

Perception and the Rational Force of Desire¹

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It's the middle of the afternoon and your motivation to work is flagging.

You pause to reflect on the beginning of a new school year. Feeling a pang of nostalgia, you feel the desire to talk to an old friend and so pick up the phone to call them.

In doing so, you seem to have acted rationally in at least one sense of the word. And part of what explains the rationality of your action appears to be the simple fact that you did something you desired to do. In this way, our desires often seem to matter to the rationality of our actions and intentions. Thus, while it is possible to deny that there is any sense in which the rationality of your actions is ever dependent on what you desire,² prior to philosophical reflection, the natural thing to say about this case, and countless others like it, is that there is a sense in which the rationality of your choice of action is in part the product of your desires.

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² For example, there is a popular - although simplistic - reading of Kant, according to which Kant would deny that sensible desire is ever relevant to what one rationally ought to do. To Kant's credit, his understanding of the relevance of sensible desire to practical rationality is more nuanced than this.

If this is right, then any theory of practical rationality must explain - or explain away - the following:

Rational: In many cases, what it is rational (in some sense) for one to do or intend to do depends on what one desires.³

Most explanations of Rational fall under two broad headings. First, there are attempts to account for it in terms of facts about what we objectively ought to do. And second, there are attempts to do so in terms of facts about subjective rationality (broadly construed). In what follows, I will first consider accounts of the first sort – offering some reason to be suspicious of them along the way. Then I will turn to accounts of second variety. In doing so, I will first consider accounts of Rational which attribute to desires a special *content* that accounts for their rational significance. Against such views, I argue that in order to capture the rational significance of desire, we need to consider both its content and its *force* - on analogy to the rational significance of both the force and content of beliefs and perceptual experiences. This will open up a new and more elegant way of explaining Rational, while also allowing us to understand how our desires provide us with a basic form of normative experience. Thus, in the end, this will provide the basis for a novel defense of the ancient thesis that desire, in some sense, presents its object under the “guise of the good”.

³ Compare Dennis Stampe’s classic “The Authority of Desire.” *Philosophical Review* 96 (1987): 335-81.

1. Understanding Rational: Which Desires Have Rational Significance?

Before I go on to consider these alternatives, I need to say something about the sort of “desires” I am interested in here – for this term is used in a variety of ways in the contemporary literature. For example, “desire” is sometimes used to refer to any “pro-attitude” that disposes us to act in a certain way under certain circumstances. Thought of in this way, the class of desires is extremely broad, including both conscious and unconscious mental states – and among conscious states, not just felt desires in the ordinary sense, but also standing intentions, habits, and (arguably) normative beliefs.⁴ For some purposes, it may be useful to group all of these different mental states together under the heading of “desire”, but when considering the rational significance of desire, doing so obscures important differences between the states within this broad class. In particular, while it is intuitive that some of these states can rationalize intention and action in the manner just described, it is not at all obvious that this is true of all such states. Thus, we should not necessarily understand Rational’s reference to “desires” to refer to all of the states in this category.

By the end of this essay, I will have given a positive characterization of the states that are capable of playing the rationalizing role I have just begun to describe. But for the time being, I will remain as open-minded as possible about exactly which

⁴ Compare Timothy Schroeder’s discussion of motivational theories of desire in *Three Faces of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) – although I don’t agree with Schroeder’s ultimate conclusions about these issues.

desire-like states are capable of playing this role. Nonetheless the states that most clearly seem to do so share the following characteristics:

1. They are “desires” in the broad sense just noted.
2. Unlike some of these “desires”, they are potentially conscious states.

Thus, they are states that can, in principle, be felt by the individual that has them.⁵

3. Unlike some of these “desires” - such as intentions - they are “passive” in a vague but intuitive sense. Much like perceptual experiences, they “come upon us” in the manner that is characteristic of passions in the traditional sense. Similarly, we are not committed to them in the same way we are to our intentions or actions.⁶

Again, a positive characterization of these states will only be possible later on. For the moment, I simply want to clarify what it is that I am interested in explaining.

⁵ Often this will mean that they have an *affective* component. But I want to remain agnostic about whether this is always the case. Perhaps some creatures (human or not) can have “purely intellectual” desires that play the role I am interested in, without possessing an affective element? Such views are not uncommon in the history of philosophy, and should only be dismissed after careful consideration. That having been said, my account fits nicely with accounts of felt desire that make affective states a necessary component of *human* desire. For an account of desire that gives affect a central role, see the forthcoming work of Peter Railton on these issues - much of which can be regarded as a way of fleshing out the ideas I am exploring in more psychological detail.

⁶ This, of course, is not to say that our intentions or choices lack rational significance - only that their rational significance is different from our more passive desires.

2. Explaining Rational: Objective Oughts

With this in mind, let's turn to how Rational is best explained. One natural way to do so is to appeal to the idea that what we objectively ought to do often depends upon what we desire.

Once again, there is some danger of terminological confusion here. For phrases like "A objectively ought to X" are used in a variety of ways. When I refer to what someone objectively ought to do, I mean to refer to what she ought to do, taking into consideration all of the relevant features of her actual, objective circumstances, whether or not she is aware of these features. So, for example, the fact that there is gasoline in the martini glass across the room from me is relevant to whether I objectively ought to drink it, whether or not I am aware of this fact. And the fact that I morally ought to give more to charity than I do is relevant to whether I objectively ought to do so, whether or not I know that this is the case.⁷

When characterized in this way, facts about what I objectively ought to do must be distinguished from facts about what subjective rationality demands of me. In particular, as I will be using these terms, subjective rationality involves properly responding to one's overall state of mind - while doing what I objectively ought to

⁷ We might refer to considerations that are relevant to what I objectively ought to do as "objective reasons for action". But I will generally avoid this way of speaking - since it brings with it new opportunities for confusion. But compare Mark Schroeder's discussion of some related questions in his "Means-End Coherence, Stringency, and Subjective Reasons," *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2009): 223-248.

do is a matter of responding correctly to one's actual, objective situation, whether or not one is aware of what one's situation involves.⁸

Given this distinction, a very natural way of conceiving of the rational significance of desire is to simply to add what one desires to the list of facts that are relevant to what one objectively ought to do. Or:

Objective: Rational is true because of the role that our desires play in determining what we objectively ought to do.⁹

On this sort of account, facts about what I desire are rationally significant in the same way as the fact that there is gasoline in a glass or the fact that morality demands something of me. They are simply among the features of one's objective situation that determine what one objectively ought to do.

