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## ‘Reasons, Desire and Intentional Actions’

### *Introduction*

There are two fundamentally different ways of understanding the relation between desires and intentional actions. According to one way, whenever someone does something for a reason, some desire of his (or ‘want’ – I use both terms interchangeably here) is always part of the reason for which he does it. Since this view is associated with Hume, I shall call this the ‘Humean’ view of reasons. Humeans argue that without desires there is no motivation in action and that, therefore, desires are an essential part of the reasons for which we act and of any explanation of an intentional action. There is an opposing view that says that desires are not, or not normally, part of someone’s reason for acting – call this the non-Humean view. Defenders of this alternative view maintain that the Humean position cannot be right, not least because beliefs can also motivate someone to act and, so, these philosophers play down, or even eliminate, the role of desires in motivation and in the explanation of action.

In the first part of this paper (sections I to IV) I shall defend the view that desires are not normally part of the reasons for which we act. Nonetheless, I believe that the Humean insistence on the importance of desires contains important truths – truths that both Humeans and their opponents have failed properly to understand. The failure is due, I shall argue, to a lack of conceptual clarity in these discussions. In the second part of the paper (sections V-VI) I shall outline some of the necessary conceptual distinctions and then provide a picture of the relation between desires and intentional actions that seeks to bring out the truths in the Humean position. None of these tasks, however, can be embarked upon without first making a few preliminary points.

Firstly, in the introductory paragraph I characterized the Humean view as the view that desires are always *part* of the reason for which someone acts because. I said ‘part of the reason’ because, although Humeans place great emphasis on the role of desires, they tend to hold that the reason for which someone acts is normally a combination of a desire *and* a belief. The focus of this paper is on desires, in particular, on the question whether desires are *part of* the reasons for which we act. However, for the sake of simplicity, I shall often drop the qualification ‘part of’

and talk of whether desires are reasons for which we act.

Second, some recent discussions about desires, reasons and actions have centred on whether desires are or provide *reasons for acting* – in the current terminology in the literature, whether desires are ‘*normative* reasons’: the reasons for which we ought to act.<sup>1</sup> However, my concern in this paper is not with normative but rather with what are called ‘*motivating* reasons’: the reasons for which we actually act. So my question is whether desires are *motivating* reasons, that is whether desires are reasons for which we act – even if they are not reasons for which we *ought* to act.

Third, the term ‘*motivating reason*’ is a term of art normally used to mean a reason that motivates someone to act, although what motivating amounts to in this context tends to be left unspecified. By ‘*motivating reason*’ I shall mean a reason that, in the agent’s eyes, makes the action right or appealing for him.<sup>2</sup> What makes the action seem right or appealing to an agent can relate to different kinds of value: moral, hedonic, prudential, aesthetic, etc. For instance, what makes buying a particular new car seem right to me might be that it’ll be great fun to drive, or that it’ll be more fuel-efficient than my current car, or that it has a beautiful design, etc. So any of those things might be a reason to motivate me to buy a car.

Finally, a comment on the concept of wanting or desiring. It is possible to distinguish two senses of wanting or desiring – as we might put it, a ‘weak’ and a ‘strong’ sense. In the weak sense, wanting something is compatible with finding the thing wanted unappealing or even repugnant. This is the sense in which most of us might sometimes be said to ‘want’ to go to the dentist, to have an injection, etc. The stronger, perhaps more common, sense of ‘desire’ is associated with preference and pleasure, and contrasted with, e.g. duty or necessity.<sup>3</sup> The claim that wants or desires are reasons for which we act is normally meant by those who advance it to involve the first, weak, sense of want or desire; and that is how I shall take it here.<sup>4</sup>

### *I. Intentional actions and acting for a reason*

Like the term ‘*motivating reason*’, the term ‘*intentional action*’ is a term of art. The term may be found outside of philosophy although it is much more likely that the relevant points be articulated in terms of whether someone did something intentionally, or whether it was intentional of him or her to have done such-and-such a thing. In philosophy, however, the term (and hence the concept) ‘*intentional action*’ have occupied centre stage for over fifty years now, particularly

since Anscombe discussed the concept in some detail in *Intention*, and many of the questions that have preoccupied philosophers of action during that period have focused on exploring intentional actions.

An intentional action is often characterized in contemporary philosophy as ‘something done for a reason’.<sup>5</sup> The characterisation is not uncontroversial as it is plausible to argue that there are some things one does intentionally but not for a reason, such as doodling while talking on the phone, crossing and uncrossing one’s legs, etc. (and perhaps actions which are expressive of emotions and passions: e.g. smashing a plate ‘in rage’).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, if ‘intentional’ is taken to mean ‘done with an intention’ or ‘something the agent *intended*’, it may seem more accurate to say that these actions are not intentional since, typically, they are not done with any particular intention nor are they things that are clearly ‘intended’ by the agent.<sup>7</sup> The issue seems largely a matter of definition. If ‘done intentionally’ is defined as merely done knowingly and voluntarily, then the actions mentioned above are typically intentional – or at least on the periphery of the intentional because sometimes one hardly realizes one is doing them. If, on the other hand, ‘intentional’ is defined as ‘done for a reason’, then these actions would not seem to be intentional because one does not normally do such things, e.g. doodle, smash a plate in rage, for a reason, even though there is a reason why one does them.<sup>8</sup> This would not imply that actions like doodling or crossing one’s legs are normally *unintentional* or accidental, or coerced; we might say that such actions are voluntary but not intentional.

