

normative relevance by being conditions on the applicability or stringency of reasons"? I think so, although, of course, other explanations may also be possible.

Raz's main example is the following: "For someone intent on running a marathon every day during August, running a marathon today, the 20th of August, is crucial to the realization of his ambition. For me it is just an opportunity to know what running a marathon feels like—a matter of much less moment." So described, the example may be complicated by factors independent of our different goals. If I have not run a marathon on each of the first nineteen days of August, then, whatever my goals are, my running a marathon today does not bring me any closer to achieving the end of running a marathon every day in August. If the August marathoner has run a marathon on each of the first nineteen days of August and remembers what running them felt like, then, whatever his goals, his running a marathon today does not bring him any closer to achieving the end, long since achieved, of acquiring knowledge of what running a marathon feels like. So, to split hairs, suppose that the date is August 1, neither of us knows what running a marathon feels like, and yet each of us is capable, and equally capable, of running a marathon every day during August. Why does the August marathoner have stronger reason to run a marathon today than I have?

To begin with, one imagines that the August marathoner cares about this goal, and has been preparing it for some time. If so, then the attitude-constituted value that we have been discussing will be in play. But even if we set this aside, the effectiveness explanation seems to account for the difference. Given that I have no plans to run a marathon every day in August, there's no chance that I will run a marathon every other day in August, even if I run one today. And if I will not run a marathon every other day in August, then running one today does not make it more likely that I run one every day in August. By contrast, given that the August marathoner does have plans to run a marathon every day in August, there is a chance that he will run a marathon every other day in August, if he runs one today. And if he will, then running a marathon today does make it more likely that he will run one every day in August. Because my running one today is not a means to my running one every day in August, whereas his running one today is a means to it, I lack the reasons that flow from realizing that value, whereas he has them. (My running one today is still a means to something of value, namely knowing what running a marathon feels like. But then so too is his running one today.)

68. For a recent revival of this challenge, see Chang, "Are Desires Reasons for Action?"

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Scanlon on Desire and the Explanation of Action

Michael Smith

IN THE FIRST chapter of *What We Owe To Each Other*, T. M. Scanlon tells us that he has "become convinced that insofar as 'having a desire' is understood as a state that is distinct from 'seeing something as a reason,' it plays almost no role in the justification and explanation of action."¹ Because desire, understood more traditionally as a behavioral disposition, is such a state—an agent can see something as a reason without having any behavioral disposition, and he can have a behavioral disposition without seeing something as a reason—Scanlon commits himself to the conclusion that desire, understood in this more traditional way, "plays almost no role" in the explanation of action. My aim in what follows is to assess his reasons for thinking this is so.

Since the standard story of action, defended by Hume and developed by the likes of Hempel and Davidson, tells us that desire, understood as a behavioral disposition, is part of the explanation of every action, I begin by outlining this standard story (§1).² I then consider and evaluate what I take to be Scanlon's official reasons for thinking that at least this part of the standard story is wrong (§2, §3). In the process of doing so, I say a little about what he has to say concerning the justificatory role of desire. I close by discussing some more positive claims Scanlon makes about a subclass of desires that he calls desires in the "directed-attention sense" (§4).³ If what he has to say about desires in the directed-attention sense is correct, then that may seem to give some additional support to the conclusion that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, have little role to play in the explanation of action. However I argue that what Scanlon has to say about desires in the directed-attention sense gives no support to that conclusion.

1. DESIRES, BEHAVIORAL DISPOSITIONS, AND THE EXPLANATION OF ACTION⁴

Suppose someone makes something happen. What makes it the case that, in making that thing happen, he acts, as opposed to merely being involved in something's happening? Equivalently, when someone makes something happen, what makes it the case that he is an agent, as opposed to being a mere patient?

The standard story of action tells us that the answer lies in the causal etiology of what happens. If the agent acts then, according to the standard story, we can trace what happens back to some bodily movement that the putative agent knows how to make happen, where his knowledge how to make that bodily movement happen is not itself explained by his knowledge how to do something else. In Arthur Danto's terms, his moving his body in the relevant way has to be a "basic action" for him, something that he can just do.⁵ If these conditions are met, then we can establish whether the agent acts by seeing whether his bodily movement is caused and rationalized in the right kind of way by some desire he has that things be a certain way, and some means-end belief he has that some basic action of his, namely, his moving his body in the way we have identified, has a suitable chance of making things the way he desires them to be. If these further conditions are met then, when the agent makes the relevant thing happen, he acts; if not, he does not.

Suppose, for example, that John flicks a switch. Is his flicking the switch an action? According to the standard story, we answer this question by first of all tracing back from the imagined action's effects, the switch's flicking, to one of John's bodily movements. If John flicked the switch then he has to have done something that caused the switch to flick, and what he has to have done is to move his body in some relevant way. Let's suppose that we trace back to a movement of his finger. If John's flicking the switch is an action then this bodily movement has to be one that John knows how to make happen, and his knowledge how to make it happen must not be explained by his knowledge how to do something else. Moving his finger in the relevant way must be something that he could just do: a basic action. If it is not—if (say) the bodily movement is a ghastly contortion caused by a bomb blast that catapults John onto the switch—then we can conclude straightaway that his flicking the switch is not an action, but is rather a mere happening in which he is involved, albeit not as an agent.

