

Knowing what you Want
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I'm starving and everything on the menu looks amazing. But what do I want? Lemme take a closer look... Wait! How can looking at a menu reveal what I want? Suppose I am only concerned with eating a delicious meal. I have put aside nutrition, cost, appearances—anything other than what will hit the spot. There is room for error here, as I might later regret what I choose, and so also for knowledge. My topic in this essay is knowledge of what one wants, in the sense of 'want' (and 'desire') marked by its connection to the prospect of pleasure. This category—*orectic* desire, as I will call it—includes not only desires that spring from appetites, but also those that pertain to, among other ends, choosing a career, a mate, a place to live, a form of exercise, a style of décor, or any other in which one's own enjoyment serves as a measure of the soundness of the subsequent decision. There are, however, a variety of epistemic paths that culminate in orectic self-knowledge. My focus is on what I take to be the paradigmatic form of such knowledge: that which is required in order to *act* from an orectic desire.

My method will be contrastive. Philosophers have, in recent years, developed sophisticated accounts of practical and doxastic knowledge that are rooted in the point of view of the subject. According to the style of account I have in mind, our ability to *just say* what we are doing (section one) or what we believe (section two)—that is, to say so authoritatively, but not on the basis of observation or evidence—is an aspect of our ability to reason about the good and the true. But a review of the epistemological requirements on acting from desire (section three) shows that no analogous approach is feasible (section four). Knowledge of desire—at least the paradigmatic knowledge of desire revealed in acting from desire—is distinctive in being a matter

of our affective response to imagined prospects. An examination of this idea yields a conception of first-personal orrectic self-knowledge (section five): I know what I want just in case the object pursued in anticipation of a certain pleasure actually yields the anticipated pleasure.

I. Knowing what you're Doing

Elizabeth Anscombe advocates a conception of intentional action (hereafter, simply *action*) according to which it is essentially self-conscious: to act is to be able to say, authoritatively but not on the basis of observation or evidence, that one is performing the action. This is the datum with which she begins *Intention*. Much of her book is an attempt to explain this specifically practical form of knowledge in terms of practical reasoning. The account is notoriously difficult to extract from her writing, and this is not the occasion to break new ground. Nonetheless, it will be important to sketch the basic idea for the discussion to follow.

An example: I am walking to the zoo. You call to ask what I am doing. "I am walking to the zoo." I do not say this on the basis of looking around, sniffing the air, recalling a penguin that flashed through my mind over breakfast, or otherwise calculating what seems a likely destination based on my intimate knowledge of the workings of my own mind. It does not seem, in fact, that I *base* the remark on anything at all. It is something I can *just say*. Going to the zoo is itself sufficient for my knowledge that I am going to the zoo. But how could that be?

Intention answers the question by appealing to the phenomenon of reasoning about what to do, i.e., reasoning about 'the good' (in a purely formal or non-substantial sense). It is possible to know what one is doing simply *in* doing it in part because, as Aristotle held, action *just is* the conclusion of practical reasoning. If the very existence of the action is nothing other than the

concluding judgment of a course of practical reasoning, then one's knowledge of what one is doing can simply be knowledge of one's own judgment. It takes some work to bring the appeal of this idea into view.

Crucially, when Anscombe speaks of practical reasoning, she has in mind not a conscious process, but an order that is there whenever anyone acts for a reason:

But if Aristotle's account were supposed to describe actual mental processes, it would in general be quite absurd. The interest of the account is that it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions.¹

The existence of the order is both a rational and explanatory matter. It is an order of *reasoning*, as it can be represented in terms of a conclusion reached in light of premises. And it is an order of *explanation*, as the premise-states explain the agent's performing the action. It manages to be both insofar as the agent acts (conclusion) in light of the force of supporting considerations (premises). The order can be elicited from an agent via the question: "why did you do that?", where the 'why' is understood as asking the agent the reason for which they performed the action. But, again, the reality of the order does not depend upon any correspondence to an actual temporal series of thoughts.

The Aristotelian thesis is essential to the approach. If reasoning ends a step short of action, then our knowledge of the judgment in which reasoning concludes cannot be knowledge of action and, furthermore, the support lent by the premises cannot fully explain the doing itself, which then occurs in part as the result of something like a mechanism linking the concluding

¹ Anscombe (1980), 80.

judgment and the doing.² But the thesis is itself mysterious. How could action be both a judgment and a particular human being's moving through space?

Anscombe's answer: Insofar as one concludes that the action is *to be done* (is 'good' in the formal sense), one can then do various other things with that aim. Once I intend to walk to the zoo, I can put on my shoes because (as I know) *I'm walking to the zoo*. Our knowledge of what we are doing is thus in a sense 'the cause of what it understands' and not the effect of what it understands.³ In the familiar case of theoretical knowledge, what is 'understood', e.g., the winding path through the park, causes, via a perceptual experience, knowledge of the winding path. In the case of practical knowledge, it is my knowledge of what I'm doing that causes (or in any case explains) how the achievement of my aim is realized. Were I oblivious to the fact that I was walking to the zoo, I could not do anything else as a means to that end. This knowledge is not a mere enabling condition. It is precisely my knowledge of the fact that I am walking to the zoo (having judged it as to be done) that explains why the known fact can serve as a rational basis for my doing other things. Knowledge of *how* to do it is relevant insofar and only insofar as I understand myself already to be embarked. I am putting one foot in front of the other, I am looking at where I am stepping and further on down the path through the park, checking my wallet to make sure I can pay for the tickets, etc. I am doing all of these things because I am going to the zoo—as I know insofar as I concluded that going to the zoo was to be done.