For the purposes of this discussion, I shall use the second definition, and regard something someone does as an intentional action of his if and only if it was something he did for a reason. And the reason for which someone does something I shall refer to as the ‘motivating reason’ for that action. So the question I want to explore in this paper is whether, whenever someone does something for a reason, his desires are motivating reasons, i.e. (part of) the reason for which he does that thing.

## *II. Wanting something and acting for a reason*

As I said above, the majority of contemporary philosophers endorse the Humean view that my wanting something, together with my believing something, constitutes the reason for which I act.<sup>9</sup> So, Humeans hold that if, for instance, I revise hard in order to pass my exam, my reason for revising is my wanting to pass my exam and my believing that my revising will result in my

doing so.<sup>10</sup> But although this is the dominant view, some have rejected it and argued that one's wanting something is very rarely the reason for which one does it. This is a view that Anscombe expresses, though not explicitly, in *Intention* so I shall start with an argument against the Humean view that can be found in that book.

The argument I have in mind relates to Anscombe's discussion of wanting in *Intention*. According to Anscombe, everything wanted has a 'desirability characteristic' in the eyes of the person who wants it – if a person wants something, then there will be something the person sees in what he wants, some feature that the person takes the thing to have, which makes it desirable to him. For Anscombe this is a conceptual truth, so that if a person claims to want something but denies that there is any 'desirability characterisation' to be given of that wanted thing, e.g. that it is beautiful, reassuring, rare, useful, completes their collection, etc., their claim to wanting it becomes unintelligible.<sup>11</sup>

The desirability characterisation that a thing has for someone would constitute the agent's answer to the question: 'What do you want it for?' and the answer will always, she argues, relate either directly or indirectly, to some form of the good (of human beings). Another way to put the point is that the agent's desirability characterisation of the thing wanted shows what, in the agent's eyes, the good of the thing is for him (see *Intention*, pp.77-8). In saying this, Anscombe is endorsing an ancient and mediaeval view that what is wanted is always wanted *sub ratione boni* ('under the aspect of the good').<sup>12</sup> As she puts it, 'good is the object of wanting' as 'truth is the object of judgment' (p. 77); and she adds:

it does not follow from this that everything judged must be true, or that everything wanted must be good [...] the notion of "good" that has to be introduced in an account of wanting is not that of what is really good but of what the agent conceives to be good (*Ibid.*).<sup>13</sup>

Now, the desirability characteristic that the thing has for an agent is *the reason* (real or apparent) *for which* that agent wants that thing: e.g., that it is profitable, or beautiful, fun, restful, it gives one a sense of peace, etc. Since the things we want may be wanted instrumentally (i.e., for the sake of something else), or intrinsically (i.e., for their own sake), the reasons for which we want something may also be instrumental or intrinsic. When something is wanted instrumentally, the reason for wanting it is, precisely, that it is a means of achieving some good (or apparent good) one wants. When something is wanted for its own sake it is still something one wants for a reason, namely that it is good in some respect. For something I want for its own sake is

something that I regard as good in itself – where, as I said above, its goodness may relate to a variety of criteria: moral, prudential, aesthetic, hedonic, legal, etc. And the good that I see in what I desire (that it is pleasant, my duty, elegant, an act of friendship, etc.) is my reason for wanting it: it provides the desirability characterisation of the thing wanted. And, in as much as I want for its own sake, it is something I see as an instance of some form of the good. Because of this, as Anscombe says, when something is wanted for its own sake, the agent's answer to what he wants it for will be ‘a desirability characterisation which makes an end of the questions “What for?”’ (*Intention*, p. 74).

The traditional view that good is the object of wanting endorsed by Anscombe has been disputed, for instance with the objection that one can want what is bad, and want it precisely *because* it is bad – to adapt the medieval terminology, to want it ‘under the aspect of the bad’.<sup>14</sup> I find this objection unpersuasive since it is plausible to claim that if one wants something because it is bad, this is because of some feature that its being bad has that makes it seem good to the agent – though this claim is only plausible, admittedly, so long as ‘good’ is not restricted here to what is morally or ethically good but includes what is good from a variety of perspectives:<sup>15</sup> hedonic, aesthetic, instrumental, moral, prudential, etc. that relate to a variety of ends that a person can have.<sup>16</sup> For example, one may want to do what is morally bad for the thrill of it, or as a way of defying authority, and thus showing that one is free, or powerful, etc. As Anscombe puts it, Satan’s exhortation in *Paradise Lost*, ‘Evil be thou my good’ is open, in order for it to be intelligible as a statement of what is wanted, to the question: ‘What is the good of evil?’. And she suggests that a plausible answer might be ‘the condemnation of good as impotent, slavish and inglorious’ (*Intention*, p.75).