Now suppose that John's making his finger move in the relevant way is something that he can just do. He moves his finger against the switch in the ordinary way in which we all move our fingers. In that case, the standard story tells us that whether or not John acts, when he flicks the switch, depends on the causal antecedents of that movement of his finger. Is that movement caused and rationalized by a desire John has that things be a certain way and a belief he has that his moving his finger in that way has some suitable chance of making things the way he desires them to be? Does he (say) desire to relieve an itch and believe that he can do so by moving his finger against the switch? Or does he desire to illuminate the room and believe that he can do this by moving his finger against the switch? If so, do his desire and belief cause his finger movement in the right way? If some such questions as these get an affirmative answer,

then John's flicking the switch was an act; if not, then we have to conclude that John was involved in a mere happening in which he was not an agent.

Note that if we accept this standard story of action, then it follows immediately that not just desire, but means-end belief as well, is part of the explanation of every action. Whenever an agent acts he moves his body in some way, where that bodily movement has its causal origins in a desire-and-means-end-belief pair. But of course this prompts an obvious question. What is it about desire and belief that enable them to play this explanatory role? The answer to this question, according to the standard story, lies in the dispositional natures of these states.⁶ As Robert Stalnaker puts it:

Belief and desire . . . are correlative dispositional states of a potentially rational agent. To desire that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that P in a world in which one's beliefs, whatever they are, were true. To believe that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to satisfy one's desires, whatever they are, in a world in which P (together with one's other beliefs) were true.⁷

An agent who acts is thus one in whom these two behavioral dispositions interact in a manner that makes it appropriate to describe him as having exercised his capacity to be instrumentally rational.⁸ In the standard story, this is what's captured by the idea that desire and belief cause action *in the right way*.⁹

Given that belief and desire have these dispositional natures, the fact that there is a distinctive kind of behavior whose causal source lies in these very dispositions, a kind of behavior that constitutes a basic manifestation of agential control, becomes completely unmythical. Agents who have these dispositions, and who act as a result, exercise their capacity to be instrumentally rational. Their behavior is differentially sensitive to what they desire and believe: they would have behaved ever so slightly differently if they had had ever so slightly different desires and beliefs from those they in fact have.¹⁰ Though much more sophisticated kinds of control are of course possible—for all that we have said, the means-end beliefs that are manifested in such behavior could be the result of brainwashing, and the desires could be utterly compulsive—it seems that these more sophisticated kinds of control would have to be built upon a foundation of agential control of this more basic kind. Every action must be the product of an exercise the agent's capacity to be instrumentally rational. The standard story of action, when belief and desire are understood in these dispositional terms, thus looks to be all but analytic.

Having said this, it is important not to suppose that what has been said is more ambitious than it really is. Means-end beliefs are more complex psychological states than mere dispositions to behave in certain ways, given our desires. Beliefs are acquired and sustained by our appreciation of evidence that bears on their truth, and they in turn provide an evidential basis for other beliefs that we either already have or go on to acquire. The inferential role of beliefs in sustaining and generating other beliefs is thus also a part of that state's dispositional nature. When we said that beliefs are dispositions to behave in certain ways, given our desires, what we said was thus

only a part of the story, albeit the only part of the story that is absolutely crucial for belief to play the role it plays in controlling behavior in the basic way we have just described. If there were some psychological state distinct from belief that shared this aspect of belief's dispositional nature, but which lacked its inferential role—imagining or fantasizing, perhaps—then it follows that imagining or fantasizing could also manifest itself in behavior, and there would therefore be a sense in which, when that happens, the person who engages in such imagining or fantasizing would be in control of what he thereby does. It is, I think, a great virtue of the standard story of action that it can so easily explain what the deep metaphysical similarities are between this kind of behavior, and cases of what it says constitute actions. The question “Should we call this sort of behavior ‘action’ too?” would seem to require something more akin to semantic decision than metaphysical reflection.

Likewise, desires are much more complex psychological states than mere dispositions to behave in certain ways, given our means-end beliefs. For one thing, notwithstanding Stalnaker's apparent suggestion to the contrary, certain desires do not have any obvious connection with behavioral dispositions. Desires that things be a certain way, where their being that way could not be the result of any intervention on our behalf, are like this. We simply have an affective orientation towards things being that way: we would experience a positive affect, were things thus—in short, we would like it.¹¹ For another, even when we restrict ourselves to desires that are plausibly constituted by behavioral dispositions, there seems to be more to such desires than just having those behavioral dispositions. People who are disposed to make things a certain way also generally like it when things are that way. Desires that manifest themselves in action thus ordinarily have an indirect connection to affect as well. Since there is a conceptual distinction between our being such that we would experience a positive affect if things were a certain way and our being such as to make them that way, we might well therefore ask whether desire, as we ordinarily understand it, is a complex state having these two dispositions as components, or whether there are two kinds of desire corresponding to motive and affect (“wanting” and “liking,” perhaps?¹²), kinds that bear a certain sort of relation to each other. But however we answer this question, what's crucial is that it is the fact that desire either is, or is *inter alia*, a behavioral disposition that is absolutely crucial for us to understand how desire can play the role it plays in the explanation of action. If we decide that desire is the name for the complex state, then whether or not we should give the name “action” to behavior that manifests dispositions to behave unaccompanied by a disposition to have some positive affect seems, once again, to be more a matter of semantic decision than metaphysical reflection. As before, it is a great virtue of the standard story of action that it can so easily explain the metaphysical similarities between this kind of behavior and cases of what we would more ordinarily call “action.”¹³

