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## JUSTIFYING DESIRES

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**Abstract:** According to an influential conception of reasons for action, the presence of a desire or some other conative state in the agent is a necessary condition for the agent's having a reason for action. This is sometimes known as *internalism*. This article presents a case for the considerably stronger thesis, which we may call *hyper-internalism*, that the presence of a desire is a *sufficient* condition for the agent's having a (prima facie) reason for action.

Keywords: desire, ethical justification, epistemic justification, general conservatism, ethical internalism.

### 1. Introduction

According to an influential conception of reasons for action, the presence of a desire or some other conative state in the agent is a necessary condition for the agent's *having* a reason for action. A desireless creature would have no reasons for acting one way rather than another. This, or something very like it, is sometimes known as (ethical) *internalism*.<sup>1</sup> The opposite view, (ethical) *externalism*, is that desires are unnecessary for having reasons for action.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, I have argued in some detail in favor of internalism (Kriegel 1999).<sup>3</sup> Here I want to consider the much stronger thesis that the presence of a desire is a *sufficient* condition for the agent's having a reason for action—at least a prima facie reason for action. This thesis, which we may call *hyper-internalism*, is one that virtually no internalists have been willing

<sup>1</sup> The label "internalism" is of course used for a variety of different views. See Darwall (1992) for a useful taxonomy. The kind of internalism at issue here is what Darwall calls "existence internalism."

<sup>2</sup> A particularly strong version of this is the view that desires *cannot* possibly be part of a reason for action, and that a reason for action must always be a purely cognitive state, such as the belief, or realization, that such-and-such state of affairs would be good or valuable. But externalism, as construed here, is the much weaker claim that desires are simply not a necessary condition for reasons.

<sup>3</sup> I have also argued for a different kind of internalism—what Darwall (1992) calls "judgment internalism"—according to which moral judgments are, or involve constitutively, conative states (Kriegel 2012).

1 to defend.<sup>4</sup> For that matter, my own degree of belief in it is limited. My  
2 purpose here is thus mostly exploratory, in the sense that I wish to con-  
3 sider what the strongest case for hyper-internalism might look like. It is  
4 only once we have this kind of case before us that we can make a consid-  
5 ered assessment of the plausibility of hyper-internalism.

6 My overarching goal is to articulate an outlook on what makes a  
7 desire ethically justified that, on the one hand, is stable, coherent, and  
8 reasonably plausible, and on the other hand, entails that every desire  
9 provides the desirer with a *prima facie* reason for action. To that end, I  
10 start with an exposition of a view on the *epistemic* justification of *beliefs*  
11 that is widely considered stable, coherent, and reasonably plausible  
12 (Section 2). I then articulate the analogous view on the *ethical* justifica-  
13 tion of *desires*, arguing that the attractions of the former carry over to  
14 the latter (Section 3) and that the analogous view entails hyper-  
15 internalism rather straightforwardly.

## 16 2. General Conservatism in Epistemology

17 Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge. Almost every  
18 account of the nature of knowledge adopts the notion that the property  
19 of *being knowledge* is an attribute, in the first instance, of *beliefs*. The  
20 question then becomes what conditions a belief must meet in order to  
21 constitute knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This is of course an area of great disagreement.  
22 Nonetheless, one recurrent, near-universal assumption is that there is a  
23 certain distinctly epistemic notion of justification, or justifiedness, such  
24 that one of the conditions for a belief being knowledge is that it exhibit this  
25 kind of epistemic justification. The question then becomes what it is about  
26 a belief that makes it epistemically justified.

27 In debating this issue, it is important to make a distinction between two  
28 kinds of justification. There is, on the one hand, *prima facie*, defeasible  
29 justification, and on the other hand, *ultima facie*, all-things-considered  
30 justification. Plausibly, the latter entails the former, but not the converse.  
31 So the notion of *ultima facie* justification is the stronger one. It is also  
32 plausible, however, that *prima facie*, defeasible justification is the only  
33 kind of justification needed for a belief to be knowledge. Thus in what  
34 follows whenever I speak of justification, I have in mind *prima facie*  
35 justification unless I indicate otherwise. The issue is therefore better con-  
36 strued as the following question: What is it about a belief that makes it  
37 *prima facie* (epistemically) justified?

38 In the epistemology of the past century, two main approaches to this  
39 question have stood out: foundationalism and coherentism. They differ

40  
41 <sup>4</sup> Williams (1989) avows sympathy for something like hyper-internalism—in passing—  
42 but does not embark on the project of arguing in its favor.

43 <sup>5</sup> Not *everybody* proceeds this way—see Williamson 2000. Nonetheless, this is a standard  
44 assumption that I will adopt here.