I have now summarized an approach to understanding practical knowledge that shows how it could be had without evidence or observation. Of course, it faces countless challenges

² In Marcus (2018), I call these 'The Knowledge Gap' and 'The Reasons Gap'.

³ Anscombe (2000), 87-88.

(some of which I have attempted to meet in earlier work).⁴ My hope is that its basic contours are sufficiently clear to set the stage for the remaining discussion. As the next section concerns doxastic self-knowledge, it will be useful to connect the two topics.

In representing x-ing as to be done in the relevant sense, I also represent as to be done, at least provisionally, what is required to do it. Furthermore, the lack of any plausible conception of how one might even begin to x or to learn how to x would disqualify the relevant attitude from being an intention at all. It would simply be a wish. Thus, it is not simply *reaching* the zoo that is not possible if one has no beliefs about how to get there. There could not even be any *intending* to walk to the zoo if one had no beliefs that pointed towards possible means since there would be nothing I could do (given the absence of such beliefs) *in order* to get to the zoo. And I could not have any practical knowledge that I was walking to the zoo, not just because I would not as a matter of fact *be* walking to the zoo, but also because I would have no conception of how to accomplish that aim. I cannot represent x-ing as to be done in the relevant sense unless I

⁴ Doesn't the agent have to actually *do* something (and not just judge something) for there to be an action? And mustn't an agent monitor their progress as they act in order to know what they are doing? And so isn't their practical knowledge based at least partly on perception? And how can action in general be the conclusion of practical reasoning given that we often act without doing any reasoning at all? And what about when people are repressing their aims but still performing the relevant actions? See Marcus (2012), (2018) and (2019) for some discussion of these and related questions.

have some answer to the question of *how to x*, an answer sufficient to start on the (metaphorical) path towards the realization of one's aim.⁵

This last point raises a question. Is the possession of the relevant instrumental beliefs enough to satisfy the *how to* requirement? In other words, does the fact that I am in possession of true beliefs corresponding to a recipe for action-completion entail that I am actually able to perform the action given the opportunity? No. The agent may lack, for example, the skills and/or equipment required to execute what they know to be a workable plan. More relevant for my purposes is a different source of insufficiency. If the agent is somehow unable to bring the relevant beliefs to consciousness, on account of repression or distraction or something else, the agent would not be able to *x*.

II. Knowing what you Believe

One cannot do anything for the reason that *p* unless one knows or believes that *p*. If I am unaware that the elevator is about to get stuck, e.g., I can't take the stairs in light of the fact that the elevator is about to get stuck. But is belief (or knowledge) that *p* sufficient to establish the cognitive connection to *p* that renders it a candidate ground of action? No. Such a connection obtains only if one's belief that *p* is not repressed or otherwise dissociated from one's point of view in acting.⁶

⁵ Cf., Anscombe (1980), 35.

⁶ What follows is a variation of an argument from Marcus and Schwenkler (2019).

Suppose that I believe that my sister is ghosting me, a searingly painful fact that I manage to avoid contemplating very often. Let us suppose further that I come to repress this belief, so that when a cousin is in town I rhapsodize at length about our sibling bond, repelling (whether due to subpersonal mechanisms or person-level strategies) any thought of the recent past and dwelling on our youth, when our connection was strong.

There are various ways in which a repressed belief might nonetheless influence my behavior. Perhaps my enthusiasm in describing our relationship is heightened as part of the self-obfuscation strategy. My belief that my sister is ghosting me would, in that case, cause me to be *more* enthusiastic than I would have been had my profession of conviction been fully honest. What I can't do, so long as the belief remains repressed, is act for the reason that my sister is ghosting me. If, on the other hand, I am clear-eyed in my obfuscation of the rupture, deliberately drawing my cousin's attention away from recent history in hopes of avoiding avoid the painful topic, then my reason for doing so *can* be that my sister is ghosting me. The primary explanatory role of expressions such as 'in denial' and 'repressed belief' is precisely to indicate that the relevant mental state is temporarily beyond the reach of reason. But what exactly does this mean?⁷

The availability of *p* to serve as a reason for acting is determined by an unobfuscated connection between what I believe and its (apparent) truth. To have the belief in mind, in the sense of it being within the reach of reason, is for its (putative) truth to be salient. In such a case, my rhapsodizing about our closeness would be a flat-out lie, whereas, under the hypothesis of repression, it would be something in the gray zone between the defective and the vicious. When

⁷ See Marcus (2019) for an extensive discussion of self-deceptive action.

repressed, the (putative) truth of the proposition—the recognition of which constitutes its being my belief—is *out of consciousness* as I rhapsodize, my mind lost in memories of happier times gone by.

My perceptive cousin, let us now imagine, finds my enthusiasm unnaturally forced; he doesn't believe me. He accuses me of being dishonest (about my own mind) when I say that I believe that my sister and I remain as close as ever. This skepticism enrages me, prompting a lengthy rant about my cousin's jealousy. After a few minutes, however, I realize that my intemperate response to the suggestion is itself a sign that I recognize its truth. Evidence of this sort might even lead me to knowledgeably attribute to myself the belief that my sister and I are no longer close. But my belief may still be repressed, so that reflection on *the truth* of the question is hijacked by my aversion to facing reality. I cannot act in light of the corresponding fact. I can only act in light of a (putative) truth insofar as I am, at the time, not repressing its *being* a truth. When I am repressing its truth, I can at best act in light of the fact that I believe that we are no longer close, just as my cousin can act in light of the fact that I believe we are no longer close.⁸

⁸ A complication: I might habitually perform a certain action under a pleasing cover story, suppressing my actual reason. (E.g., I finish my brother's sentences under the cover story 'being helpful', whereas my real reason is that doing so undermines him.) Thus I might act for the reason that p even while p is repressed. However, it's crucial that *at some point* I saw that finishing his sentences did undermine him, knowledge that was later repressed. For the purposes of this argument, I will put this complication to one side. See Marcus (2019) for an extensive discussion of this phenomenon.