The view that there is a conceptual connection between wanting and the good, namely that, as Anscombe puts it, good is the object of wanting as truth is the object of judgment, seems to me right. For whenever someone’s desirability characterization of what he wants involves something bad for that person (say something that he sees as painful, humiliating, hurtful, etc. to himself) it is possible to make sense of that person’s claim to want it only on the assumption that its being bad in those ways serves, or appears to him to serve, some other end that is itself a form of the good (e.g., health, power, friendship, pleasure, etc.). In Anscombe’s words, ‘the good (perhaps falsely) conceived by the agent to characterize the thing must *really* be one of the many forms of good’ (*Intention*, p.76). And those who question the connection between wanting and the good would have to give an account why it is that, if someone claims to want something because it’ll be, say, boring, or painful, or humiliating, we must either imagine that he thinks

some good might come out of this bad thing (perhaps he sees it as penance, or as ‘good for the soul’, or takes, as we say, perverse pleasure in such things), or must remained baffled by their avowal.

Since I am persuaded by the traditional view, I shall argue on the basis that it is right and that the desirability characterization that an agent would give of what he wants relates , as Anscombe claims it does, to the good broadly conceived. But even if the view that there is a conceptual connection between wanting and the good were wrong or an exaggeration, and the connection turned out to be simply contingent, Anscombe’s point that wanting requires a desirability characterisation on the agent’s part would still stand – even if what makes it desirable might occasionally be, as her opponents claim, that what is wanted is ‘bad’.

The relevance of this claim about wanting, the good, and the need for a desirability characterisation to the question of motivating reasons is as follows. I said above that a motivating reason is the reason that motivates me to act because it is something that, in my eyes, makes the prospective action appealing or right for me, when I consider it from some perspective: prudential, hedonic, etc. And we have just seen that what makes an action appealing in my eyes is, precisely, the desirability characterisation that I’d give of the action: what good I see in the action, whether in itself or as a means to a further end I desire in itself, which makes me want to perform the action. And this desirability characterisation I’d give of the action is both, my reason for wanting to do that thing, and the reason for which I do it – if I do it for a reason. In other words, my reason for doing it is the same as my reason for wanting to do it: whatever good I see in my doing that thing. If this is right, then it seems that my reason for doing something is not that I want to do it but rather whatever reason I have for wanting to do it.

So, for instance, suppose I sell my car for a reason. Since I sell it for a reason, then we might say that I wanted to sell my car. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the reason for which I sell my car is that I wanted to sell it. Rather, my reason for selling it is my reason for wanting to sell it, for my reason for selling it will be something that speaks to me in favour of selling my car – the desirability characterisation that I’d give of the action of selling my car. Let’s imagine that the desirability characterisation I’d give is that it’ll save me quite a lot of money (we might think of this as a prudential instrumental reason). The fact that selling my car will save me money is, to use Anscombe’s phrase, the desirability characteristic that selling my car has for me: what speaks to me in favour of selling it, and that is the reason that motivates me to sell it. My reason for selling it is not that I want to sell it, for my wanting to sell it says nothing about what, in my eyes, speaks in favour of selling it. Of course, in these circumstances, I *do*

want to sell the car, but I want to sell it precisely because I shall thereby save money. So, that it'll save me money is both my reason *for wanting* to sell it and my reason *for selling* it. So it seems that my reason for doing A is not (normally) that I want to do A but something about doing A that seems to me good, worthwhile, or otherwise appealing.<sup>17</sup>

### *III. Doing A because one wants to*

One may be prepared to accept that when I have a reason to want to do something and do that thing, then, typically, my reason for doing it will be my reason for wanting to do it. Nonetheless, one may argue, there are times when I do something and the only answer to the question why I did it that I could sincerely give is simply that I wanted to do it, perhaps that I felt like doing it. Perhaps if others insisted I could come up with some kind of ‘desirability characterisation’ that doing that thing seemed to have (it was quirky, or fun, etc.) but it seems mere stipulation to say that that was really my reason for doing it rather than, as I would naturally say, that I simply wanted to do it. If so, then this would seem a case where my reason for doing A was simply that I wanted to do A.<sup>18</sup>

It is undeniable that we often claim to do things simply ‘because we want’. But there is no reason to assume that in saying this, we are giving *our reason for* doing that thing: the reason that motivated us to do it. For there are other ways of construing cases where we do A simply ‘because we want to’.

For example, if when asked why I sold my car I answered that I did it ‘Because I wanted to’, my interlocutor is likely to hear this response as an injunction to mind his own business, not as a statement of my reason for selling the car. So sometimes expressions such as ‘Because I want to’ are used to convey the fact that there is a reason that one does not care to reveal. And there are other possibilities also. For example, suppose that Andrew says that he returned some stolen property ‘because he wanted to’. One thing he might mean by this statement is that nobody forced him to do it. To say this is not to give his reason for returning the money, it is rather to exclude a range of reasons for which he acted – a range of reasons connected to external coercion, commands, duty, etc.: it tells us is that Andrew did not act because he had been commanded to do so, or threatened, or because he felt obliged or compelled to do it.