1 on whether to grant special epistemic status to a subset of the subject's  
2 beliefs.

3 Foundationalism does grant special status to a subset of the subject's  
4 beliefs. According to foundationalism, a given belief is *prima facie* (epis-  
5 temically) justified just in case it is either a foundational belief or suitably  
6 based on foundational beliefs. The foundational beliefs are beliefs which  
7 are either self-justifying or not in need of justification. Thus in this picture  
8 foundational beliefs form a subset of the subject's beliefs that enjoy a  
9 special status. There are two types of belief traditionally designated as  
10 potentially foundational: "rationalists" have identified beliefs in certain  
11 *a priori* and/or necessary propositions as foundational; "empiricists" have  
12 preferred perceptual and/or introspective beliefs (beliefs regarding the  
13 subject's concurrent perceptual experiences).

14 Coherentists deny that *any* beliefs are foundational. According to  
15 coherentism, no beliefs enjoy special status. None is self-justifying, let  
16 alone exempt from the need to be justified. Rather, beliefs justify each  
17 other by hanging together in a belief system that coheres in the right way.  
18 Thus a given belief is justified just in case it suitably coheres with other  
19 beliefs. Different coherentists offer different views on what it is for a belief  
20 to "suitably cohere" with others.

21 Despite the opposition between them, there is one assumption that both  
22 traditional foundationalism and coherentism share, an assumption that has  
23 only recently been called into question. The assumption is that beliefs are by  
24 default lacking in justification—that they need to somehow qualify in order  
25 to *become* justified. On this assumption, normally beliefs stand in need of  
26 being justified. They do not just *come* justified—their justification does not  
27 come for free. Instead, they have to pass some test, and only then can they  
28 qualify as justified. The traditional views differ on *what* the test is: founda-  
29 tionalism requires that a belief either be or be based upon foundational  
30 beliefs, and coherentism requires that it suitably cohere with other beliefs.  
31 But *some* test must be passed in order for a given belief to qualify as justified.

32 This assumption has recently been called into question. According to  
33 Harman (1986), all beliefs are *prima facie* justified *by default*.<sup>6</sup> The subject  
34 is (*prima facie*) justified in believing as she does as long as there is no  
35 special reason to *stop* believing as she does. Beliefs do not generally need  
36 to pass some test in order to be justified. Thus beliefs do not stand in need  
37 of being justified; they are only expected, more minimally, not to *lose* their  
38 justification. Rather than require beliefs to *acquire* justification in some  
39 way, this approach requires them to *conserve* their pre-given justification.  
40 On this approach, then, beliefs do not need to pass any test in order to  
41 *qualify* as justified, they just need to avoid being *disqualified* from the  
42 realm of the justified. In this sense, beliefs *come* justified—they do not have  
43 to *become* justified.

44  
45 <sup>6</sup> See, more recently, Harman 2003.

1 This statement of the view, which Harman calls *general conservatism*, is  
2 loose and metaphorical—it employs centrally a temporal or causal meta-  
3 phor. Literally, the view is not about the *temporal* or *causal* precedence  
4 of justification over nonjustification. It is rather about *conceptual* pre-  
5 cedence. The basic idea is that a belief *B* is *prima facie* justified simply in  
6 virtue of being a belief. For foundationalists and coherentists, by contrast,  
7 *B* is *prima facie* justified in virtue of being a belief of kind *K*, with the  
8 disagreement being on the character of *K*. Thus general conservatism is  
9 best formulated as the following thesis:

10  
11 (GC) For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* epistemically justified if  
12 *S* is a belief.<sup>7</sup>  
13

14 This is to be contrasted with the following foundationalist and coheren-  
15 tists theses:

16  
17 (F) For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* epistemically justified if  
18 (and only if) either (a) *S* is a foundational belief or (b) *S* is suitably  
19 based on foundational beliefs.

20 (C) For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* epistemically justified if  
21 (and only if) *S* is a belief that suitably coheres with other beliefs.  
22

23 Talk of the belief being justified by default, not having to pass a test, and  
24 so on is thus merely expressive and designed to communicate the *spirit* of  
25 general conservatism. The *letter* of general conservatism is provided by  
26 (GC).