The fact that to act at all, an agent's behavior has to be the causal upshot of desire and belief, where these are behavioral dispositions that may themselves be susceptible of further explanation, helps us understand how agents may come to exercise more sophisticated kinds of rational control over their behavior. For example, since rationality is on the side of an agent's believing what is supported by his evidence, when an

agent does what he does because of some belief he has, where this is understood as a behavioral disposition, but that disposition is (or is not) in turn the product of an exercise of his capacity to be so disposed in the light of the evidence available to him, we can cite his rationality (or his lack thereof) in explaining his action, and we can see him as manifesting (or failing to manifest) a corresponding kind of control. His actions may reveal his differential sensitivity (or his lack thereof) to the evidence available to him. Likewise, because rationality would seem to be on the side of an agent's being disposed to make things ways he would like them to be, when an agent does what he does because of some desire he has, where this is understood as a behavioral disposition, but that disposition is (or is not) in turn the product of his capacity to be so disposed in the light of how he would like things to be, we can similarly cite his rationality (or his lack thereof) in explaining his action, and we can see him as manifesting (or failing to manifest) a corresponding kind of control. His actions may reveal his differential sensitivity (or his lack thereof) to his likes and dislikes.¹⁴ These are just a few examples; more could easily be given.

To sum up, we have seen that the special role played by desire in the explanation of action, and means-end belief too, is underwritten by these states' natures as complementary behavioral dispositions together with a conception of action as a basic manifestation of agential control: the differential sensitivity of what an agent does to what he desires and believes. The upshot is that if Scanlon is going to succeed in calling desire's claim to play this special explanatory role into question, then he will need to provide us with some reason to question either the conception of desire as a behavioral disposition, or the conception of action as a basic manifestation of agential control. Let us therefore turn to consider and assess the reasons he provides.

2. SCANLON'S OBJECTION

The first, and most important, move Scanlon makes in arguing against the claim that desire, understood as a behavioral disposition, has a crucial role to play in the explanation of action lies in his classification of desire as a “judgment-sensitive attitude.”¹⁵ Let's therefore begin by examining what judgment-sensitive attitudes are and the role that the idea of such attitudes plays in his argument.

According to Scanlon, judgment-sensitive attitudes are those “... that an ideally rational person would come to have whenever that person judged there to be sufficient reasons for them, and that would, in an ideally rational person, ‘extinguish’ when that person judged them not to be supported by reasons of the appropriate kind.”¹⁶ The reasons to which judgment-sensitive attitudes are supposed to be sensitive are what he calls reasons in the “standard normative sense,” the paradigmatic examples of which are considerations that support the truth of our beliefs.¹⁷ In Scanlon's view, desire is thus an attitude for which reasons, much like reasons for belief, can be given, and it is also an attitude that is responsive to beliefs about the reasons that there are to have it. Moreover, as he sees things, intention, hope, fear, admiration, respect, contempt, and indignation are also such attitudes.¹⁸

The identification of the members of the class of judgment-sensitive attitudes is in turn important, according to Scanlon, because these attitudes "constitute the class of things for which reasons in the standard normative sense can be asked or offered."¹⁹ As he notes, this commits him to the view that reasons for action, which are also reasons in the standard normative sense, reduce to reasons for some judgment-sensitive attitude or other. His preferred candidate is intention:

"[R]eason for action" is not to be contrasted with "reason for intending." The connection to action, which is essential to intentions, determines the kinds of reasons that are appropriate for them, but it is the connection with judgment-sensitive attitudes that makes events actions, and hence the kind of things for which reasons can sensibly be asked for and offered at all.²⁰

Here, then, Scanlon provides us with his own preferred account of what makes an event an action: an event is an action in virtue of its connection with judgment-sensitive attitudes, specifically, with intentions.

It might be thought that we are already in a position to see why Scanlon rejects the view that desire, understood as a behavioral disposition, has a crucial role to play in the explanation of action. For, it might be suggested, Scanlon evidently thinks that that role is reserved for intentions, where intentions differ in some important way from desires. But although there are theorists who think that intentions differ in an important way from desires—Michael Bratman and Richard Holton are notable examples²¹—even they think that intentions share a crucial feature with desires, at least as desires are understood in the standard story, as in their view intentions are also behavioral dispositions. To the extent that Scanlon thinks that the state plays a crucial role in the explanation of most action is taking something to be a reason, where this is a different state from a behavioral disposition, he presumably thinks that this is so even when the behavioral disposition in question is intention: what really does the explaining, even when an agent acts on an intention, is the agent's taking something to be a reason.

