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## DESIRES, WHIMS AND VALUES

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**ABSTRACT.** Neo-Humean instrumentalists hold that an agent's reasons for acting are grounded in the agent's desires. Numerous objections have been leveled against this view, but the most compelling concerns the problem of "alien desires" – desires with which the agent does not identify. The standard version of neo-Humeanism holds that these desires, like any others, generate reasons for acting. A variant of neo-Humeanism that grounds an agent's reasons on her values, rather than all of her desires, avoids this implication, but at the cost of denying that we have reasons to act on innocent whims. A version of neo-Humeanism that holds that an agent has reason to satisfy all of her desires that are not in conflict with her values appears to allow us to grant the reason-giving force of innocent whims while denying the reason-giving force of alien desires.

**KEY WORDS:** desire, Humeanism, practical rationality, reasons for acting, values

Desires generate reasons for acting – or so it seems to many. It is natural to think that if you desire some state of affairs you have a reason (typically overrideable, of course) to do what you can to bring about that state of affairs. Still, it takes little familiarity with philosophical discussions of the concept of reasons for acting to know that this initially attractive picture is hardly uncontroversial. The picture becomes all the more controversial if it is painted so as to require that *all* desires generate reasons, and more controversial still if it requires that *only* a desire can generate a reason for acting.<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of respects in which the picture may be thought troubling. Some object to the implication (waiting in the wings if not already on stage) that a person can, given unusual enough desires, have a reason, and perhaps a sufficient reason, to do absolutely anything whatsoever. Finding this implication implausible, they look for something that inhibits the ability of certain desires to generate reasons or, alternatively, for some other source of reasons to combat the force of those generated by certain desires. Other critics register a more modest objection. That one could, given suitably bizarre desires, have a reason to perform absolutely any action, they do not deny. But, they think, it is a crude oversimplification to hold that every desire generates a reason for acting.

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<sup>1</sup> More precisely, the further controversy is generated by the view that every reason for acting must be grounded, at least in part, on one of the agent's desires.



A variety of attempts have been made to show that some desires are “rationally impotent” – that they do not generate reasons for acting. Most of these attempts fault specific desires because of their content or their logical relation to the agent’s other desires. I find few of these attempts compelling and have argued against them elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Here, I intend to present a challenge to the view that all desires generate reasons for acting – a challenge that *does* seem compelling.

This challenge might appear to be a frontal assault on the neo-Humean theory of reasons for acting (or rational advisability) – a view I have regularly defended.<sup>3</sup> Neo-Humeanism is often taken to hold that all desires an agent has will generate reasons, and that reasons are generated only by the agent’s desires. Though I am not deeply concerned with terminological issues, part of my project will be to argue for a slightly broader understanding of the neo-Humean approach to reasons for acting. I will sketch two views that acknowledge the rational impotence of certain desires but should, I think, be understood as versions of neo-Humeanism because of deep affinities they share with more standard versions of neo-Humeanism. Though the views differ from one another in important ways, both ground an agent’s reasons entirely on subjective conative states of the agent.

Still, I believe that the especially attractive features of the specific theory of reasons for acting I shall suggest are the result of sophisticating the standard neo-Humean view in ways that many anti-Humeans would find desirable. In particular, greater weight is placed on the notion of an agent who can be active in choosing the desires that will be sources of reasons for him. Practical rationality can involve a creative act of self-definition that neo-Humeans have typically failed to recognize or appreciate.

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<sup>2</sup> See Donald C. Hubin and David Drebusenko, “Quicksand in the Contract Ground,” *Philosophical Studies* 44 (1983), pp. 115–120; Donald C. Hubin and Michael Perkins, “Self-Subverting Principles of Choice,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1986), pp. 1–10; Donald C. Hubin, “Irrational Desires,” *Philosophical Studies* 62 (1991), pp. 23–44; and Donald C. Hubin, “Hypothetical Motivation,” *Noûs* 30 (1996), pp. 31–54.

<sup>3</sup> See Hubin, “Irrational Desires,” pp. 23–44, Hubin, “Hypothetical Motivation,” pp. 31–54 and Donald C. Hubin, “What’s Special about Humeanism,” *Noûs* 33 (1999), pp. 30–45. This position is often referred to simply as “Humeanism.” However, since there is significant controversy over whether Hume even had a theory of reasons for *acting*, it seems better to avoid the suggestion that this is *Hume’s* view. See Stephen L. Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 53; Hubin, “Irrational Desires,” pp. 26–28; and Elijah Milgram, “Was Hume a Humean?,” *Hume Studies* 21 (1995), pp. 75–93.

## NEO-HUMEANISM

I take neo-Humeanism to be the view that the rational advisability of actions is grounded ultimately on subjective, contingent, conative states of the agent. These states are typically, if incautiously, called “desires” by neo-Humeans. For ease of exposition in this preliminary sketch of neo-Humeanism, I will follow this practice.

A very crude form of neo-Humeanism would hold that all of an agent’s actual desires, and only that agent’s actual desires, generate reasons for acting for that agent. This crude theory encounters damning objections from the outset. One is the familiar problem of desires based on false beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Gil desires the attention of the gorgeous Gwendolyn. He learns that Gwendolyn is attracted to well-muscled men. Flipping through a comic book, Gil sees an ad for the Charles Atlas Body Building Course and, gullible guy that he is, immediately desires to purchase the course. Unfortunately, Gil’s belief that the Charles Atlas course will give him a well-muscled body is completely false. This crude form of neo-Humeanism still holds that there is a reason for Gil to purchase the course. If Gil’s belief were reasonable, even though false, there might be a sense in which he is acting rationally in sending in his money for the course, but doing so is not what someone, aware of the facts, would advise him to do in order to achieve his ends. Neither is it the advice Gil would seek; he would want to know how to achieve the body that would capture Gwendolyn’s attention – not how to do what *he thinks* would achieve such a body. He wants to know what action is rationally advisable, not what action would be rationally advisable were the world the way he happens to believe it to be.