27 General conservatism has commonalities with both traditional founda-  
28 tionalism and coherentism.<sup>8</sup> With foundationalism, it shares the claim  
29 that there is such a thing as foundational beliefs, in the sense of beliefs that  
30 need not derive their justification from *other* beliefs. The difference is that  
31 according to general conservatism *all* beliefs are foundational (at least in  
32 this sense, the sense that they do not derive their justification from other  
33 beliefs), whereas according to traditional foundationalism *not* all beliefs  
34 are foundational. With coherentism, the view shares the claim that there is  
35 no distinction to be made between beliefs that have a special epistemic  
36 status and beliefs that do not. All beliefs have the same *prima facie* status.  
37 The difference is that according to general conservatism this is the *prima*  
38

39  
40 <sup>7</sup> Note that this is only a one-way conditional. One might push for a formulation of (GC)  
41 as a biconditional—For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* epistemically justified if *S* is a  
42 belief—but for the purposes of the analogy pursued in the next section only the one-way  
43 conditional will matter.

44 <sup>8</sup> I refer here to “*traditional* foundationalism” because there is a sense in which general  
45 conservatism is itself a form of foundationalism. At least this is how Harman himself treats  
it (Harman 2003).

1           facie status of being justified, whereas according to traditional coherent-  
2           ism it is the prima facie status of lacking justification.

3           Why should we accept general conservatism? Harman motivates his  
4           general conservatism mainly by arguing that it overcomes the challenge of  
5           skepticism in a way traditional foundationalism and coherentism have  
6           consistently failed to do. If one starts out with the assumption that beliefs  
7           by default lack justification, then as the recent (and not-so-recent) history  
8           of epistemology attests, one will be hard pressed to show how belief in  
9           the existence of, say, the external world, or other minds, or the past, can  
10          *acquire* justification and *become* justified. By contrast, if one assumes that  
11          beliefs are by default justified, then one only needs to show how it is that  
12          belief in the existence of the external world, or other minds, or the past,  
13          *retains* its justification and does not become *unjustified*. The challenge here  
14          is much easier to meet: we only have to claim that the normal subject does  
15          not have any special epistemic reasons to *stop* believing that there is an  
16          external world (or other minds, or a past).

17          To a first (and rough) approximation, then, the argument for general  
18          conservatism might be put as follows: (1) if (F) or (C) is true, then we do  
19          not know that there is an external world; (2) we do know that there is an  
20          external world; therefore, (3) neither (F) nor (C) is true. Alternatively, one  
21          might argue as follows: (1) we know that there is an external world only if  
22          (GC) is true; (2) we know that there is an external world; therefore, (3)  
23          (GC) is true. Call this the *argument from skepticism*.

24          The argument from skepticism is one motivation for adopting general  
25          conservatism. Another potential motivation might be the following. On  
26          the face of it, one could wonder what is supposed to make the assumption  
27          that beliefs are by default *lacking in justification* preferable over the  
28          assumption that they are by default *justified*. The fact that it has been  
29          presupposed throughout the history of epistemology does not make it any  
30          more philosophically or logically compelling.<sup>9</sup> After all, the intuition is  
31          that when, say, it seems to one that there is an external world, in the sense  
32          that one finds oneself believing that there is an external world, this gives  
33          one reason enough to believe that there is an external world. Why would  
34          one's belief have to pass some test in order to ensure that one is not at fault  
35          for holding it? Intuitively, unless one has done something to disqualify  
36          one's beliefs—unless one has been epistemically irresponsible in some  
37          way—one cannot be at fault for holding one's beliefs. It is almost as  
38          though there is something perversely distrustful and unforgiving about an  
39          epistemology that requires the subject to “prove himself” before he can be  
40          found justified in believing as he does. In epistemology, as in life, one

41  
42          <sup>9</sup> Rather, it seems to be a mere historical contingency, having to do with the way  
43          Descartes and other rationalists have set the agenda for modern epistemology. Intuitively,  
44          the assumption that beliefs have to pass some test if they are to qualify as justified appears  
45          unduly harsh.



ought to be innocent until found guilty. Traditional epistemology suffers from a syndrome of holding subjects guilty until found innocent.

### 3. A Metaethical Analog

The suggestion I would like to make at this point is that the same syndrome appears to rear its head in twentieth-century metaethics. The desires and actions of moral agents are often held to be guilty until found innocent. They are required to qualify for justification rather than allowed to be justified pending disqualification. Let us therefore attempt to articulate a conception of desire justification that parallels Harman's conception of belief justification. On the view I would like to defend, desires are innocent until found guilty—in order to be justified, they do not have to qualify but rather have to avoid being disqualified.

It is important to note that the kind of justification at stake here is in all likelihood different—it is a kind of ethical or moral justification rather than epistemic justification. It may be possible to develop an argument to the effect that one of these two types of justification is analyzable in terms of the other, or that their underlying nature is the same, or whatever. But there is no obvious, antecedent, a priori reason to treat them as the same, and thus we may proceed on the assumption that there is at least a conceptual distinction between epistemic and ethical justification. Our concern in the present section is with the ethical justification of desires.