In any event, Scanlon himself seems to side with those who think that intentions just are desires, in a suitably broad sense of the term.

"Desire" is sometimes used in a broad sense in which the class of desires is taken to include any "pro-attitude" that an agent may have toward any action or outcome, whatever the content or basis of this attitude may be. Desires in this sense include such things as a sense of duty, loyalty, or pride, as well as an interest in pleasure or enjoyment. It is uncontroversial that desires in this broad sense are capable of moving us to act, and it is plausible to claim that they are the only things capable of this, since anything that moves us (at least to intentional action) is likely to count as such a desire.²²

Putting these two passages together, Scanlon seems to be saying that events are actions in virtue of their connection with judgment-sensitive attitudes, specifically with

intentions, and he also seems to be saying that the only states capable of moving us to act at all are desires, in a suitably broad sense of the term "desire," from which I take it to follow that Scanlon would be happy to admit that intentions are a certain kind of desire. In what follows I will therefore just assume that his skepticism about the claim that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, have a special role to play in the explanation of action is not grounded in his conviction that that role is reserved for intentions.

So why does Scanlon reject the claim that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, have a special role to play in the explanation of action? What is the relevance of the fact that desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes? As I understand it, the answer comes in the very next passage.

[M]any elements of this class [that is, the class of desires in a suitably broad sense, whose members are judgment-sensitive attitudes] are what Nagel calls "motivated desires"; that is to say, they do not seem to be sources of motivation but rather the motivational consequences of something else, such as an agent's recognition of something as a duty, or as supported by a reason of some other kind.

A substantial thesis claiming a special role for desires in moving us to act would have to be based on some narrower class of desires, which can be claimed to serve as independent sources of motivation and perhaps also of reasons. Natural candidates for this role are what Nagel calls "unmotivated desires" (that is to say, desires that are not dependent on some other state for their motivating and reason-giving force).²³

Scanlon's objection to the claim that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, play a crucial role in the explanation of action thus seems to be that, since desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes, it follows that when the desires on which we act are themselves produced by our beliefs about the reasons that there are to have them—that is, when they are *motivated desires*—then they are not themselves the explanation of what we do, but are rather part of what gets explained in our doing what we do by the thing that really does the explaining: namely, our beliefs about our reasons.

A good question to ask at this point is whether the argument we gave earlier for thinking that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, play a crucial role in the explanation of action, required us to take a stand on whether the desires that play that role are motivated or unmotivated. Somewhat surprisingly, the answer is much more difficult to provide than might initially be thought. In order to get these difficulties in focus, let's ask whether Hume should agree that desire is a judgment-sensitive attitude. Or, to put the question somewhat differently, should Hume think that the desires that move us to act are *motivated* or *unmotivated*? The evidence is equivocal.

Consider the following passage from the *Treatise*:

A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other

existence or modification. When I am angry, I am actually possest with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objections, which they represent.²⁴

Here Hume seems to be saying that, because desire is not a state on which evidence bears—that is, because desires are not appropriately “consider'd as copies”—it follows that reason is simply silent on the issue of what to desire. Based on this passage, we might therefore think that Hume should deny that desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes. Desires are not judgment-sensitive attitudes because no sense can be made of the idea that there are reasons for or against having them. The desires on which we act must therefore be unmotivated.

On the other hand, however, just a little bit later on Hume says this:

I may desire any fruit as of an excellent relish; but whenever you convince me of my mistake, my longing ceases. I may will the performance of certain actions as means of obtaining any desir'd good; but as my willing of these actions is only secondary, and founded on the supposition, that they are causes of the propos'd effect; as soon as I discover the falsehood of that supposition, they must become indifferent to me.²⁵

Here Hume seems to be saying that certain desires are sensitive to evidence. Consider my desire to procure fruit of a certain kind. As soon as I get evidence that that fruit is not an excellent relish, I lose my desire for it. Based on this passage, we might therefore conclude that Hume would agree that desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes and that the desires on which we act are therefore motivated.

So should Hume agree that desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes, or should he disagree? Should he think that the desires on which we act are motivated or unmotivated? In order to answer these questions we need to make the all-important distinction between *intrinsic* desires, which are the “original existences” Hume speaks of in the first passage, and *extrinsic* desires, which are the “secondary” willings he talks of in the second passage. Extrinsic desires are *amalgams* of an intrinsic desire and a belief about how the world would need to be for the intrinsic desire to be satisfied. A desire to procure fruit of a certain kind is thus extrinsic, because it is an amalgam of some intrinsic desire—perhaps a desire to have relish with a certain taste—and a belief that having that particular piece of fruit would be a way of getting that sort of relish. Now suppose that I extrinsically desire a particular piece of fruit and then get evidence that the fruit does not have the taste that I intrinsically desire. If I am rational in the way I put my intrinsic desires together with my beliefs about how they might be satisfied, then my extrinsic desire for the piece of fruit will disappear. It will disappear because the belief component of the extrinsic desire will disappear. Extrinsic desires are thus judgment-sensitive attitudes, as Scanlon defines them, because, as amalgams of belief

and desire, they are sensitive to reasons that bear on the truth of their belief component. They therefore count as “motivated desires,” in Nagel's sense, because their motivating force depends on their being sustained by the beliefs that agents have about the reasons they have for believing what they believe about the way the world would need to be for their intrinsic desires to be satisfied.²⁶