Another thing he might mean, which is compatible with the above, is that he did not do it

for some ulterior motive, e.g. to avoid jail or to appear to be good, but rather he did it ‘for its own sake’ – he saw a point in returning the stolen stuff which is not instrumental to some other end. Here, the reason for which Andrew acted was some good that he saw in his acting – e.g. that it was the decent thing to do, or whatever, which appealed to him.

Finally, in saying that he returned some stolen property because he wanted to, Andrew might mean that he returned the money simply because he felt like it, i.e., because he felt an impulse to do so. In saying this, he would be explaining *why* he returned the money and also probably implying that he did not do it for a reason. For doing something simply because you feel like doing it is not doing it for a reason: your feeling like doing it is not your reason for doing it, although it is the reason why you do it.

In denying that wanting to do A is the reason for which one does A, I am not claiming that one never does things just because one wants to, or because one feels like doing them. My claim is that, when one does do something just because one wants to, and there is no more to say about the issue, that action will not be an action done for a reason, even though it will probably be voluntary, and even though there will be a reason why one did it – namely that one wanted to do it:<sup>19</sup> one’s wanting to do it makes it intelligible that one should do that thing, i.e. it explains one’s doing it, but that does not mean that it is the reason that *motivated* one to do it. (I return to this below, in section VI).

It should be noted that doing something because you want to, or because you feel like doing it, is different from doing something because *you like* doing that thing. If you give as your reason for doing something that you *like* doing that thing, then your reason for doing that thing is that you will enjoy it, which is perfectly intelligible as your reason for acting – though, as Anscombe says (*Intention*, p.75), there are limits here. The limits are not those of morality or propriety but of intelligibility, for sometimes it is difficult to see what the pleasure of doing a particular thing might be – for instance, the pleasure of sitting through an eight-hour-long speech by Fidel Castro. But, though this is a case when you act for a reason, it is quite different from doing something simply because you want to or feel like doing it, which are not.

Let me mention a kind of example that I think is the closest to a case where wanting to do something might seem to be your reason for doing it. Suppose that you have a persistent want to do something – to remove a thread from the jacket of the person sitting in front of you at a lecture. Now, you may or may not be able to give a desirability characterisation for it (it could be an aesthetic desirability characterisation, or the thought that the world will be a tidier place if you remove the thread). But suppose that though initially you decide against doing it (perhaps you

don't know the person at all), the desire to do it is so persistent and is so distracting that eventually you conclude that unless you do it you won't be able to concentrate on the lecture, and you end up removing the irritating thread.

Here it seems plausible to say that your only reason for removing the thread was that you wanted to do so, and indeed that you wanted to do it very much. But in fact I think that is not quite right. Your reason for removing the thread, if we agree that you did it for a reason, is rather captured by the following. You judge that you have good reason not to remove the thread – it may disturb the person in front of you – you decide that you have better reason to do it because unless you do it, you won't be able to concentrate on the lecture. *That*, namely that it'll enable you to concentrate on the lecture, is the desirability characterisation for you that removing the thread has (given that we agree that you did it for a reason), and not the mere fact that you wanted to do it; the fact that you very much want to do something does not make doing that thing desirable, it makes it *desired* – which is quite a different thing.<sup>20</sup>

To sum up, on none of the interpretations examined of what doing something ‘because one wants’ to amounts to have we found that one’s reason for acting was that one wanted to do it: things done ‘because one wants to’ are either things done for some reason that has not been stated, and is perhaps obscure and subconscious – and hence, *a fortiori*, not for the reason that one wanted to do them, or things not done for a reason – and hence, and also *a fortiori*, the fact that one wanted to do it was not one’s reason for doing it.

#### *IV. Doing A because one wants to do B*

Defenders of the view that wanting is a motivating reason might think that my arguments have been aimed at the wrong target. For they do not claim that, typically, my reason for doing A is that I want to do A. Rather, their claim is that my reason for doing A is, typically, that I want something else (perhaps x, or to do B), and believe that I shall get that thing I want (shall get x, or to do B) by doing A.<sup>21</sup> So, according to them, in the example above my reason for selling my car would be that I want to save money and believe that selling my car is a way of saving money.

This suggestion seems plausible but on examination it is also unconvincing. My reason for selling the car, I suggest, is not that I *want* to save money but rather that *selling the car will save me money*. For that is the aspect of my action of selling the car that speaks to me in favour of doing so – it is the desirability characteristic it has for me. It is true that this is a reason that

motivates me only because I want to save money – that is, because saving money has some desirability characteristic for me. But this does not suggest that my wanting to save money is the reason that motivates me to sell my car. What it suggests is rather that my wanting to save money is a *condition* for those other things to be reasons that motivate me. But we must not conflate a condition with what it is a condition for. That it will save me money was a reason that motivated me to sell the car only because I wanted to save money but it does not follow that my wanting to save money is also my reason for selling the car.

This may be difficult to see because we often say ‘my reason for doing A was that I wanted to do B’. For instance, my reason for running was that I wanted to catch the train; my reason for studying is that I want to become a barrister. And so on. And this certainly appears to imply that my wanting the end was my reason for taking the means.

