

**MOTIVATING BELIEFS.
ANTI-HUMEAN STRATEGIES ON PRACTICAL REASON**

GUSTAVO ORTIZ-MILLÁN
Columbia University
gmo9@columbia.edu

1. According to the so-called Humean Theory of Motivation, desires are the starting point of any process of practical deliberation. Humeans work with a picture of the mind in which there are two basic kinds of motivating states: desires, which provide the essential and necessary motivational force for action, and beliefs, which are able to motivate only when standing in the appropriate relation to a desire. But while desires are essentially motivating states, beliefs borrow their motivating force from desires, because by themselves beliefs are motivationally inert, given their representational, non-dynamic, nature. Beliefs, by definition, are cognitive, not conative, states; their role is to guide and to provide the necessary information to satisfy desires. Beliefs have a “representational quality”, they work as copies of the world, and their being true consists in representing it in the most accurate possible way. According to Humeans, there is nothing in the nature of beliefs that could make them possess the motivational force that desires have. On the other hand, desires by themselves are unable to motivate: they need the presence of the information provided by beliefs in order to be satisfied. In other words, motivation has its source in the presence of a desire and a means-end belief. If there were no desires to serve, we would never be motivated to do anything, because beliefs by themselves do not have any motivational power. Beliefs have only an instrumental role to play in motivation; they have nothing to do with determining the objects of our desires. Practical rationality, according to the Humean theory, is instrumental rationality.

Any complete account of motivation requires beliefs and desires, tells us the Humean, but acknowledging that the primary motivating force comes always from desires. Reasons for action, they say, are always desire-dependent: desires do not depend

on other rational considerations, they are not conclusions of any process of practical reasoning, but always its starting point. Although there is no single characterization of desires given by Humeans, this kind of theories rests on an essentially empiricist conception of motivation, according to which desires are dispositions to action, dynamic psychological states that push us to action, and with respect to which we are ultimately passive. In Hume's account, desires are dispositions to act so as to try to bring about the desired state of affairs, and they "arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable".¹ Not only in Hume, but in much of the empiricist tradition, desires are primitive drives that possess agents, and in front of which these are passive and have no control, because desires are not susceptible of being modified by our beliefs or by any kind of reasonable argumentation. Given the different nature of beliefs and desires in the Humean picture, the latter are inaccessible to reason. Desires are semantically and causally isolated from reason: not being copies or representations of anything, they cannot be true or false, hence they cannot be contrary to reason. Reason is also impotent to oppose or cause any desire or action.² Rationality has nothing to do with the determination of the objects of our desires, as Hume puts it, it is "not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (*Treatise*, 416). Desires are not subject to any kind of rational modification or criticism at all. According to this picture, the mind is divided into two different provinces that have very little relation with each other, given their very different natures.

This is, in very rough terms, the theory of practical reasoning that Humean theories of motivation give us. Ever since Kant, philosophers have reacted against this theory proposing different theories of practical reason. But many recent analytical philosophers have questioned some of the basic premises of the Humean theory. However, they also work with the same elements the Humean put forward first: beliefs and desires. In a certain way, anti-Humeans work with a modified picture of the belief-desire model. What critics of the Humean theory will attack is the dependence of our motivating and

normative reasons on desires, the idea that all our reasons and the whole edifice of practical reason depend on desires. But given the framework in which this discussion takes place, the only other alternative is that beliefs and cognitive attitudes unseat desires from their privileged place in practical reason. That is, the anti-Humean will challenge Humean skepticism about the motivational power of practical reason.³

The reason of the anti-Humean discontent with the Humean theory is the possible moral subjectivism and relativism that derive from it. The only way for the anti-Humean to rescue objectivism for moral theory is by making the edifice of practical reason depend on beliefs or cognitive states. Cognitivism in moral theory, as well as in other areas, has the intention of creating some form of agreement between agents and of achieving objectivity. Unlike desires, beliefs are subject to the standards of truth and falsity that make possible the achievement of objectivity.

