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***Desire as Belief: A Study of Desire, Motivation, and Rationality***, by Alex Gregory. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. vi + 223.

A traditional Humean view about motivation says that only desires motivate action. This theory meshes with the familiar “directions of fit” metaphor: while beliefs aim to *fit the world*, desires aim to *change it*. In this way, desires and beliefs appear to be different types of mental state. But such appearances may be misleading. The central aim of Alex Gregory’s *Desire as Belief* is to defend the unorthodox thesis that desires (or equivalently, wants) are nothing more than beliefs with a particular normative content, an idea with Aristotelian and Stoic roots (see p. 20). In particular, the proposal is that to desire something amounts to believing that you have a reason to bring it about. It is beliefs of this sort, combined with instrumental beliefs, that explain motivation. Gregory’s book is a consistently impressive defense of what he calls *desire-as-belief*.

Chapter 1 clarifies desire-as-belief by way of an analogy with the mental state of disbelieving. To talk of disbelief, on a straightforward analysis, is to talk jointly of an attitude and a content. That is, disbelieving that p doesn’t seem to refer to a *sui generis* attitude of disbelieving but rather a belief, namely a belief that not-p. In similar fashion, desire-as-belief says that my desiring that p consists of an attitude – belief – with a certain content – that I have a reason to bring about p. Such first-personal beliefs about reasons are special in that they have *both* aforementioned directions of fit. They aim to conform to the world insofar as they are correct just in case the belief is true; and they aim to change it insofar as such beliefs dispose the desirer to act according to the relevant reasons.

A key feature of desire-as-belief is that it is formulated in terms of *reasons* rather than *goodness*, a proposal Gregory defends in Chapter 6. This diverges from more traditional “guise of the good” views of desire (Oddie 2005; Tenenbaum 2007; cf. Milona and Schroeder 2019). The occasion for this shift is that the guise of reasons arguably overcomes certain problems for the guise of the good without yielding the idea that desires represent a normative relation. For example, David Velleman raises a well-known counterexample to guise of the good theories: Satan may rebel against God such that he desires what he deems to be evil (1992, 18). Given that this seems possible – it apparently captures the possibility of being truly “satanic” – desire thereby lacks an essential connection to goodness. Yet presumably Satan nevertheless finds *reasons* for being evil and so the guise of reasons seems to escape this problem.

Desire-as-belief is a bold thesis, one with major implications in moral psychology, action theory, and metaethics. Gregory emphasizes and explores many of these, weaving them seamlessly into the book’s narrative by making the case that they are to desire-as-belief’s advantage. I’ll mention two examples. First, Chapter 8 explores a key prediction of desire-as-belief, namely that desires can be controlled through reasoning. This prediction clashes with *instrumentalism*, a view according to which instrumental desires, but not ultimate ones, can be changed through reasoning. But a major difficulty for instrumentalism, Gregory argues, is that not all desires are determinately ultimate or instrumental (e.g., the way in which many people desire health); yet these desires can *come to be* determinately ultimate or instrumental through reasoning. Gregory

builds on this observation to argue that we should therefore concede that *all* types of desire are modifiable through reasoning, as desire-as-belief suggests (pp. 165-166). Second, in Chapter 10, Gregory observes that desire-as-belief fits poorly with subjectivism, the view that an agent's reasons depend on their desires. Nevertheless, desire as belief can explain some of subjectivism's attraction while avoiding its difficulties. For if desires are beliefs about reasons, then there is a sense in which it is *rational* to act according to our desires insofar as it is rational to act according to what we believe our reasons to be. Desire-as-belief also has implications for other topics, including, for example, non-cognitivism (pp. 55-66), moral epistemology (pp. 87-93), and well-being (pp. 196-197).