⁸ The broad category of subjective rationality is meant to include within it a number of different forms of rationality including: (i) properly responding to what one knows, and (ii) properly responding to the way things subjectively seem to one, given one's state of mind. I discuss the relationship between these two forms of subjective rationality further below.

⁹ This, I take it, is one of the main historical motivations for the idea, often (wrongly) associated with Hume, that objective reasons for action depend wholly upon what we desire. After all, if the best way to explain Rational is to claim that our desires are a primary source of reasons for action, it can seem a short step to the claim that the same is true of *all* our reasons. For some discussion of Hume's views on this issues see my "Practical Reasons and Practical Reasoning in Hume," *Hume Studies* 34:2 (2008): 189-208 - as well as Rachel Cohon's discussion in *Hume's Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a contemporary defense of the "Humean" view, see Mark Schroeder's *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2.1. First Worry: Intuitions about the Objective Significance of Desire

Accounts of this sort have long been popular. In fact, if any response to our question deserves to be regarded as philosophical orthodoxy, it is this one. But despite their popularity, there is reason to worry about whether Objective in fact provides a plausible basis for explaining the rational significance of desire - at least in all the cases relevant here.

The first such worry relates to whether desires are plausibly regarded as relevant to what we objectively ought to do - or, at least, whether they are plausibly regarded as so relevant in sufficiently broad range of cases to validate Objective. For instance, as T.M. Scanlon and Derek Parfit have recently argued, while it might at first seem that desires often determine what I objectively ought to do, when we reflect on ordinary cases, this ceases to be obvious.¹⁰ For instance, consider your desire to hear the voice of an old friend. It might seem at first that you objectively ought to call your friend in this case (or at least that you have an objective reason to do so) *because* you desire to call him. But the more one considers this case, the more doubtful this seems. Rather, the real sources of what you objectively ought to do in this case seem to be facts which have no necessary connection with what you desire - such as the fact that speaking with your friend would bring you pleasure or the fact that speaking with him would be an appropriate response to your

¹⁰ See Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1999)) and Parfit's *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

friendship.¹¹ Thus, in this case, and countless others, it can easily seem as though one's desires *per se* are ultimately irrelevant to what one objectively ought to do.¹²

Authors like Scanlon and Parfit represent an extreme form of skepticism about the connection between one's desires and what one objectively ought to do. But we need not follow them all the way to a general skepticism about this connection in order to find a source of concern about Objective here. For even if our desires are sometimes relevant to what we objectively ought to do, this is insufficient to explain Rational, wherever it is true. Thus, in order for Objective to hold, it must be the case that whenever a desire matters to the rationality of our actions and intentions *ala* Rational, this is wholly explained by the manner in which this desire matters to what we objectively ought to do. And a much milder degree of skepticism about the ability of desires to determine what we objectively ought to do is sufficient to call this into question.

For instance, consider again my phone-call. It is natural in this case to think that my desire to call my friend plays a decisive role in determining the rationality of my action in the sense of "rational" at work in Rational. For it is easy to flesh out this case so that the following is true of it: if the facts in it were the same - minus only this desire - my action would not have been rational in the manner it was. But even if this desire is relevant to what I objectively ought to do, surely it is only one

¹¹ Of course, one might respond to this point by arguing that these facts are, in turn, partially constituted by what we desire. But this requires one to adopt controversial views about the nature of (say) pleasure and friendship. And even if this is true, the desires in question will only matter insofar as they are partially constitutive of these further facts.

¹² Again, this leaves open the possibility that my desires are relevant to what subjective rationality demands of me via being a potential means of access to my objective reasons for action.

relevant fact among many - including, for instance, facts about what will bring me pleasure and facts about the nature of my friendship. Thus, although desires like this one can loom very large with respect to the rationality of my action in the sense relevant to Rational, they seem to have a much more modest significance with respect to the question of what I objectively ought to do. And so there is a *prima facie* lack of fit between the rational significance of desire *ala* Rational and the role desires play as potential determinants of what I objectively ought to do.¹³

2.2. Second Worry: The Disanalogy with the Case of Perception

A second source for concern about Objective is that it ignores a suggestive analogy between the role of desire in practical reasoning and the role of perception in theoretical reasoning - an analogy that provides us with a promising *Leitfaden* for thinking about the rational significance of desire.

What an analogy do I have in mind? The basis of it lies in the following two facts. First, when we have a perceptual experience as of P, all other things being equal, this causes us to believe P - just as, all other things being equal, a desire to A will cause us to intend to A.¹⁴ Of course, in both cases, further facts may sever this

¹³ A possible response to this worry is to claim that while our desires are the source of the existence of our objective reasons for action, they are not the source of the respective strength of these reasons. (See Schroeder's *Slaves of the Passions* for a version of this strategy.) Whether or not such a view is truly a version of Objective is a delicate issue. But in any case, it doesn't seem to me that such an account manages to fit all of our intuitions about these cases. Still a full comparison of this strategy and the one described below would take us too far afield of this essay's main argument.

¹⁴ Here, and in what follows, I will speak of perceptual experiences as if they have propositional content. But this is merely for the sake of simplicity. Nothing in what follows

connection. For example, if I believe that my senses are being manipulated, then I will not respond to this experience with the corresponding belief. And if I believe that what I desire is not something I ought to pursue, then I will not respond to my desire with the corresponding intention. Thus, in both cases, the causal connection in question is defeasible. But this does not undermine the analogy between these cases, since the possible defeating grounds in both cases are of a broadly parallel sort.¹⁵

Moreover, when we respond to a perceptual experience with the corresponding belief, all other things being equal, the resulting belief is rational, in part, because it is a response to this perceptual experience.¹⁶ Thus, just as our desires are capable of rationalizing our actions or intentions, our perceptual experiences are capable of rationalizing our empirical beliefs. And they seem to play this rationalizing role in much the same way. To put things succinctly, we might say that just as desires play the role of standard inputs into our processes of practical reasoning, perceptual experiences play the role of standard inputs into our processes of theoretical reasoning.

hinges on any claims about what the content of perceptual experiences is – rather, what is crucial is the particular manner in which perceptual experiences present their contents to the subject.

