leave out the intentional aspect. We might put the point this way: A person who is motivated by a desire has chosen or decided to take what she desires as an end. But this would also be inaccurate, since it would not fit the example of the unconscious motivation of the mirror man and it would not fit the kind of spontaneous motivation of the woman in the rose garden.

Accordingly, we think that Humean psychology needs to be made more sophisticated and articulated. As we argued, it needs to distinguish motivational elements in the causal history of an action from other factors and to acknowledge that the desire-like element in the causal history of an action need not always be a “motivational element” in the relevant way. It also needs to explain the distinction between motivation by desire and motivation in the presence of desire, to capture what is involved in deciding to take the object of a desire as an end, and to capture the motivational aspects of unconscious and spontaneous motivation. But these outstanding issues in Humean psychology should not persuade philosophers that it is hopeless.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Desire and the Justification of Action

There is a common view that, as Scanlon says, “a person who has a desire has a reason to do what will promote its fulfillment” (8). On this view, desires are “normatively significant” in the sense that “when someone has a reason ... to do something this is generally, perhaps even always, true *because* doing this would promote the fulfillment of some desire which the agent has” (37). Scanlon disagrees with this common view. He thinks that

---

<sup>15</sup>Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations,” in David Copp and David Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason, and Truth* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), pp. 49-78.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Bratman has been addressing these issues in a series of papers over the past decade. See, for instance, the essays in Michael Bratman, *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

even when desires in the ordinary intuitive sense are understood the way he favors they lack normative significance.

First, he thinks that desires are not “original sources of reasons” regardless of whether they are understood in the Humean way or in the way he favors (45). The issue here is whether my *having* a desire gives me a reason to act. Scanlon thinks that in most ordinary cases it does not. Rather, he thinks, if I have a desire in the ordinary sense that P, then I take a certain consideration as a reason for P. For Scanlon, this taking must be either correct or incorrect. If it is incorrect, then of course the consideration does not give me reason for P. If it is correct, then I do have a reason for P, but the reason is the consideration that counts in favor of P. If we suppose that this consideration might be some *other* desire that has a bearing on our getting P, we are no further on. For again, that other desire would be partly constituted by an appearance that some further consideration counts in favor of P, and that appearance must be either correct or incorrect. Eventually, it appears, there must be some consideration other than a desire that is appearing to me to count in favor of P. But this leaves it open whether, on Scanlon’s account of desire, my having a desire that P could itself give me a reason for P. For Scanlon, for example, the important issue about buying a new computer is whether we would benefit from one rather than whether we want one. If we would benefit, it is those benefits that provide the reason to buy the computer.<sup>17</sup> If we would not benefit, we have no reason to buy a new computer, except, possibly, an indirect reason to get rid of the nagging desire (44). Even in this case, it is not the existence of the desire that gives us a reason but rather the fact that buying the computer will restore psychological equilibrium. Scanlon does allow that unmotivated minor urges, such as the desire to smell a rose in a case in which one “just felt like it,” might provide minor original reasons. But he does not view such urges as desires in the ordinary intuitive sense (48).

Second, Scanlon thinks that a rational agent will not take her desires to determine what reasons she has. Rationality, in the minimal sense Scanlon has in mind, basically consists in conforming one’s attitudes to one’s judgments (25). A rational person takes into account her judgments about her reasons in making decisions about what to do. But a desire that P might involve only an unendorsed thought or appearance of something’s counting in favor of P; it need not involve a judgment or a belief that something counts in favor of P. In forming a *judgment* that you have reason to P you presumably will evaluate the appearances of reasons to P that are partly constitutive of your desires. But if you are rational, you will conform your

---

<sup>17</sup>This thinking signals that Scanlon rejects a desire-based account of benefit. See especially p. 119.

desires to your judgments about your reasons rather than vice versa.

It is nevertheless intuitively quite plausible that desires can ground reasons that justify actions. For example, if I desire some coffee ice cream, then, other things being equal, surely I have a reason to have some. Scanlon discusses such cases, and proposes various ways of understanding them (44-47). In what seems to us to be the crucial passage, he says that although my desiring some ice cream might be *evidence* that I would enjoy it, and so might be evidence that I have a reason to have some, it does not itself give me a reason. The fact that I want the ice cream is itself no reason to have some. Scanlon holds that "it is almost never the case that a person has a reason to do something because it would satisfy a desire" (8). This does not seem to us to be true to how a person views her desires in such cases. When I say "I would like some ice cream" and head to the freezer, I am expressing my desire and acting on it, not reporting a hypothesis about enjoyment that I have formed on the basis of noticing my desire.