The point of this section is to describe a sort of distinctively first-personal knowledge of belief, one that makes it possible to act in light of what one believes. Given the possibility of repression, distraction, and anything else that can keep a belief out of consciousness, believing that *p* by itself does not suffice for the relevant sort of cognitive connection. Nor is knowing that I believe sufficient, since the belief might still be repressed. What kind of knowledge of belief is required if that belief is to serve as a basis for thought and action?

It must be *transparent*. According to the approach to doxastic self-knowledge pioneered by Gareth Evans, rational creatures determine what to believe by thinking about what's true, and it is on this very same basis that we paradigmatically attribute to ourselves the corresponding beliefs.⁹ There are, of course, challenges to the very idea and squabbles among its proponents about how best to articulate and defend it. But the basic thought is that, ordinarily at least, the possibility of a belief's self-attribution is simply a function of our recognizing the proposition's truth. I would add the following: The conditions under which one cannot do this—denial, confusion, distraction, etc.—should be understood as involving the *masking* of this ability. These factors prevent us from exercising an ability that nonetheless remains (albeit masked): the ability to self-attribute the belief, an ability grounded simply in possession of the belief. Doxastic self-knowledge remains, even as we are temporarily unable to bring it to mind.¹⁰

The practical and doxastic self-knowledge requirements discussed thus far are inextricable. If I don't know (or even believe) that the elevator is about to get stuck, then

⁹ Evans (1982). See Moran (2001) for a key development of the basic idea.

¹⁰ See Marcus (2021b), chapters 1-3, for an elaboration of the idea of transparency along the lines just sketched.

‘avoiding getting stuck in the elevator’ does not describe what I’m (intentionally) doing when I take the stairs. What I can know I am doing without observation is in part a consequence of what I believe my actions will bring about, which in turn is determined by any number of beliefs about the workings of the world. An agent’s beliefs thus help determine under which descriptions an action *can* be intentional.

Recall now Anscombe’s requirement regarding the character of our knowledge of action: it must be non-evidential. Imagine a man who dodges his girlfriend’s phone calls because he knows she wants to break up with him. But now imagine that he represses this knowledge, explaining his own behavior with a cover story. He claims, say, simply to have been seized by the urge to go running at the various time during which she usually calls. So long as his belief that she’s going to dump him is repressed, he can no longer recognize what he is doing when he runs as *avoiding break up*. That is, he cannot think of going running at odd times as his means of avoiding being dumped if he cannot bring the relevant background fact to consciousness. And so he cannot (so long as the belief is repressed) just say that he is avoiding being dumped *in* going running.

He would also fail to exhibit first-personal practical knowledge of action were he to say “I am avoiding being dumped” simply in virtue of accepting the diagnosis of his therapist. Agentive knowledge is the sort of knowledge exhibited when we ask ourselves a question like “how can I avoid being broken up with?”. But if I am in denial that I am x-ing, the question of how to x is moot. One’s distinctively first-personal knowledge of action is grounded in an unobstructed relation between what one is doing and one’s judgment of the good, i.e., the to-be-done. This neatly parallels the thesis of the current section: one’s distinctively first-personal

knowledge of belief is grounded in an unobstructed relation between what one believes and one's judgment of the true, i.e., the to-be-believed.

According to the first-person approaches discussed here, belief and action are essentially self-known. Failures of self-knowledge in these domains are not instances of ignorance but of alienation from what is nonetheless still known. As we shall see, failure to know what one wants need not involve this sort of alienation.

III. Knowing what you Want from the Outside

As many have observed, there are broader and narrower senses of 'desire' and 'want'. According to the standard picture of action, every intentional action is motivated by some desire or other. Whether the action has its source in a judgment about what to do or about what would serve one's interests or the anticipation of pleasure, its motivational contribution is structurally identical. In what I call the *action-minus* sense, one 'desires' whatever one intends to do or does intentionally.¹¹ A desire, in this sense, is whatever supplies the motivation to act. I so term it because we typically use 'desire' and (especially) 'want' in this sense when either the time for action is not yet at hand or when an action has been unsuccessful, as in "he boarded that bus because he wanted to go to Atlanta, but it turned out to be headed to Albuquerque." To make sense of this explanation, we do not need to think of the agent as finding any pleasure in the prospect of either the trip itself or the arrival at his destination. (Perhaps the trip is a

¹¹ Cf., Schueler (1995), 29–30.

punishment.) My topic is desire in the orectic sense, in which it is connected to pleasure, leading people to say things like “Everything on the menu looks so good, I just don’t know what I want!”. When you do what you feel like doing, because you feel like doing it, you are acting on an orectic desire. My focus is on the epistemological requirement for the orectic desire-action connection.

I begin with the following observation: Given (as I have assumed here) that I must have knowledge of what I’m doing for it to *be* a doing, then, just as in the case of belief, no desire of which I am ignorant can supply the description under which I am acting intentionally. If, for example, I have no idea that I want to eat ice cream, then I cannot take any action with a view to doing so. I cannot orient myself towards the goal of eating ice cream and hence I cannot do it. Imagine otherwise. I am walking to the fridge in order to get some ice cream, but I am unaware that I want to eat ice cream. “Why am I walking to the fridge?”, I might ask myself. Why are the words “where is the ice cream scooper?” emerging from my mouth? Would I continue to walk to the freezer? This would not be acting on a desire; it would be a mysterious internal force usurping control of my body. Since I have no idea that I desire ice cream, there is nothing that I’m doing that I can explain by saying “I’m doing *that* because I am going to eat some ice cream.” My desire for ice cream, so long I’m completely unaware of it, cannot provide any rational guidance. The next question, and one that I answer in this section, is this: Is *mere* knowledge of desire enough to establish the cognitive connection required to act on the desire? The answer is ‘no’, paralleling the conclusion of the previous section.