We can now see why Hume is committed to the conclusion that the secondary willings he talks about in the second of the two passages quoted above are judgment-sensitive attitudes. They are judgment-sensitive attitudes because secondary willings are *extrinsic* desires. It is, however, perfectly consistent with his being committed to this for him to be also committed to the conclusion that the intrinsic desires that partially comprise these extrinsic desires are not judgment-sensitive attitudes. This is the view of intrinsic desires to which Hume seems to commit himself in the first of the two passages quoted above. There he argues that, because those desires that he calls “original existences”—that is, because *intrinsic* desires—are not themselves beliefs, and because they have no beliefs as a proper part either, it follows that they are not the sort of psychological state that could be sensitive to evidence about the way the world is. Reasons do not bear on them. Hume thus commits himself to the conclusion that intrinsic desires are what Nagel would call “unmotivated” desires. They are unmotivated because their contribution to the motivating force of an extrinsic desire is not itself dependent on the motivating force of any belief.

Let's return to consider Scanlon's objection to the claim that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, have a substantial role to play in the explanation of action. To repeat, Scanlon's objection is that, because desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes, it follows that when the desires on which we act are themselves produced by our beliefs about the reasons that there are to have them—that is, when they are *motivated desires*—it follows that these desires, considered as behavioral dispositions, are not themselves the explanation of what we do, but are rather part of what gets explained when we do what we do by the thing that really does the explaining: namely, our beliefs about our reasons. But if what we have just said is right, this objection is based on a total misunderstanding of the distinct, but complementary, roles played by intrinsic desire and belief in the explanation of action. In order to see that this is so, look at what happens when we map the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic desires onto the standard story.

According to the standard story, remember, desires and beliefs are both behavioral dispositions, and dispositions of both kinds are required for an agent to act. An agent must have the behavioral dispositions constitutive of his desiring that things be a certain way, and he must also have the behavioral dispositions constitutive of his believing that some basic action that he can perform will make things that way, and he must be instrumentally rational and put these two states together. We can restate all of this, but overlaying it with the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic desires, as follows: the agent must both have the behavioral dispositions constitutive of his intrinsically desiring that things be a certain way, and he must have the behavioral dispositions constitutive of his believing that some basic action that he can perform will make things that way, and he must be instrumentally rational and put these two

states together so that he has the complex behavioral dispositions constitutive of his extrinsically desiring to perform the relevant basic action.

When we restate the standard story in this way it turns out to be a mistake to think that we face stark alternatives: either agents act on motivated desires, or they act on unmotivated desires, but they do not act on both. For, according to the restated version of standard story, whenever an agent acts he acts on both a motivated desire (for he acts on the extrinsic desire that is the amalgam of his intrinsic desire and his belief about the basic action whose performance will make the world the way he intrinsically desires it to be) and he also acts on an unmotivated desire (for he acts on the intrinsic desire that is a proper part of that amalgam). It is therefore true that, whenever an agent acts, there is a desire on which he acts that is produced by his beliefs about the reasons that there are to have that desire. The belief component of his extrinsic desire is, after all, produced by whatever the agent takes to be the reasons that there are for believing that the basic action in question will make the world the way he intrinsically desires it to be. But it does not follow from this that his action can be fully explained by his taking those considerations to be reasons. A distinct role still has to be played by the intrinsic desire with which the means-end belief that is supported by the considerations that he takes to be reasons must combine.

Let's recapitulate. Scanlon claims that once we see not just that desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes, but that they are sustained by beliefs about the reasons that there are to have them, we see that desires, where these are understood as behavioral dispositions, play no crucial role in the explanation of action. Instead they are just a part of what gets explained by what really does the explaining when we act, namely, our beliefs about our reasons. As we have just seen, however, this objection fails. For although the extrinsic desires on which we act are both judgment-sensitive attitudes and motivated desires, they are themselves just amalgams of intrinsic desires and means-end beliefs, where these are both conceived of as behavioral dispositions playing distinct but complementary roles, and where, for all that has been said, the intrinsic desires that are components of our extrinsic desires are neither judgment-sensitive attitudes nor motivated desires. To put the point somewhat paradoxically, the fact that we always act on (extrinsic) desires that are both judgment-sensitive attitudes and motivated is perfectly consistent with our always acting on (intrinsic) desires that are neither judgment-sensitive attitudes nor motivated.