This problem with crude neo-Humeanism has usually been addressed by “correcting” the desires in a specific way – by holding that it is not all of an agent’s desires that generate reasons for acting, but only those that have been reflectively endorsed in light of all relevant truths or, more commonly, that *would be* so endorsed in light of vivid awareness of all relevant truths. As I have just stated it, the proposed correction of the

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<sup>4</sup> The problem of desires based on false beliefs was recognized by Hume, himself. He acknowledges two senses in which an affection can be considered unreasonable:

First, When a passion, such as hope or fear, grief or joy, despair or security, is founded on the supposition of the existence of objects, which really do not exist. Secondly, When in exerting any passion in action, we chuse means insufficient for the design’d end, and deceive ourselves in the judgment of causes and effects [David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 416].

agent's desiderative profile is merely a filtering process; on this view actual desires that would not survive the hypothetical process would be deemed rationally impotent but the agent would not be taken to have reasons based on desires that would be produced by the process. Usually, though, the corrective measures are generative, too; they result in the agent having reasons to act in virtue of desires she does not have, but would have under idealized conditions.

This approach to correcting the desiderative profile of the agent is initially so attractive that it is almost universally accepted by those adopting a neo-Humean approach, as well as by many who reject this approach but borrow from it. However, the attractions should be resisted, I think. These theories, which I call "hypothetical motivation theories of reasons for acting," encounter a serious problem.<sup>5</sup> The idealizing process itself may create "counterfeits" – desires that we do not believe should ground reasons for the agent to act – or it may produce "truants" by extinguishing desires we believe the agent does have a reason on which to act.<sup>6</sup> For example, it may be true of a person who loves the taste of tripe that she would, if vividly aware of the source of tripe, both lose her desire to eat tripe and gain a desire never to eat tripe again regardless of the taste of the tripe. These dispositions may be based solely on squeamishness – not some principled opposition to eating the stomach lining of animals. Perhaps the mere knowledge of the source of tripe does not affect her desires at all. It is the *vivid* awareness of the source of her meal that alters her conative states. It seems reasonable to hold that this person's current desire to eat tripe gives her a reason to do so and, in the absence of any current desires not to eat tripe (or desires that would be satisfied by not eating tripe), she has no reason not to eat tripe. The actual desire to eat tripe is rendered truant by the hypothetical process and the counterfactual desire not to eat tripe is a counterfeit of the process.

A different, and preferable, approach to refining the crude form of neo-Humean instrumentalism begins by noting that there is a structure to desiderative profiles. Many desires are "derivative" in the sense that they are dependent in obvious ways on other, more basic, desires and certain beliefs of the agent. So, for example, the desire to put money in a vending machine may be derived from the desire to get a candy bar and the belief that putting money in the machine will get the candy bar. The desire for

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Arneson refers to this as "the decisive objection" to such theories. See Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999), pp. 113–142.

<sup>6</sup> I have argued this both in Hubin, "Irrational Desires," pp. 29–34 and, extensively, in Hubin, "Hypothetical Motivation," pp. 31–54.

the candy bar itself may be derivative from a desire to satisfy a craving and the belief that eating a candy bar would satisfy that craving.

On the neo-Humean view, this process of grounding desires on beliefs and more basic desires must come to an end. And the end it comes to is a basic desire. On any theory properly considered neo-Humean, these desires are beyond *intrinsic rational* criticism. They can, of course, be criticized as immoral or imprudent – but not as intrinsically *irrational*. And, while there may be *instrumental* reasons why an agent should rid herself of some of these desires – and, so, they can be said to be “contrary to reason” in this sense – they cannot be *intrinsically* or non-instrumentally contrary to reason.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, there could be *instrumental* reasons why an agent should develop a basic desire.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, such a desire could be “rationally required”; it could be one that the agent has an overriding reason to develop. But it would not, thereby, be intrinsically rationally required. The requirement to develop the desire would be grounded on the existence of other desires of the agent. (Practical) reason is, the neo-Humean insists, the “slave of the passions.”<sup>9</sup>

What the agent has most reason to do is what would best satisfy the agent’s basic (non-derivative) desires. These are the objects and states of affairs that the agent intrinsically desires – desires independently of the causal, criterial or mereological relations they bear to other objects and states of affairs. Grounding rational advisability on the intrinsic desires of an agent avoids the problem of desires based on false beliefs; it allows rational advice to be *corrective* – to instruct the agent to act differently from how he intends or desires to act. To return to gullible Gil, if his desire for Gwendolyn’s attention were a basic desire, then he would, in virtue of having that desire, have a reason to take actions that are means to achieving her attention. Purchasing the Charles Atlas Body Building Course is, according to our story, not a means to the end that he intrinsically desires. There may be some other reason why Gil should purchase this course, but there is none based on his desire that is derivative from his desire to become more muscular to impress Gwendolyn.

On this neo-Humean account, these basic desires always generate reasons for acting in the sense specified – that is to say, there is a reason in the sense relevant to rational advisability to perform actions that satisfy

<sup>7</sup> See Donald C. Hubin, “The Groundless Normativity of Instrumental Rationality,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001), pp. 445–468, for a fuller discussion of these issues.

<sup>8</sup> David Schmitz’s “maeutic ends” are ends that are realized by coming to have other “ends in themselves” [See David Schmitz, *Rational Choice and Moral Agency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995)].

