

## **Might desires be beliefs about normative reasons for action?**

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Abstract: This paper examines the view that desires are beliefs about normative reasons for action. It describes the view, and briefly sketches three arguments for it. But the focus of the paper is defending the view from objections. The paper argues that the view is consistent with the distinction between the direction of fit of beliefs and desires, that it is consistent with the existence of appetites such as hunger, that it can account for counterexamples that aim to show that beliefs about reasons are not sufficient for desire, such as weakness of will, and that it can account for counterexamples that aim to show that beliefs about reasons are not necessary for desire, such as addiction. The paper also shows how it is superior to the view that desires are appearances of the good.

Keywords: Desires, reasons, desire as belief, direction of fit, desire, motivation, appetites, weakness of will, desires as appearances

In this paper I shall defend the view that desires are beliefs about normative reasons for action. More precisely, I shall defend a view I call DAB, according to which to desire to  $\phi$  just is to believe that you have normative reason to  $\phi$ . (for other defences of views similar to DAB, see Humberstone 1987 and McNaughton 1988: 106-117, as well as McDowell 1998 and Massin and Lauria in this volume). Though I shall briefly

sketch some attractions of DAB, my main task in this paper is defensive. It may seem as though DAB is obviously false because it is subject to decisive objections. But I shall show that the most obvious objections to it fail. I shall also compare DAB to views on which desires are mere appearances of normative properties, rather than full blown beliefs.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 1, I describe the view, and swiftly lay out three attractive features it has. Then, in section 2, I respond to five objections to the view: that it is inconsistent with the distinction between the direction of fit of belief and desire, that it is falsified by the existence of appetites, that beliefs about reasons are not sufficient for desire, that beliefs about reasons are not necessary for desire, and that animals have desires but no beliefs about normative reasons.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in section 3, I compare DAB to the view that desires are appearances of the good.

### **1. Desires as beliefs about normative reasons for action**

To remind you, here is the view that I shall defend:

*DAB*: To desire to  $\phi$  is to believe that you have normative reason to  $\phi$ .<sup>2</sup>

Let me illustrate DAB with two examples. First, imagine that I desire to read Asimov's *Foundation*. According to DAB, this is just the same as my believing that I have a reason to read Asimov's *Foundation* (perhaps I think it will be fun). Second,

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I shall not address David Lewis' decision-theoretic objection to DAB (1988, 1996). I hope to explore this elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively: To desire to  $\phi$  in respect R is to believe that R is a normative reason for one to  $\phi$ . I shall not adjudicate between these two formulations here.

imagine that I believe I have a reason to buy a new scarf today (I've lost the old one). According to DAB, this is just the same as my desiring to buy a new scarf today.

DAB is an account of *desire*. I take desires to be the same as wants, and as the constituents of preferences. DAB analyses only desires to act, which I take to be the paradigm case of desire. I assume that DAB could be extended by treating other desires as desires to act so as to bring about some state of affairs, but I shall not make that case here. Desires come in varying strengths, and when I talk about what an agent desires to do, I am talking about what they have *some* desire to do, not what they most want to do, all things considered.

DAB analyses desires in terms of beliefs about *normative reasons for action*. A normative reason to perform an action is something that counts in favour of that action (see, e.g., Parfit 2011: 31, Scanlon 1998: 17). Hereafter, for brevity, I will often use the word 'reason' to mean 'normative reason for action'. Note that not all such reasons are moral reasons: I am not offering a moralised account of desire. Further, note that reasons, like desires, come in varying strengths. When I talk about what an agent believes they have reason to do, I am talking about what they believe they have *some* reason to do, and not what they believe they have most reason to do, all things considered.

DAB has at least three attractive features. First, because DAB identifies desires and beliefs about reasons, we do not have to see these two as competitors in our motivational system. That allows us to solve a certain puzzle about moral motivation: DAB entitles us to agree that normative judgements are beliefs, and to agree that such

judgements have the power to motivate us to act, whilst also allowing us to accept the Humean claim that only desires have the power to motivate us to act (cf. McNaughton 1988: 23, 46).<sup>3</sup> It is only if we accept DAB that these three plausible claims are consistent.