Our concern is, moreover, with *prima facie* ethical justification rather than *ultima facie*, all-things-considered ethical justification.<sup>10</sup> For we are attempting to construct a parallel with general conservatism in epistemology, and the latter pertains only to *prima facie* justification.

Talk of desire justification may strike some as unnatural and forced. There is a sense in which desires are, in themselves, neither justified nor unjustified—they are brute psychological events or states. For this reason, it may be better to speak not of desires' status as *justified* but rather of their status as *justification-conferring*. A desire to  $\Phi$  is neither justified nor unjustified, but, depending on its nature, it might *confer* justification on the act of  $\Phi$ -ing or fail to confer such justification. On this way of thinking, ultimately what is justified or unjustified is actions, not desires.<sup>11</sup> But desires may be said to be justified in a *derivative*, or perhaps extended, sense when they are effective desires to act in what is a justified way. More precisely: an agent's desire to  $\Phi$  is justified (in this derivative or extended sense) just when  $\Phi$ -ing is justified (in an unextended and nonderivative sense), and justified because of the agent's desire to  $\Phi$ .

<sup>10</sup> One may have *prima facie* justification for helping an old lady to cross a busy intersection even if one does not have *ultima facie* justification for doing so because, say, she is on her way to murder to someone.

<sup>11</sup> We are assuming here that actions are indeed justified in an unproblematic way. One routinely speaks of actions as being morally justified, or more generally normatively justified.

1 Even more cautiously, we may speak of actions as being not justified but  
2 *reasonable*, where an agent's action is reasonable when the agent has a  
3 reason *for it*—a justificatory or normative reason for it.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that  
4 a desire can constitute such a reason for action, it has the status of being  
5 reasonableness-conferring, in that it confers reasonableness on the action  
6 for which it is (or constitutes) a reason. If the desire to  $\Phi$  constitutes a reason  
7 for  $\Phi$ -ing, then the act of  $\Phi$ -ing is reasonable and the desire to  $\Phi$  is  
8 reasonableness-conferring. In what follows, I will speak of a desire that  
9 constitutes a reason for action, and thus confers reasonableness, as a  
10 *justified* desire. This is to be understood as a stipulative and technical usage  
11 of the term “justified,” one that is supposed to designate nothing more and  
12 nothing less than the status of being reasonableness-conferring.<sup>13</sup>

13 Also, it should be emphasized that my interest is not so much in desire  
14 itself, understood as a particular kind of psychological attitude. Rather, it  
15 is in *conative* states generally, including intending, deciding, wanting,  
16 wishing, planning, and so forth. What all these types of mental state have  
17 in common is a substantive question, but several features seem central.  
18 First, all such states appear to ensue from a single faculty, which we may  
19 call “the will.” Second, they all appear to be *inherently motivational*, in  
20 that one cannot be correctly attributed with such states unless one has an  
21 appropriate motivational impetus to act (which impetus may or may not  
22 actually issue in action). Third, such states arguably share a phenomenol-  
23 ogy of presenting their intentional objects or contents as *good* (or as  
24 good-for-me), as opposed to presenting them as *true* (or as obtaining).  
25 Relatedly, though more theoretically, their intentional contents appear to  
26 have a so-called world-to-mind (or “telic”) direction of fit.<sup>14</sup> In any case,  
27 such states are what Davidson (1963) calls *pro attitudes*: psychological  
28 attitudes of being “pro,” or *favoring*, a certain state of affairs (and/or the  
29 action deemed suitable to bringing it about).<sup>15</sup> My interest here is strictly  
30

31 <sup>12</sup> I make reference here to the common distinction between two senses of “reason for  
32 action.” There is the purely explanatory sense, in which a reason statement is made in order  
33 to explain the agent's action; and there is the normative sense, in which a reason statement  
34 is made in order to justify the agent's action. In this article, however, I am only interested in  
35 normative reasons. So whenever I speak of reasons for action, I should be understood to  
36 mean normative reasons.

37 <sup>13</sup> I adopt this shorthand for ease and clarity of exposition. After articulating the view of  
38 desire justification in this particular sense, I will spell out the view more explicitly in terms of  
39 reasons for actions, reasonableness of action, and so forth.

40 <sup>14</sup> Whereas cognitive states have a mind-to-world direction of fit, in that the mind has to  
41 bring itself to fit the way the world is, conative states have a world-to-mind direction of fit,  
42 in that their point is to bring the world to fit the way the mind is. This distinction is originally  
43 due to Anscombe 1957, and is presented very clearly in Searle 1983. Michael Smith (1994) is  
44 best known for employing this distinction in the metaethical context.