It is difficult to avoid having recourse to a notion of desires as non-cognitive appetitive states or pro-attitudes that are "original" sources of reasons. This can be seen in Scanlon's discussion of enjoyment, which he does view as an original source of reasons. Scanlon sensibly wants to allow that "one's 'subjective reactions' are ... of prime significance to the reasons one has" (42). So, for example, he is keen to allow that the fact that I will enjoy coffee ice cream can ground my having a reason to get some (44). Scanlon does not explain what enjoyment is, but his discussion makes clear that enjoyment is supposed to be neither something cognitive, such as an appearance to the effect that something is a reason, nor something in the camp of desire as the Humean conceives of it. He might understand enjoyment as simply the experiencing of a specific kind of tingle. It is not clear what other sort of thing enjoyment could be thought to be, once it is scrubbed clean of any element of Humean desire. But if Scanlon's claim is that we have a reason to go in for enjoyment understood merely as a special kind of tingle, then he is correct to say that this accords no grounding role for desire. Just because of this, however, the claim seems suspect. Why would we have a reason to experience a certain kind of tingle if that tingle was not something towards which we had a positive attitude? After all, why did Scanlon pick this tingle rather than the tingle associated with "pins and needles"? It seems clear that some people might prefer a different kind of tingle. Scanlon might mean, by "enjoyment," a tingle that one favors. But either way, he seems to have failed to make sense of the obvious thought that I have a reason to eat coffee ice cream without appealing to my appetitive noncognitive pro-attitudes. Scanlon's attempt to allow subjective conditions as original sources of reasons by invoking enjoyment seems to be plausible only if enjoyment brings back

the appetitive element that Scanlon was hoping to do without.

To be sure, Scanlon might say that the desire that an experience continue, which, if we are correct, is typically a component of enjoyment, is a desire in the directed-attention sense, so that it involves seeing oneself as having a reason. But first, what is this reason a reason *for*? If Scanlon says it is a reason to desire (in the directed-attention sense) that the experience continue, he must view it as a reason to see oneself as having a reason, which would bring us back to the original question: a reason to see oneself as having a reason for what? And second, what *is* the reason that one is supposed to take oneself to have? The view presumably is not that to enjoy an experience is in part to take the fact that the experience is *enjoyable* as a reason that it continue, for the view is that an experience only *counts* as enjoyable because, in part, we take ourselves to have reason to desire that it continue. Perhaps Scanlon will say that to enjoy an experience is in part to take its intrinsic character to be a reason to desire that it continue. But this proposal introduces new problems. Most important, we think that it over-intellectualizes enjoyment. A child can enjoy ice cream in just the way that an adult can even if the child has no concept of a reason. So again, we think that Scanlon cannot easily avoid having recourse to Humean non-cognitive appetitive elements.

The issue has been whether desires in the ordinary sense are original sources of reasons. We think that the desire to have some ice cream is a good example of a desire in the ordinary sense that is an original source of a reason. It seems to us that having this desire is as good a reason to have some ice cream as the rose woman's desire to smell a rose is a reason to smell a rose. And Scanlon admits that the rose woman's desire might constitute a "minor original reason" (48). This is enough to show, we think, that Scanlon is forced to admit that Humean desires can be original sources of reasons.

## 6. Primitivism About Reasons

If there is one thing that initially seems clear about Scanlon's view, it is that it involves what we earlier called the broad, bold claim that desire in the ordinary intuitive sense involves a cognitive element, a tendency to take it that some consideration gives us a reason or counts in favor of something. Unfortunately, Scanlon announces that he does not mean to deny that claims about reasons express "special attitudes different from belief" (58). He cites Allan Gibbard as the central proponent of the view that reason judgments express special attitudes. On the special-attitude view, "taking something to be a reason" expresses "a certain attitude rather than registering the truth of some fact outside us" (59). So on this view, the

distinctive component of desires in the directed-attention sense is some such attitude rather than a true or false thought. This would seem to undermine the distinctiveness of Scanlon's view and to undermine his claim that desires are not merely appetitive states, since the special attitudes that Gibbard has in mind are in the camp of Humean desire. But Scanlon then tells us that the choice between a special-attitude interpretation of reason claims and a belief interpretation "makes[s] very little difference, as long as there are standards of correctness for attitudes of the relevant sort" (59).