<sup>9</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 415.

these desires – and nothing else generates such reasons. So stated, the theory is initially plausible – indeed, Nozick calls it “the default theory”<sup>10</sup> – and elegant. It has not lacked for critics, though, and where supporters see an elegant theory, critics see a simplistic one. These critics raise a number of cases that are intended to cast doubt on the initially plausible neo-Humean theory.

#### SOME ALLEGEDLY PROBLEMATIC CASES

I will begin with some putatively problematic phenomena – phenomena that some take to provide a plausible *prima facie* case against the neo-Humean view. The phenomena discussed in this section do not, in my opinion, force a modification in the standard neo-Humean theory. The belief that they do results, I suspect, from an uncharitable understanding of that standard theory as well as a methodology that is, in its effect, question-begging.

The first two kinds of problem cases I will discuss are illustrated in William Wymark Jacobs’ well-known short story “The Monkey’s Paw.”<sup>11</sup> In this memorable story – which is, perhaps, recounted to older children around a campfire more often than it is read – Mr. White acquires a magic mummified monkey’s paw. This talisman, which was cursed by an old fakir who wished “to show that fate ruled people’s lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow,”<sup>12</sup> would grant three wishes to each of its first three owners. Mr. White receives the paw from an acquaintance, who is the second to own the paw. The acquaintance urges Mr. White to destroy the paw; and, if he must use it, to employ it sensibly. Mr. White, at the suggestion of his son Herbert, wishes for the relatively modest sum of 200£ – enough to pay off his house. This wish expresses, we will assume, one of Mr. White’s desires.

The wish is granted, but the money comes to Mr. and Mrs. White as a result of a horrible accident that kills their son, Herbert. At the repeated urging of his wife, Mr. White finally invokes the power of the monkey’s paw a second time – this time to wish his son alive again. As the Whites should have expected after the way in which the first wish turned out, this wish turns out poorly, too. Herbert lives again, but unfortunately not as the Whites intended. Though Jacobs does not describe Herbert after the second

<sup>10</sup> Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 133.

<sup>11</sup> William Wymark Jacobs, “The Monkey’s Paw,” in *The Lady of the Barge* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1902), pp. 27–53.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, “The Monkey’s Paw,” p. 33.

wish, it appears that what has been reanimated is a week-old, partially decayed, mangled, bloody corpse – no doubt, wracked with pain.<sup>13</sup> When Herbert finally makes it to the Whites' door, Mrs. White, who either has not understood how the wish has been granted or does not care, tries to open the door to let him in. Mr. White hurries to find the monkey's paw and makes his last wish. His final wish was, as was the final wish of the first owner of the monkey's paw, a wish for death – in this case, the death of his son.

Mr. White's first two wishes go horribly wrong, as is typical of (perhaps essential to) fiction of this genre. But they go wrong for different reasons, I think. In the first case, Mr. White gets something he desires, but at the cost of something he desires so much more. In the second case, Mr. and Mrs. White do not get what they desire at all.

### *Overwhelmed Desires*

Some have seen problems for a neo-Humean theory arising from its commitment to the view that desires (or some similar subjective, contingent conative state of an agent) can generate reasons for acting even in the presence of overwhelming reasons to refrain from acting in that way. In "The Monkey's Paw," Mr. White does not know at what cost he will be granted his wish for 200£. His ignorance of this, though, does not matter to the rational advisability of making the wish; the point of developing a conception of rational advisability is to sidestep the ignorance and mistaken beliefs of the agent. The issue is not whether Mr. White has reason to think that he ought, rationally, to make the first wish. Perhaps, not knowing the cost of its fulfillment, he does. The crucial issue is whether there is some reason *in the sense relevant to rational advisability* for Mr. White to make the first wish.<sup>14</sup> Some think not.<sup>15</sup> And some take this to generate a problem for the neo-Humean.

<sup>13</sup> When the Whites are arguing about whether to use the talisman to bring their son back to life, Mr. White says, "He has been dead ten days, and besides he – I would not tell you else, but – I could only recognize him by his clothing. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how now?" (Jacobs, "The Monkey's Paw," pp. 48–49).

<sup>14</sup> Some authors would invoke here a distinction between there *being* a reason for an agent to act and the agent *having* a reason for acting [For example, see Russell Grice, *The Grounds of Moral Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 12]. There is a reason for Mr. White to refrain from making the first wish, based on the (implied) causal connection with his son's death. However, not knowing of this connection, Mr. White may *have* no reason not to make the wish.

<sup>15</sup> I suspect this would be the answer given by Jonathan Dancy based on his discussion of a similar case [Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 181] that was constructed by Larry Temkin.

There is no doubt that Mr. White desires the money. Does this desire require the neo-Humean to say that he has a reason to wish for the money (at the cost of his son's life)? In answering this question, it is worth noting first, that Mr. White is not a money fetishist. He desires the money only instrumentally. The best version of the standard neo-Humean account of rational advisability holds that what an agent has reason to do is grounded on his *intrinsic* desires. So, perhaps the neo-Humean could argue that Mr. White has no reason to wish for the money because, at least so far as we know, he has no *intrinsic* desire that would be satisfied by getting the money.

Such a reply would, though, be a cheap one – quibbling with the example rather than addressing the point behind it. Surely, we can imagine that the money Mr. White wished for resulted in the satisfaction of some intrinsic desire. Perhaps he intrinsically desires to be a person who owns his home free and clear. If so, a critic might charge, the neo-Humean must admit that Mr. White has a reason to wish for the money, even though this wish will result in the death of his son. And, the critic might claim, this is manifestly false and, so, neo-Humeanism must be rejected.