Second, DAB explains why desires are sensitive to evidence about what we have reason to do (cf. Fernández 2007, Byrne 2011, Moran 2001: 119). If you want to vote Conservative, I might get you to rationally abandon this desire by presenting you with evidence that there are no good reasons to vote Conservative. Or for another example, if I ask you whether you want my spare plane ticket to China, you will respond by considering the reasons for and against taking this choice: the sights, the food, the weather, etc. DAB explains why desires are sensitive to evidence about reasons: because they are beliefs about reasons.

Third, DAB resolves disagreement about whether what we ought to do depends on our desires (see, e.g., Joyce 2001, Schroeder 2007, and Williams 1981, 1995). If DAB is true, this amounts to the claim that what we ought to do depends on our beliefs about what we have reason to do. It is very plausible that this claim is ambiguous between something true and something false. It is false in the sense that one's beliefs might be false. But it is true in the sense that what we *rationally* ought to do does depend on our beliefs about what we have reason to do (see e.g. Scanlon 1998: 25).

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<sup>3</sup> For this general problem, see Smith 1994, Brink 1989: 43-4, 52, Darwall 1983: 28. My formulation of the problem above is slightly nonstandard, in that it appeals to the motivational *powers* of the relevant states of mind. Crucially, the existence of such powers is consistent with the possibility that those powers are not always exercised. This will be important later.

So DAB resolves the controversy regarding whether what we ought to depends on our desires.

These three points are helpful for contrasting DAB with motivational theories of desire (e.g. Smith 1994: 113). DAB coincides with motivational theories insofar as both claim that desires have the power to motivate. DAB says that desires have motivational potential because they are beliefs about reasons to act, and such beliefs have motivational potential. But DAB goes beyond motivational theories of desire because it also makes other claims about desire. In particular, it explains how they are under rational control, and explains the broader role they play in determining how we ought to act.

In summary, I hope it is clear that DAB has some appeal. To provide conclusive support for DAB I would need to defend the above arguments at much greater length, and I do not have space to do that here. But in light of the above remarks, we should at least be curious about whether DAB can withstand criticism. So now I can turn to the real focus of this paper: are there any convincing objections to DAB? We should remember throughout that my goal is purely defensive. My goal is the modest one of showing that if there is good independent reason to accept DAB, the issues below provide no evidence to the contrary.

## **2. Objections**

### 2.1. DAB is inconsistent with the distinction between directions of fit

An initial worry is that DAB is inconsistent with the distinction between the direction of fit of belief and desire. According to that distinction, beliefs aim to fit the world,

whereas desires aim to have the world fit them. Roughly, where there is a discrepancy between what you believe and what is true, you should change your beliefs. But where there is a discrepancy between what you desire and what is true, you should change what's true. There are many questions about how to formulate this contrast more precisely (see Gregory 2012, Humberstone 1992, Smith 1994: 111-6, as well as Railton and Lauria in this volume). But regardless of how we do this, the underlying issue for DAB is the same: if beliefs and desires contrast with one another in this way, how could desires be beliefs, as DAB says?

The answer is that the direction of fit metaphor should not be understood, at its most fundamental, as describing a contrast between beliefs and desires. The easiest way to see this is to note that other states of mind – such as intentions and memories – also have a direction of fit. So the direction of fit metaphor is best understood not as a contrast between beliefs and desires, as such, but rather as a contrast between two functional roles a mental state might play. On the one hand, a state of mind might be sensitive to evidence in a certain manner: being such that it ought to fit certain facts about the world. On the other hand, a state of mind might have motivational power: being such that facts about the world ought to fit the state.