It is not easy to know what to make of this. Even if the so-called special attitudes can be correct or incorrect in some relevant way, it is unclear why the Humean belief-desire theorists would need to reject Scanlon's account of desires in the directed-attention sense if the takings that Scanlon thinks partly constitute them are special attitudes that are not beliefs. The Humean view is committed to the thought that desires are nonrepresentational and different in nature from beliefs. The Humean must therefore resist Scanlon's idea that desires are partly constituted by appearances to the effect that there is a reason if this idea is conjoined with the thesis that such appearances are belief-like. But a Humean would have no need to reject Scanlon's account of desire if the appearances that are partly constitutive of desire on Scanlon's account are nonrepresentational, as they would be on the special attitude view.<sup>18</sup> Now a special attitude view might permit us to judge such appearances as "correct" or "incorrect." But if the correctness of such appearances were merely a matter of their coherence with other such states of the person, then again the Humean would have no reason to resist, as far as we can see.

Whether Scanlon describes claims about reasons as true or false, or merely as correct or incorrect, he still needs to explain what would make our evaluative judgments true or correct. It is precisely this difficulty in understanding what, if anything, could make evaluative beliefs true or correct that has been at the center of metaethical debates for at least a century. Here we come to one of the most intriguing and frustrating elements of Scanlon's book. Scanlon's answer seems to be that beliefs or takings to the effect that one has reason to do something are made true or correct, when true or correct, by the fact that one has reason to do that thing. And this is the end of the matter. What is represented by an appearance to the effect that there is a reason? That there is a reason. What would make this true? That there is a reason. This is what Scanlon means to be warning us about when he announces, near the beginning of the book, that he "will take the idea of a reason as primitive" (17). There is nothing helpful or noncircular

---

<sup>18</sup>Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 8. There are complexities here that we must ignore.

to say about what reasons are, or about what makes claims about reasons true or correct. Thus, the only answer to the question of what makes it true that one has a reason to P is that one has a reason to P (60-61).

Scanlon is keen to avoid the idea that postulating the existence of unexplained "truths" about reasons commits him to an extra ontology over and above the ontology of the natural world. With this in mind, he asks us to compare truths about reasons to truths about mathematics. He thinks we can make sense of there being mathematical truths without needing to posit extra entities to make them true. But Scanlon himself rightfully finds this analogy rather strained and seems to allow that this is a serious ground for doubting that there are primitive truths of the kind he posits (63-64). He has nothing further to say to allay such concerns.

The view that justifying reasons can be reduced to desires has been tempting to some philosophers because the idea of desire has seemed clearer than the idea of a reason. Reasons guide action in *some* sense, but it is unclear what this amounts to. It has seemed that desires guide action in the very clear sense that they motivate action. Hence, some philosophers have thought, we can gain ground if we can defend the idea that reasons can be analyzed in terms of desires. For if this is so, then the action-guiding nature of reasons can be explained in terms of the action-motivating nature of desire. Scanlon's primitivism commits him to rejecting this kind of move as well as the view that desires are a source of reasons. But we need to be given a reason to embrace Scanlon's primitivism.

Scanlon says that the judgment that something is "a *good* reason for some action or belief contains an element of normative force which resists identification with any proposition about the natural world" (57). He claims that "hypothetical analyses of normative terms," such as the view that someone has a reason to P just in case she would want herself to want P under conditions C, are systematic failures (57). The chief explanation he provides for their failure is that a substantive normative judgment to the effect, say, that someone has a reason to P, cannot plausibly be analyzed in terms of subjective reactions, such as desires, since the analysis "remains a mere prediction of my reactions" (58). For example, the thesis that I would want myself to want P under conditions C is a "mere prediction of my reactions." Because of this, Scanlon says, as long as the characterization of the "conditions C" is not question-begging, there will be "an open feel" to the question "I would want myself to want to P under conditions C but do I have a reason to P?" (58). Scanlon concludes from this argument that the judgment that a consideration is a good reason for something cannot be analyzed as a proposition about the natural world, for any such analysis would fail to capture the normativity of reasons. He writes that "open-question arguments show that neither claims about what counts as



evidence nor claims about what count as reasons for action can be plausibly understood as claims about natural facts" (60).