This sort of case should not trouble the neo-Humean much. The obvious solution is a plausible one, too. The neo-Humean should admit that an agent such as Mr. White does have *some* reason to perform the action that costs him the life of his son, but insist that this reason is “swamped” by his other reasons. As a result, while there surely is pragmatic oddity in saying that there is a reason for him to make the wish, we need not acknowledge any semantic oddity in the claim. We have a clear explanation for our reluctance to say that Mr. White has a reason to make the wish that does not entail that he does not, in fact, have such a reason and, so, does not cause a problem for the neo-Humean.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Incompletely Specified Desires*

What has gone wrong for Mr. White's second wish is, I think, somewhat different. With respect to the first wish, at least as we fleshed out the case, Mr. White got something he intrinsically desired. His second wish has not brought him anything he intrinsically desired. Mr. White wanted his son to be alive again, to be sure. But, in describing his desires in this way, we do not mean to imply that every state of his son being alive was more desirable to him than the current state in which he is dead.

Given all of his desires, of course, the world is much worse for him after his first wish is granted than it was before this. And the world is worse still after his second wish is granted. However, there is a difference between

<sup>16</sup> For a more extended discussion of similar, and related, cases, see Hubin, “What's Special about Humeanism,” pp. 33ff.



what has gone wrong with the first wish and what has gone wrong with the second. With respect to the second wish, one might say, he got what he wished for, but not what he wanted. The state of affairs that came to pass fulfilled, Mr. White's expressed wish in the technical way that many "deal with the devil" stories portray. However, his expressed wish did not adequately capture what he desired, even with respect only to the condition of his son.

The problem here is one that I have previously labeled "incompletely specified desires."<sup>17</sup> I do not believe that the neo-Humean need be troubled by this problem. The neo-Humean holds that what is rationally advisable for an agent is grounded in what the agent intrinsically desires – not in a misspecification of those desires. An agent may describe his desires incompletely or incorrectly; she may even conceptualize them incorrectly in her thinking about them. To ground the rational advisability of an action on what the agent says she intrinsically desires or even on what she *believes* she intrinsically desires is to give a leading role to linguistic facts or cognitive states. The neo-Humean, in contrast, grounds rational advisability in the agent's conative states. To say exactly what these states are is a difficult task, of course.<sup>18</sup> Surely, though, even in the absence of a worked out theory of the nature of conative states, the neo-Humean is free to hold them to be distinct existences – mental states about which the agent might have false beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hubin, "What's Special about Humeanism," p. 34ff.

<sup>18</sup> Many have attempted to get a handle on the distinction between cognitive states and conative states in terms of the so-called *direction of fit* between the world and the state of mind. Intuitively, cognitive states, like belief, have a "mind-to-world" direction of fit while conative states, such as desire, have a "world-to-mind" direction of fit [See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957); M. Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); J. R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and N. Zangwill, "Direction of Fit and Normative Functionalism," *Philosophical Studies* 91 (1998), pp. 173–203, for example]. One of the most sophisticated versions of this plausible approach is developed by I. L. Humberstone (I. L. Humberstone, "Direction of Fit," *Mind* 101 (1992), pp. 59–83. The entire "direction of fit" approach is, though, challenged in David Sobel and David Copp, "Against Direction of Fit Accounts of Belief and Desire," *Analysis* 61 (2001), pp. 44–53.

<sup>19</sup> The fact that an agent may hold false beliefs about her basic desires makes it possible, of course, for an agent to be resistant to even correct rational advice. Ordinarily, once an agent is clear about the connection (causal, criterial or mereological) to the valued state of affairs, she is not resistant to the advice. However, given the possibility of false beliefs about one's values, an agent may, sincerely but incorrectly, deny that she has a reason to perform an action even after she is well aware of the connection to the value in question because she denies that she holds this value. (I am grateful to an anonymous referee *The Journal of Ethics* for drawing my attention to this implication of the view.)

*Whims and Pseudo-Desires*

Whims are common, of course. Some people report suicidal whims: driving on a busy highway, they imagine – not with horror but fascination – driving into oncoming traffic; walking along the edge of a cliff, they imagine, with similar fascination, simply stepping off. Even destructive whims need not be suicidal, of course. We may take a similar fancy to killing someone, to destroying some beautiful work of art or, I suppose, to just about anything else.<sup>20</sup> The suicidal case is useful because such whims are often reported among people who, we are inclined to say, “have no reason to kill themselves.”

Whimsical desires – especially those that are self-destructive or harmful to our projects – present an apparent problem for neo-Humeans. Do we really want to embrace a theory that says that we have some reason to act on these suicidal whims?

I do not think, though, that the neo-Humean need be too troubled by the case of whims. If satisfying these whims does not interfere with the satisfaction of other desires that the agent has, it is difficult to see what is wrong with saying that the agent has a reason to satisfy them. If, walking home in a rainstorm from some formal occasion, I have the whim to take off my shoes and socks and roll up my suit pants to go stomping through mud puddles, and if satisfying this whim would not interfere with any of my other desires (for example, the desire to be perceived as a serious and sober person), there seems to be nothing objectionable in the assertion that I have a reason to satisfy this whim.

For most of us, of course, a *suicidal* whim could be satisfied only at the expense of many of our most deeply held desires. For us, then, even if there is a reason, based on the whim, to perform the suicidal action, this reason is resoundingly overridden by other reasons we have. This allows the neo-Humean to appeal to a “swamped reasons” reply: Though there is always *some* reason to act on whimsical desires, when the satisfaction of these desires would conflict with other, stronger desires, that reason is swamped and, frequently, sinks from our perception.<sup>21</sup>

This reply is not satisfactory to some. It seems to them that the whim to leap from the tall building generates *no* reason to do so; one needs no countervailing reason to override it in order for jumping to be irrational.