¹⁵ As a matter of fact, the connection between desire and intention is broken more often than the connection between perceptual experience and belief. But this is simply a product of the fact that our desires conflict with each other, and with our normative beliefs, more often than our perceptual experiences conflict with each other and our empirical beliefs. Thus, it does not undermine the structural analogy between these cases.

¹⁶ Of course, some doubt that perceptual experiences have any role in rationalizing belief. There is no space here to argue against this view, but for some useful discussion, see Jim Pryor's "There is Immediate Justification" in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, eds. E. Sosa and M. Steup (Blackwell, 2005).

If taken seriously, this analogy suggests that the correct explanation of the rational significance of desire should have the same general structure as the correct explanation of the rational significance of perceptual experience. And if this is right, then Objective hardly seems promising. For few of us would be attracted to the corresponding approach with respect to the rational significance of perceptual experience.

After all, such an explanation would rest on the following analogue of Objective:

Objective-Perception: Perceptual experiences matter to what one is rational in believing because of the role that our perceptual experiences play in determining what we objectively ought to believe.

To understand this, we need understand what it is that we objectively ought to believe. Following the definition of “objectively ought to” above, this is just what we ought to believe, given all the facts about our objective situation. But, given all the facts, what we ought to believe is just the truth - whatever this is - insofar as this is relevant to the questions we are considering.¹⁷ So if what we objectively ought to believe often depends on the nature of our perceptual experiences, this must be

¹⁷ To be clear, this is not the only sense in which one might talk of what we “objectively ought to believe”. For example, one might use this phrase so that the claim that one objectively ought to believe P is equivalent to the claim that one is in a position to *know* P. But this is not the usage of “objectively ought to believe” that corresponds to the usage of “objectively ought to do” that we made use of above.

because whether our beliefs are true often depends upon these experiences. Thus, Objective-Perception can only be true, if the following is true as well:

Idealism: Perceptual experiences matter to what one is rational in believing because whether one's beliefs are true or false often depends on the nature of one's experiences.

But Idealism is a gross over-reaction to the fact that perceptual experiences are relevant to the rationality of our beliefs. For surely there is no need to follow the idealist in claiming that (say) truths about my immediate surroundings depend upon my perceptual experiences in order to account for the rational significance of these experiences. Rather, the natural explanation of this significance runs through facts about what I would be rational or justified in believing, given my experiences - and not through facts about whether my beliefs are objectively correct or incorrect in the sense of being true or false.¹⁸ Thus, assuming that the explanation of the rational significance of desire parallels that of the rational significance of perceptual experience, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Objective involves a similar, if somewhat milder, over-reaction to the fact that desires have rational significance.

¹⁸ Once again, our perceptual experiences matter in at least two ways to the epistemic status of our beliefs. First, whether or not they are veridical, our experiences matter to whether our beliefs are a rational response to how things subjectively seem to us. And second, when they are veridical and appropriately connected to the facts, our experiences matter to whether or not our beliefs count as instances of knowledge.

3. Explaining Rational: Subjective Rationality

None of these considerations, to be sure, are decisive. But they do provide us with a *prima facie* case against Objective that deserves to be taken seriously - seriously enough to motivate the consideration of other ways of explaining Rational. As I hope to show next, there are less problematic ways of explaining Rational available to us; ones that leave the intuitive parallel between perception and desire intact to a much greater degree than Objective does.

After all, an obvious alternative to Objective is suggested by the analogy with perceptual experience we have just been discussing: namely, that desires are rationally significant, not because they determine what we objectively ought to do, but rather because they matter to subjective rationality in much the manner that our perceptual experiences do.

Now, as I will use the term “subjective rationality”, to say this is to say that what we desire matters - not because it contributes to what we objectively ought to do - but instead because it contributes to the way our state of mind presents the world to us and so helps to determine what the appropriate response to this state of mind is.¹⁹ Thus, on this alternative, the rational significance of desire is a matter - not of the ability of desires to determine what we objectively ought to do - but

¹⁹ Once again, this general heading is meant to include under it both how we should respond to what we know, and how we should respond to the way things subjectively seem to us.

instead of their ability to alter the way our state of mind presents the world to us.²⁰

Or:

Subjective: Rational is true because what we desire matters to what is subjectively rational for us to do.

If we reject Objective, then Subjective seems to offer the most natural way of accounting for the rational significance of desire. But much more than Objective, Subjective is unable to stand on its own. For it is not enough to assert that desires matter to the subjective rationality of our actions in some way. Rather, we need to explain why the impact that desires have on our state of mind should matter to what we are subjectively rational in doing.

3.1. Explaining Subjective: Desires as Perceptions

Dealing with this challenge is not at trivial. For while it does seem obvious why some of my mental states - like my moral beliefs - are relevant to the subjective rationality of my actions; it is much less obvious why my desires should be relevant in this way. After all, a belief that some action would be morally obligatory plainly changes the way the world seems to one - and does so in a manner that is directly

²⁰ Again, my claims about the relevance of perceptual experiences to the subjective rationality of our beliefs are paralleled by claims about the relevance of *veridical* perception to *knowledge*. As I discuss in this essay's last section, a similar parallel exists in the case of desire, but I will focus on the issue of subjective rationality for the most part for the time being.

relevant to which actions are an appropriate response to this state of mind. But it is not obvious whether or how the same is true of a desire to A.

This way of couching this issue, though, immediately suggests a possible response. For if a belief that something is right or wrong, good or bad is relevant to the subjective rationality of our actions, then perhaps our desires are relevant to subjective rationality in the same fashion? That is, perhaps a desire is relevant to subjective rationality because it represents its object as something that *ought to be* in much the same way that the belief that its object is right or good would?

This basic thought might be fleshed out in several different ways. For example, one might simply claim that desires involve full-fledged beliefs about what ought to be.²¹ Unfortunately, this has a number of unattractive consequences. First, it makes it difficult to explain cases in which someone seems to desire something, despite in no way believing that it ought to be. If such cases of perverse desire are possible, then the straightforward identification of desires with beliefs about what ought to be is not promising.²² And, second, this way of accounting for the rational significance of desire faces the challenge of explaining the sense in which we often seem to be passive with respect to what we desire - a form of passivity that does not seem to be shared by many of our normative beliefs.²³

²¹ For examples of this strategy see, *arguably*, Warren Quinn's *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and Scanlon's work on these issues.