In this way, the anti-Humean will characteristically claim that not all our reasons are desire-dependent, that there are cases of motivation for which we need a different account, where the stress has to be put not on the side of desires, but on that of beliefs. Additionally, a different account of desires and beliefs than that given by the Humean has to be provided. Basically, anti-Humeans do two things: 1) They reformulate the Humean conception of desires, and redefine their place in the picture of practical reason. What most critics of the Humean version of the belief-desire model find objectionable is not the claim that motivation requires desires, but the idea that desires be non-cognitive states or isolated from the influence of cognitive states, and that there are no rational constraints to them.⁴ 2) While doing this, they also deny the Humean idea that beliefs are motivationally inert. If desires are to be subject to the influence of beliefs, beliefs have to be able to motivate desire and, ultimately, action.

What the anti-Humean basically does is redefine the Humean concept of desire as a mental state with no rational constraints. Anti-Humeans typically redefine desires in cognitive terms or as susceptible to be motivated by cognitive states. In some extreme

versions, they deny that desires play any role in the motivation of action, granting some states, such as moral judgments—which they take to be cognitive states—motivating power. We can identify four different choices of anti-Humean strategies.⁵ 1) simply get rid of desires for the case of moral motivation, claiming that cognitive states by themselves have motivating power, and do not need the presence of desires. This would be similar to the model of moral motivation proposed by Kant, who claimed that practical reason by itself was able to motivate action, independently of desires or empirical inclinations; 2) redefine the concept of desire in terms of beliefs, which we can call the “Belief-as-Desire Theory”; 3) make desires mere accessories that play a secondary role in motivation, beliefs having the main explanatory role of actions; or finally 4) he may accept the idea that desires can be independent states motivated by beliefs. Let me analyze each one of these strategies separately. I am going to present the arguments they use against the Humean theory of motivation, and then I am going to raise some questions and criticisms taking them altogether. One of the problems with some of these anti-Humean strategies, I shall argue, is that even though they reorganize the pieces of the game in a different way, they keep playing with the same pieces: beliefs and desires. Moreover, given the way in which these elements were originally characterized, the anti-Humean redefinition seems to generate more questions than it answers and seems doomed to fall prey of some of the rules of the game previously set up by the Humean.

a) *The Kantian Strategy*. I call this strategy Kantian because it receives its first and most forceful formulation in the philosophy of Kant, but has only adopted the terminology of desires and beliefs in some recent Kantian theories. To be sure, Kant, as many of his contemporaries and predecessors, didn’t talk in terms of beliefs and desires, and to try to reduce his terminology to these two labels would amount to a misunderstanding of his thinking. Historically, Kant was among the first philosophers to see the possible subjectivist and relativist consequences that the Humean theory of motivation could have

in moral theory, and he reacted proposing a model of moral motivation. Kantians attack the Humean theory of motivation by formulating an alternative theory for the case of moral motivation, although they continue to accept the Humean account of motivation for behavior in which moral principles are not at stake. Kantianism rests on the idea that motivation of a moral action can come entirely from pure practical reason, without the intervention of any desire or empirical inclination. Desires and empirical inclinations, they claim, constitute a threat to the idea of freedom and autonomy. Since many Kantians conceive desires and empirical inclinations in terms of active causal forces and belonging to the realm of nature in which causality and determinism reign, then to accept that motivation come from desires implies an acceptance of determinism and a denial of freedom: if we are causally determined in our moral behavior, then we are not self-determining, autonomous, agents.⁶ So the reaction of the Kantian to the Humean model is that, if we want to preserve autonomy, freedom, and the purity of moral actions, then moral motivation has to do without desires or any kind of empirical inclinations, that is, just with pure practical reason. It would be unfair to reduce Kant's conception of practical reason to mere beliefs, but translated into our contemporary jargon of beliefs and desires, some have talked just in terms of cognitive states.⁷ In any case, the Kantian model of moral motivation suggests that we can do without desires; moral judgments and cognitive states are more than enough. Any kind of empirical inclination, such as desires and emotions are radically expelled from moral motivation.⁸ But again, this is a model of moral motivation that seems to be content with a Humean account in terms of desires and beliefs for the rest of our non-moral actions.⁹

b) *Desire-as-Belief*. Some philosophers in the Kantian and other traditions have taken the different strategy of not getting rid of desires, but of reducing them to beliefs. Desires are just forms of beliefs, we are told. In some versions of this strategy, desiring is equated, for instance, with thinking desirable, and it is possible to construe desires as beliefs of a