One can allow that there is this contrast between these functional roles and nonetheless maintain DAB. We merely need to say that some mental states play both of these functional roles: that some mental states have both directions of fit. This is exactly what DAB says. It says that there is a state of mind which represents one proposition as fitting the world, namely that one has reason to  $\phi$ , and simultaneously represents another proposition as something that the world should fit, namely that one

φs. That is, DAB says that there is a state of mind which is sensitive to evidence, and which also has motivational power. There is nothing problematic about this. In short, the direction of fit metaphor is consistent with DAB. The direction of fit metaphor is best understood as stating a contrast between two functional roles, and that is consistent with DAB, which says that some states of mind play both functional roles.

Note further that DAB implies that we have two different names for a single state of mind. We might explain this by appeal to the claim that those names highlight different features it has (cf. the different names you might use to refer to one and the same multi-purpose penknife). So the truth of DAB is consistent with the fact that when you describe a state of mind as a ‘desire’, you draw attention to its motivational power, and when you describe a state of mind as a ‘belief about a reason’, you draw attention to its sensitivity to evidence. In turn, DAB is consistent with the fact that one direction of fit is more associated with desire, and the other with belief. But this is a matter of what we draw attention to when we describe this state in these ways, and not a difference between which features it in fact has.

There is a worry with what I have said in response to this objection. It might seem problematic if DAB entails that desires bear both functional roles to one and the same proposition. That would be deeply problematic (Smith 1994: 118). But this is not what DAB says. DAB says that desires represent one thing as to be made true, and something else as true (Little 1997: 64, Price 1989: 120-1).

In summary, the direction of fit metaphor is consistent with DAB. The direction of fit metaphor is best understood as drawing a contrast between two different functional

roles, and defenders of DAB just need to say that desires – beliefs about reasons – play both.

## 2.2. Appetites are desires but are not beliefs about reasons

One obvious complaint about DAB is that whilst some desires may somehow involve beliefs about reasons, others do not. And appetites like hunger and thirst seem to fall into the latter category (see Nagel 1970: 29, Parfit 2011: 52-3, Schueler 1995: 9-10, as well as Alvarez and Railton in this volume). In what follows, I shall focus on hunger, but it should be clear that my remarks will generalise to other states such as thirst.

The problem is that hunger seems to be a desire to eat, and yet there seem to be numerous reasons for thinking that hunger is not a belief about a reason to eat. For example, it seems that hunger is outside of rational control: it just assails us. Or, for another example, hunger seems to have a distinctive phenomenology that no belief could have.

But in cases of this kind we should distinguish two things. First, there is the feeling of hunger (predominantly located in one's abdomen), and second, there is the desire to eat. It is easy to confuse these two because the former normally leads to the latter. But they are nonetheless distinct. We can desire food even when we are not hungry. For example, you might want to eat some food in order to be polite, or for the taste (how often do you want dessert because you're hungry?). Vice versa, it would be unusual, but seems possible, that you might be hungry and yet not have any desire for food. For example, you might be on a religious fast, or a particular kind of anorexic.



With this distinction between the feeling of hunger and the desire to eat in hand, it's easy to see that DAB can overcome the objection. Defenders of DAB can grant that the feeling of hunger is not a belief about a reason to eat. But this leaves open the possibility that the desire to eat *is* a belief that one has a reason to eat. This claim seems plausible. Normally, we want to eat because we are hungry. According to DAB, this comes out as the plausible claim that we often take our hunger to be a reason to eat. In other circumstances we might want to eat even when we aren't hungry, as when we want to eat something for the taste. According to DAB this comes out as the plausible claim that we might believe that other things, such as the taste of the food, are reasons for eating. In still other (rare) circumstances someone might be hungry and yet not want to eat, as when on a religious fast. According to DAB this comes out as the plausible claim that in other (rare) circumstances someone might be hungry and yet believe that this gives them no reason to eat.

In summary, once we distinguish the feeling of hunger from the desire for food, it is clear that hunger is no threat at all to DAB. The feeling of hunger is isolated from belief, but the desire for food is not, and so DAB is quite consistent with the existence of appetites. Though the feeling of hunger just assails us and is not a rational response to anything, the desire for food is under rational control, and is a rational response to the reasons as we see them – often, responsive to the reasons we see for quelling our hunger.