Despite desire-as-belief's significance and potential advantages, it may seem straightforwardly implausible. Time and again, however, Gregory shows tempting objections to be less compelling than may first appear. For example, Chapter 9 responds to an important worry concerning desire-as-belief's fit with the psychology of (non-human) animals. According to the objection, animals appear to have desires but not normative beliefs. This is plausibly because beliefs require a grasp of concepts while desires do not. Gregory offers a rich response, which begins by sketching a conceptual role semantics for what it takes for a mental state to qualify as a belief with a particular content. Beliefs about reasons, in particular, have the role of being sensitive to (for instance) instrumental reasoning and beliefs about goodness; they likewise have the role of producing (for instance) further beliefs about reasons and motivation. Part of what explains why states that play such roles count as reasons beliefs is that these roles are isomorphic to the workings of actual reasons (e.g., that something is good normally gives reasons to pursue it). For desires to count as beliefs about one's reasons, then, they need to play these roles; and Gregory maintains that they do. Many animals, by contrast, lack mental states that squarely conform to these roles, though they may have ones that approximate them. Our desires, for instance, are sensitive to means-ends reasoning far beyond what animals are capable. This indicates that animals have desire-*like* mental states. Gregory therefore resists a picture on which humans have primitive desires that are continuous with animals. He instead maintains that we are "creatures whose rational capacities infuse much of our mental lives with new significance" (p. 185).

Gregory confronts numerous other objections. This includes worries having to do with the fact that desires aren't truth-apt (pp. 16-17), that we often act contrary to our normative beliefs (i.e., akrasia; pp. 106-109), and that we seem to appropriately desire what we know we have no reason to pursue (i.e., wishing; pp. 125-128). Everything Gregory has to say about these and other objections is interesting and reasonable. But what positive arguments do we have to accept desire-as-belief? Gregory emphasizes two, the first spanning Chapters 2 and 3 and the second in Chapter 4. In what follows, I critically evaluate both.

The first argument begins (Chapter 2) with the premise that only desires motivate, or what Gregory calls *ODM*. More precisely, ODM is the thesis that motivation is explained by the conjunction of a desire along with a means-end belief about how to promote what is desired. But why accept ODM? Some are drawn to it partly because they doubt ordinary beliefs are ever capable of motivating. But that would immediately rule out desire-as-belief. In any case, Gregory thinks that there are two simple ways to support ODM that don't rely on any such distinction. The first is that it provides a plausible explanation of any action we might consider. For example, if someone does twenty jumping jacks, we can reasonably infer that they want to achieve

something and believe jumping jacks is a way to do so. Second, and relatedly, ODM offers a simple and unified explanation of *all* motivation.

The next premise in Gregory's argument (Chapter 3) is that normative beliefs can motivate. Such motivational internalism is supported by everyday explanations of people's behavior. It even seems to be the very point of normative beliefs that they set aims and guide action. Gregory does not accept, however, that normative beliefs *necessarily* motivate. For example, a soldier may judge that they have most reason to charge the enemy lines but lack any motivation to do so (p. 51). The idea is rather that normative beliefs *dispose* us to be motivated.

A key point in Gregory's argument is that motivational internalism covers only certain normative beliefs, namely first-personal beliefs about one's reasons. This includes beliefs about what one all-things-considered ought to do insofar as such judgments just are (at least partly) beliefs about what one has most reason to do (p. 67n10). That said, judgments about what one *morally* ought to do may well not fall within the scope of motivational internalism. Whether they do depends on the possibility of an amoralist: a person who makes judgments about what they morally ought to do but doesn't believe they have any reason to act morally. Furthermore, normative judgments about *others* are not included in Gregory's version of motivational internalism. If I judge that my friend has most reason to call their mother (or that Caesar ought to have crossed the Rubicon), I'm not *thereby* disposed to be motivated at all. For that to happen, I would need to make a further normative judgment about my own reasons (e.g., that I have reason to remind them about calling).

The upshot of ODM and motivational internalism, then, is an identification of desires and first-personal normative beliefs. This doesn't straightaway entail desire-as-belief, however. Non-cognitivists, for instance, rely on similar premises to argue that normative beliefs are unlike ordinary beliefs. But non-cognitivism says that *all* normative beliefs are desires (or desire-like). Desire-as-belief's analysis going from desire to belief thus appears a better fit with Gregory's more modest motivational internalism.