45 <sup>15</sup> As Smit (2003) and others have pointed out, the set of conative states should more  
46 accurately be understood to include also “con attitudes,” attitudes that inherently motivate  
47 the agent against a certain state of affairs. Just a feeling of approval counts as a conative  
48 state, so should a feeling of disapproval: both are inherently motivational states.

1 speaking in the justification not of desires but of pro attitudes more  
2 generally. I will continue to conduct the discussion in terms of desires,  
3 but the reader should feel free to substitute any other pro attitude for  
4 desire.

5 The question that concerns me, then, is this: What makes desires (and  
6 other pro attitudes) *prima facie* ethically justified, in the sense of being  
7 *prima facie* reasonableness-conferring? Traditional approaches to this  
8 question can be profitably divided in a way parallel to traditional episte-  
9 mologies. This way of dividing the traditional approaches—of carving the  
10 traditional debate on desire justification—may not be the most historically  
11 prominent, but in the present context it will be useful in bringing out  
12 vividly the parallel between the epistemological “syndrome” pointed out  
13 above and its metaethical counterpart.

14 What we may call *practical foundationalism* is the view that desires are  
15 justified when they are well founded, that is, when they either are, or are  
16 somehow based upon (perhaps derive from), foundational desires. Founda-  
17 tional desires are desires that are either self-justifying or exempt from  
18 the need to be justified. Here too there are two main versions of this view,  
19 rationalism and sentimentalism, depending on what the foundational  
20 desires are taken to be. Rationalism identifies as foundational desires for  
21 what is good a priori or necessarily.<sup>16</sup> Sentimentalism identifies founda-  
22 tional desires with suitably emotionally formed desires—desires issuing,  
23 say, from an empathetic sentiment.<sup>17</sup>

24 What we may call *practical coherentism* is the sort of view we get when  
25 no desires are allowed to be foundational. Here what makes a desire  
26 justified is that it coheres well with other desires, where desire coherence is  
27 a matter of co-satisfiability and/or suitable prioritization (that is, a matter  
28 of ensuring that the desires either can be satisfied simultaneously or, when  
29 they do not, are arranged so that the satisfaction of some takes priority  
30 over that of others). The result is a system of desires that justify each other  
31 by cohering in the right way.<sup>18</sup>

32  
33 <sup>16</sup> Arguably, but not uncontroversially, the paradigmatic version of rationalist founda-  
34 tionalism is Kantian ethics. It maintains that foundational desires are desires that conform  
35 to the categorical imperative, that is, desires the agent could want everybody to harbor (first  
36 formulation), or desires that treat others as ends and not means (second formulation). It is  
37 possible to deny that Kantian ethics is indeed foundationalist in this sense, but I will not  
38 discuss the matter further here.

39 <sup>17</sup> According to sentimentalists, there are certain moral sentiments that are founda-  
40 tionally justified, and other desires are justified only when derived from these moral sentiments.  
41 This antirationalist version of foundationalism parallels the empiricist foundationalism dis-  
42 cussed above: the foundations are identified in the instinctual and more “passive” parts of the  
43 agent’s mental life, rather than in the more rational or “active” parts.

44 <sup>18</sup> Again, arguably but controversially the view of morality (or more generally, norma-  
45 tivity) as a “system of hypothetical imperatives” (Foot 1972) is an instance of such coher-  
46 entism: desires’ contents conform with conditional imperatives that do not conflict. Showing  
47 that this is indeed an instance of such coherentism, however, would take us too far afield.



1 Both these approaches to desire justification—practical foundational-  
2 and practical coherentism—presuppose that desires normally stand in  
3 need of being justified. Desires do not just *come* justified, they have to  
4 become justified. They become justified when they pass a certain test. Only  
5 then do they “qualify” as justified. The approaches just sketched differ on  
6 *what* the relevant test is. But they all agree that *some* test must be passed  
7 in order for a given desire to qualify as justified.

8 The opposing outlook would suggest that all desires are by default  
9 justified. The agent is justified in desiring as she does so long as there is no  
10 special reason to *stop* desiring as she does. She is justified in desiring *what*  
11 she does so long as there is no reason to stop desiring what she does.  
12 Desires do not generally need to pass some test in order to be justified.  
13 Thus desires do not stand in need of being justified, they are only expected  
14 not to *lose* their “default justification.” Rather than require desires to  
15 *acquire* justification in some way, this opposing outlook requires them  
16 merely to *conserve* their pre-given justification. On this view, desires only  
17 have to avoid being *disqualified* from the realm of the justified; they do not  
18 need to *qualify* in order to belong in it. In this sense, desires *come*  
19 justified—they do not have to *become* justified.