However, I want to suggest that those expressions do not give the reason that motivates the agent to act; rather they provide the agent’s *goal*: e.g., to catch the train, to become a barrister, etc. Outside of philosophy, goals, as well as intentions, motives, etc. are called ‘reasons’. However, when trying to map out the conceptual territory of reasons, desires, etc., we must see what distinguishes these concepts. And these apparent expressions of reason are really statements of purpose or goals.

Consider a peculiarity that these expressions have. If I say that my reason for running was that I wanted to catch the train, then it follows that I ran *in order* to catch the train. However, if I say that my reason for running was that I was late (and running was my only chance of catching the train), then we cannot say that I ran in order that I was late and running .... That is because the first kind of expression, unlike the second, does not really state a reason but a goal, namely to catch the train. And my reasons for running relate to the means to achieve that goal and to the value that goal has for me. (I return to the notion of a goal shortly.)

So some things are motivating reasons only for those agents who want certain things, that is, for those agents who have certain goals. Nonetheless, this does not make the goals those agents have the *reasons* that motivate them to act.

So far I have argued against the Humean view that desires are reasons for which we act. But, as I said in the Introduction, I think that Humeans are right to insist on the importance of desires in motivation and in the explanation of action. In this remainder of the paper I shall explain what role desires play in motivating action, and in the explanation of action. In order to do so, I need to make an important conceptual distinction concerning the term ‘desire’.

### *V. Desires and motivation*

In the introduction I articulated the Humean position as the view that desires are reasons for which we act. But so stated, there is an ambiguity in the claim which corresponds to an ambiguity concerning the term ‘desire’, which arises from the fact that the term ‘desire’ has two possible uses: one to refer to what is desired, and the other to refer to someone’s desiring something.<sup>22</sup> And although the question I intend to address now is not whether desires are motivating reasons (since I concluded above that they are not) but what role, if any, they play in motivation and in the explanation of action, the ambiguity inherent in the term ‘desire’ infects those issues too.

These two uses of the term ‘desire’ just mentioned correspond to the act/object distinction; a distinction that can be brought out by considering that there are things which are true of the one (i.e. the object) that need not be true of the other (the act). For instance, *what A desires*, e.g. to own a limited-edition Ferrari, may be expensive, capricious and perhaps very desirable, while *A’s desiring* it need not be any of those things.

Consider the difference between an intense desire and an unattainable desire. This difference is reflected in the fact that a desire of each kind is characteristically qualified by means of an adverb and an adjective respectively. So, typically, we use an adverb if we are qualifying the act – i.e. the desiring; and tend to use an adjective when qualifying the object – i.e. what is desired. For instance, if I have an intense desire to see Mt Everest, it is my desiring, not what I desire, that is intense. And this is expressed by means of an adverb that qualifies the act: ‘my *intensely* desiring to see Mt Everest’ (and not my desiring to intensely see Mt Everest). However, if I have an unattainable desire, e.g. to win an Olympic medal, then it is what I desire, not my desiring it, that is unattainable, and this is expressed by means of an adjective that qualifies what is desired: ‘Her desire, namely to win an Olympic medal, is unattainable’.

This difference between desiring something and what is desired is a familiar distinction which nonetheless tends to be neglected in discussions of desires and reasons. And yet I think the distinction is crucial in order to understand the role of desires in motivation and in the explanation of action.

In order to do this, let us first examine what these things desired are. The things we desire, though seemingly very varied, can be thought of under two main headings: (i) for oneself, or for someone or something else, to  $\phi$  (where  $\phi$ -ing need not be an action); or (ii) for oneself, or

for someone or something else to be a certain way (or the negation of these: not to  $\phi$ , not to be a certain way). So they can all be expressed by means of an infinitival clause: I desire x to  $\phi$ , or I desire x to be F. Examples of these are: I can desire or want to be more patient; to drink water; to own a horse; to run a mile in four minutes; my daughter to come home; cold-callers to stop calling; tomorrow to be a sunny day, poverty to become history, etc. (An apparent exception is that we may desire a *thing* or a *person*, but it is only an apparent exception because to desire an thing or a person is to desire to own, or consume, or somehow use or interact with that thing or person – i.e. to desire to  $\phi$  that object.)<sup>23</sup>

Now, what is desired can play the role of a *purpose or goal* for the sake of which we act: that is, given a goal and certain conditions, one may act in the way that one believes *will bring it about* that one's goal is realized, whether that goal is for one to do something, or for others, or for things to be a certain way, etc. Suppose that I want my neighbours to turn down their music. Then, my goal in acting will be that my neighbours turn down their music, and I shall act so as to bring it about that they do, e.g. by knocking on the wall, or going round and asking them to do so, etc.

So what is wanted, though not a reason, does motivate – it is that for the sake of which we act. And as Aristotle put it, ‘το ορεκτόν’, what is wanted, is the starting point of motivation and of practical reasoning. Thus, Aristotle asks what it is that is the source of (local) movement for us, and he answers:

Both of these then are capable of originating local movement, thought and appetite; thought, that is, which calculates means to an end, i.e. practical thought (it differs from speculative thought in the character of its end); while appetite is in every form of it relative to an end; for *that which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of practical thought* (*De Anima*, Book I, section 10; 433a,10-18. My italics).