Consider the following case:

Ice Cream 1: Issa is hungry but not sure what for. “What do I want to eat?”, she asks her roommate Rudy. “Ice Cream!” says Rudy. “Why do you say that,

Rudy?” “Because whenever you ask that question and you eat ice cream, you are happy you did; and whenever you eat anything else, you realize you made a mistake.” On the strength of this evidence, Issa grabs the ice cream scooper and heads to the freezer.

Issa, one might say, acts in light of her desire. If asked why she was opening the freezer door, she might even say, knowledgeably, “because I want some ice cream.” So far so good. But were she to add “or that’s what Rudy thinks, anyway”, it would transform our understanding of her initial remark. Acting on my desire is not something I do *merely* on the basis of someone else’s (knowledgeable even) testimony. *That* can still require willpower since the thought of ice cream itself does not motivate me. Issa is not so much acting on her desire in IC1 as acting on Rudy’s advice about what will please her. When I act on a desire, I recognize its object *as* the object of my desire. It is in part *through* that recognition that I act on it. Another example will further clarify:

Ice Cream 2: Issa, filled with ennui, ambles towards the freezer, motivated by the well-confirmed hypothesis (supported by evidence from previous episodes of ennui) that eating ice cream might jar her out of her listlessness.

In this case, Issa is suffering spiritually and speculates that ice cream might cure her. She has, we can suppose, the paradigmatic form of knowledge of her suffering, whatever exactly that is. And the point of her action is to end it.

But wait: Is she acting on a desire for ice-cream or is she acting on a desire to end suffering? As the Epicureans emphasized long ago, these are not the same. If she wants simply to stop the suffering, then she might take an appetite suppressant. Taking the pill *will* satisfy the desire to end her suffering. But a desire for ice cream cannot be satisfied by taking an appetite

suppressant, only eliminated. IC2 makes it seem as if desire's pursuit begins with a hypothesis. This is a distortion. To describe someone as acting on a desire excludes their being completely blind, like Tigger in *Winnie the Pooh*, as to the nature of what will satisfy it.

Krista Lawlor argues for a sophisticated blind-desire view. Orectic self-knowledge, she holds, requires inference:

There are then at least two characteristic marks of having identified a desire:

(a) the self-ascribed desire is an explanation of the current shape of one's mental imagery and (b) the self-ascription effects characteristic changes in the further course of one's imaginative rehearsals... In sum, it seems that causal self-interpretation, specifically, inference from internal promptings, is a routine means by which we know what we want. In some cases, the internal promptings are simple sensations; in other cases, where desires are more complex, one's internal promptings may include imaged natural language sentences and visual images (which in turn may figure in specific kinds of imaginative rehearsal).¹²

This conception of our knowledge of desire is fundamentally passive; we infer what we desire from what we witness inside the theatre of our minds. This divorce from the practical is a red flag. Desires themselves are nothing if not what action brings to fruition. Even desires on which we don't act are experienced as something in the family of a temptation to act. Still, there is undoubtedly some truth to Lawlor's description of a process by which we sometimes come to

¹² Lawlor (2009), 60.

know what we want and the effect of so knowing. Saying what this truth is without losing sight of desire's fundamentally practical orientation is tricky.

This much seems undeniable: various sorts of obstacles often prevent us from knowing our minds. And insofar as we don't know what we want, the relevant desire cannot figure in practical deliberation in the ordinary way—although it can no doubt still influence us. We may thus find ourselves in the position of Lawlor's Katherine, who is unsure whether she wants another child.

So how will Katherine find out what she wants? Now that the question has been called, Katherine starts noticing her experiences and thoughts. She catches herself imagining, remembering, and feeling a range of things. Putting away her son's now-too-small clothes, she finds herself lingering over the memory of how a newborn feels in one's arms. She notes an emotion that could be envy when an acquaintance reveals her pregnancy. Such experiences may be enough to prompt Katherine to make a self-attribution that sticks. Saying "I want another child", she may feel a sense of ease or settledness.¹³

How should we understand the relationship between this process of self-discovery and our epistemic connection to the vast majority of our desires, which are known to us without causal self-interpretation? The metaphor of *sticking* is suggestive, but the nature of our knowledge of what is stuck, once it is stuck, remains obscure. It's not as if desires on the basis of which we are presently able to reason and act are continuously being discovered by causal self-interpretation. A different account is required to understand our cognitive relation to those

¹³ Lawlor (2009), 57.

desires of ours—some of which we have arrived at on the basis of self-reflection and others of which required no such process—that are at any given time available to be acted on.

Causal self-interpretation is not only not *necessary* for paradigmatic or ectic self-knowledge, it is also not *sufficient*. I might infer on the basis of causal self-interpretation that I desire to eat ice cream, but the mere acceptance of this hypothesis does not ensure the relevant sort of cognitive relation to my desire. This was the upshot of IC1. Rudy’s testimony may confer on Issa knowledge of what she wants, but not the sort that enables her to act on the desire in the ordinary sense. A justified belief that I possess a desire—even if the justification is knowledge-conferring—does not put me *inside* it. Paradigmatically, I know what I want simply *in* desiring it. And no inference made on the basis of causal self-interpretation or testimony can by itself constitute such knowledge.