20 This view, which we may call *practical general conservatism*, or general  
21 conservatism about desires, has certain commonalities with both tradi-  
22 tional foundationalism and coherentism about desires. With founda-  
23 tionalism, it shares the claim that there is such a thing as foundational desires,  
24 desires that need not derive their justification from *other* desires (or any  
25 other source). The difference is that according to general conservatism *all*  
26 desires are foundational in this sense, whereas according to traditional  
27 foundationalism only *some* desires are. With coherentism, general con-  
28 servatism shares the claim that there is no distinction to be made between  
29 desires that have a special justificatory status and desires that do not.  
30 Rather, all desires have the same *prima facie* status. The difference is that  
31 according to general conservatism this is the *prima facie* status of being  
32 *justified*, whereas according to traditional coherentism it is the *prima facie*  
33 status of *lacking justification*.

34 What we have here, then, are two opposing outlooks on desire justifi-  
35 cation. According to what may be called the *qualification model*, a desire  
36 has to acquire a certain property in order to *qualify* as justified. According  
37 to the *disqualification model*, a desire must acquire a certain property in  
38 order to be *disqualified* as unjustified. On the former model, a desire  
39 remains unjustified, or at least nonjustified, until it acquires the relevant  
40 justification-bestowing property. On the latter model, the desire remains  
41 justified as long as it does not acquire the justification-vacating property.

42 As in the epistemological case, the temporal or causal language is  
43 to be understood as merely metaphorical. The literal point is simply that  
44 according to practical general conservatism, a desire is *prima facie* ethi-  
45 cally justified, in the sense of being *prima facie* reasonableness-conferring,

1 simply in virtue of being a desire—or more generally, in virtue of being a  
2 *conative state* or a *pro attitude*. The contrasting view, found in practical  
3 foundationalism and coherentism, is that a desire is *prima facie* ethically  
4 justified just in case it is a desire of some special kind *K*, with the  
5 foundationalism/coherentism debate being over what *K* is. Thus we may  
6 offer the following formal statement of practical general conservatism:

7  
8 (PGC) For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* ethically justified if *S* is  
9 a desire (or another conative state).<sup>19</sup>

10  
11 This is to be contrasted with the following practical foundationalist and  
12 coherentist theses:

13  
14 (PF) For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* ethically justified if (and  
15 only if) either (a) *S* is a foundational desire or (b) *S* is suitably  
16 based on foundational desires.

17 (PC) For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* ethically justified if (and  
18 only if) *S* is a desire that suitably coheres with other desires.

19  
20 (PGC) is intended to capture the letter of practical general conservatism,  
21 just as (GC) captures that of general conservatism in epistemology. Note  
22 well: given the understanding of desires' justifiedness in terms of their  
23 conferring reasonableness on actions (the actions they are desires to  
24 perform), a more explicit statement of (PGC) is possible, whereby a desire  
25 to  $\phi$  confers reasonableness on  $\phi$ -ing simply in virtue of being a desire  
26 to  $\phi$ .<sup>20</sup>

27 An immediate consequence of practical general conservatism is that the  
28 having of a desire to  $\phi$  is sufficient to provide the desirer with a normative  
29 reason for action—at least a *prima facie* reason. This is what I called  
30 hyper-internalism in Section 1. To get hyper-internalism from (PGC), we  
31 only need something like the following bridge principle: If a subject's  
32 desire to  $\phi$  is *prima facie* (ethically) justified, then the subject has a *prima*  
33 *facie* (normative) reason to  $\phi$ . We can then argue as follows: (1) For any  
34 mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* ethically justified if *S* is a desire; (2)  
35 if a subject's desire to  $\phi$  is *prima facie* (ethically) justified, then the subject  
36 has a *prima facie* (normative) reason to  $\phi$ ; therefore, (3) if a subject  
37 has a desire to  $\phi$ , then that subject has a *prima facie* reason to  $\phi$ . On  
38

39  
40 <sup>19</sup> For someone who sympathizes with this one-way conditional, the biconditional may  
41 be tempting: For any mental state *S*, *S* is *prima facie* ethically justified iff *S* is a desire (or  
42 other conative state). However, the proponent of practical general conservatism *need not*  
43 deny that nonconative states could also constitute justificatory reasons for actions. I am  
44 indebted to a *Metaphilosophy* referee for making me see that the biconditional need not be  
45 plausible.

46 <sup>20</sup> A somewhat unlovely statement of the thesis would be this: For any mental state *S*, *S*  
is *prima facie* ethically reasonableness-conferring iff *S* is a desire (or other conative state).

1 some interpretations, the bridge principle in premise 2 is tautological;  
2 on others, it is substantive but obviously true. Either way, through  
3 it hyper-internalism follows straightforwardly from practical general  
4 conservatism.