²² One might try to deny that such perverse desires are "really" desires at all, but this stretches my understanding of the meaning of the word "desire" to the breaking point.

²³ For an especially nice discussion of this issue, see Tamar Schapiro's "The Nature of Inclination," *Ethics* 96 (2009): 335-81. See also John Deigh's "Cognitivism in the Theory of the Emotions," *Ethics*, 104 (1994): 824-854

For these reasons most philosophers who have taken this line have focused on the idea that desires should be thought of as involving - not full-fledged normative beliefs - but rather perceptions of what ought to be. Or, in other words, they have adopted the following explanatory strategy:

Content of Desire: Subjective is true because when one desires something, one has a perceptual experience, part of the content of which is that the object of the desire ought to be.

Such an account of the nature of desire does open up a way of responding to the questions we are considering. For perceptual experiences of what ought to be are exactly the sorts of mental states that would make a practically significant difference to how things seem to the subject. And unlike beliefs about such matters, experiences of this sort do not raise concerns about perverse or merely passive desire. For we are all familiar with the possibility that our perceptual experiences might conflict with our beliefs - and, on this account, this is all that is involved in a case of perverse desire.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that most philosophers who have been attracted to Subjective have appealed to some version of Content of Desire. For instance, in his seminal "The Authority of Desire", Dennis Stampe writes that, "The authority of desire is the authority of perception. Desire is an origin of rationality because it is a kind of perception."²⁴ And he goes to claim that "what a desire is is a

²⁴ *Ibid*, 362.

perceptual state, a state wherein it seems as if some state of affairs would be good.”²⁵ Similarly, in his recent defense of this line of thought, Graham Oddie writes that, “The desire that P is P's seeming to be good (or P's being experienced as good).”²⁶ And he goes on to make it clear that this involves a commitment to Content of Desire.²⁷

As should by now be obvious, I think these philosophers are close to an important philosophical insight. But nonetheless there is reason to question whether they have managed to capture this insight in its most attractive form - insofar as their views focus on the content of desire, as opposed to the force with which a desire presents its content to the subject.

3.1. First Worry: Explaining Content

Perhaps the most serious problem for any account that accepts Content of Desire is the problem of explaining how and why it is that desires involve perceptions with a normative or evaluative content. This challenge involves two distinct sub-challenges: First, the defender of Content of Desire must explain why desires involve a perceptual element. And, second, granting that desires do involve some sort of perceptual experience, the defender of Content of Desire must explain how

²⁵ *Ibid*, 363.

²⁶ *Value, Reality, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 42.

²⁷ Sergio Tenenbaum's defense of a scholastic account of desire as an “appearance of the good” might also be read to imply a version of Content of Desire. But recent comments of Tenenbaum's indicate that his view is best understood as a version of the view I outline in the next section. For Tenenbaum's view, see his *Appearances of the Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and his reply to Schroeder in *Social Theory and Practice* 34:1 (2008).

this experience comes to have the sort of content that Content of Desire ascribes to it.

The answers to these questions are far from obvious. For surely it is not obvious that desires involve a sort of perceptual experience - and, if they do, it is even less obvious how and why this experience comes to involve normative content. Thus, any full defense of Content of Desire must give a compelling account of these issues.

Unfortunately, the extant versions of this strategy don't do a very satisfying job of responding to these challenges. For example, in arguing for his version of this thesis, Graham Oddie writes:

When I desire P, P has a certain magnetic appeal for me. It presents itself to me as something needing to be pursued, or promoted, or preserved, or embraced. So my desire that P certainly involves P's seeming good (seeming to be worth pursuing). It is but a small step from there to identifying the desire that P with the experience of P's seeming .. good.²⁸

This is, I think, a very attractive articulation of the sort of theory we are exploring - one that makes clear that this account does have real intuitive appeal. But while Oddie's claims may provide some *prima facie* support for the claim that desiring that P involves an experience of P as good, they do nothing to explain *how* this is possible. In particular, nothing is said here about how it is that our desires acquire

²⁸ Oddie, 55.

the content Oddie ascribes to them. And, at least to my mind, nothing else he has to say in his otherwise insightful discussion satisfactorily answers this concern.

Below, I'll argue that by focusing on the "force" of desires as opposed to their content we can develop an alternative way of accounting for the intuitions Oddie discusses - one that does not take on this explanatory burden. But for now, I want to simply note that Oddie's discussion of these issues leaves an important part of this work undone.

Similarly, in his classic discussion of these issues, Dennis Stampe attempts to account for the ability of our desires to provide us with perceptions of value by appealing to the fact that our desires are, at least in ideal circumstances, reliable indicators of what is valuable. But it is highly doubtful that a satisfactory account of any form of mental content can be provided solely on the basis of facts about reliable indication. And it is even more doubtful that we can give a satisfying account of what it is to experience something as valuable in the sense that might explain Subjective solely by noting that our desires reliably co-vary with facts about value. For surely simply noting that our desires co-vary with certain external facts about value is insufficient to explain why they should be relevant to subjective rationality in the manner Subjective claims.

3.2. Second Worry: The Disanalogy with Perception Again

My second worry about this style of account is that it fails to do justice to the analogy between perceptual experience and desire we are exploring. This

accusation should be surprising - since it is precisely this analogy that motivates this strategy. But upon closer reflection, it is clear that if we take this analogy seriously, we should not think of the rational significance of desire *ala* Content of Desire.

To see this, we need only consider the proposal about the rational significance of perceptual experience that corresponds to Content of Desire. Content of Desire claims that desires are relevant to the rationality of our actions because they involve experiences of their objects as good - where this is understood as a claim about the content of these experiences. But why does a perceptual experience as of P matter to the rationality of our beliefs? Not simply because it has the content P. Rather, this experience matters to the rationality of beliefs because, in some sense, it presents P to the subject as something that is true. And, if we attempted to account for this feature of perceptual experience on the model of Content of Desire, we would lead to the following:

Content of Perception: Perceptual experiences matter to what one is subjectively rational in believing because when one has a perceptual experience as of P, one has a perceptual experience, part of the content of which is that P is true.