certain sort—beliefs about what is desirable or valuable or beliefs about normative truths. The basic idea is that we can identify “Desiring X to be the case” with “Believing that [something like] it would be good if X were the case”. This “desire-as-belief” position, as it has been called, is held, among others, by Lloyd Humberstone, for whom desires can be taken as species of belief and it is always possible to paraphrase a desire statement in terms of desiderative beliefs, with the clause “it is desirable that”.¹⁰ Very roughly, Humberstone shows that introducing an operator ‘D’ to represent this kind of clauses allows us to paraphrase a desire for α as the belief that ‘D α ’ (‘BD α ’), that is, desiring α can be paraphrased as believing that α is desirable.¹¹

However, this reduction of desires to beliefs seems to be in trouble when it comes to face some features of our mental life that we can characterize as irrationalities, such as weakness of the will, wishful thinking, self-deception and so on. Jay Wallace formulates this line of criticism in the following way:

...certain kinds of desires can be given a rational explanation, in terms of an agent’s beliefs (together with principles or norms of practical rationality). This would establish, perhaps, a *rational* connection between certain beliefs and certain desires. But to conclude, on this basis, that the beliefs and desires in question are identical, or necessarily connected, is to confuse the rational connections of explanation and justification with laws of psychological necessity. People are irrational, much of the time, and for this reason alone no rationalist account should identify beliefs with desires, or hold that they are necessarily connected.¹²

If desiring is tantamount to believing something to be desirable or valuable, how would we explain cases in which we desire something, even though we do not believe it to be valuable or desirable in any way? How is it possible that an agent has the belief of something as desirable and, nevertheless, does not desire it? This is the very common case of weakness of the will, where it is perfectly possible to think of something as desirable, but not desire it just because it is not among our current interests or simply due to, say, fatigue, apathy, illness or depression. Various sorts of depression can leave our evaluative outlooks not impaired in any way, but completely remove our desires and motivation. This kind of irrationality is too frequent in our lives as for not taking it as a

serious limitation to a theory of action of this kind, and it only shows us that believing something to be desirable and actually desiring it are two distinct and independent things. Not only weakness of the will would be hard to explain, but self-deception and wishful thinking as well, that is, cases of desires influencing our beliefs so that one believes what is not true. If the desire that is motivating the false belief is also another belief, then self-deception would be just a case of simply mistakenly believing something and there would not be such cases at all. In any event, the desire-as-belief theorist would have a hard time accounting for this kind of irrationalities.¹³

c) *Pure Ascription Theory*. The third kind of strategy that we can identify has its origin in the pioneering work on motivation by Thomas Nagel. As part of his strategy against the Humean model, Nagel proposes a different concept of desire. This concept does not replace the Humean concept of desire, accepted by Nagel, but it is additional to it. Nagel distinguishes between motivated and unmotivated desires. The latter are the desires the Humean talks about—for whom all desires are equal and does not make any distinction between kinds of desires. Roughly speaking, while motivated desires are those for which other reasons, such as prior beliefs or rational considerations, can be provided, for unmotivated desires no such reasons can be given. Whereas a motivated desire can be rationalized by other cognitive attitudes the agent has, this is not the case for an unmotivated desire. Unmotivated desires would be appetites, cravings, and whims; desires, so to speak, that just come to us without any invitation. Such desires presumably have an explanation (physiological, psychoanalytical, etc.), but not in terms of an agent's reasons. This kind of desire is merely an “affection (not susceptible to rational assessment) to which one is either subject or not”;¹⁴ that is, unmotivated desires are Humean desires. On the other hand, in the case of motivated desires we can always adduce reasons for explaining them other than a simply “she just wants it”; these desires are something one comes to have through the recognition that there is a reason for