<sup>20</sup> Gary Watson gives examples that have now become standard: a normally loving mother “has a sudden urge to drown her bawling child in the bath;” “a squash player who, while suffering an ignominious defeat, desires to smash his opponent in the face with the racquet” [Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975), p. 210].

<sup>21</sup> For more on “swamped reasons,” see Hubin, “What’s Special about Humeanism,” pp. 33–34.

But this objection needs further defense. First, the objector needs to explain why some whims *do* seem to generate reasons for acting. The explanation of the rational advisability of my “puddle hopping” seemed to be that there were no reasons against doing so and, in the absence of such reasons, my satisfying the whim seems rationally recommended. The whim appears to generate a reason for acting.

More important, the objector is assuming something to which she is not entitled. While we may be able to evaluate a theory of rationality in part by appeal to pre-theoretical convictions, it is unreasonable (and question-begging in its effect) to assume that we have pre-theoretical convictions about every aspect of the theory in question. Surely, there are some questions that are best left to the theory to answer. The critic of this reply by the neo-Humean claims to have pre-theoretical awareness that there is *no* reason to act on the swamped desire. It would not be sufficient for the critic to allege merely that we do not have any awareness of such a reason; the neo-Humean theory does not entail that we will always be aware of the reasons we have. Furthermore, especially when a reason is “swamped” by other reasons, it is plausible to suppose that we would be unaware of it and may resist acknowledging it. The critic seems to suppose that, simply by riding in a speeding boat, we can tell whether there is, in addition to the powerful propeller driving the boat forward, a feeble propeller pushing against the boat’s progress. This seems implausible. It is also to be expected that we would, in most contexts, not discuss reasons that are obviously “swamped” and perhaps even find it odd to refer to them as reasons. The critic must show, though, that this oddity is semantic and not merely pragmatic; that is, the critic must show that our reluctance to acknowledge a reason to act on the swamped desire is based on the falsity of the claim that there is such a reason rather than on the pointlessness (or misleadingness) of acknowledging the reason.

I think these replies are appropriate and correct, as far as they go. There is, though, another point that is worth making – a point that may be a bit truer to the phenomenology of at least some whims. Consider first, by way of analogy, a mental state that is not belief but is like it in certain respects. Sometimes we “entertain” a thought – we “try it on for size” – without believing it. We have not taken the appropriate stance toward the proposition in question for it to be called one of our beliefs.

I suggest that at least sometimes what call “whims” are to be understood on this model. They are mental states like desires in certain respects but it is no more correct to say that these are our desires than it would be to say that every proposition we entertain is one of our beliefs. We “try them on for size” and, in seeing how they feel, learn something about ourselves. I

suspect that sometimes what people are describing when they talk about a “suicidal (or homicidal) whim” is not something that can be considered a conative state of the agent at all. It is, rather, a kind of “toying” with the thought of desiring something. The Humean is no more committed to treating these states as desires than she is to treating merely entertained propositions as beliefs.

The above may handle adequately the problem of whims. But there are other cases that pose a greater difficulty for the Humean position.

#### A TRULY TROUBLING CASE

##### *Alien Desires*<sup>22</sup>

Followers of fundamentalist faiths sometimes claim that certain urges they feel are the “the devil’s doing.”<sup>23</sup> These fundamentalists *disown* some of their felt desires. Such a stance toward felt desires is not idiosyncratic to fundamentalists, though the characterization of the source of the desire may be. Most of us, I think, feel the force of desires that seem alien to us – seem, in some sense, not to be ours, not to be reflective of our true self.

This attitude is reflected in our language. Consider the, perhaps subtle, difference between, “I have a desire for *x*,” and, “I desire (want) *x*.” The first is more likely to be used to hold the desire at a distance; one might employ it to report an unwanted desire – a desire one hopes to extinguish, perhaps – to one’s psychiatrist. The second is more likely to be employed to embrace the desire; one would more naturally use it when one sought advice on how to satisfy the desire.

I am not claiming that these two phrases cannot be used interchangeably in many contexts. Nor do I mean to rest any part of my argument on intuitions about these particular phrases. I mean to allude, in a way that might be suggestive, to different attitudes that people take toward felt desires. To my ear (and to those of many to whom I have spoken about this), these two phrases suggest something different about our attitude toward our desires.

<sup>22</sup> The phenomenon I call “alien desires” has been sensitively explored in a series of essays by Harry Frankfurt. Many of Frankfurt’s most important writings on this issue are collected together in *The Importance of What We Care about* [Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care about* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)]. For some time, Frankfurt’s approach to understanding alien desires and their role in rational deliberation rested on certain second-order desires – in particular, desires that a given first-order desire be effective in choice. Though I do not develop a positive account of the notion of valuing in this paper, it is important to note that I do not understand an agent’s values as being simply second-order desires.

<sup>23</sup> See Gary Watson’s extraordinarily fecund discussion of these issues in Watson, “Free Agency,” pp. 205–220.

That we take different attitudes toward our felt desires is obvious. We are relieved to find that we have some desires and lack others. For example, we may be delighted to find how much we desire to cuddle and comfort our first baby – enough, usually, that we overcome aversions to various ordinarily repellent bodily fluids being spewed on us. We may be appalled by our lack of desire to help someone who has harmed us but now needs our help – thinking this a sign of a vindictive person.

The phenomenon of alien desires, if it exists, involves a special attitude toward a felt desire. It involves viewing the desire as not fully our *own* – as alien – even while feeling the force of the desire. Alien desires conflict with our values – the concerns by which we define who we are and what our lives are about. I do not know how to argue that such a phenomenon exists. If it is denied, there is little point in going on. I do not deny it and, so, will go on.