But this is an absurd theory of the rational significance of perceptual experience.

The fact that some proposition is true is by no means a component of the content of

an ordinary perceptual experience.²⁹ Nor is this required in order to explain the ability of such experiences to rationalize belief. Rather, what explains this fact is simply the fact that perceptual experiences presents their contents to the subject in certain manner - namely, with we might call “assertoric force”.

4. Explaining Subjective: The Force and Content of Desire

4.1. The Force and Content of Perceptual Experience

In this way, Content of Perception gives a wildly misleading picture of why it is that perceptual experiences matter to what it is rational to believe. For while it is plausible that this is a product of these experiences’ contribution to what seems true to us in some sense, this does not imply that part of the content of these experiences is that such-and-such is true. Rather, the ability of these experiences to contribute to what seems true to the subject - like the ability of judgments and beliefs to do the same - is a matter, not of their content, but rather of the manner in which they present their content to the subject. Or, in other words, to make somewhat loose use of a familiar piece of Fregean terminology, it is a matter of their force in addition to their content.³⁰

²⁹ After all, surely it is possible for someone who lacks the concept of truth to have a perceptual experience?

³⁰ The force-content distinction, in various forms, runs through almost all of Frege's work in the philosophy of language. See, for example, “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry,” *Mind* 65:259 (1956): 289-311.

If we wished to express this point in Kantian terms, we might say that what is significant here is not merely the content of our perceptual experiences, but also their form. But putting things in this way runs the risk of making a familiar phenomenon obscure. For the relevance of both force and content to epistemic rationality is a familiar point. Consider, for example, the difference between merely imagining that P and perceiving that P. Clearly, only one of these mental states is capable of rationalizing belief that P. And yet, these two states share the same content. Thus, the difference between their rational significance is a product – not of their content alone – but of how they present this content to the subject - or, in other words, of both their content and force, as I am using the term.³¹

To be careful here, it is important to keep separate a number of distinctions that are often run together:

1. The distinction between states that are concerned with what is and states that are concerned with what is to be brought about. The former class of states are often referred to as states with a “cognitive direction of fit” and, at least when characterized in this way, includes not just beliefs and perceptual experiences, but also states such as imagining that P and supposing that P.³²

³¹ For classic articulation of this line of thought see Hume's discussion of the nature of belief in the *Treatise*. For a more recent discussion of these ideas, see David Velleman's “The Aim of Belief” (in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)).

³² For this way of drawing the distinction between states with a “cognitive direction of fit” see David Velleman's “The Guise of the Good” (in *The Possibility of Practical Reason*): “Hypothesizing that p, assuming that p, fantasizing that p, and the like are all attitudes in which p is regarded, not as a representation of what is to be brought about, but rather as a representation of what is.” (110)

2. The distinction between states that present their content to the subject as something that is the case and states that do not. This is a feature that distinguishes both beliefs and perceptual experiences from states like imagining that P and supposing that P - and it is what I mean to refer to when I speak of the “force” that perceptual experiences and beliefs share.

3. The distinction between states, like belief, which commit the subject and states, like perceptual experience, which do not.

4. The distinction between states, like belief, which seem at times to be the product of a mental action (e.g. a judgment) and states, like perceptual experience, which are not.

Although the latter two distinctions are both somewhat obscure, it is natural to think that there is a connection between them. For surely the sense in which my beliefs may be regarded as the product of a mental action is not wholly unrelated to the sense in which they involve commitments. Fortunately, the nature of this connection is not our concern - for these two features are part of what distinguishes beliefs from perceptual experiences. And our interest is in the features that are common to beliefs and perceptual experiences, but not to states like imagining or supposing - namely, the features that are relevant to the second of these four distinctions.

In this regard, it is especially important not to confuse what I will be calling the “force” of a perceptual experience with its cognitive direction of fit in the sense noted above. As Velleman's discussion nicely indicates, a state - like imagining that

P - may have a cognitive direction of fit in this broad sense, without presenting its content to the subject as something that is the case in the manner distinctive of the shared force of perceptual experience and belief. Thus, while both of these distinctions point to important formal features of these states, it is crucial not to confuse them.³³

Of course, what matters here is that we keep these distinctions separate – and not the terminology we use to do so. For example, I can imagine that my use of “force” will seem non-standard to some. In particular, given the above distinctions, we could use this term in at least two ways. First, we might use this term to refer to the features that are common to attitudes like belief and attitudes like perceptual experience - namely, the sense in which these attitudes present their contents in the same way to the subject. But there are other philosophers - including arguably Frege himself - who use “force” to capture both this and the degree to which an attitude generates commitments for the subject. On the first of these uses of “force”, belief and perceptual experience would share the same “force” - while on the second of them, these states would have different “forces” – although these forces would share a common core.

³³ Unfortunately, the phrase “direction of fit” is also used in a variety of different ways in the contemporary literature. So what I am calling “force” may correspond to the “direction of fit” associated with a mental state in some senses of this phrase.

For instance, there is considerable dispute about how to read Elizabeth Anscombe's classic discussion of this notion in *Intention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). To my mind, Anscombe does not always clearly distinguish between “direction of fit” in the first broad sense discussed above and “force” in the sense of interest to me. But nothing would please me more than to be convinced that the notion Anscombe has in mind in her discussion is the same as the notion I am interested in.

Similarly, it is possible to read Michael Smith's discussion of direction of fit in *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) as giving a functionalist characterization of what I am calling “force” – although his discussion appears to me to cover a broader class of states than what I have in mind here.

Fortunately, this issue is purely terminological. Thus, while I will use “force” to refer to what is common to perceptual experience and belief, this is not essential to any of the points to follow. In particular, if one prefers to use “force” in the second way just noted, one may simply read my references to “sameness in force” to mean “sameness in force, minus any differences in the level of commitment that an attitude involves”. What is important for my purposes is that even if we use “force” in this second way, the difference in the force of a belief that P and the force of a perceptual experience as of P is purely a matter of the level of commitment that these states involve. It is this, I claim, that accounts for the sense in which these two states present their contents to the subject in the same way. And it is this that accounts for the ability of perceptual experiences to justify beliefs as they do.