One final worry is that if my defence of DAB requires that I deny that hunger is a desire, then it is revisionary to an implausible degree. Hunger, we might think, is the paradigmatic desire, and if a theory of desires excludes hunger from its purview, then

it is no longer a theory of *desire* at all.<sup>4</sup> However, it would be misleading to say that I deny that hunger is a desire. Rather, my claim is that ‘hunger’ is ambiguous between a desire, a feeling, and the combination of both of these. The fact that the word has this loose meaning should not be surprising, since normally, feelings of hunger and the desire for food go together. But if we want our theorising to carve nature at the joints, we should anticipate that these different things will need different analyses. Certainly, if we try to give a theory of ‘desire’ that makes sense of all of these things at once, as well as common desires such as to catch the train, to finish a paper, or to tie your shoelaces, we are going to end up with a disjointed theory, since such desires do not have any associated feelings. There is a more general lesson here, which is that the word ‘desire’ may carry certain connotations – such as the presence of physical sensations – that are not really part of our subject matter when we investigate desires. After all, we are supposed to think of desires as the same as wants, and as systematically related to preferences, but ‘want’ and ‘prefer’ do not necessarily carry these same bodily connotations.

### 2.3. Beliefs about reasons are not sufficient for desire

In this section, I address counterexamples that aim to show that beliefs about reasons are not sufficient for desire. One might think that we are sometimes weak willed in that we don’t want to do things that we believe that we have reason to do (e.g. Smith 1994: 117-125, Stocker 1979, especially 741-6). I shall address two representative examples. First:

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Julien Deonna for raising this worry.

*Smoking Sally:* Sally is a smoker. She knows full well that she has very good reasons to quit: smoking is costly and unhealthy. But she is weak willed, and continues to smoke.

Such a case might seem like it threatens DAB. Isn't Sally's problem that whilst she knows she should quit, she doesn't want to?

To understand the issue, we should first distinguish desiring to  $\phi$  from being motivated to  $\phi$  (*pace* Dancy 2000: 85-8). We should distinguish these for various reasons, of which I shall mention two. First, though we desire very many things – a list of all your desires would be enormous – motivation is a more limited resource that we have to spend frugally. Second, when Humeans claim that only desires motivate, they are not making the trivial claim that only motivations motivate. Considerations like these make clear that desiring to  $\phi$  is distinct from being motivated to  $\phi$ .

It is worth briefly revisiting a claim I made earlier: that desires have the potential to motivate. It should be clear that this claim is consistent with the above distinction between desire and motivation. My claim is that desires and motivation are distinct, though the former has the power to generate the latter. An analogy may help: on my view, desires stand to motivation as beer stands to inebriation. Beer has the power to inebriate, but it does not always exercise this power. Equally, desires have the power to motivate, but they do not always exercise this power.

With this distinction in mind, it seems plausible to suppose that, assuming Sally really does think she has very good reasons for quitting, she has some desire to quit smoking.

Imagine asking Sally: ‘Would you prefer to stop smoking or continue doing so?’ It would be incredible if she responded that she preferred to smoke. She clearly wants to stop: this is precisely why finding yourself in a situation like Sally’s can be frustrating. But this does nothing to show that Sally must be motivated to quit smoking. Precisely her problem is that although she wants to quit, she cannot motivate herself sufficiently to achieve this goal (her desire is failing to exercise its motivational power). This seems like a much more natural way to describe her problem, as well as the similar problem faced by those who think they should eat less, exercise more, and other such cases. In cases like Sally’s, the problem is that we lack the motivation to achieve our goals. If weakness of will is a lack of motivation to achieve one’s goals, it is consistent with DAB.