pursuing the object of one's desires, that is, they admit rationalizing explanations. "Many desires", says Nagel, "like many beliefs, are *arrived at* by decision and after deliberation. They need not simply assail us, though there are certain desires that do, like the appetites and in certain cases the emotions..." (p. 29). Desires we arrive at by decision and after deliberation are motivated desires in which the agent wants the object of her desire for a reason. To be sure, not all of our motivated desires are arrived at by decision and after deliberation, most of the times we don't reflect on what we want and deliberation is not involved, but if we were asked about our desires, we could always give justifying reasons for them, and these reasons would include beliefs and some kind of rational considerations. That is, these desires can be explained in terms of the agent's reasons for holding them. It is in this subset of motivated desires where Nagel focuses, and where his criticism of the Humean theory is based. Even though at times he seems to accept the Kantian thesis that pure practical reason, rational considerations or beliefs by themselves are enough for explaining action, he insists in the inclusion of desires within the picture—of course these are not unmotivated Humean desires, but motivated ones.

The claim that a desire underlies every act is true only if desires are taken to include motivated as well as unmotivated desires, and it is true only in the sense that *whatever* may be the motivation for someone's intentional pursuit of a goal, it becomes in virtue of his pursuit *ipso facto* appropriate to ascribe to him a desire for that goal. But if the desire is a motivated one, the explanation of it will be the same as the explanation of his pursuit, and it is by no means obvious that a desire must enter into this further explanation (...) That I have the appropriate desire simply *follows* from the fact that these considerations motivate me; if the likelihood that an act will promote my future happiness motivates me to perform it now, then it is appropriate to ascribe to me a desire for my own future happiness. But nothing follows about the role of the desire as a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of those considerations. (pp. 29-30, italics in the original)

This classification of desires is by itself a departure from the Humean theory of motivation, since it assumes the possibility of desires being motivated by other reasons, not as starting points of practical reason, but as one of its possible products. It also questions the role that beliefs and desires can play in explaining motivation. The explanation of the motivated desire that we ascribe when accounting for the action is

going to be the same one as the one of the belief or the rational considerations that we ascribe to the agent. However, Nagel's paragraph suggests two different theories of motivation. Nagel himself is actually ambivalent between both of them. I shall examine the first one here, and the second one in the next subsection.

We can call the first theory, following Dancy, the "pure ascription theory": according to Nagel, the ascription of a desire "simply *follows* from the fact that these considerations motivate" the agent, that is, we ascribe a desire to an agent who is motivated entirely by her beliefs; for instance, her buying medical insurance would be explained entirely by her holding certain beliefs about her future well-being. In this case we simply ascribe the desire as following from her belief about what she believes would promote her future well-being. But the actual burden of the explanation is not carried by the desire, but by the belief; the desire is ascribed as a consequence of the ascription of the belief. This model probably takes a clearer shape with John McDowell, who precisely claims that the ascription of some desires is simply consequential upon certain beliefs or cognitive attitudes with which we credited the agent and that work as the main motivating reason in the explanation of his action.

Suppose, for instance, that we explain a person's performance of a certain action by crediting him with awareness of some fact which makes it likely (in his view) that acting in that way will be conducive to his interest. Adverting to his view of the facts may suffice, on its own, to show us the favourable light in which his action appeared to him. No doubt we credit him with an appropriate desire, perhaps for his own future happiness. But the commitment to ascribe such a desire is simply consequential on our taking him to act as he does for the reason we cite; the desire does not function as an independent extra component in a full specification of his reason, hitherto omitted by an understandable ellipsis of the obvious, but strictly necessary in order to show how it is that the reason can motivate him. Properly understood, his belief does that on its own.¹⁵

The burden of the explanation is carried by the belief, while the desire is just ascribed as a consequence of the agent holding the belief that we cite in the explanation of his action. The desire is consequentially ascribed and not independently intelligible. Cases in which the agent's conception of a situation is enough for showing us the

favorable light in which his action appeared to him, desires do not play the primary role that the Humean claims them to have nor they have an independent intelligibility apart from the beliefs we cite when accounting for the action. They are not independent existences, as the Humean claims, but they depend—as well as their intelligibility—on the belief that is ascribed to the agent.