Causal self-interpretation is important not because our knowledge of desire is typically inferential—it isn’t—but because, when successful, it can lead one back inside one’s desire, from which knowledgeable vantage point causal self-interpretation is no longer required. It is thus a therapeutically invaluable ladder, but one that can be safely dispensed with once it has served its purpose. I don’t propose to undertake here an analysis of the power of self-observation to bring ordinary or ectic self-knowledge to the surface of consciousness. Its significance for the present inquiry is chiefly negative: it is not what we’re after. As we shall see in the next section, transparency approaches to or ectic self-knowledge—on the surface quite different from Lawlor’s causal interpretationalism—also fail due to their inferentialist commitments.

IV. Knowing What You Want from the Inside

I claim that Lawlor's approach misses the central phenomenon: being inside of a desire. What exactly is it to know one's desire in this way? The proper sort of knowledge of *action* is derived from one's orientation towards the good or to be done; the proper sort of knowledge of *belief* is derived from one's orientation towards the true or the to-be-believed. Practical and doxastic self-knowledge fit the following pattern: we know that we x (e.g., believe that it's raining/are baking a cake) by determining that a certain x-able (a believe-able or a do-able) is to be x-ed (believed/done). Does this pattern fit orectic desire? No. We do not know what we desire by determining what is *to be desired*.

Let's start with action. Here again, in capsule form, is the Anscombean account of practical knowledge: I know that I'm x-ing because my x-ing is nothing other than the judgment that x-ing is to be done. Having made this judgment, x-ing is eligible to confer this status on the various means-actions that I judge conducive to x-ing. Orectic desire, plainly, is not governed by our judgments of to-be-doneness. After all, we often desire exactly what we would never choose, precisely because it is *not* to be done. Still, desire is at the very least an appearance of the good, as Sergio Tenenbaum puts it.¹⁴ To desire something is for that thing to hold itself out to one (so to speak) as choice-worthy. But how exactly to understand this idea?

Recall that our topic is knowledge of orectic desires and not knowledge of desires of other sorts. Sometimes, or so I would argue, our knowledge of desire is simply knowledge of what one represents as to be done. Suppose, for example, that I split this morning's bacon equally between my children on the grounds that it is a fair method of division. If asked what I was doing with the ruler, I might have said "I want to split the bacon evenly". How did I know

¹⁴ Tenenbaum (2007).

that this is what I wanted? Because I knew my own judgment of fairness. When the motivation for an action is *just* a matter of the determination that it is to be done—with no influence of anticipated pleasure—then what I know in knowing the underlying desire is just that (as I judge) x-ing is to be done.¹⁵ Knowledge of this *anorectic* desire is a function of my representing the proposition as true. I know that the even-split is what I want because I determined that it was the right thing to do.

Thomas Nagel calls desires arrived through reflection *motivated*.¹⁶ The category includes not just desires that spring from judgments of the good, but those that spring from instrumental knowledge. Since, as I know, the ice cream scooper will facilitate ice cream eating, the to-be-done-ness of eating some ice cream confers to-be-done-ness on retrieving the ice cream scooper. My knowledge that I want to retrieve the ice-cream scooper is knowledge that it facilitates eating ice cream together with knowledge of my desire for ice cream. But what about the desire for ice cream itself?

Consider

Ice Cream 3: Issa wakes up in the middle of the night dying to eat a bowl of ice cream. After a bit of tossing and turning, she flings off the blanket and marches briskly to the freezer.

Issa's knowledge that it is *ice cream* that she wants does not derive from testimony, nor is she hazarding a guess. But it also is not the product of any judgment, whether of to-be-done-ness or

¹⁵ The distinction between these *anorectic* desires and *orectic* desires is the topic of Marcus (2021a).

¹⁶ Nagel (1970).

to-be-believed-ness. She has not *reasoned* that eating ice cream is a worthy pursuit. Rather, she just feels like eating ice cream.

Jordi Fernandez holds that transparency is operative even in the domain of orrectic desires, that it is what puts us ‘inside’ of them. To know one’s desires, one simply considers whether there are grounds for pursuing the object of desire:

If I am asked (by myself or others) whether I want p to be the case, my attention will be directed at p being the case. To address the question, I do not try to, so to speak, scan my own mind in search of a state that I can identify as the relevant desire. Rather, I concern myself with the outside world by focusing on the intentional object of the desire....If I am asked whether I want a drink, then I will consider my having a drink. Specifically, I will consider whether I feel like having one. In general, it seems that one answers the question of whether one wants that p by focusing on considerations that do not concern one’s own mind, but the fact that p.¹⁷

On this analysis, whether I *desire* a drink is a question that concerns my own mind, but whether I *feel like having* a drink does not concern my own mind but rather “the intentional object of desire”: a drink. Fernandez’s emphasis on non-mental, worldly, facts is plainly unsuited to the case of orrectic desires, as it becomes necessary to switch immediately from a focus on the drink to a focus on how one feels about the drink, which is just as much a mental matter as the desire itself.

¹⁷ Fernandez (2007), 525.

Suppose that I am feeling thirsty and, on the basis of my feeling thirsty, I believe that I want to quench my thirst. Is my belief justified? Recall generalization Urge. Given Urge, if I feel thirsty and I therefore experience an urge to quench my thirst, then, in normal circumstances, I will want to quench my thirst. My feeling thirsty therefore constitutes adequate support for the belief that I want to quench my thirst. Thus, my belief that I have the basic desire in question is justified provided that it has been formed on the basis of the appropriate urge.¹⁸

There are two curious aspects of this account. First, as we just saw, his explanation of how we know our desires does not, as promised, proceed from outer (world) to inner (mind), but from inner (sensation) to inner (desire). Our knowledge of this sort of desire is based on our direct knowledge of sensation. Second, and relatedly, our knowledge of desire is, on this picture, inferential. I infer that I desire to drink, as that would make sense for someone who feels like having one, as I know I do from (one presumes) something like direct acquaintance.