Once we make this distinction between desiring to do something and being motivated to do it, DAB can also handle numerous other apparent counterexamples, such as people with depression (Stocker 1979: 744-6, see also Smith 1994: 119-121, cf. Garrard and McNaughton 1998: 49). Clearly, we might believe that we have reason to do something and not be in the least motivated to do it. But this is irrelevant to the truth of DAB (*pace* Oddie 2005: 37, Tenenbaum 2007: 227-298). DAB only entails that beliefs about reasons are sufficient for desire, not that beliefs about reasons are sufficient for motivation, and as such is perfectly consistent with weakness of will.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, it is also consistent with the kind of weakness of will that Richard Holton discusses, according to which one can be weak willed by being overready to modify one’s intentions (Holton 1999).

I now turn to a second example that aims to show that beliefs about reasons are not sufficient for desire (cf. Scanlon 1998: 39):

*Teething Tabatha:* Tabatha knows that she has good reason to go to the dentist: her teeth are in an awful state. But she will quite keenly insist that she doesn't want to go to the dentist – who does?

This kind of case seems to be as much a problem for the Humean theory of motivation as for DAB, since it is natural to suppose that Tabatha might go to the dentist even though she has no desire to do so. Just as Humeans should try to find some interpretation of Tabatha that does justice to what she says but which also attributes to her a desire to go to the dentist's, so too should defenders of DAB.<sup>6</sup>

One way to see that something puzzling is going on here is to imagine that Tabatha is indeed going to go to the dentist (as she knows she should), but hasn't made her appointment yet. She picks up the phone, gets through to the secretary, and might quite normally say: 'Hi, I want to see the dentist today please'. Or imagine that she's made the appointment and intends to get a taxi there. She might quite normally ask the taxi driver: 'I want to go to the dentist please.' One possibility here is that Tabatha is just contradicting herself when she insists in one breath that she doesn't want to visit the dentist, and then asserts in the next breath that she does want to see the dentist. But a more plausible interpretation is that her initial claim was implicitly restricted in scope. When she insists that she doesn't want to go to the dentist, she

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<sup>6</sup> In what follows I say nothing more about the Humean theory of motivation, but it should be clear that my remarks stand to benefit that view as well as DAB.

really only means that she doesn't want the pain that she'll experience there. But this is of course consistent with wanting, all things considered, to go.

Because of this, DAB is vindicated. Clearly, Tabatha doesn't think she has good reason to seek out the pain at the dentist. This is the sense in which she doesn't want to go. But all the same, Tabatha does think that she has good reason to visit the dentist, all things considered. And all things considered, she does want to go. Once we acknowledge this restriction of scope in her initial claim, it is clear that DAB is not undermined by the example.

In summary, so long as we attend to the fact that DAB identifies beliefs about reasons with desire and not motivation, and so long as we make sure to attend to possible implicit restrictions of scope in claims about what someone does or doesn't want to do, DAB is unobjectionable for implying that beliefs about reasons are sufficient for desire.

#### 2.4. Beliefs about reasons are not necessary for desire

In this section I address counterexamples that aim to show that beliefs about reasons are not necessary for desire. One might think that we sometimes want to do things that we don't believe we have reason to do (e.g. Stocker 1979: 746-9, Velleman 1992).

In this respect, DAB commits us to something like *the guise of the good* (see e.g., Anscombe 1963: 75, Aquinas ST I-II.1.1, DV 24.2, Davidson 2001: 22-3, Raz 2010, as well as Döring, Massin and Oddie in this volume). It entails that we can only want to do something if we think that there is some merit in it. There are various putative

counterexamples to the guise of the good, such as Satan, who desires to do things precisely because they are bad (Velleman 1992: 18), and the person who, in a fit of guilt, desires to make their own life worse (Stocker 1979: 748). But we must take care to remember that DAB analyses desires as beliefs about *reasons* rather than as beliefs about *goodness* (cf. Massin). As such DAB is perfectly consistent with such possibilities: we merely have to endorse the plausible claim that Satan believes he has normative reasons to do bad things, and the plausible claim that those with self-destructive desires believe that there are normative reasons for them to make their lives go worse (I discuss these issues in greater detail in Gregory 2013).