Scanlon's reliance on the open-question argument is worrisome. Many prominent contemporary naturalists who would identify a normative property with a natural property have explicitly tried to blunt the charge that the open-question argument scuttles their project by explaining that they see the purported identity as not conceptual but rather empirical. Presumably competent English speakers could have sensibly doubted that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, but this surely cannot be allowed to thwart the identity claim. Perhaps this popular strategy of the modern naturalist is also subject to important objections, but it does at least attempt to avoid the open-question argument.<sup>19</sup> Scanlon needs to argue against this strategy.

Scanlon's primitivism about reasons will seem theoretically unsatisfying to many, but it does constitute an interesting and novel approach in theorizing about reasons. Since G.E. Moore, we have been familiar with primitivism in moral theory. It would be philosophically valuable to explain and defend primitivism about reasons, but Scanlon has little to say by way of defending this approach. Why, for example, take reasons as primitive but not moral rightness? When is primitivism about an area of discourse justifiable? How should we choose between a vindicating primitivism in an area of discourse and a nonvindicating error-theory or noncognitivism?

## 7. Conclusion

We have explored Scanlon's rationalistic moral psychology and his theory about the nature of desire and the relation between desire and reasons. Scanlon opposes his views to Humean psychology and to Humean subjectivism about reasons. As we have seen, his views are rationalistic in several respects. First, he argues that beliefs about reasons can move us to action without any additional motivating element. Second, he holds that a desire in the ordinary intuitive sense is partially constituted by taking something to be a reason, where such "takings" are cognitive representational states akin to beliefs. To be sure, he wavers on whether to think of such takings as representational states akin to beliefs, but we argued that a Humean could accept Scanlon's view if he adopted a noncognitivist special-attitude account of takings. Third, although Scanlon thinks that desires in the ordinary sense can motivate action, he argues that they can do so only because they are partly constituted by such takings. And fourth, leaving

---

<sup>19</sup>Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward Fin de Siecle Ethics: Some Trends," *The Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 115-89, pp. 115-19.

aside whims, Scanlon thinks that the Humean view that desires are a source of reasons is mistaken (8). In Scanlon's rationalistic psychology, however, the idea of a reason is taken as a primitive, and reasons—and beliefs and takings about reasons—are crucial to justifying and motivating action.

We argued against most of these rationalistic doctrines. We did accept Scanlon's thesis that beliefs about reasons can move us to action without any additional motivating element, but we argued that it should be understood in a way that is compatible with Humean psychology. We argued that Scanlon fails to provide an adequate reason for accepting his directed-attention account of the nature of desire; that he fails to underwrite his view that desires cannot motivate unless they are partly constituted by takings that there are reasons; and that he fails to show that desires are not a source of reasons. In addition, we argued that Scanlon must choose between a functionalist account of desires and other judgment-sensitive attitudes and a normative account. His arguments would be weakened by a functionalist account, but if he were to choose the normative account instead, his non-naturalism would force him to treat psychology as non-natural and to treat our judgment-sensitive attitudes as not being part of the natural world. The latter position is quite unpalatable, in our view.

Despite our criticisms of Scanlon's rationalistic psychology, we do think that he has identified two crucial gaps in Humean views of desire and action. First, the view that action is motivated by desire seems to miss the intentional aspect of action and motivation. We do not merely act under the force of desire, but in typical cases we intend to act in light of our desires. An adequate belief-desire psychology must account for this, and we agree that it is not a simple gap to fill. Second, judgments about reasons are normative and for this reason cannot obviously be identified with any proposition about desire, such as a proposition about what would be desired in certain hypothetical circumstances. Judgments about reasons seem to have an action-guiding force that is possessed by no judgment about the natural world. These gaps need to be filled before a Humean account can be fully satisfactory.<sup>20</sup>

**David Copp and David Sobel**  
Department of Philosophy  
Bowling Green State University  
dicopp@bgnet.bgsu.edu  
sobel@bgnet.bgsu.edu

---

<sup>20</sup>David Sobel's work on this paper was supported by a Taft Post-Doctoral Fellowship from the University of Cincinnati. We would like to thank Tim Scanlon and Nishi Shah for very helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper.

Copyright of Social Theory & Practice is the property of Florida State University / Dept. of Philosophy and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.