McDowell also follows Nagel in holding that this is a model that works for moral and prudential considerations, while accepting the Humean model for non-moral or non-prudential reasons. However, he departs from Nagel in stressing the role of perception (or the agent's conception of a situation) as the cognitive attitude that triggers motivation and action. Nagel does not attribute any special role to perception, and he would rather talk in terms of the rational considerations or a process of practical reasoning that would bring about action. Anyway, although the cognitive states chosen by these authors for explaining motivation may be different, in both cases the basic motivational factor is cognitive—this emphasis in different cognitive states would certainly have differences in the kind of moral theory that they propose, but this is something that I am not going to examine here.

d) *The Motivated-Desire Theory*. Nagel's classification of unmotivated and motivated desires has also given rise to a different variation of an anti-Humean strategy. Although we can find it first formulated in Nagel's work, this kind of motivated-desire theory has been developed and refined in Mark Platts's theory of desires.¹⁶ In Platts's account, desires can be either merely consequentially attributed in virtue of the agent holding certain beliefs or they can be taken as *motivated* by the agent's holding these beliefs. According to this motivated desire theory, for instance, to think that something is desirable or morally or prudentially required can account for the presence of a desire with the same propositional content specified in the desirability characterization—the desire would be a reasonable effect of our beliefs about the desirability of something. Desires

can be reasonable effects of beliefs in virtue of the relation between their propositional contents. My belief that to act in some way is desirable, worthy, required or that I ought to do it, may reasonably motivate a corresponding desire with the same propositional content. The desire would be backed up by such characterization: the reasons that justify and support these beliefs can likewise be cited to justify and support the desire this characterization of desirability may bring about. Thus, the reasons adduced for our beliefs may be considered as reasons for desiring also. When ascribing desires, we should be able to answer such questions as “why does *A* desire *F*?”, and the answer must be given in terms of *A*'s reasons for believing, perceiving or characterizing something as desirable or valuable. We would be able to justify, to give reasons for, our desires, but these reasons would be pretty much the same reasons that we gave for our beliefs.

2. These four strategies present us with different ways of construing desires, beliefs and practical reason that can compete with the Humean theory, specifically with its basic claims: that desires are starting points of any process of practical reasoning, that there are no internal or rational constraints to them, and that beliefs are motivationally inert. It is in challenging these assumptions that we can take their accounts as criticisms of the Humean theory. However, all these alternative theories coincide in admitting that *there is* Humean motivation, where beliefs and desires help together to bring about an action in the way the Humean claims (perhaps with the exception of the second strategy that tries to construe all our desires in terms of beliefs, but this theory, as we already saw, presents several problems on its own). Nagel, McDowell and Platts admit, as Kant also does, that there is Humean motivation and they are just trying to provide an alternative account for the cases of morality and of prudence. Kantians are mainly concerned with giving an account of moral motivation in which desires play no role, in which pure reason is practical in its issue, but they seem to be content with the Humean account for the rest of our actions—or just remain silent about this issue. Nagel, McDowell and Platts, as well

as other philosophers who accept the Nagelian distinction, admit that their account aims at explaining prudential and moral actions, but acknowledge the possibility of Humean motivation for the rest of our actions in which unmotivated desires have the main explanatory role in actions.¹⁷

However, there is a puzzle that these criticisms left us with. On an anti-Humean account, it is the agent's conception of the situation, his rational considerations, his perception of certain values, or ultimately, his beliefs of what is valuable and what has to be done, what bring about motivation; therefore, to have this conception, these beliefs, is to have a desire, or implies a consequential ascription of a desire. Here a couple of questions are in place. The first one has to do with the motivational role of beliefs, and here is where these critics challenge the Humean model: according to Hume, beliefs have a representational nature, and there is nothing in them that provides the necessary force for motivating action. Beliefs, the Humean says, are motivationally inert. The anti-Humean challenges this assertion. There are certain kinds of beliefs, he says, that can work as beliefs (representing reality, providing knowledge, etc.) and at the same time provide motivation for action; they typically characterize them as beliefs about values, that have some necessary connection with having a reason to act.¹⁸ These beliefs seem to have the defining characteristics of both beliefs and desires. J.E.J. Altham has called them "besires",¹⁹ beliefs that in addition of having their natural cognitive role, have also the motivating power of desires. However, the anti-Humean does not seem to me to have provided any philosophical argument for this redefinition of beliefs, and does not really tell us much about what gives beliefs about values this especial motivating power that regular beliefs lack, or about what kind of values give beliefs this motivating power. Is it just our moral and prudential beliefs that have this capacity? Or beliefs about values in general? If so, once again, what is the need to ascribe desires when beliefs about values are doing all the work? Here appears the second set of questions for the anti-Humean. If we accept the idea that beliefs can have a motivational role and that the burden of the