However, there is one other counterexample of this kind that is sometimes thought to threaten DAB specifically, and which I shall therefore address directly:

*Addict Amy*: Amy has been a heroin addict for many years. She believes that she has very little reason to take the drug. But she strongly craves it nonetheless. (cf. Frankfurt 1982: 87-8, see also Smith 1994: 134)

Cases like this may appear to threaten DAB. But again, this is not true. There are at least three ways in which we might understand this case consistently with DAB. First, above I described some cases of weakness of will as involving a mismatch between desire and motivation, where one is not motivated, or undermotivated, to pursue something that one wants. If we allow for that possibility, it seems as though we should also allow for the reverse possibility, where one is overmotivated by one's desires. Sometimes, one's desires may generate more motivation than they ought to. Perhaps this is the situation that Amy is in. Perhaps Amy's problem is that though she

has only a weak desire to take heroin – she thinks she only has a very weak reason to take the drug – this desire is very strongly motivating her to take it.

Second, we might say that to the extent that Amy is motivated to take heroin by a state of mind which is completely irrational and insensitive to facts about what she has reason to do, we might think that she is being motivated not by a desire, but instead by some more primitive compulsion or drive (cf. Railton in this volume).<sup>7</sup>

This way of describing addiction fits well with the natural thought that addicts don't really want to do what they do, but are instead compelled to by their condition.

A third (best?) possibility is a hybrid view. Real life addicts might be partly motivated by a genuine desire to avoid withdrawal symptoms, partly overmotivated by a very weak desire to take the drug, and partly compelled to take the drug by some drive. These things together might generate a strong motivation to take the drug in someone who believes that they only have weak reason to take it. This possibility is entirely consistent with DAB.

### 2.5. Animals have desires but no beliefs about reasons<sup>8</sup>

In the last section, I defended the claim that beliefs about reasons are necessary for desire. Another putative counterexample to that claim needs separate treatment, and that is the desires of animals (see e.g., Döring and Friedrich in this volume). Animals

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<sup>7</sup> This possibility seems to also explain Ayer's case of the kleptomaniac (Ayer 1982: 20): such a person is not acting on their desires at all, and so is not a counterexample to DAB (*pace* Smith 1994: 133).

<sup>8</sup> Here I use 'animal' to mean 'non-human animal', though everything I say in this section could plausibly also be said about very young humans.



may seem to have many desires but no beliefs about reasons at all. For example, you might think that cats can want milk, but are incapable of having any beliefs about what they have reason to do. Clearly there is a great deal to be said here about the appropriateness of attributing various mental states to animals, but let me just note two broad possibilities left open by DAB.

First, one might be generous in attributing states of mind to animals. One might insist that animals have both desires and beliefs about reasons. Just as we might think that cats can desire milk even though they have only an extremely minimal grasp on the concept of milk – do cats know that milk must come from a mammal? – we might think that cats can believe that they have reason to do things, even though they have only an extremely minimal grasp on the concept of a reason. Of course animals can't understand reasons at the level of sophistication that we can, but we might nevertheless think that they can see an action as being favoured in some respect ('good dog!'), and to acknowledge this is just to think that they believe that there is a reason to perform that action (cf. e.g., Korsgaard 2009: 110-2).

Second, one might be stingy in attributing states of mind to animals. One might insist that animals have neither desires nor beliefs about reasons. Just as one might think that animals have no beliefs, but instead only representations, one might think that animals have no desires, but instead only drives. Certainly, our desires are very different from animal 'desires' in various respects, such as that they are under a greater degree of rational guidance and can be expressed in language. We might think that differences like these justify the claim that there is a difference in kind between our desires and animal 'desires' (cf. e.g., McDowell 1994: 114-124). It certainly

seems that the defender of DAB should distinguish desires from drives (see section 2.4 above), and once this distinction is made, it is not that implausible to suppose that the motives of animals are more similar to our drives than to our desires.