3. A REVAMPED VERSION OF SCANLON'S OBJECTION

Might Scanlon rerun his objection wholly in terms of the judgment-sensitivity of *intrinsic* desires, where these are understood to be behavioral dispositions? In other words, might he suggest that the fact that the intrinsic desires on which we act, understood as behavioral dispositions, are themselves produced by our beliefs about the reasons that there are to have them, entails that they too are motivated desires, and hence that they are no part of the explanation of what we do either? Instead, might he suggest, our intrinsic desires, so understood, are just another part of what gets

explained in our doing what we do by the thing that really does the explaining, namely, our beliefs about our reasons for having the intrinsic desires that we have?

Before considering the merits of this revamped version of Scanlon's objection, it is worthwhile pausing for a moment to highlight just where, if this is what Scanlon's objection really amounts to, it turns out that he disagrees with Hume. On this way of interpreting him, Scanlon disagrees with Hume about whether specifically *intrinsic* desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes: that is, states that a rational agent will have or not have depending on what he takes to be the reasons that there are for having them. Hume says that they are not; Scanlon says that they are. However it is important to remember that Hume gave an argument for his view that intrinsic desires are not the sort of psychological state for which there can be reasons. As he sees things, remember, for considerations to constitute reasons for having attitudes with a certain content, those attitudes would have to be appropriately "consider'd as copies." Or, to put the point slightly differently, the considerations in question would have to constitute evidence for the truth of the proposition that expresses the content of those attitudes. The only psychological state for which there can be a reason is therefore either a belief pure and simple, or a complex psychological state, like an extrinsic desire, that has belief as a component. The question Scanlon must answer is where this argument goes wrong.

As I understand it, Scanlon thinks that this argument has a false premise. He thinks that it is not true that all reasons are evidence. Scanlon tells us, for example, that "... [a]ny attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. 'Counts in favor how?' one might ask. 'By providing a reason for it' seems to be the only answer."²⁷ In Scanlon's view, the concept of a reason is therefore coeval with the idea of a consideration that counts in favor, and this pair in turn is primitive, permitting no further explication. There are therefore reasons for belief—that is, considerations that count in favor of believing—and, because what these considerations count in favor of is *believing*, these reasons are indeed *evidence*. But there are also considerations that count in favor of intrinsically desiring, where these are reasons in the very same sense of "reason" in which reasons are reasons for belief—both are considerations that *count in favor*—but, because the attitude that these considerations count in favor of is *not believing*, these considerations, which are reasons, are *not evidence*.

Is Hume or Scanlon right about the nature of reasons? In favor of Hume's view, note that we can say more than just that there are considerations that count in favor of believing. We can also say how it is that those considerations count in favor. As I understand it, this is what we try to do when we give substantive theories of confirmation and statistical reasoning. We attempt to say how it is that certain evidence bears upon the degree to which you should believe something.²⁸ A good question to ask is whether we can say anything remotely similar about how the way in which the considerations that count in favor of certain intrinsic desires count in favor of them. If not, then Hume seems to have the better of the argument. To suppose that there are reasons for intrinsically desiring, much like reasons for believing, would be to admit that there is a glaring disanalogy between reasons for believing and reasons for

intrinsically desiring, a disanalogy so glaring as to cast doubt on there being reasons for intrinsically desiring.

Derek Parfit, who also thinks that intrinsic desires are judgment-sensitive attitudes, thinks that we can at least begin to say something completely general about reasons for intrinsically desiring. He thinks that it is the fact that certain things have the intrinsic natures that they do that counts in favor of intrinsically desiring those things.²⁹ For example, if there is a reason for intrinsically desiring enjoyment, then that reason is constituted by the fact that enjoyment has the intrinsic nature that it has. Or if there is a reason to intrinsically desire that we are able to justify our conduct to others, then that reason is constituted by the fact that being able to justify our conduct to others has the intrinsic nature that it has. But plausible though this may seem to be at first blush, it is important to realize that the suggestion does not help all that much. For the question now just becomes whether we can say how it is that the fact that certain things have the intrinsic natures that they do makes that fact about them count in favor of intrinsically desiring things with that intrinsic nature to a certain extent, whereas the fact that other things have the intrinsic natures that they don't similarly count in favor of intrinsically desiring them to that same extent. Absent an answer to this question, the claim that there are reasons to intrinsically desire certain things and not others simply won't be credible.³⁰

This bears on an issue about which I wish to remain officially neutral here: namely, Scanlon's suggestion that in addition to desiring, understood as a behavioral disposition, playing little or no role in the explanation of action, it plays almost no role in the justification of action either. For if Hume turns out to be right, and we can make no sense of there being reasons to intrinsically desire certain things rather than others, then it will turn out that intrinsic desires do indeed play a crucial role in the justification of action. For the only apt question to ask about reasons for action will be whether or not there are reasons for an agent to extrinsically desire to act in certain ways, where all such reasons will be conditional on the presence of some relevant intrinsic desire that the agent has, where this is understood as a behavioral disposition, and where acting in the way in question will satisfy that intrinsic desire. (Or, somewhat more accurately given that rationality seems to be on the side of an agent's being disposed to behave in ways that make things turn out as he would like them to be, all such reasons will be conditional on the presence of some relevant intrinsic desire, where this is understood as a behavioral disposition that in turn squares with the agent's dispositions to like it when things turn out to be certain ways.) This will be the only apt question to ask because all such reasons will be reasons to believe that some basic action will satisfy some such intrinsic desire.³¹