This is a clever argument, one which repurposes familiar premises in a new way. But supporting ODM and motivational internalism *together* in this fashion may be a shakier exercise than first appears. To explain, it helps to get some background points on the table. As far as I can tell, even if desire-as-belief were true, it would appear to be synthetic rather than somehow secured by the *concept* of desire or meaning of 'desire'. Relatedly, Gregory himself notes that some may react to desire-as-belief with the proverbial "incredulous stare" (p. 18). Matters are different when it comes to Gregory's structurally similar analysis of disbelief. Even if it weren't a conceptual truth that disbelieving that p amounts to believing that not-p, this is at least a highly intuitive analysis. My prediction, then, is that much of Gregory's audience will begin with a low credence in the proposition that desires are ordinary beliefs.

If a reader starts with this orientation, they're likely to find unattractive *either* Gregory's support of ODM or his support of motivational internalism. Since I'm among those happy to accept the latter, I'll focus on the case for ODM. Such a reader, it seems to me, is likely to think that ODM faces persuasive counterexamples. This is because it will seem that beliefs about one's reasons can motivate whether or not the agent has a corresponding desire. For instance, suppose

Cassandra asks Kunal, “Do you want to help at the soup kitchen this afternoon?” Kunal might respond, “I’m honestly exhausted. I don’t much *want* to. Still, I think that I have most reason to help and so let’s go.”

Gregory is aware of such potential counterexamples and aims to debunk them (pp. 37-41). One strategy draws on linguistic considerations to argue that people who say that they *lack* some desire are often indicating that they *have* a desire *not* to do something. For example, a person who says that they have no desire to get out of bed may be indicating that they have a desire not to get out of bed. Moreover, they (and their audience) may well-know that the speaker has instrumental desires to get out of bed. In this way, pragmatic considerations often favor not mentioning that we have certain desires, if it’s obvious we have them. These are fair points: our talk about desire can sometimes mislead. But notice that in Kunal’s case, he isn’t denying a desire to go to the soup kitchen; he’s implying otherwise but then insisting the normative belief is his primary motivation. (Note that Gregory convincingly argues that strengths of desire and motivation can come apart (pp. 30-35). But it doesn’t seem as if Kunal’s motivation is plausibly explained by his weaker desire to help going awry in producing outsized motivation.) Even still, we likely *could* adapt one of Gregory’s strategies to insist that Kunal’s motivation must nevertheless be explained by his desires. But such maneuvers aren’t obviously tempting if we aren’t *already* attracted to ODM.

Gregory may argue that we have positive grounds not to take Kunal’s remarks to Cassandra at face value. Suppose, for instance, that Kunal wasn’t able to help since the kitchen closed early due to a shortage. He might then tell his partner that he *wanted* to go but it closed early (see p. 19). Doesn’t this indicate that one of Kunal’s remarks is misleading and that we should perhaps explain away his initial comments to Cassandra? I’m not so sure. Here it is important to recall that many philosophers distinguish between a generic “pro-attitude” sense of ‘desire’ (or ‘want’) and a more specific sense that has been the object of regular philosophical attention (cf. p. 37). In the latter sense, ‘desire’ just neutrally refers to a goal-directed state of some sort (e.g., an intention, urge, desire, or normative belief). Kunal’s remarks plausibly indicate that both uses of ‘desire’ are involved in everyday discourse and thus offer a tempting way of interpreting what he says.

In sum, then, if we start skeptical about desire-as-belief and likewise find motivational internalism attractive, Gregory’s specific strategy for defending ODM in terms of everyday explanations of actions will seem to face counterexamples. (Other potential counterexamples involve emotions (pp. 44-45) and intentions (pp. 45-46), though I found these less threatening to desire-as-belief.) Gregory can still insist that ODM leads to a simpler explanation of motivation than alternatives. It likewise doesn’t pressure us to invoke an additional usage of ‘desire’. Once the dust settles, then, perhaps ODM’s simplicity, combined with Gregory’s defensive strategies for debunking various counterexamples, will tip the balance. I can hardly hope to weigh the competing considerations here.