This second view may seem unduly revisionary, since we do often *say* that animals want things. But this is not at all decisive, since we also often say that flies, plants, computers and cars want things (e.g. ‘the car doesn’t want to start today’). Unless we adopt some extremely broad theory of desire that aims to capture all of these claims (e.g. Dennett 1987), a better option is to claim that some uses of the word ‘desire’ are looser than others, and to aim for a theory that captures only the more precise uses of the term. If we take this second approach, we might claim that attributions of desires to animals are only of this looser kind.

The defender of DAB can of course also appeal to a combination of these two strategies. The former response may be more plausible for higher animals (e.g. chimps), and the latter response may be more plausible for lower animals (e.g. salmon). And they might also say that between these extremes there is some indeterminacy as to which is the correct account. It is far from clear that there is anything objectionable about such a theory.

### **3. Desires as appearances**

In summary, DAB can overcome the above five objections. That is, the most obvious objections to DAB all fail. I now turn to explain how DAB is superior to one popular nearby view, which is the view that desires are appearances of the good (see Oddie in this volume, as well as Oddie 2005: 28-46, Stampe 1987, Tenenbaum 2007). One

difference between this view and DAB is that DAB analyses desires as representations of *reasons* rather than as representations of *goodness*. I discussed this briefly in section 2.4 above, and discuss it in more detail elsewhere (Gregory 2013, and again, see also Massin). In this section I shall instead focus on the other difference between DAB and this rival, which is that this rival analyses desires as mere appearances, rather than full-blown beliefs. This view states that desires involve actions *seeming* to be good, and this is neither necessary nor sufficient for *believing* that some act is good, just as it seeming that a stick in water is bent is neither necessary nor sufficient for believing that it is.

Scanlon's view is also of this kind (1998: 37-49). One might think that he endorses something like DAB, but this is not true (one might be encouraged by his remarks on pp.7-8, but see the unambiguous remarks on pp.43-4). He claims that to desire to  $\phi$  is for certain facts to be highly salient in consciousness and to *seem* like reasons to  $\phi$  (1998: 39-40). That is, to desire to  $\phi$  is for  $\phi$ ing to often be present in consciousness in a positive light. But Scanlon insists that some act might appear in consciousness in this way even when you don't actually believe you have any reason to perform it (1998: 43-4), and that you might believe that you have reason to perform some action without it often appearing in consciousness in a positive light (1998: 38-9). By implication, on Scanlon's view beliefs about reasons are neither necessary nor sufficient for desire.

I will call the Oddie/Scanlon/Stampe/Tenenbaum view *the appearance theory*. The appearance theory may appear to promise similar payoffs to DAB without being so bold. But there is little reason to endorse the appearance theory. It is generally

preferred to DAB on the grounds of the kinds of example that I addressed above in sections 2.3 and 2.4 (see, e.g., Oddie 2005: 36-8, 40-43, Tenenbaum 2007: 227-298). But DAB is consistent with those examples, so it is doubtful that they really support the appearance theory over DAB. To confirm the point, I shall address an example that Scanlon employs to argue that the appearance theory is superior to DAB. I will then offer two examples of my own that show DAB to be superior to the appearance theory.

Here is Scanlon's example:

*Scanlon's computer:* 'Suppose that [...] I am beset by a desire to have a new computer. [...] I find myself looking eagerly at the computer advertisements in each Tuesday's *New York Times*. I keep thinking about various new models and taking their features to count in favour of having them. [...] Such a state can occur [...] even when my considered judgement is that I in fact have no reason to buy a new machine' (Scanlon 1998: 43)

In this case, two things are contributing to the impression that Scanlon wants a new computer but believes he has no reason to buy one. First, Scanlon is understating the degree to which he believes he has reason to buy a new computer. He clearly thinks that there is some reason to buy a new machine: they are more fun than his present machine, more efficient than his present machine, some of their features might come in handy someday, and so on. I take it that Scanlon would agree that he should upgrade if he could do so for free and with absolutely no hassle.