The focus of the discussion thus far has been on the coherence of the idea that there are reasons for intrinsically desiring to act in certain ways. Let us now put such doubts as we might have about the existence of such reasons to one side, and return to consider the revamped version of Scanlon's objection, the version that takes that idea for granted. The revamped version of Scanlon's objection is that when the intrinsic desires on which we act, where these are understood as behavioral dispositions, are themselves produced by our beliefs about the reasons that there are to have them, these

motivated intrinsic desires are not part of the explanation of what we do, but are rather just another part of what gets explained in our doing what we do by the thing that really does the explaining: namely, by our beliefs about the reasons that there are for having the intrinsic desires that we have. How convincing is this objection?

Imagine two variations on the example of John given earlier. John⁺ is maximally reasonable. He only has intrinsic desires for things when he believes that there are reasons for having those intrinsic desires. His unreasonable twin brother John⁻, though he has the same intrinsic desires as John⁺, has intrinsic desires that are not based on his beliefs about reasons. In the terms outlined at the beginning, this means that both John⁺ and John⁻ have the very same dispositions to behave in certain ways. In the possible worlds in which their means-end beliefs are the same, they therefore do exactly the very same things. Now let us suppose that both John⁺ and John⁻ have an intrinsic desire to illuminate the room and a belief that they can do so by flicking the switch—that is to say, they have not just the same intrinsic-desire-dispositions, but also the same means-end-belief-dispositions—and let us suppose further that they both act accordingly. The only difference between them lies in the fact that John⁺'s action is the upshot of a motivated intrinsic desire, whereas John⁻'s is not: in other words, John⁺'s disposition to illuminate the room is the causal upshot of a belief, whereas John⁻'s is not. Does John⁻'s intrinsic desire play a role in the explanation of his action that John⁺'s does not play in his? That seems quite incredible on the face of it.

Of course, what is true is that John⁺ would not have done what he did had he not had the beliefs he has about the reasons that there are for having his intrinsic desire to illuminate the room. But this does not show that John⁺'s intrinsic desire doesn't play the same role in explaining what he does that John⁻'s plays in explaining his, because when we imagine John⁺'s having different beliefs about the reasons that there are for having intrinsic desires, we thereby imagine him having different intrinsic desires as well. That's a consequence of our counterfactualizing under the supposition that John⁺ is maximally reasonable. So how might we determine whether their intrinsic desires do or do not play the same crucial explanatory role?

Note that because John⁺'s intrinsic desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, are distinct psychological states from his beliefs about his reasons, we can ask whether, if John⁺ had had the very intrinsic desires that he has, he would have done exactly what he did, *whether or not* his intrinsic desires had been the product of his beliefs about the reasons that there are for having them. And the answer to this question is clear. He would have done exactly what he did. This is what is shown by the behavior of John⁺'s unreasonable twin brother John⁻. Nor is this surprising. For in each case their behavior simply tracks their behavioral dispositions. What else would we expect? But if John⁺ would have done exactly what he did so long as he had the intrinsic desires that he has, where these are understood as behavioral dispositions, then it would seem to follow that his having the intrinsic desire that he has to illuminate the room, so understood, must play a crucial role in explaining his doing what he in fact did, the very same role that John⁻'s intrinsic desire plays in explaining his doing what he did.

So where does the revamped version of Scanlon's objection go wrong? It goes wrong in illicitly moving from the premise that the *ultimate* explanation of an agent's action, when he acts on an intrinsic desire that is in turn explained by his beliefs about the reasons that there are for having that intrinsic desire, is not the intrinsic desire, but is rather the belief about the reason, to the conclusion that that intrinsic desire plays no role in the explanation of his action. This move is illicit because, as we have just seen, even when the ultimate explanation is the belief about reasons, a crucial role still needs to be played by the agent's intrinsic desire. John's belief about the reasons that there are for intrinsically desiring to illuminate the room itself explains his illuminating the room only because it gives rise to that intrinsic desire, where the intrinsic desire is a behavioral disposition, as it is that disposition that gives rise to John's action. This is why John would have done exactly what he did, so long as he had the intrinsic desires that he has, even if his intrinsic desires had not been the product of his beliefs about the reasons he has for having those intrinsic desires.³²

4. SCANLON ON DESIRE "IN THE DIRECTED-ATTENTION SENSE"

Later on in the first chapter of *What We Owe to Each Other*, Scanlon characterizes a subclass of desires that he calls desires "in the directed-attention sense."³³ Because these desires are also supposed to be capable of explaining action, and yet are not behavioral dispositions, their existence might also seem to create problems for the idea that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, play a crucial role in the explanation of actions. Let us therefore consider what Scanlon has to say about desires in the directed-attention sense to see whether they really do pose such a problem.

Scanlon works towards his account of desire in the directed-attention sense via a discussion of Nagel's example of thirst.