Suppose we *do* take different stances toward felt desires – in particular, that we identify with some and declare others to be alien.<sup>24</sup> How does this create a problem for standard forms of neo-Humeanism?

Alien desires would present no problem for the neo-Humean if it were plausible to treat them all as generating reasons for acting. However, many have thought that alien desires do not generate such reasons – at least not in the sense that is relevant to the rational advisability of actions. The conviction that one has no reason to act on these alien desires, while sometimes strongly held, is not *obviously* true. One might argue that alien desires generate reasons that are overridden by other reasons the agent has – perhaps so overridden that they are not noticeable. The loving mother who has the desire to kill her baby has some reason (on this view) to satisfy this desire, but that reason is swamped by her other reasons.

I find this sort of “swamped reasons” defense less plausible in the case of some alien desires than I do in the sorts of cases discussed in the last section.<sup>25</sup> The objects of some of these alien desires may be essentially in conflict with the values that form the foundation of the agent’s evaluative

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<sup>24</sup> “Adopting an attitude” and “taking a stance” should not be interpreted as implying there is never any fact of the matter about whether a person merely *has a desire* for a thing or she *desires* that thing – a fact of the matter, that is, which is independent of adopting an attitude or taking a stance about it and in virtue of which such an attitude or stance can be evaluated as correct or reasonable. I hope, here, to remain agnostic about such matters. For interesting discussions of these issues, see, in addition to Frankfurt’s work, Connie Rosati, *Self-Invention and the Good* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1989). Furthermore, I am not accepting a form of “voluntarism” about such attitudes or stances. To what extent one can adopt such a state “at will” seems to me a complex, partly empirical, question.

<sup>25</sup> They are discussed at greater length in Hubin, “What’s Special about Humeanism,” pp. 33ff.

system. Nevertheless, some of these desires might be persistent and quite strong. To avoid the conclusion that satisfying the alien desire is rationally recommended, all things considered, the neo-Humean would, at the very least, need some way of limiting the strength of the reason generated by the alien desire. While I think that one might be able to “make a go” of the swamped reasons defense even for the case of these sorts of alien desires, it leaves one biting pretty hard on the bullet. It seems truer to the phenomena to deny that such desires generate any reason to act. The more attractive view seems to be that even really strong alien desires can be rationally impotent; they can fail to generate reasons for acting in the sense relevant to rational advisability.

But denying the reason-giving force of alien desires raises a problem for the standard neo-Humean theory. Are not we required, on the neo-Humean view, to say that alien desires generate reasons for acting? The answer depends, obviously, on how narrowly we define “neo-Humeanism.” Neo-Humeans typically frame their theories in terms of desires (though some employ the concept of preference, instead) and do not explicitly discuss the different stances we could take toward our desires. We could treat neo-Humeans as having been sensitive to the psychological subtleties involved and intending to include all felt desires as reason-generating. Or, recognizing that their view was motivated by opposition to theories that located the source of reasons outside the subjective conative states of the agent, we may interpret them as running roughshod over these psychological subtleties. Oddly, the latter interpretation is the more generous, I think – or at least it leads to a more sympathetic understanding of neo-Humeanism. The concern of neo-Humeans was to locate the basis for reasons in some subjective conative state of the agent; “desire” was the term they (typically) used to identify this state, but not much attention was paid to whether, of all the subjective conative states to which one might attend, desire was the right one.<sup>26</sup>

## TWO NEO-HUMEAN SOLUTIONS

I take the heart of the neo-Humean theory of rationality to lie in the view that the source of reasons, in the sense relevant to rational advisability, lies in the subjective, contingent, conative states of the agent. I do not think it

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Fumerton [Richard Fumerton, *Reason and Morality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 129–130] explicitly indicates that he is using “desire” in a very broad sense to cover what may for many purposes be more properly considered a whole family of mental states including wanting and valuing.

essential to neo-Humeanism that all intrinsic desires be seen as generating reasons for acting.

A neo-Humean who holds that there are different kinds of conative states need not, I am saying, hold that all of an agent's conative states ground reasons for acting. She is free to identify as the grounds of an agent's reasons for acting some special kind of conative state. For example, suppose that, among an agent's conative states, we could identify a proper subset of states that we might consider the agent's *values*. A theory holding that what there is reason for an agent to do (in the sense relevant to rational advisability) is determined not by all of his conative states, but only by his values, would still be a neo-Humean theory.

If this taxonomic point is correct, then the neo-Humean has an obvious, and initially promising, line of reply to the problem of alien desires. Alien desires, the neo-Humean might claim, are not in this special subset of conative states that ground reasons for acting. Indeed, the specific suggestion that the appropriate subset of an agent's desires that generates reasons for acting is the agent's *values* is at least initially plausible. The standard examples of alien desires – the unwilling addict's craving for her drug of choice, the lustful desires of the puritanical preacher – are certainly not the agent's values in any natural sense of "values." Call this "value-based neo-Humeanism" for a short, if inelegant, handle:

*Value-Based Neo-Humeanism:* There is reason for an agent to perform an action (in the sense relevant to rational advisability) if, and only if, and *because* the agent's performing that action would promote the satisfaction (realization) of the agent's intrinsic values.

Obviously, the defender of Value-Based Neo-Humeanism would need to develop an account of the nature of values and explain why it is that they, but not other positive conative states, generate reasons for acting. But let us suppose that these large tasks were completed. And suppose that the account of an agent's values cut reasonably near the joint of alien and non-alien desires so that this variant of neo-Humeanism could hew off alien desires from the class of reason-generators. Would we now have a satisfactory neo-Humean theory?