Gregory’s second argument for desire-as-belief (Chapter 4) concerns the relationship between desires, beliefs, and rationality (i.e., rational action). Starting with beliefs and rationality, the key is what Gregory calls the *Best Enkratic Requirement*: “If you believe you have reason to v, rationality favors v-ing” (p. 84). This is an intuitive principle (though see 77n3). If Linda

believes that she has a reason to visit her dad, then this seems to rationally favor her doing so. This is true even though she might not be rationally *required* to do this, if she believes that she has stronger reason to do something else.

Now consider how desires intersect with rationality. Gregory maintains that if one desires to *v*, then rationality favors *v*-ing. For example, if Vernon wants a milkshake while Jordan doesn't, then Vernon has a reason to get a milkshake that Jordan doesn't, even if both would equally enjoy one. Gregory observes that taking desires to have this power fits nicely with decision theory, which typically appeals to desires or (what Gregory analyzes in terms of desires) preferences. (The purported link here with decision theory is best interpreted as tentative, I think, since the utility assignments involved in decision theory may ultimately not be properly understood as desires in the ordinary sense (cf. p. 27).) In any case, once we accept this point about the rationalizing power of desire, we have a curious symmetry between desire's connection with rationality and belief's connection with rationality (i.e., the Best Enkratic Requirement).

Gregory argues abductively: given the above symmetry, desire-as-belief explains the rationalizing power of desire better than alternatives. For example, the view that desires are simply dispositions to behave can explain how desires *cause* behavior but leaves it unclear why they make it rational. Consider, too, a cousin of desire-as-belief which analyzes desires in terms of *non-doxastic* perceptual (or perceptual-like) normative representations (e.g., Oddie 2005). Gregory refers to these as *presentational* theories. The trouble here is that presentations don't generally seem to make a difference to evaluations of rational *action* (in contrast with rational *belief*). To illustrate, if someone sensorily presents the world as being some way (e.g., a sensory illusion), but believes it to be another, then we evaluate any relevant actions in terms of their beliefs, not their presentations. This suggests that *if* desires were non-doxastic presentations of reasons, they wouldn't be able to rationalize action. But they can. Hence desire-as-belief is more plausible than presentational alternatives.

This is a tempting argument. I'm skeptical, however, that we should ultimately explain the rationalizing role of desire by assigning it a foundational role explaining rational action. To see why we might want to explore alternatives, consider an agent who strongly desires to purchase a latte but only weakly desires to use that same money to buy a homeless person food. On Gregory's view, strengths of desire are understood in terms of how weighty the desirer believes the relevant reason to be (pp. 148-159). This suggests that, all else equal, it is rational for the person to buy the latte. But while this is plausibly what advocates of desire-as-belief *should* say, it strikes me as tying rationality and (strengths of) desire *too* closely together. We might instead prefer a view on which desires rationalize action in the sense of rendering action *intelligible* (cf. Quinn 1998, 182; Boswell 2018, pp. 8-12; Gregory 2021, p. 78n5). The rough idea here is that when one is motivated by a desire to *v*, they are motivated in a way that *makes sense* and is unlike being propelled by purely mechanical dispositions. The aforementioned presentational alternative to desire-as-belief is arguably poised to make sense of this idea: desires involve non-doxastic normative representations that provide defeasible indicators of our (objective) reasons. But they themselves aren't the ultimate determiners of rational action.