I should emphasize, as to the first point, that I don't take it to be an objection to Fernandez's analysis that he bails on the outer-to-inner explanatory strategy characteristic of transparency. Orectic desires are not transparent. But the particular way he bails is unsatisfactory and one aspect of its unsatisfactoriness is his attempt to dress it up as a vindication of that strategy, which it wouldn't be even if it worked (which it doesn't).

As to the second point: The direction of inference from sensation to desire is highly dubious. It is in general *much easier* to describe our desires than to describe in non-intentional

¹⁸ Fernandez (2007), 528.

terms the sensations associated with those desires. Furthermore, the thought that we are capable of cognizing our (blind) sensations with a degree of richness that would enable us to conclude merely on their basis that we desire, say, apple juice, as opposed to pear juice, is preposterous. (We are in the neighborhood of sense-data-theoretic attempts to construct our perceptual beliefs about the world.)

Alex Byrne's version of orrectic transparency would seem to sidestep these problems. Like Fernandez, he interprets transparency as a pattern of inference: "if ϕ -ing is a desirable option, believe that you want to ϕ ."¹⁹ But he makes no mention of sensation as an intermediary. Is ϕ -ing desirable? That is not a question about *me*, it is a question about ϕ -ing. Is drinking apple juice a desirable option; does it, for example, taste good? Yes! I guess I want to drink apple juice.

But is it actually an outer-to-inner explanation? I don't think so. For 'tasting good', in the relevant sense, is not obviously a worldly-as-opposed-to-mental quality, since what I represent in desiring to eat the ice cream is its tasting good *to me* and not, say, to competent judges. So perhaps, like Fernandez's, Byrne's account also ultimately turns on an inference from one element of my own mental life ("does ice cream taste good to me?") to another ("do I desire ice-cream?").²⁰

The deep and unfixable problem with both theories, however, is inferentialism itself. Consider that in any of our versions of Ice Cream, Issa does something that an observer can explain by citing the fact that Ice Cream will hit the spot. In 1, she ascertains this fact on the

¹⁹ Byrne (2011), 18.

²⁰ I elaborate on this objection to Byrne in Marcus (2021a).

basis of Rudy's testimony. In 2, she ascertains this fact on the basis of the evidence provided by her own mood. In each of these cases, the explanation depends upon Issa cognizing the fact that ice cream will hit the spot. But only in IC3 does Issa have characteristically first-personal knowledge of her desires. In IC1 and IC2, Issa knows ice cream tastes good but she does not have the sort of awareness of her orectic desire that makes it possible to act in light of it. Byrne, even if he is right that the inference 'it tastes good therefore I want it' confers knowledge upon her, does nothing to show that this knowledge is of the right sort. Issa, were she to make the Byrne inference and consequently begin to eat the ice cream, would not be eating the ice cream *because she wants to eat ice cream*, as that form of explanation is generally understood. The inference does not put her *inside* the desire. There is *no* pattern of inference that explains how we know what we want in paradigmatic cases. Transparency, in the realm of desire, is a dead end.²¹

The framework that can best accommodate the distinctive character of our first-personal orectic knowledge is broadly Aristotelian. Aristotle holds that desire is an exercise of the imagination, in the form of a "craving for pleasure"²² in which one "concretely envisag[es] candidate courses of action"²³ as Hendrik Lorenz puts it. Jessica Moss writes: "pleasurable

²¹ It follows from this argument that (orectic) desire is not *any* sort of belief, since we do not know our orectic desires the way we know our beliefs. Thus the sort of desire-as-belief view defended in, e.g., Humberstone (1987) and Gregory (2021), cannot be right. Elaboration of this consequence will have to wait for another occasion, however.

²² Aristotle (350BCE), 18-27.

²³ Lorenz (2006), 127.

phantasia induces desire and pursuit, just as would the actual pleasurable perception. Phantasia's key contribution to action is its pleasurable representation of an object not presently perceived, which thereby becomes desired as a goal".²⁴

The structure of desire, on this approach, is a pleasurable representing of an object. My pleasurable representing explains why in desiring it, we are motivated to pursue it. What does it mean to say that the *representing* is pleasurable? This: it is the pleasure in anticipation of x-ing that constitutes my orectic desire to x. It is an anticipatory pleasure, one that represents what is pleasurable and does so by inducing a pleasure that is itself a version of that very pleasure, a species of the same genus—its shadow, as I will put it. This is not the pleasure of a mere sensation, as it has an intentional structure: it is the (shadow of) pleasure felt *in* x-ing, but independently of actually x-ing. The difference between enjoying x-ing and desiring to x (in the orectic sense) is the substitution of the imagination for reality. When I take pleasure in actually eating ice cream, I do not need to infer that it is in ice cream that am taking pleasure. Why not? Because it is precisely insofar as I represent what I'm doing (eating ice cream) as the source of my pleasure that I am motivated to continue doing it and to do it again, all other things being equal. Ice cream stands at the nexus of my affective appreciation and practical orientation. It is ice cream I pursue exactly because my pleasure itself presents the ice cream as delicious and therefore as to be eaten. Similarly, when I desire ice cream in anticipation of eating it, I know

²⁴ Moss (2012), p. 62.

that it is *ice cream* I desire precisely because it is my pleasurable imagining of eating ice cream that motivates me to find some ice cream.²⁵

Both Fernandez and Byrne portray our knowledge of desire as implausibly inferential. On Fernandez's view, the premise of the inference is knowledge of our sensations (e.g., I feel like having an ice cream); on Byrne's view, its premise is knowledge of the world (e.g., ice cream tastes good). I contend that it is *in* desiring to do something that one takes pleasure in the thought of doing it. In feeling this pleasure, one represents an imagined x-ing as a prospective source of its continuance and enhancement. I know what I want because my desire to x just is the pleasurable representing of x-ing.²⁶

Let us return to Issa. In the first version of the example, Issa knows what she wants by testimony. In the second, Issa knows what she wants by causal self-interpretation. In neither case, does she feel the pleasure of x-ing in anticipation of actually x-ing. But she does in the third version, when she is woken up in the night with a craving specifically for ice cream. Orectic self-knowledge is explained by the structure of desire itself, in which an object is pleasurable represented.