I think not. For in our zeal to banish problematic alien desires from the set of reason givers, we will also have exiled innocent whims. Or, if we manage to retain our reasons for acting on whims, it will be with the help of a Band-Aid that looks rather unattractive on the neo-Humean theory.

It might seem misguided to treat the reason-giving force of whims as a desideratum for a theory of reasons for acting. Indeed, some take the claim that agents have reason to act on mere whims to be an unattractive implication of neo-Humeanism – a bitter pill to be swallowed if necessary, but nothing to be sought. I disagree, though. In addition to whims that

may present themselves to the agent as alien desires to be fought against, which I agree are rationally impotent, and “costly” whims, where one might plausibly deny that reasons are created at all, there are “innocent whims.” These are whims that are not in conflict with the agent’s values and are satisfiable at a relative small cost. My whimsical desire to splash through mud puddles on the way home from a formal affair seems to tend to make it rationally advisable to do so.

Still, puddle splashing can hardly be considered something I intrinsically value, let us suppose. If not, then Value-Based Neo-Humeanism tosses out the baby of innocent whims with the bathwater of alien desires.<sup>27</sup>

The Value-Based Neo-Humean might attempt to recover the reason to act on innocent whims by supposing that the agent in question *values* acting on whims or something promoted by acting on whims – perhaps a *joie de vivre*. But this seems to be “one thought too many” at best. My whimsical desire to splash in the puddles seems to give me a reason to do so by itself, not because I have some more serious conative state – a value – that is promoted by doing so.

This sort of appeal to values to endorse whims is an awkward fit with traditional forms of neo-Humean theories. It is structurally similar to those anti-Humean theories that hold that desires, in themselves, never generate reasons for acting. Rather, they say, when someone has a reason for satisfying a desire, it is because of some objective principle endorsing the satisfaction of that desire (or desires of that sort).<sup>28</sup>

There is, I think, a better way for the neo-Humean to cast off alien desires while retaining the force of innocent whims in a straightforward

<sup>27</sup> It is not just whims that wind up down the drain, according to value-based neo-Humeanism. Many other desires would turn out to be rationally impotent on Value-Based Neo-Humeanism. For example, desires that are appetitive, such as the desire one feels when one smells a pan of freshly baked brownies, are not (typically) values. And, while we may value having pleasurable experiences, it hardly seems correct to construe all of our desires for pleasurable experiences as values. Furthermore, people often set themselves projects that do not seem like mere whims but are not derived from their values (My brother-in-law plans to play golf in every county in Illinois and every state in the U.S.). If the desires associated with these projects are not grounded in the agent’s desires, Value-Based Neo-Humeanism would declare them rationally impotent (this sort of case was presented to me by an anonymous referee for *The Journal of Ethics*). Employing a commonsense conception of an agent’s values, it begins to look as if Value-Based Neo-Humeanism will dispose of a bevy of babies along with the bathwater we are trying to toss out.

<sup>28</sup> Some have thought that neo-Humean instrumentalism is committed to some sort of objective reason-giving principle of this sort – that instrumentalism can only handle the *transmission* of reasons and there must be some principle for “getting reasons going” in the first place. I think this is a misunderstanding of the neo-Humean’s project (see Hubin, “The Groundless Normativity of Instrumental Rationality,” pp. 445–468, for a defense of this claim).



way. I will call this approach “Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism” and begin by noting the similarities it has with Value-Based Neo-Humeanism.

Value-Based Neo-Humeanism is correct, the Value-Screened Neo-Humean says, in taking an agent’s values seriously and treating them differently from the agent’s other desires. The mistake arises when the Value-Based Neo-Humean assumes that the special role played by an agent’s values is that of grounding reasons for acting. The mistake is based on a plausible, but false, assumption of what is necessary to solve the problem of some alien desires. It is clear that a solution to this problem, as I have construed it, will require us to deny the reason-generating status of certain desires. If we are still to be neo-Humeans, we must, then, identify a subset of the agent’s desires that do generate reasons for acting. The mistake of the value-based neo-Humean is in assuming that this subset must be identified by some intrinsic property of the conative states in question rather than by a relational property they have to other elements of the agent’s conative psychology.

The Value-Based Neo-Humean is attempting to find a characteristic of some, but not all, conative states that make them capable of generating reasons for acting. And, she is assuming that this characteristic is specifiable independently of the content of the agent’s particular conative psychology.<sup>29</sup> The idea is that we can identify set of conative states – values, on this theory – that, in virtue of their intrinsic nature, generate reasons for acting. And we can find other conative states – whims, alien desires and so forth – that, in virtue of their intrinsic nature do not generate reasons for acting. But this assumption is mistaken according the Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism.

The value-screened theorist agrees with the value-based theorist that an agent’s values function as a source or reasons for acting but denies that they function as the *sole* source for such reasons. Other conative states can generate reasons, too. However, in addition to functioning as a source of reasons for acting, an agent’s values perform a filtering function. Put simply, the value-screened theorist holds that an agent’s reasons for acting (in the sense relevant to rational advisability) are generated by those positive conative states of the agent that are not in conflict with the agent’s values.

*Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism:* There is reason for an agent to perform an action (in the sense relevant to rational advisability) if, and only if, and *because* the agent’s performing

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<sup>29</sup> She is not assuming, of course, that the content of an agent’s values can be determined independently of an agent’s conative psychology – only that the characteristic of a conative state that renders it rationally potent or rationally impotent can be so determined.

that action would promote the satisfaction (realization) of one of the agent's positive conative states (desires, values, *etc.*) that is not in conflict with the agent's values.