explanation is in the belief, why should desire always be kept within the picture? Why do anti-Humeans insist in attributing a desire to the agent even in cases where the explanatory burden is carried by some cognitive state and this is supposed to be doing all the work? I think that the reference to desires, first of all, even if it is only secondary, is a way of keeping us within the framework of our folk-psychology, in which we usually account for actions by attributing desires. But more important than this trivial reason, it seems to me that the real reason has to do with the acceptance of a central thesis of the belief-desire model: the distinction between beliefs and desires in terms of their different direction of fit.²⁰ This is the idea that beliefs aim at fitting the world, and their fitting the world is their being true, while desires aim at the world fitting with them, they aim at changing the world. Even when the burden of the explanation is carried by a cognitive state (e.g. the belief about values, the conception of the situation), yet the action shows the presence of a mental state with the direction of fit of a desire. An action always shows a change in the world, and this would show the presence of a desire. According to Platts, the argument would be something like this: “*any action (other than intentional omissions) is, and must be meant to be, a change in the world; but any such intended change requires the obtaining of a mental state with a ‘direction of fit’ of the kind distinctive of desire*”.²¹ This would be the reason of why the anti-Humean seems to be committed to the ascription of desires, even when they are secondary or accessory motivating reasons for action, and the belief is providing the real motivating force. The intention of this argument is to show that the constitutive elements of a motivating reason must include reference to a desire, but, at the same time, this would also show us the commitment of the anti-Humean to one of the central theses of the belief-desire model. Humeans and anti-Humeans are united in their acceptance of the notion of direction of fit, and ultimately, in their acceptance of the belief-desire model.²² If I am right, the discussion between these two rival theories seems to be trapped in the conceptual framework of this model. Also, if I am right in claiming that the reason for keeping

desires within the picture of motivation has to do with the acceptance of the thesis of the direction of fit of beliefs and desires with the world, then the anti-Humean would still have to tell us a story about how something with the direction of fit of beliefs can at the same time have the opposite direction of fit and can motivate a desire, which is the state that is supposed to have motivational power.

The redefinition of beliefs in terms of motivating beliefs means the acceptance of the idea that there are certain beliefs that can have both directions of fit. Their cognitive nature implies that they have the direction of fit of beliefs, that is, a mind-to-world direction of fit: they aim at the true, and they are true when they fit the world; but they also have the opposite direction of fit: world-to-mind, since their having motivating power implies that they are also goal-directed, and aim at changing the world—starting with the modifications of existence that desires are. The existence of states with both directions of fit would make completely unnecessary the inclusion of desires within the theory—however, anti-Humeans insist in including desires within their theory of motivation. All this would imply a contradiction in the anti-Humean version of the belief-desire model.²³

I asked before for a more precise characterization of motivating beliefs than that given by the anti-Humean, but this anti-Humean, in his turn, could very well ask us for a reason that would preclude evaluative beliefs from motivating. “What precludes beliefs, by themselves, without the intervention of desires, from motivating?”, he might ask. This is a legitimate question, even though it gives rise to my second set of questions about the irrelevance of including desires within the picture. But the real problem with this question is that it seems to keep us within the limits of a very peculiar image of practical reason and, ultimately, of our mental life. The question is legitimate, but I think it is not the right question to ask. The question should not be whether beliefs by themselves are able to motivate, but whether any mental state *by itself* is able to motivate any intentional action at all, independently of its relations with other mental states or, ultimately, with the whole

of our mental life. Asking whether beliefs by themselves can provide enough motivation for action seems to assume that beliefs can act independently of other mental states— independently of desires or other conative attitudes, in the first place. A belief by itself, just as a desire by itself, seems to be as unable to motivate any intentional action or process of thought as any other mental state is, if taken separately from the rest of the web of inferential relations with other states. The mere belief that something is good or valuable seems to be as unable to motivate any intentional action or process of thought by itself, as the mere desire that something be the case.