The second thing contributing to the impression that Scanlon wants a new computer but believes he has no reason to buy one is that Scanlon is overstating the degree to which he wants to buy a new computer. This desire might keep popping into his mind, but we should not think that phenomenology provides an infallible guide to the strengths of our desires (Smith 1994: 104-111). For example, I want to avoid torturing people much more than I want bacon sandwiches, though the former desire almost never occurs to me, and the latter desire often does. Once we distinguish the strength of a desire from its phenomenological salience, it seems plausible to think that Scanlon's desire for a new computer is actually relatively weak: that's precisely why he's unlikely to buy one.<sup>9</sup>

These two facts combine to give us the correct description of the case: Scanlon believes that he has weak reason to buy a fancy new computer, and weakly desires to buy one, though this desire, it so happens, is highly phenomenologically salient. This is all consistent with DAB.

In short, Scanlon's example fails to show that the appearance theory is an improvement over DAB. I now look at two examples that I believe demonstrate DAB to be superior to the appearance theory. I take them together:

*Conan the Barbarian*: I visit the cinema, and see a trailer for the remake of *Conan the Barbarian*. The film looks absolutely thrilling, engaging, and just

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<sup>9</sup> Above I argued that the strength of a desire does not necessarily correlate with the degree of motivation (sections 2.3 and 2.4). But this does not undermine the thought that in some circumstances a lack of motivation can be defeasible evidence that an agent lacks desire, as is the case here.

plain awesome. But wait: I've seen the reviews, and heard from friends, that the film is terrible. It looks good, but I know better.

*The King's Speech*: I visit the cinema, and see a trailer for *The King's Speech*. The film looks excruciatingly dull. I have no interest in the monarchy, and still less interest in their speech impediments. But wait: I've seen the reviews, and heard from friends, that the film is just fantastic. It looks terrible, but I know better.

In these examples, it seems clear that my desires will track my beliefs rather than the appearances. In the first case, I might well not much want to see *Conan the Barbarian* (I didn't), and in the second case, I might well strongly want to see *The King's Speech*, and even make various sacrifices to do so (I did). So DAB is superior to the appearance theory.<sup>10</sup>

These examples highlight a broader problem with the appearance theory. This is that it cannot account for the effect testimony, and also deliberation, can have on desires (see also Setiya 2010: 106, fn16). We can receive advice that influences what we want, but it is abnormal, at best, for testimony to affect how things appear to us. And, we very often deliberate about what to desire, but again, it is abnormal, at best, for mere

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<sup>10</sup> A defender of the appearance theory might claim that my informants change how good the films seem to me, and thereby claim that the examples do not demonstrate that DAB is superior to their theory. But testimony cannot change how things perceptually appear to us, so it is unclear why things would be different here. At any rate, once they allow that this kind of information changes how things appear, it becomes far less clear how appearances are distinct from beliefs, and in turn how the appearance theory is supposed to be distinct from DAB. I thank Graham Oddie for raising this issue.

deliberation to affect how things appear to us. Indeed, the very point of appearances is that they remain despite deliberation and testimony: they involve an external imposition on us over which we have no rational control. But desires are not like this: they are responsive to evidence, including evidence gained via testimony and deliberation. So it is doubtful that desires can be understood as appearances of any kind.

In summary, the appearance theory is not well motivated, faces clear counterexamples, and more broadly cannot explain how testimony and deliberation can influence our desires.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper I have outlined and defended DAB, according to which to desire to perform some action just is to believe that one has some normative reason to perform that action. After describing the view, and setting out three appealing features it has, I defended it from five objections: that it is inconsistent with the distinction between the direction of fit of belief and desire, that it cannot account for appetites, that beliefs about reasons are not sufficient for desire, that beliefs about reasons are not necessary for desire, and that animals have desires but no beliefs about reasons. I then argued that DAB is superior to the view that desires are appearances of the good. In summary, DAB has some prima facie appeal, is defensible, and is superior to rivals. It therefore merits further investigation.<sup>11</sup>

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