5 The observation I would like to make at this point is simply this. The  
6 idea that a desire may constitute, in and of itself, a normative reason for  
7 action is almost nowhere to be found in moral psychology and metaethics  
8 (Stampe 1987 being a notable exception). More generally, although  
9 discussions of the role of desires in practical reasoning/deliberation and  
10 action guidance may bear in certain roundabout ways on the issue of  
11 which model ought to be preferred, practical general conservatism (as well  
12 as the disqualification model that goes with it) has not been *explicitly*  
13 stated and formulated, let alone *explicitly* argued against.<sup>21</sup> Yet the view  
14 appears coherent and stable.

15 Moreover, the view seems just as attractive in metaethics as general  
16 conservatism is in epistemology. I noted in Section 2 that the great  
17 advantage of general conservatism is its dissolution of the problem of  
18 skepticism—its ability to account for our beliefs about the existence of  
19 the external world being justified. Analogously, arguably the traditional  
20 adherence to the qualification model has led to an intractable problem of  
21 moral skepticism. What makes any action (or corresponding desire to  
22 perform that action) justified? How could we ground the notion that it is  
23 better to feed hungry cats than to torture them for fun and profit? These  
24 are questions surrounding the “sources of normativity”—what could  
25 make a course of action not only *take place* but also be *justified*, that is, not  
26 only occur but also have a normative status. Such questions present  
27 tremendous, perhaps insurmountable, challenges to ethical theory—but  
28 only insofar as we stick with the qualification model. If instead we start  
29 out with the assumption that any desire justifies the action for which it is  
30 a desire, at least *prima facie*, such skepticism about the sources of norma-  
31 tivity dissipates instantly.<sup>22</sup> Thus the theoretical payoff of practical general  
32 conservatism is tremendous. It offers us a straightforward account of the  
33 sources of normativity, an account that is moreover purely naturalistic  
34 and avoids the complications and difficulties attending accounts in the  
35 mould of the qualification model.

36 If this is right, we can formulate an argument for (PGC) that would  
37 parallel the argument from skepticism for (GC). As parallel to the belief  
38

39 <sup>21</sup> Indeed, I am not aware of so much as an explicit *acknowledgment* of practical general  
40 conservatism as an option. In a way, the primary purpose of the present article has been  
41 precisely to articulate practical general conservatism (and the disqualification model) as a  
42 *prima facie* coherent position.

43 <sup>22</sup> Relatedly, another fundamental problem is the one captured by the question “Why  
44 should I be moral?” Under the disqualification model, the desire to be moral, which every-  
45 body but the wicked and amoralist shares, is justified unless there is a special reason to think  
46 it is not, and is so simply because it is a desire. So the problem dissolves again.

1 that there is an external world, let us take the desire to not commit  
2 genocide. The argument then looks like this: (1) if (PF) or (PC) is true,  
3 then we are not ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide; (2)  
4 we are in fact ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide; there-  
5 fore, (3) neither (PF) nor (PC) is true. Alternatively, we might argue as  
6 follows: (1) we are ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide  
7 only if (PGC) is true; (2) we are in fact ethically justified in desiring to not  
8 commit genocide; therefore, (3) (PGC) is true. The general reasoning  
9 would be this: (1) we are ethically justified in wanting to act morally only  
10 if (PGC) is true; (2) we are in fact ethically justified in wanting to act  
11 morally; therefore, (3) (PGC) is true. Call this the *argument from moral*  
12 *skepticism*.

13 The argument from moral skepticism is the chief motivation for practi-  
14 cal general conservatism. As with general conservatism in epistemology,  
15 however, there are ways in which practical general conservatism is, upon  
16 reflection, quite intuitive. Just as the fact that one finds oneself believing  
17 that there is a table before one, or some such trivial fact, constitutes prima  
18 facie epistemic *justification* for believing that there is a table before one, so  
19 the fact that one feels like scratching one's ear gives one a prima facie  
20 ethical justification for scratching one's ear. The action of scratching one's  
21 ear is made reasonable simply by the fact of the agent's desire at the time,  
22 arbitrary and insignificant though it may be, in the same way the agent's  
23 holding on to his belief in the table's existence is reasonable given that the  
24 belief already exists. These reasonableness-conferring psychological states  
25 may well later be outweighed by other considerations. But so long as they  
26 are not, their very existence makes sure that their subject is being reason-  
27 able in believing or acting as he does. Here too the intuition is that, unless  
28 there is something to disqualify one's desire in some way (e.g., its being  
29 formed in an unreliable or irresponsible way), one cannot be *at fault* for  
30 believing or acting as one does.