So, according to Aristotle, on the one hand there are goals, which are ‘the objects of appetite’ and ‘the stimulant of practical thought’. On the other hand, there is practical thought, which involves means-ends reasoning about how to achieve those goals, as well as about how the satisfaction of one goal may affect other goals one also has, etc.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of humans, not every thing wanted is made into a goal of action. I may feel a desire to eat but reason that I ought not to, because I need to fast for an operation. Or I may have a desire to visit Rome but reason that it will be too hot and decide against visiting it. Here these things are not adopted as a goal (at least *pro tem*). However, when something wanted is adopted

as a goal, then it can motivate, and be the beginning of practical reasoning about how to achieve that goal; as Anscombe, paraphrasing Aristotle, puts it: ‘the *αρχή* (starting point) [or practical reasoning] is το οφέλον’ (the things wanted) (*Intention*, p.62). And she adds:

The rôle of ‘wanting’ in the practical syllogism is quite different from that of a premise. It is that whatever is described in the proposition that is the starting-point of the argument must be wanted in order for the reasoning to lead to any action (Anscombe, *Intention*, p.66).

Thus, what is desired is clearly crucial in motivation. It is important to note here that Humeans might agree with this for this claim is one of their main contentions. For example, in his defence of the Humean thesis about motivation, David Lewis says:

A Humean thesis about motivation says that we are moved entirely by desire: we are disposed to do what will serve our desires according to our beliefs. If there were no desires to serve, we would never be moved more to do one thing rather than another. ('Desire as Belief', *Mind*, 97, 1988, pp.323-32, p.323).

The Humean mistake is to think that from this we can conclude the following two theses. One, that it is *states* of desire (rather than the ‘objects’ of desire) that motivate us to act. Second, that those states of desire are motivating reasons. It is mistaken because the Humean thesis that ‘we are moved entirely by desire’ seems compelling only if we interpret ‘desire’ to mean ‘*what we desire*’ (as indeed Lewis’s passage suggests). And we have seen that the role of what is desired in motivation is that of a goal and not that of a reason. So if one has a desire which one has made into a goal, then one is motivated to act but what motivates one to act is not having the desire, but the desire one has, together with whatever reason one might have for having that desire, and for acting in pursuit of that desire.

So we might say that desires, in the sense of what is desired, motivate actions but not because they are reasons to act but because they are the goals we pursue in acting. On the other hand, desiring something does not motivate either as a reason, or as a goal. The state of motivation that we are in when we desire something can be said to be state of being inclined to act in order to obtain what we desire. If I desire to eat, or to become Prime Minister, then I am inclined to act so as to satisfy those desires. What is desired (to drink, to be Prime Minister) is

motivating: it is, or can be unless one decides against pursuing the desire, the goal towards which our actions aim. But the state of desiring is not; though it is a state of being motivated.

Sometimes, wanting something is characterized as a motivating reason because, it is argued, wanting something is a motivational state.<sup>25</sup> But the claim that wanting something is a motivational state is somewhat ambiguous, as it can be read as a claim that wanting something is a *motivating* state, or as a claim that wanting something is a state of *being motivated*. Consider an analogy. As Aristotle points out, the term ‘healthy’ can be applied to something in two different though related senses: a thing can be said to be healthy on account of its *promoting* health, or on account of its *having* health. Thus exercise is said to be healthy in the first sense, while people are (generally) said to be healthy in the second.

For my wanting something to be a motivating reason, my wanting something must be motivating in the first sense: it must be a *motivating* state, a state that motivates me to act. However, it seems that a state of wanting something is motivational in the second sense: it is a state of *being motivated* to act in the way, if any, that one believes will bring it about that one gets what one wants. Thus, a state of being motivated is not what motivates and *a fortiori* it is not a motivating reason.

#### *VI. Desires and the explanation of action*

I have already noted that Humeans are right to emphasize that desires are important in motivating action but I have also explained that there is an ambiguity in the term ‘desire’ and that the Humean thesis is plausible only if we construe it in terms of what is desired. So, contrary to what Humeans argue, this prominent role of desires in motivation has no tendency to show that our desires, conceived as states of wanting, are reasons for which we act. Nonetheless, Humeans are right in saying that desires play an important role in motivation, and this is one of the truths contained in the Humean position.

The Humean emphasis on desires contains another truth. But just as the previous one could not be brought out without disambiguating the term ‘desire’, this one cannot be made clear without making another conceptual distinction – though I should note that this distinction is not one I have ever seen made and may prove more controversial.

In the literature, motivating reasons are often identified with *explanatory* reasons – the reasons that explain why we act. In my view, that identification is most unhelpful because a

reason is called ‘motivating’ or ‘explanatory’ respectively on different grounds: namely, on the grounds that it motivates, or on the grounds that it explains an action, respectively. It is true that the same reason can do both – that is, the same reason can motivate someone to act *and* explain his action. For example, that it shall be enjoyable could be a reason that motivates me to go to a concert and it could also be the reason that explains why I go to the concert. In that case the reason, that it’ll be enjoyable, will be both a *motivating* reason (a reason for which I act) and an *explanatory* reason (a reason that explains my action). But the fact that the same reason can play both roles does not obliterate the difference between the two roles, and hence between the two kinds of reason.