This having been said, I will continue here to speak of perceptual experiences and beliefs as sharing the same force. To put a label on the force that is shared between them, we can say that, like a belief that P, a perceptual experience as of P presents P to the subject with “assertoric force”.³⁴ Because of this shared force, the contribution that a perceptual experience as of P makes to the way things seem to the subject will be of the same fundamental kind as the contribution of a belief that P. And, as a result, perceptual experiences will be perfectly suited to rationalize the corresponding beliefs. Or:

Force of Perception: Perceptual experiences matter to what one is subjectively rational in believing because when one has a perceptual

³⁴ Again, some may want to restrict talk of “assertoric force” to states that generate the sorts of commitments that beliefs and assertions do.

experience as of P, one is in a mental state with the same force and content as a belief that P.³⁵

I take it that Force of Perception represents the standard picture of why it is that perceptual experience is capable of rationalizing belief.³⁶ But the application of these ideas to the perceptual case is only one instance of a more general schema. For the same basic thought will apply to any mental state that shares its force with the belief that P - namely, it will apply to any mental state - other than a belief - that presents P with assertoric force.

Assertoric: All other things being equal, a non-belief mental state that presents P with assertoric force is capable of making the belief that P rational.³⁷

³⁵ Once again, for the sake of simplicity, I am writing as if perceptual experiences have propositional content. But this is not at all essential to the point I am making. For this point concerns the fit between the force of a perceptual experience and the force of a belief, not the fit between their contents.

³⁶ In particular, Force of Perception is compatible with disjunctivist views according to which the rational significance of misleading perceptual experiences is parasitic on the rational significance of veridical ones. After all, it may be that Force of Perception itself is explained by the fact that perceptual experiences make it seem to the subject that he is in a state which (if it obtained) would provide his perceptual beliefs with the sort of warrant that knowledge requires. Thus, accepting Force of Perception does not require us to take a stand on this issue - although it does require us to take a stand on the features of perceptual experiences that make them the sorts of states that are capable of playing this role. For more on these issues, see the last section of this paper.

³⁷ The restriction to mental states other than beliefs is required to avoid a belief that P rationalizing itself. In this way, what is important about perceptual experiences is that provide our belief-forming processes with a source of input that shares the same sort of force as belief, without thereby being an instance of belief.

4.2. The Force and Content of Intention and Desire

If this is right, and we take the analogy between perceptual experience and desire seriously, then we should expect a very different explanation of Rational than that provided by Content of Desire. Rather than supposing that what explains the distinctive rational contribution of desire is the content of felt desire, we should suspect that what is relevant here is something about the manner in which a desire presents this content to the subject - or, in other words, something about its force.

Once again, if we put this point in Kantian terms, we might say that what is relevant here is the form of our desires and intentions as opposed to their content alone. Unfortunately, even more so than in the case of belief, there is no well established label for the force with which desires and intentions presents their object to the subject. But, of course, the terminology we use to mark this feature is more or less beside the point - provided we do not confuse it with other related features of desire. Rather, all that matters here is the following: just as perceptual experiences present their contents to the subject with same basic force as beliefs - desires present their contents to the subject with the same basic force as intentions.

In particular, much as before, it is important not to confuse the force that is common to desires and intentions with the broader notion of a "conative direction of fit" *ala* Velleman. Once again, the class of states with a "conative direction of fit" in this broad sense will include, not just intentions and desires, but also the practical analogues of imagination and supposition - states that do not possess the ability to justify intention in the manner desires do. And it is also important not to confuse

the force that is common to desires and intentions with the features that are distinctive of intention as opposed to desire. For, like beliefs, intentions differ from desires in the sense of interest to me in at least two respects: First, they commit the subject to the intended action in a way that merely desiring this action does not. And second, they are often the result of mental action (e.g. decision) in ways that our desires are not. Once again, it is natural to think that these two features of intention are closely related. But this relation is not what concerns us here. Rather, our concern lies in the commonalities between desire and intention - and, in particular, the sense in which they present their objects to the subject in the same way. Just as was true in the case of perceptual experience, it is this commonality that I will refer to as their “shared force”. And it is this feature of them that, I claim, explains the rational significance of our desires for our intentions and actions.³⁸

For lack of a better term, I’ll refer the force that is common to desires and intentions as “imperative force”.³⁹ Now remember that the standard account of the rational significance of perceptual experience implied that any (non-belief) mental state that presents P with the assertoric force is capable, all other things being equal, of rationalizing belief that P. Thus, it appears that, in order for a mental state to rationalize belief, there must be a fit between two aspects of that mental state and

³⁸ Just as in the case of belief, the issue of how to use “force” arises in the case of intention. And here we face a terminological choice that is exactly analogous to the one we discussed above in the case of belief. Once again, I have no objection to alternative uses of this terminology, provided it is clear what one means by them.

³⁹ Of course, this terminology is not meant to prejudice questions about the nature of imperatives.

The notion of the imperative force I am interested in also has similarities to the notion of the “thing to do” that Allan Gibbard discusses in *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

the belief being made rational: namely, their content and their force.⁴⁰ But there is no reason to think that this principle of fit is limited to mental states with assertoric force. After all, a mental state that presents its content to the subject with same force as an intention will make a contribution to that subject's experience that is of the same general kind as the corresponding intention. And so, any such mental state – provided that it is not itself an intention - should be capable, all other things being equal, of rationalizing the corresponding intention in the same general way that perceptual experiences rationalize beliefs. Or:

Imperative: All other things being equal, a mental state (other than intention) that presents an action A with imperatival force is capable of making the intention to A rational.

Imperative is simply the result of carefully applying the mode of explanation familiar from the perceptual case to the case of desire. And it presents a very attractive picture of which sorts of mental states are capable of rationalizing intention. After all, just as in the case of belief, if a mental state S presents P to the subject in the same manner that the intention to A would, then surely S should be capable of making that intention subjectively rational? For just as the belief that P is simply an endorsement of the way the perceptual experience as of P makes things

⁴⁰ Once again, if the content of perceptual experiences is non-propositional, the story about the fit between their content and the contents of the beliefs they justify will be more complicated than the comments here suggest.

seem to the subject - the intention to A is simply be an endorsement of the way that such a mental state already presents A to the subject.