31 To be sure, practical general conservatism faces some clear objections.  
32 Perhaps the most pressing is presented by wicked or evil desires. Jean  
33 Kambanda's desire to incite the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda did not give  
34 him a reason to do so, it might be plausibly argued, and was not a justified  
35 (or justifying) desire. But practical general conservatism entails that it did  
36 and was, and is thereby reduced to absurdity.

37 The first response to this objection is to insist on the distinction between  
38 prima facie and ultima facie justification. Arguably, pretheoretic intuitions  
39 about Kambanda's desire and their justification seem to concern  
40 a generic notion justification, one that does not discriminate between  
41 prima facie and ultima facie justification. We may therefore do justice to  
42 them by accepting that Kambanda's desire did not provide Kambanda  
43 with ultima facie justification, and thus did not constitute a conclusive,  
44 all-things-considered reason for inciting genocidal activity, while insisting  
45 that the desire did provide him with prima facie justification. Such prima

1 facie reasons can readily be outweighed. Indeed, they can be *overwhelm-*  
2 *ingly* outweighed, to the point that their comparative weight becomes  
3 negligible.

4 This initial response to the objection may seem inappropriate,  
5 however, inasmuch as we would like to think that Kambanda's  
6 desire did not give him *any* (justificatory) reason, not even a slight one.  
7 There are two possible responses to this pressing of the objection. One  
8 response is to claim that our intuitions are not sufficiently fine-tuned to  
9 tell apart not having a reason at all and having a negligible reason. That  
10 is, if we really appreciate what it means for someone to have a negligible  
11 reason to do something—a reason infinitely outweighed by contrary  
12 reasons, say—we realize that we have no intuitive sense of whether it is  
13 this kind of reason that Kambanda's desire provided him with or no  
14 reason at all. A second response is to hold that prima facie reasons are  
15 such as to be susceptible not only to being outweighed and overridden  
16 but also to being altogether vacated and annulled. Compare the notion  
17 of defeasible evidence in epistemology: as Pollock (1986) pointed out,  
18 one's defeasible evidence for something is susceptible to two different  
19 kinds of defeater, which Pollock called "overriding" and "undermining,"  
20 respectively. The former defeat the evidence by presenting heftier coun-  
21 terevidence; the latter do so by removing an apparent evidential con-  
22 nection. Still, both overridden and undermined defeasible evidence is  
23 defeasible, prima facie evidence. By the same token, we may insist, both  
24 outweighed and vacated prima facie ethical justification is genuine prima  
25 facie justification. Kambanda's desire to incite genocidal activity may  
26 thus have provided him with a prima facie, though vacatable and indeed  
27 vacated, justification.

28 It may be objected that if prima facie reasons are vacatable, as opposed  
29 to merely overridable, then they are very meager reasons indeed, making  
30 practical general conservatism much less interesting than it had originally  
31 seemed. But the important point about prima facie reasons is that,  
32 however meager, they are *normative*. Thus the fact that every desire con-  
33 stitutes, in and of itself, a prima facie reason for performing the action it  
34 is a desire for means that normativity comes for free with the natural  
35 having of desires. It is still the case that practical general conservatism  
36 dissolves any deep mystery about the sources of normativity.

37 This response may raise the ire of some objectors, who may insist that  
38 desires cannot possibly have any normative force in and of themselves,  
39 and by default, since in themselves they are brute, dated psychological  
40 occurrences. Their occurrence is a brute fact and cannot carry any evalu-  
41 ative or normative significance by itself. To assert this, however, is nothing  
42 more than to assert the falsity of practical general conservatism. In the  
43 present context, it effectively amounts to begging the question. More  
44 deeply, I am of course well aware that practical general conservatism is not  
45 immediately compelling in a way one might wish. But the discussion above



1 is an invitation to try on for size this way of thinking, one that may well  
2 involve, if you will, an achievement of the philosophical imagination.

#### 4. Conclusion

3  
4  
5 To be sure, other objections and difficulties may attend practical general  
6 conservatism. I am very much open to the possibility that ultimately the  
7 liabilities associated with practical general conservatism would make it  
8 untenable or at least undesirable. As I indicated in Section 1, my own  
9 degree of belief in it is limited. Nonetheless, I find that it forms a coher-  
10 ent and stable position, one that upon reflection is not unduly unintuitive  
11 and may neutralize one of the perennial problems of metaethics, the  
12 specter of moral skepticism. An interesting consequence of practical  
13 general conservatism is hyper-internalism: the thesis that the having  
14 of a desire to  $\phi$  is sufficient to provide the desirer with a normative  
15 reason for  $\phi$ -ing.

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