This means that I think that we ought to distinguish between *three* kinds of reason: *normative* reasons, which are the reasons for which one ought to act; *motivating* reasons, which are the reasons for which one actually acts; and *explanatory* reasons, which are the reasons cited in explaining one’s action. The same reason may play all three roles for a particular action but it need not.

To see the difference between the motivating and the explanatory roles that reasons play more clearly consider that, although a reason that motivates an action can always explain it, the converse is not true: the reason that explains an action need not be the reason that motivated the agent to act. For example, the reason that explains why Fred gives much of his money to charities may be that he’s a generous man; but that he’s a generous man is not the reason that motivates Fred to give money to charities (the fact that he is generous is not what, in his eyes, makes his giving money right or appealing). And, a different kind of example, the reason that explains why Sarah bought a new mobile phone is that she thought hers had been stolen; but the reason that motivated her was not *her thinking* that her phone had been stolen. And yet a different kind of case, the reason why Angie missed the party may be that she forgot all about it, but that she forgot is not a reason that motivated her to miss the party. So in these cases, the reasons that explain why Fred, Sarah, and Angie φ (gives money to charity; bought a new mobile phone; missed the party) are not the reasons that motivated them, and therefore they are not *motivating* reasons.<sup>26</sup> They are *explanatory* reasons: they explain why these agents did what they did (or omitted to do what they omitted to do).

Therefore, I think we ought to use each of those labels depending on whether we are referring to a reason in so far as it plays a motivating or an explanatory role. I, at any rate, shall do that here, and so I shall call a reason *for which* someone acts a ‘*motivating* reason’; and a reason *why* someone acts an ‘*explanatory* reason’, without assuming that these will always be the

same for a particular action – but allowing that they might be.

Humeans are impressed by the fact that when we explain intentional actions, we often, or perhaps always, implicitly or explicitly make reference to the fact that the agent wanted certain things. From this they tend to conclude that one's wanting something is (part of) the reason for which someone acts – i.e. is part of a *motivating* reason. However, it ought to be clear from the discussion so far that what the point just mentioned suggests is that an agent's wanting something is (part of) the *explanatory* reason – the reason that explains why that agent acted.<sup>27</sup>

So neither the Humean thesis that without desires there is no motivation, nor the view that actions are explained by reference to the fact that the agent desired something, is grounds for concluding that wanting something is part of the reason for which one acts, i.e. that it is part of a *motivating* reason. As we have seen, although desires play an important role in motivating and in explaining actions, they are not motivating reasons.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of some of the main positions in this debate, as well as references to some of the most influential contributions, see R. Chang, ‘Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?’, in J. Wallace *et all*, (eds.) *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, Clarendon, Oxford, 2004, pp.56-90.

<sup>2</sup> Motivating reasons are premises in the agent’s implicit or explicit practical reasoning. I shall return to this below.

<sup>3</sup> This strong sense of desire corresponds roughly to Aristotle’s ‘*epithymia*’ and to the Medieval concept of *concupiscentia*. G. F. Schueler, in his *Reasons and Purposes: Human Rationality and the Teleological Explanation of Action*, Oxford University Press, 2003, ch.2, calls what is desired in the stronger sense ‘proper desires’. Perhaps this is justified because in ordinary use we tend to restrict the term ‘desire’ for the strong sense, and use ‘want’ when the weaker one is at issue, although this usage is not consistent.

<sup>4</sup> So I shall not rely on an argument against the Humean view defended by, e.g. Schueler (Schueler, 2003, ch.2), that seems to depend on construing the Humean claim to involve a stronger sense of ‘want’.

<sup>5</sup> Most philosophers accept a point made explicit by Anscombe in *Intention*, Blackwell, 1957, that actions are intentional only ‘under a description’. Although this way of talking is widespread, I believe Anscombe’s point is better put using the adverbial phrase ‘A φ-ed intentionally’ since, as Anscombe herself complains, the phrase ‘under a description’ encourages confusion, e.g. talk of things happening, or being done, or being performed ‘under descriptions’ but, as she says:

no natural sense suggests itself for “happening” or “being done” or “being performed” together with the phrase ‘under the description *d*’. At best, the phrase seems redundant – one might say: What happens happens under every description that is true of it! (Anscombe, ‘Under a Description’, in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind: Collected Papers Volume II*, Blackwell, 1981, pp.208-19, p.209).

Nonetheless, I shall occasionally use Anscombe’s phrase while making sure that such confusion is avoided.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of this issue see R. Hurtshouse, ‘Arational Action’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 83, 1991, pp.291-5, and J. Raz, ‘Agency, Reason and the Good’, in his *Engaging Reason: On The*

*Theory of Value and Action*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.22-45.

<sup>7</sup> This would involve a rejection of the view that there is an action only when there is some description of what the person did ‘under which’ it was intentional, for on this view a person could act, that is perform an action, even though there is no description that applies to her action such that, so described, it would be right to say that she acted intentionally.