If this is right, then in order to explain the relevance of desires to subjective rationality, we need not say anything about the content of these desires. And, in particular, we need not claim that a desire to A involves an experience, part of the content of which is that A is good or valuable. Nor need we take any stance on the problematic issue of when and how our desires matter to what we objectively ought to do. Rather, in order to account for the rationalizing role of desires, we need only to appeal to a very plausible claim about the manner in which our desires present their contents:

Force of Desire: Subjective is true because when one desires to A, one is in a mental state that has the same force and content as an intention to A.⁴¹

4.3. The Force of Desire and What Seems Like It Ought to Be

If Force of Desire is correct, then in order to explain the rational significance of desire, we need not claim that desiring to A involves literally perceiving A as something that ought to be done. But does this mean that we should entirely reject the idea desires present their objects as things that ought to be done? Not at all. For

⁴¹ Again, for simplicity's sake, I have been discussing these issues as if desires and intentions take actions (as opposed to propositions) as their objects, but nothing essential in this explanation will be affected if instead of this we take them to take, say, propositions as their objects.

there is another, more attractive alternative here: we can understand this idea as a way of capturing the particular force of felt desire.⁴²

As above, it is helpful to compare the case of desire/intention with the case of perceptual experience/belief. It is perfectly natural to speak of a belief that P as presenting P to the subject as true in some sense. But, as we noted above, this should not be understood as a characterization of the content of this belief. Rather, when we say that a belief presents its content to the subject as true, we are simply characterizing the (assertoric) force with which it presents this content. Or:

True: Any mental state that presents P with assertoric force presents P as true.

Similarly, when we speak of a desire to A as presenting A as something that ought to be done, this is best understood as a way of characterizing the force that is common to desires and intentions:

⁴² This, I believe, is the best way of interpreting Tenenbaum's discussion of the nature of desire. If so, then there is a good deal of convergence between the conception of desire I have been outlining here and Tenenbaum's scholastic conception of the same. But I hope that my way of approaching these ideas will present them in a light that makes them attractive to philosophers who might find Tenenbaum's conception of desire mysterious. After all, if my account of desire is correct - and if it is in fact the sort of account of desire that Tenenbaum wishes to defend - then the scholastic conception of desire follows quickly from some very modest claims about the force with which desires present their objects. Similarly, Tamar Schapiro's excellent "The Nature of Inclination" suggests a similar view, although she does not make the distinction between force and content I am relying on here, and I doubt she would agree with all of what I say about this matter.

Ought: Any mental state that presents A with imperatival force to me presents A to me as something that I ought to do.⁴³

If this is right, then far from having to give up on the idea of desires as presenting their objects as things that ought to be, we can use our account to explain the sense in which they do exactly this.⁴⁴ And we can do so in a manner that does not require us to take on the task of explaining how the content of a desire might involve normative elements.

This having been said, it is important to stress that my explanation of the rational force of desire does not depend on describing a desire's force in terms of what ought to be. Rather, the explanation provided above depends only upon the existence of a match between the content and force of a desire and the content and force of the corresponding intention. How we characterize the shared force in question is incidental to this stage of the explanation. Rather, a principle like Ought only becomes important when we move from explaining Rational to considering whether our desires might be significant to the rationality - not just of actions or intentions - but also of normative beliefs. For if Ought is correct, it becomes

⁴³ Note that the distinctively first-personal character of practical reasoning requires that this principle be phrased in first-personal terms.

⁴⁴ In addition, to connect up our discussion with Anscombe again, we might make this point by saying that any representation of A of this sort represents A'ing as desirable in something like Anscombe's sense. Of course, not all such states will represent A'ing as desirable for its own sake - for many states that present A with imperatival force will also involve a consciousness that they are based on other similar states. Moreover, even when we have a basic or underived desire to A, we should not assume that this state represents A'ing as desirable for its own sake. Rather, a state of this sort will often simply be neutral on the question of whether there is some further explanation of A's desirability. In other words, just because a state represents A'ing as desirable, and does not represent this as the product of some more basic desirability characterization, that representation in no way rules out the possibility that some such characterization may in fact exist.

plausible that our desires are also capable of justifying beliefs about what we ought to do. After all, if one of the ways to present A as something that I ought to do is just to present A with imperatival force, then the belief that I ought to A will simply represent an explicit endorsement of the way a desire to A presents the world to one. Thus, given Ought, desires would be perfectly suited to rationalize normative beliefs of this sort, as well as intentions and actions.⁴⁵

In this way, if Ought is correct, our desires provide us with a basic form of normative experience. For, given this, we need not have any normative or evaluative beliefs in order to experience the world as, in Sellars's phrase, "fraught with ought". Rather, in order to experience the world in these terms, we simply need to feel a desire. In this way, prior to moral or normative reflection, simply in feeling desire, the world is already presented to us in normatively laden terms.

⁴⁵ In "The Guise of the Good", David Velleman argues that it is a mistake to think that anything about the attitude towards P one has when one desires P involves presenting P as something that ought to be done. In arguing for this point, Velleman shows, quite convincingly, that the mere fact that desiring P involves having an attitude towards P with a conative direction of fit is insufficient to make it the case that this desire presents P as something that ought to be done. But this point does nothing to cast suspicion on Ought. For Ought only applies to mental states that share, not only their direction of fit in Velleman's sense, but also their force, with intentions. And just as it is very plausible that any state that presents P with assertoric force presents P as true, it is also plausible that any state that presents P with imperatival force presents P as something that ought to be done. Similarly, the possibility of "perverse" desires that are contrary to one's beliefs about the good does not count against Ought once this is interpreted in the manner outlined above. For while believing P while also believing P to be false *may* be impossible, there is surely nothing unusual about having a perceptual experience as of P while believing P to be false. And yet perceptual experiences present their contents as true in the sense that is relevant here. Thus, there cannot be any general incompatibility between a mental state presenting X as Y in this sense and the presence of a belief in the subject that X is not Y.