The question about the motivating power of beliefs, it seems to me, remits us to a framework of thinking very similar to the one we find in Hume's philosophy of mind, with his corpuscular theory of the mind, in which different mental states are corpuscles that work in different provinces or departments; a theory in which mental states can work separately from the rest of our mental life. This is the way of thinking that we find in Hume, but also in Kant, who thought that pure practical reason was able to motivate actions independently of its relations with our emotive mental states and our empirical inclinations. This is a picture in which the mind seems to be compartmentalized: a picture in which desires can stop working when moral beliefs are in play. These pictures of the mind are not very different from the one we find in people asking the question about the motivational nature of this or that mental state (some being inert, some others active), as if this or that mental state had any motivational power by itself. A possible answer to this debate, once again, could be that specific mental states by themselves do not motivate because mental states do not work separately from other mental states or from the rest of our mental life. We could call this position mental holism about motivation: the idea that the motivating power of any mental state is determined by its place in an inferential web of mental states comprising a whole theory about the reasons we have for acting. The opposite picture, the one we find equally in Humeans and anti-Humeans, with their concerns about the motivating power of this or that mental state, responds more to an

atomism that derives from Hume's corpuscular theory of the mind. This atomism would characterize the motivational power of mental states not so much in terms of their position within the web of mental states, but it would say that this or that mental state has motivational power independently of its inferential relations to other mental states or independently of its position in the web.²⁴

NOTES

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 415. See also the characterization of the Humean Theory of Motivation given by Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994

² Cf. Mark Platts, "Hume on Morality as a Matter of Fact", *Mind* 97, (1988).

³ See Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason", *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, (1986).

⁴ Cf. David McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, p. 107; see also Phillip Pettit, "Humeans, Anti-Humeans, and Motivation", *Mind*, 96 (1987).

⁵ I have partially followed Jonathan Dancy in his characterization of these theories. See his *Moral Reasons*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, chap. 1.

⁶ In many Kantian theories, desires and empirical inclinations also make impure the motives of moral actions because they are characterized in terms of psychological hedonism and self-interest—Kant himself characterized desires in these terms. Kant equates the faculty of desire with the feeling of pleasure, this resulting in a hedonistic conception of desires and, derived from this, in a conception of these as self-interested. Since we are always motivated by *our own* desires, by the search for our own pleasure, not someone else's, any action motivated by our own desires and pleasure is self-interested. To seek for the satisfaction of desires is basically directed to produce pleasure in the individual who experiences the desire, and this is a selfish, egoistic, search. These are also reasons for thinking that desires make impure the motives of our moral actions.

⁷ Maybe it is not that unfair this translation, since practical reason has for Kant a cognitive role. However, we have to be careful when talking about the cognitive role of reason in Kant. He does not talk about knowledge of external reasons, objective realities or values; reason is epistemically practical in the sense that it provides knowledge of the normative truths that reason itself has generated.

⁸ This kind of strategy has been adopted by Thomas Scanlon in his discussion about reasons and desires. "I will defend the stronger claim that desires almost never provide reasons for action in the way described by the standard desire model. According to this familiar model, desires are not conclusions of practical reasoning but starting points of it. They are states which simply occur or not, and when they do occur they provide the agent with reason to do what will promote their fulfillment." Then he goes on in an strategy of belittling desires and absorbing them into beliefs about normative reasons. (*What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, p. 43.)

⁹ I have argued for this interpretation in my "Kant on Desires, Moral Motivation and Autonomy" (unpublished). Similar interpretations about this last point are held also by Mark Timmons, "Kant and the Possibility of Moral Motivation", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23, (1985); Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977; and Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, p. 7.