²⁵ See Gorodeisky and Marcus (2022) for further discussion of the connection between feeling and action.

²⁶ There is no space to examine the curious manner in which pain can be an element of pleasure, as when we look forward to continuing to read a devastatingly upsetting book. The issue is discussed at length in Gorodeisky and Marcus (2022). For the purposes of the present argument, it is enough to note that, however this connection is to be understood, it is just a fact about human nature that we can be drawn to a pleasure that essentially involves pain.

V. Orectic Knowledge and Failures Thereof

The Aristotle-inspired approach to the nature of desires is buoyed by its illumination of paradigmatic orectic self-knowledge. This section explores orectic self-knowledge in further detail and reveals a related virtue. Insofar as desire has the intentional-affective structure just described, we can begin to understand the asymmetries between our treatment of orectic knowledge failures on the one hand, and doxastic and practical knowledge failures on the other.

On the picture I've sketched, this asymmetry is easy to understand. It is due to the fact that our response to the imagined prospect of x-ing is different from our response to actually x-ing. Thus one may derive pleasure at the prospect of x-ing and yet not actually enjoy x-ing. This is the sort of error to which orectic desire is distinctively vulnerable. And there is no analogue in the case of belief or action. I am ineradicably *in the picture* when it comes to what I actually want (orectically) since whether or not I *actually* desire it turns on whether or not it would actually have the pleasing effect *on me* that I imagine *in* desiring it. Desire, precisely because it is an affective representation of an absent object, is assessable along a distinctive dimension: match between anticipated and actual pleasure.

One way of describing a mismatch of this sort would be to treat desire as belief-like in the following respect: Just as my belief turning out to be false doesn't show that I never held the belief, the fact that the object of pursuit displeases me doesn't show that I never held the desire.

I held the desire, but I what I desired turned out not to please me. But this is not how desire works.²⁷

Consider the following (imperfect) analogy: A Venus flytrap ‘wants’ insects. But if you stick your pinky in its ‘mouth’, it will ‘bite’ you. Your finger is what it ‘pursues’, but not what it ‘wants’. To put it differently, the ‘want’ that moves the plant is not for the object it (in this case) pursues. Similarly, a man might pursue a marriage with a movie star, only later realizing that the girl next door is whom he wanted to marry all along.

This is tricky, as we speak in different ways about this sort of mismatch. Imagine someone who says “I really want to have an affair with Shia LeBeouf”. He does, but it’s miserable and he regrets it. Now consider two ways he might describe the situation.

(A) “I thought I wanted to have an affair with SB but I really didn’t”; and

(B) “I wanted to have an affair with SB and boy was it a mistake!”

Which formulation is metaphysically perspicuous?

To the extent that there is a *question* of what I desire, or desire most, or whether I desire a specific thing, my answer cannot be such that it will be correct no matter what I choose. As I contemplate the possibility of having a strong drink, I am attempting to determine whether I want

²⁷ It remains to be seen to what extent a conception of desire that modeled its correctness conditions on belief could nonetheless be made consistent with the general approach to knowing one’s desire from the inside sketched in the previous section. I do not pursue that question here.

one. I am not yet deliberating about whether to drink it.²⁸ I'm attempting to gauge my own response to the prospect of drinking it. Once I determine that I do want a strong drink, I then face the question of whether to act on the desire. But the first question is a substantial one. It is not only a substantial question *before* I've answered it; it remains one up to the moment my pursuit is successful. Even as I walk to the bar to order a scotch, I cannot be certain that what I pursue in the name of satisfying my desire *is* in fact what I want, as opposed merely to what I think I want. This shows that what we can call the *objective* sense of 'desire' (used in (A) above) is central, whereas the correspondingly *subjective* sense of 'desire' (used in (B) above) is secondary. It is secondary for the same sort of reason that we should think that the various concepts associated with *misperception* are secondary in relation to that of *perception*. We pursue an object in the anticipation of a pleasure that will satisfy the lack that prompts pursuit. Our conception of what we *really* want is thus the engine of desire, even as we realize we might be wrong. We know what we want in wanting it when what we desire in the objective sense draws us to the object that will actually satisfy it, i.e., when it is also what we desire in the subjective sense.²⁹ Our happiness in life is in no small part a function of this particular sort of epistemic success.

²⁸ Pace Stampe (1987).

²⁹ One might think the subjective, orectic sense of 'desire' collapses into the 'action-minus' sense, but that is not so. What someone wants, in the action-minus sense, is whatever they intend, without regard to the nature of the prompting. What someone what wants in the orectic, subjective, sense is what the anticipation of pleasure in fact motivates them to pursue. Insofar as we act on an anorectic desire, e.g., a judgment of the good or of prudence, regret cannot be based

I should emphasize that there are a wide variety of cases whose nuances escape our analysis. I might regret ordering a dessert because it turned out that I didn't want something sweet: the genus was wrong. But I might have just wanted a different dessert: the genus was right; the species was wrong. The satisfaction conditions associated with desire range from the very general (anything potable) to the very specific (that glass of water). I might mistake for a desire a feeling of malaise, i.e., a general feeling of dissatisfaction that is not quilleable. I might order what I in fact *didn't* want only to start wanting it upon seeing it. Or, conversely, I might order something I really did want at the time but which I no longer want when it arrives. These possibilities are worth exploring, but for present purposes, they can be put to one side.