The challenge above isn't meant to deny that *beliefs* about reasons always bear directly on rationality. The advocate of desire-as-belief may thus complain that I've problematically

assumed that (strong) desires can float free from beliefs about (weighty) normative reasons. But it seems to me that there intuitively *are* such cases and that they are among the most compelling challenges for desire-as-belief. (In my view, these cases are even more forceful than objections pointing to beliefs about weighty reasons without corresponding desires, e.g., the case involving Kunal above.) I'll close this review by considering such a case in detail. To adapt a familiar example, imagine a person who is strongly inclined to drink from a vat of colorful paint (Quinn 1998, pp. 183-185; Davidson 2001, p. 4). ('Inclined' is a non-ideal term but is meant to serve as a momentary neutral placeholder). They don't *believe* they have *any* reason to drink the substance. In fact, they know that it would taste awful. We might also suppose that they are no more tempted to make inferences from the inclination than is someone experiencing a known sensory illusion (cf. p. 99). But the inclination isn't a raw urge. It's creamy texture and red coloring reminds them of a strawberry smoothie, one of their favorite treats. The inclination is intensified by the fact that they've just finished working in the smoldering sun. So their inclination toward the delicious-looking liquid *makes sense*. But then what is this inclination, exactly? For my part, this seems most naturally called a desire, though one that clearly conflicts with the agent's beliefs.

This isn't *yet* a problem for desire-as-belief. Gregory points out that our beliefs are often inconsistent, and so perhaps that is happening here. By way of potential comparison, Gregory has a helpful discussion of ascetics, understood as people who believe, perhaps on religious grounds, that pleasure is not a source of significant reasons (pp. 142-144; see also p. 99). Despite this belief, they may succumb to particular pleasures by forming desires for them. This may seem like a problem for desire-as-belief. But notice that the ascetics' normative beliefs about pleasure *in general* may be conflicting with their normative beliefs about *particular* pleasures. The paint example, however, doesn't seem to be like this. The person is convinced that they have *no* reason to drink *this* substance. So if they also believe that they do have a reason to do so – indeed a weighty one, given their strong inclination – this would be an especially extreme form of incoherence. But it seems implausible to me that people with such inclinations are *that* incoherent.

Advocates of desire-as-belief might instead argue that the inclination to drink paint is not really a desire. For example, Gregory rightly observes that desires can be confused with emotions, appetites, and likings (see Chapter 7). Consider the appetite of thirst, which may be especially relevant here. Being thirsty typically involves two things: distinctive bodily feelings and a desire to drink. This regularity is plausibly explained by the fact that we typically take our feeling of thirst as a reason to drink. But the feeling and taking as reasons could come apart; and thirst itself seems properly identified with the bodily feeling. In similar fashion, perhaps the person in the paint example is thirsty but lacks any desire. I'm skeptical, however, since the inclination isn't just a bodily feeling but an experience of the apparently appealing aspects of the substance. (The agent seems aware that this experience is misleading in much the way that we are aware a ventriloquist's puppet isn't really talking.) My temptation here is to say that there really is a desire, but it is non-doxastic. I'm further inclined to say that it is a *presentation* of reasons in much the way that a sensory experience is a presentation of empirical properties. But here's the trouble: Gregory levels numerous important challenges for presentational theories of desire, more than I can hope to evaluate here (pp. 87-93). This includes, for instance, the objection that presentations are never assessable for rationality but desires are. If some such objections are

persuasive, then Gregory may reasonably insist on the following: while the paint example involves a presentation of reasons, the best systematic theory of desire treats them as merely desire-adjacent rather than desires proper.

To sum up, Gregory's book reveals that the best case for desire-as-belief emerges slowly but forcefully. He consistently demonstrates that objections aren't as persuasive as they seem (e.g., the objection from animal desires). Desire-as-belief is likewise suited to overcome some of the challenges for alternative theories (e.g., presentationalism). The positive arguments for desire-as-belief, moreover, draw on popular theses in clever ways. So resisting them is difficult without adopting some highly controversial position (e.g., rejecting the Humean theory of motivation). We thus really needed a project like this to see the full attraction of desire-as-belief. Gregory himself is more than up to the task and has offered desire-as-belief its most compelling defense to date.\*

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