It is important to note the special role that this theory gives to an agent's values. The theory does not hold that the special function of values is to override the reason-giving force of other positive conative states. If it did, it would treat the problem of alien desires as a special case of overwhelmed desires – still granting the reason-giving force of the alien desires. Rather, it holds that in order for other desires to ground a reason for acting in the first place, those desires must not be in conflict with what the agent values.

Like its value-based cousin, Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism holds that there may be only a subset of an agent's desires that generate reasons for acting. However, unlike the value-based theory, Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism holds that membership in this subset cannot be identified independently of the content of the agent's values. For the value-based theory, the whim of splashing in the puddles generates no reason for acting because it is not the proper type of desire. For the value-screened theory, whether this whim generates a reason for acting depends on how it is related to the agent's values. If it does not conflict with the agent's values, she has a reason to act on it. If it does conflict with her values, she has no reason to act on it.

The reason-giving force of *innocent* whims is preserved because these desires are not in conflict with the agent's values. The problem of alien desires is solved because those alien desires that are problematic are in conflict with the agent's values. Such alien desires are declared "rationally impotent" by the theory, but the grounds for such a declaration are consistent with the spirit of neo-Humeanism, for their reason-giving force depends crucially on the subjective, contingent, conative states of the agent.

#### PROMISSORY NOTES AND PROMISING PROJECTS

Like Value-Based Neo-Humeanism, Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism incurs some weighty philosophical obligations. A developed theory of this sort must give us an adequate account of values. It must indicate what differentiates an agent's values from her other positive conative states. This task will be subject to both extensional and explanatory constraints. The theory must divide values from other positive conative states in a way that is intuitively plausible and, if it is to help with the problem of

alien desires, leaves the problematic instances of such desires outside the extension of “value.” And, the account of what values are must explain why they have the special role the theory claims they have in determining what is rationally advisable for an agent, in particular in screening out alien desires.

These are, I believe, very difficult problems. However, neo-Humeans who acknowledge the phenomenon of alien desires and believe that these desires can be rationally impotent are pushed to think along these lines. I have not endeavored here to answer these crucial questions; my focus has been on a question about the functional role that an agent’s values should play in her deliberative processes.

With respect to the nature of value, I have relied on an intuitive notion of what it is for an agent to value something. At this level, it is natural to think of an agent’s values as being positive conative states that tend to be relatively enduring through time, relatively stable upon reflection, relatively central to the agent’s conative psychology in the sense that the best account of the agent’s conative psychology treats these states as explanatory of other positive conative states of the agent. Even on the most generous understanding of “philosophical explication” or “conceptual analysis,” this is far from being such an explication or analysis.

I have said nothing about how it is, or why we should believe, that values play the role I have suggested. I believe that the capacity for an agent’s values to screen off the reason-giving force of other conative states is required for autonomous agency.<sup>30</sup> For simpler conative creatures – those with only desires, for example, every positive conative state will ground a reason for acting. Reflective beings capable of autonomous agency must be able to organize and structure their deliberative lives in such a way that some of their conative states carry no weight in their deliberations. To say this, though, is merely to gesture toward a direction in answering a crucial question for the Value-Screened Neo-Humean.

And, there are other issues that need to be addressed. To develop Value-Screened Neo-Humeanism adequately, more must be done to examine the nature of the conflict between values and other positive conative states that results in the rational impotency of those other states. I have briefly suggested answers, based on an intuitive appeal to examples, for two

<sup>30</sup> In an unpublished manuscript, “Grounding a Modest Conception of Rationality,” David Copp develops and defends a connection between an agent’s values and her autonomous agency. He does not address the distinction between value-based and value-screened versions of neo-Humeanism, but the connection he develops between values and autonomy provides a plausible approach for the Value-Screened Neo-Humean to justifying the role of an agent’s values in determining her reasons for acting.

possible cases of conflict – but there are many more ways in which a desire could conflict with an agent’s values.

Finally, the Value-Screened Neo-Humean must give thought to the problems that arise when an agent has conflicting values.<sup>31</sup> What do we say, for example, when a pro-attitude is contrary to one value an agent has in the sense necessary to render it rationally impotent, but *required* by another value the agent holds? I have not even hinted at a solution to this problem.

On the positive side, these lines of thought hold attractions beyond solving the problem of alien desires. Depending on how we understand what it is for a positive conative state to be one of an agent’s values, we might open the door to a rich neo-Humean understanding of the notion of an agent being active in determining what he has reason to do. An unconstrained “values voluntarism” seems implausible; I doubt that I can simply will my values to be as I wish. But limited, restricted voluntarism about values seems plausible.<sup>32</sup> Of those considerations that guide my particular preferences, I might simply choose to employ some as values – as functioning not only to generate reasons for acting, but also to filter out other potential bases for reasons for acting. A theory that makes room for such a creative act of (normative) self-definition would help us make sense of the kinds of commitments we make in controlling our actions. If adopting this sort of stance toward some of our conative states allows them to function as filters on our other conative states, then some desires, such as certain alien desires, will turn out to be rationally impotent. But they will have this status not because the desires are, in themselves, irrational, nor even because, taken together with our other desires, they form an inconsistent set of desires. Instead, their rational impotence depends on our values – a special kind of subjective, contingent, conative state.

Practical reason is, as Hume maintained, the “slave of the passions.” But the structure of the passions may be more complex than many neo-Humeans have appreciated.

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<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Fred Schueler for pointing out and helping me to see its significance.

<sup>32</sup> Some may think of voluntarism with respect to a domain as implying that the agent has voluntary control over all items in that domain. If so, the notion of *restricted voluntarism* will seem a strange one. I mean only to suggest that, with respect to some conative states but not all, an agent might have voluntary control over whether that state is one of his values.

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