The account on offer helps to explain the asymmetry between the weirdness of being wrong about what you believe or are doing on the one hand and the weirdness of being wrong about what you want on the other. Being wrong about what you believe is *really* weird. Suppose that I am told by others you believe that your high school philosophy teacher thought you had little talent and directed you away from a career in philosophy. But when I ask, you say that this teacher was quietly encouraging, and you say so, we can suppose, *non-lyingly*, as I will

simply on the fact that the action displeased us—since we might well have known that it would all along. But when we act on an orectic desire, regret is grounded precisely in the absence of anticipated pleasure. We might put this point by saying that pleasure is part of the *form* of orectic desire, whereas pleasure is at most part of the *content* of an anorectic desire (as when I eat a disgusting mushroom on a friend's testimony that I will enjoy what happens later).

somewhat awkwardly put it.³⁰ But if you really believed it, how could you non-lyingly disclaim it? To make sense of this, we must postulate fragmentation of some sort: e.g., owing to its being such a painful memory, you have repressed it.

But only so much fragmentation is intelligible, and its intelligibility is topic-sensitive. We can imagine that for a callow, would-be philosopher, the opinion of a first teacher was important and the issue emotionally charged. The pain and pleasure associated with the considerations of various hypotheses as to the teacher's judgment might lead to pathological forms of repression. Correlatively, it becomes much harder to accept a repression hypothesis when the attributed belief concerns what could not comprehensibly cause such an emotional reaction. Absent an insane backstory, I could not make sense of the idea that you believe that your eyes are hazel, but that you nonetheless non-lyingly deny holding such a belief.³¹

A similar point holds for action. I may be convinced that you are intentionally undermining your brother by finishing his sentences, but under the cover story 'being helpful'. This is fragmentation in your practical consciousness: the ultimate aim—your brother's humiliation—is repressed, but the cover story of helpfulness continues to guide your action in the here and now in a manner that nonetheless realizes that repressed aim.³² This is, again, intelligible because we can imagine a complex emotional connection to one's brother that would create both the warring impulses and the strains on self-conception that prompt self-deception.

³⁰ I eschew 'sincerely' here as some might balk at the notion that I can sincerely yet falsely avow.

³¹ Cf., *Intention*, 27.

³² See Marcus (2019).

And finishing his sentences is plausible as something which could either be aimed at helpfulness or sabotage. Absent such forces, it ceases to be intelligible that someone non-lyingly disclaims doing what they are intentionally doing. There is (without insane backstory) no way of making sense of someone *intentionally* passing the salt and yet being unaware of their doing so, such that when asked they would have to speculate in the manner of a third person. Obviously, we often act absent-mindedly. But what makes self-deception a deep hermeneutical challenge is that one's goal has not just slipped from focus; rather, somehow, one is still taking steps to produce a result that one honestly disavows.

To make sense of someone holding a belief or performing an action and yet non-lyingly denying it, we need to postulate pathological fragmentation. This is possible in the case of desires too, which can of course also be repressed. But there is nothing *necessarily* pathological or even out of the ordinary about not knowing what you want. We do not need to postulate fragmentation to understand how someone might think that they wanted to have an affair with Shia LaBeouf, but upon having one discover that they did not want to at all. And not necessarily because LaBeouf behaved any differently than they imagined. Often, this sort of knowledge-failure is the result of inaccurately imagining one's *own* response to a circumstance that one has (otherwise) imagined accurately. Far from being weird, this is common.

VI. Conclusion

Knowing oneself is a tricky business. When I am at sea in trying to characterize my own actions, beliefs, feelings, desires, and so forth, I am not so much searching for what's hidden as trying to bring into focus what's already under my nose. Like trying hard to fall asleep or to find

the image hidden in a magic eye photograph, trying hard to know your mind often goes nowhere. One must contend not just with the limits of one's powers of articulation, but with the fact that pleasing distortions often present themselves as unimpeachable insights. It never ends.

When I intentionally undermine my brother by finishing his sentences and non-lyingly deny doing so, I am hidden from myself. What should be a simple matter of saying what I'm up to has somehow misfired. This sort of pathological self-concealment threatens self-knowledge across the whole range of human qualities. But in the case of desire, ignorance is generally not pathological at all. If it is a career in poetry rather than philosophy that in fact suits me best, my pursuit of philosophy is a failure of imaginative anticipation. The difficulties of bringing one's desires into focus *might* be due to pathological obstacles to self-articulation—e.g., shame—but are often just the result of lack of exposure, which deprives one's imagination of the experience that informs its activity.

All such knowledge—what I call self-conscious knowledge—is non-inferential. We can speak of ourselves in any of these domains with an authority that is not based on observation or evidence. But in the case of desire, the scope of this authority is limited, since the truth of an orrectic self-ascription is hostage to what happens or to what would happen later. When it comes to our desires, we are often enigmas even to ourselves. And this is, I submit, the fundamental difference between the epistemology of desire and that of action and belief.³³

³³ Thanks to the audience at the 12th Action Network meeting in Leipzig in 2023, and especially to Lucy Campbell, Luca Ferrero, Jeremy Fix, Alex Gregory, David Horst, David Hunter, John Hyman, Maya Krishnan, Jessica Moss, Anselm Mueller, John Schwenker, Sergio Tenenbaum, Will Small, and Tom Stephen.

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