4.4. Two Forms of Defect in Desire and the Metaphysics of Perception

This having been said, I am sure that the preceding discussion will seem to many to ignore a crucial disanalogy between perception and desire. To see why, let's begin with the observation that perceptual experiences are capable of at least two distinctive forms of defect. First, a perceptual experience is defective insofar as it is non-veridical. But even when this is not the case, a perceptual experience is defective when it is not caused by the objects that it concerns. Or, alternatively, a veridical perceptual experience is defective when it is not caused by the things that make it true. And while all perceptual experiences appear to have some rational significance, when a perceptual experience manifests either of these defects, it can no longer ground perceptual knowledge in the manner genuine perception can. Thus, whenever a perceptual experience is defective in either of these ways, it loses an important aspect of its general ability to ground belief - even if it retains the weaker sort of rational significance that is due to its force and content alone.

In the context of the analogy between perception and desire being developed here, it is natural to wonder whether there are also two basic ways in which our desires can be defective. Given what been said above, it is easy to identify the first of these forms of defect. After all, if a desire presents its object as something that I ought to do, then any case in which our desires latch onto an object, which is not something that I ought to do, is a case in which there is a lack of fit between the objects that our desires present in this manner and the things that actually have this status.

In a straightforward sense, this form of defect is closely analogous to the sort of defect that is involved in non-veridical perceptual experience. In saying this, it is important to stress that acknowledging this form of defect in desire only commits us to the existence of facts about what ought to be done in the most minimal sense of “fact”. For all that is required in order to maintain the contrast between desires that do and do not mislead us about what ought to be done is the first-order belief that there are things that ought to be done. Thus, in order to maintain the analogy between perception and desire on this point, we need only accept the existence of facts about what ought to be done in a sense of “fact” that is common to almost every non-error-theoretic view of the normative.

Things are more complicated when we consider the second form of perceptual defect just noted. Here the idea was that a veridical perceptual experience is defective insofar as it is not caused by the things that make it true. The analogous idea in the case of desire would be that a non-defective desire must be caused by whatever it is that make it the case that its object ought to be done. Or, in other words, it must be caused by the considerations or reasons that support the “ought-to-be-doneness” of its object.

But if we accept this idea then we must accept the following disjunction: Either some of our desires are caused by the relevant considerations/reasons or all our desires are defective in this second way. And acceptance of this disjunction leaves us with a potentially uncomfortable choice between a metaphysical picture according to which practical reasons can be causally efficacious and the idea that

our desires are systematically defective in much the same way that our experiences in a complex computer simulation would be.

This choice will seem particularly unattractive to those who believe that we have already discovered that the first of these disjuncts is false. To my mind, this view plainly represents an overly pessimistic view of the prospects for making room for causally efficacious reasons within a broadly naturalistic worldview. But this is not the question facing us here. Rather, what we need to consider is whether we should extend the analogy between perception and desire by accepting a disjunction of this sort.

To explore this question, consider how we would react to the discovery that our desires are not caused by the relevant reasons for action. Here we should distinguish two forms this discovery might take. First, we might discover that our desires are caused by factors that are not even well correlated with the facts about what ought to be done. In this case, we would have also discovered that our desires are defective in the first sense noted above - for we would have discovered that they are simply misleading with respect to what ought to be done. Thus, this sort of discovery would plainly reveal an obvious sense in which our desires are defective. And, much as would be true in the perceptual case, given this discovery, we would plainly cease to regard our desires as relevant to the question of what we ought to do.

But the real case of interest is one in which we discover that our desires manifest the second of these alleged forms of defect without manifesting the first. In this case, we would have discovered that our desires are generally a reliable guide

to what we ought to do, even though they are not caused by the consideration that explain why we ought to do what we ought to. This, on the analogy being developed here, would be akin to the discovery that we are subject to a systematically reliable set of hallucinations - i.e. to the discovery that our perceptual experiences, while reliable, are not caused in the normal fashion by their objects. The question facing us is whether the analogy between perception and desire continues to hold in cases of this sort. In other words, would we react to these parallel discoveries in the same manner, as this analogy suggests we should?

What would the proper reaction be to such a discovery in the perceptual case? I think it is relatively plain that we would take this discovery to show that our perceptual experiences are defective in an important respect. In particular, given such a discovery, we would cease to regard our experiences as a possible basis for perceptual knowledge in the manner we previously did. But this does not mean that we would cease to regard them as a potential source of knowledge of some sort. Rather, it is more accurate to say that our understanding of the manner in which they could ground knowledge would be transformed by this discovery. Whereas we had previously regarded them as having the sort of epistemic significance that genuine perceptions do, we would now regard them as just another reliable source of information about the world. In this way, the discovery that our perceptual experiences are reliable hallucinations would rob them of whatever special epistemic significance they had as perceptions, relegating them to the status of just another source of data that we know to be reliable.

It seems to me that the significance of a parallel discovery about our desires would be very similar. In particular, while such a discovery would not rob our desires of their significance as potential sources of practical justification, it would transform this significance. For while we would continue to regard our desires as a reliable guide to what ought to be done, our reliance on these desires would no longer be direct or unmediated in the manner that was true prior to our discovery. Rather, given this discovery, our reliance on them would be the product of our belief that they are a reliable guide to what ought to be done. In this way, this discovery would rob us of the ability to base our intentions and actions directly on our desires in much the same way that the parallel discovery would rob us of our ability to directly base our beliefs on perceptual experiences in the manner a naive perceiver can.

Thus, I am inclined to think that the analogy between perception and desire that I have been developing here extends to this further level as well. Just as there is a distinctive form of perceptual defect that is present whenever our perceptual experiences are caused by something other than their objects, there is also a distinctive form of defect in desire that is present whenever our desires are caused by something other than the relevant considerations/reasons.

An important question, which there is no space to discuss here, is whether this extension of the analogy between perception and desire has any consequences for our understanding of the metaphysics of desire. The short answer to this question is that this depends very much on one's understanding of the correct metaphysics in the perceptual case. If one takes the facts about perception noted

above to mandate a particular metaphysics of perception, then there will naturally be pressure to adopt a corresponding metaphysics in the case of desire. But nothing that I have said here rules in or out any particular view of the metaphysics of perception. Rather, it only supports the extension of one's preferred metaphysics from the perceptual case to the case of desire. The precise significance of this extension is a matter for further argument.