<sup>8</sup> On this criterion, there may be actions of a different kind that are not intentional, such as things one does because one feels like doing them, such as whistling, or giving a little jump, etc. Many claim that such things are done for the reason that one felt like doing them. But, I shall argue, it is plausible to say that such actions are not done for a reason at all. If that is right, then these would be things done voluntarily but not intentionally.

<sup>9</sup> Notable among them, because of his influence in establishing this view, is Donald Davidson. He encapsulated the Humean view in his characterisation of a ‘primary reason’ for an action in his paper ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’. According to Davidson,

C1. *R* is a primary reason why an agent performed the action *A* under the description *d* only if *R* consists of a pro attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that *A*, under the description *d*, has that property (Davidson, ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’, 1963, rpted in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press, 1980, pp.1-19, p.4).

Davidson holds that a primary reason, i.e. the reason for which someone does something, is also the cause of that action.

<sup>10</sup> Most of those who endorse the Humean position, think of these reasons as mental states of the agent’s but I shall not assess that claim here.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent defence of this claim, see W. Quinn, ‘Putting Rationality in its Place’ in his *Morality and Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.228-55. See also Raz, 1999; and T. Scanlon, *What we Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae, q.8, a.1. See also Aristotle’s *Physics*, II, 3, 195a26; and *Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 1, 1094a3.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle says that the object of desire ‘may be either the real or the apparent good’ (*De Anima* III, 433a28). And Francis Bacon says that ‘There is no man doth a wrong for the wrong’s sake,

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but thereby to purchase himself profit, or pleasure, or honours, or the like' (*On Revenge*).

<sup>14</sup> On this see M. Stocker, 'Desiring the Bad: An Essay on Moral Psychology', *Journal of Philosophy*, 76, 1979, pp.738-53, and 'Raz on the Intelligibility of Bad Acts' in Wallace *et al*, 2004, pp.303-32; and Raz's 'Agency, Reason and the Good' in Raz, 1999. See also D. Velleman, 'The Guise of the Good', 1992, reprinted in Velleman, 2000, pp.99-122; and U. Heuer, 'Reasons for Actions and Desires', *Philosophical Studies*, 121, 2004, pp.43-63.

<sup>15</sup> So, for instance, Velleman's objection to Anscombe's view seems to me to depend on implicitly thinking that the good must be some kind of 'ethical good', for he says: 'Anscombe's Satan can desire evil only by judging it to *be* good, and so remains at heart, a lover of the good and the desirable – a rather sappy Satan' (Velleman, 2000, p.119). But this objection only has bite, I think, if Satan must remain a lover of the *ethically* good as only that would make him a 'sappy Satan' but not if he is a lover (and desirer) of evil, i.e. if he has, as the Satan of *Paradise Lost* seems to have done, made evil *his good*.

<sup>16</sup> This relates to another medieval notion that Anscombe endorses, namely that *bonum est multiplex*.

<sup>17</sup> If this is right, how can we respond to the problem raised by akrasia, where one acts for a reason that is not the reason that makes the thing done appear right or worthwhile: I see two possible responses here: either (i) we act for a reason – that the 'irrational' act is pleasant – even though it is a reason we think is less good than the reason not to do it; or (ii) we do not act for no reason, but there is a reason why we act: that doing the thing one fails to do requires effort while that the thing one ends up doing doesn't, etc. I'm inclined to the first.

<sup>18</sup> A.R. Mele, *Motivation and Agency*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp.82ff. has an argument to this effect.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps some people, persuaded by Freud, might claim that things we do ostensibly for no reason, or claim to do just because we feel like doing them, are in fact always done for some reason – but they are reasons that the agent is *unable* (psychologically, not epistemically, speaking) or unwilling to identify; reasons that may require a great deal of soul-searching or professional help to be unearthed (a project which in most cases may be felt to be neither necessary nor profitable). If this is right, then there may be reasons for which we do those things but, if so, our reasons for doing those things are not that we feel like doing them or that we want

to do them but rather those other facts that psychoanalysis will unearth.

<sup>20</sup> A variant of this case is examples where the fact that one wants to, e.g. marry one's mother is one's reason for visiting a psychoanalyst.

<sup>21</sup> Which conforms with Davidson's characterisation of a 'primary reason'.

<sup>22</sup> The same is true of the term 'belief': it can be used to refer to my believing something, or to what I believe. I discuss the relation between beliefs and reasons in 'Reasons and the Ambiguity of "Belief"', *Philosophical Explorations*, 11, 2008, pp.1-13

<sup>23</sup> On this issue see A.J.P. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, Routledge, 1963, 112ff.

<sup>24</sup> On this see also Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q.1

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Audi says that wanting may be considered as 'the most representative motivational element' (R. Audi, *The Architecture of Reason*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.66); and Mele says that states of desiring are states 'that encompass motivation' (Mele, 2004, p.16).

<sup>26</sup> In Angie's case there was no motivating reason and her missing the party was not something she did intentionally. In Sarah's case, she thought she acted for a reason but she didn't. In Fred's case, we can assume that he did act for a reason but we have not been told it explicitly.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is precisely because being in a state of desiring something is normally being in a state of being inclined to act that it is possible to explain why someone acted by citing the fact that they desired something, i.e. that they were in that state of motivation.

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