¹⁰ I.L. Humberstone, "Wanting as Believing", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 17, (1987). See also R.B.K. Howe, "The Cognitive Nature of Desire", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32, (1994)

¹¹ However, the identification of desires with beliefs faces several kinds of criticism. The first one was formulated by David Lewis, who argues that the desire-as-belief thesis is incompatible with standard formal theories of Bayesian decision. If the thesis of desire-as-beliefs is right, this would trivialize these

theories—such as Richard Jeffrey’s decision theory. This would also imply that classical decision theory is not motivationally neutral, because it does not tolerate non-Humean interpretations (Lewis, “Desire as Belief”, *Mind* 97, (1988); see also John Collins, “Belief, Desire, and Revision”, *Mind* 97, (1988)). Collins, Horacio Arlo Costa and Isaac Levi defend Lewis position, but they get a stronger conclusion: they make the claim independent of Jeffrey’s theory, and argue that the desire-as-belief thesis is incompatible even with a weaker system of decision theory that does not presuppose Jeffrey’s theory (Arlo Costa, Collins and Levi, “Desire-as-Belief Implies Opinionation or Indifference”, *Analysis* 55, (1995). A criticism of the critics of the desire-as-belief thesis can be found in Huw Price, “Defending Desire-as-Belief”, *Mind* 98, (1989)). Similar conclusions would be valid for the field of belief revision, since in this kind of account, when new information is added to a set of attitudes, beliefs evolve in one way and (instrumental) desires in another, and this rules out the identification of desires with beliefs. A hybrid of beliefs and desires, trying to go both ways would be torn apart.

¹² R. Jay Wallace, “How to Argue about Practical Reason”, *Mind* 99, (1990), p. 372.

¹³ There is another line of criticism that comes from Michael Smith’s defense of the Humean distinction of beliefs and desires, which would preclude the identification of desires to beliefs, due to the different direction of fit of these two states. There is nothing in the direction of fit of beliefs that would explain the goal-directedness nature of desires. Their different direction of fit makes desires irreducible to any form of beliefs. See Smith, *The Moral Problem*, pp. 116 ff.

¹⁴ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1970, p. 4.

¹⁵ John McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume LII, (1978), p. 15, now in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Mark Platts, *Moral Realities*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991.

¹⁷ For a similar opinion about this point, see Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, p. 9.

¹⁸ David Wiggins, for instance, tells us: “Thoughts of value or obligation not only appear to us as beliefs; they also have some sort of necessary connection with our having a reason of some sort (not necessarily a universally overriding reason) to act (or otherwise respond) accordingly. On the other hand, no mental state that is a belief and *only* a belief can suffice in itself to explain one’s acting or responding thus or so.” (“Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism and Motivating Moral Beliefs”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 91 (1990-1991), p. 81).

¹⁹ Altham, “The Legacy of Emotivism”, C. Wright and G. Macdonald (eds.), *Fact, Science and Morality*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.

²⁰ Here I follow Platts’ approach to this question. See his *Moral Realities*, p. 54. For more on the notion of direction of fit, see Platts, *Ways of Meaning*, 2nd ed., MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, pp. 256-257, and Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, pp. 22 ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55. Italics in the original. However, this proposal would present two problems: the first one is how would we explain the cases of intentional omissions or abstentions. Not all omissions are actions, some of them are failures to act or non-performances, but some others are intentional, these are abstentions, where we refrain from acting voluntarily, and here my action (or better, my non-action) does not imply any change in the world. Intentional omissions would pose a problem to the Humean view that conceives desires and actions as similar kinds, given that both of them are “modifications of existence”. A second case would arise if anyway we conceived omissions as events or changes in the world, and then the problem would be that not all our desires—in fact a lot of them—result in any action at all, and some of them do not have any behavioral manifestation, such as the case of some long-term desires or some desires about the future. This is a familiar problem for behavioristic and functionalistic conceptions of mental states as dispositions that I do not plan to pursue here.

²² I argue for such a characterization in my “Direction of Fit and the Belief-Desire Model”, paper presented to the Oxford Graduate Conference in Philosophy, November 2000.

²³ A possible answer is that perhaps they keep desires within the picture just to explain cases of irrationalities, such as weakness of the will, which would be very hard to explain if we throw away desires from the theory or reduce them to beliefs. But in this case, desires are understood just as Humean desires and the role they are assigned in action is minimal.

²⁴ Thanks are due to Akeel Bilgrami, Isaac Levi and Carol Rovane for criticism on a longer earlier version of this paper. Conversations with Mark Platts about this topic were also very helpful.