Suppose I am thirsty. What does this involve? . . . In addition to the dryness in my throat, the future pleasure brought about by drinking, and my judgment that this pleasure is desirable, there is the fact that I feel an urge to drink. But when we focus on this idea of a mere urge to act, separated from any evaluative element, it does not in fact fit very well with what we ordinarily mean by desire. Here we may consider Warren Quinn's example of a man who feels an urge to turn on every radio he sees. It is not that he sees anything good about radios' being turned on; he does not want to hear music or news or even just to avoid silence; he simply is moved to turn on any radio that he sees to be off. Quinn's point is that such a functional state lacks the power to rationalize actions. . . . But as he also points out, although we may sometimes have such urges, the idea of such a purely functional state fails to capture something essential in the most common cases of desire: desiring something involves having a tendency to see something good or desirable about it. This is clear from the example of thirst. Having a desire to drink is not merely feeling impelled to do so; it also involves seeing drinking as desirable (because, for example, it would be pleasant). The

example of the urge to turn on radios is bizarre because it completely lacks this evaluative element.

I might seem to be saying here that there is no such thing as an unmotivated desire. Taken in Nagel's sense this would entail that all desires arise from prior evaluative judgments of some kind, a claim which seems clearly false. What I am claiming, however, is not that all desires arise from prior judgments but rather that having what is generally called a desire involves having a tendency to see something as a reason.³⁴

In this passage Scanlon rightly points out that the idea of mere dispositions to behave in various ways, in the light of one's beliefs, "fails to capture something essential in the most common cases of desire." He thinks that what we need to add, in order to capture the most common cases, is "having a tendency to see something as a reason." But is that really what we need to add?

As was pointed out above (§1), the psychological state that we ordinarily call "desire" comprises not just behavioral dispositions, but also a disposition to be affectively oriented towards the world's being the way we are disposed to make it. We would normally like it if the world were that way. This state must not be confused with the thinking that it would be good if the world were that way, or with having a tendency to see reasons, because there is plainly a conceptual distinction between being disposed to like it if things were a certain way and thinking it would be good if they were that way, or with having any tendency to see any reasons for anything: we may be disposed to like it if things were a way that we believe is bad, or that we have no tendency to think that any reason could justify their being. Moreover, psychologists posit a psychological subsystem corresponding to the disposition to be affectively oriented towards the world's being a certain way, a subsystem distinct from that corresponding to the disposition to make it that way, in order to explain the behavior of not just mature human beings (who might well have a tendency to see things as reasons), but also the behavior of rats, monkeys, and infant humans (who are plainly incapable of having such a tendency). Even conceptually unsophisticated agents, agents who have no concept of a reason, normally adjust their degree of motivation to accord with the degree to which they like it when the world turns out the way they are disposed to make it.³⁵

What all of this suggests, to me at any rate, is that what is most obviously missing from someone like Quinn's radioman, who just has behavioral dispositions, is this affective orientation towards the outcome of his turning on radios. What's missing is his being such that he would like the world to be the way he is disposed to make it, an affective orientation towards the objects of his behavioral dispositions that he could share with rats and monkeys and infant humans. Perhaps Scanlon would agree with this. But he might then insist that there is an additional difference between desire in conceptually sophisticated human beings and desire in rats and monkeys and infant human beings, and that this is what he is trying to capture with his idea of desire in the directed-attention sense. This too is missing from Quinn's radioman. In ordinary cases in which conceptually sophisticated human beings have desires, he might say, they do not just have behavioral dispositions together with dispositions to have an

affective orientation towards things being a certain way, but they also have an additional psychological state, the state of being disposed to see something to be a reason. As he puts it, when he finally provides us with his full-dress proposal:

I am claiming . . . that having what is generally called a desire involves having a tendency to see something as a reason. . . . Even if this is true, however, this is not all that desire involves. Having a desire to do something (such as to drink a glass of water) is not just a matter of seeing something good about it. I might see something good about drinking a glass of foul-tasting medicine, but would not therefore be said to have a desire to do so, and I can even see that something would be pleasant without, in the normal sense, feeling a desire to do it. Reflection on the differences between these cases leads me to what I will call the idea of desire in the directed-attention sense. A person has a desire in the directed-attention sense that P if the thought that P keeps occurring to him or her in a favorable light, that is to say, if the person's attention is directed insistently toward considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P.³⁶

The trouble with this full-dress proposal, however, is that it makes no sense in Scanlon's own terms.

To repeat, Scanlon tells us that the only things for which reasons can sensibly be asked or given are judgment-sensitive attitudes. Here, however, he tells us that desire in the directed-attention sense is a matter of having a tendency to think that there are reasons for propositions. Presumably he is speaking loosely when he says this, so the question we have to ask ourselves is which judgment-sensitive attitude he has in mind. Since when p is a consideration that counts in favor of q, that sounds like the claim that p supports the truth of q, the answer might appear to be *belief*. But of course, this cannot be what Scanlon intends. He surely does not think that having a desire in the directed-attention sense that p is a matter of having one's attention directed insistently to considerations that support the truth of the claim that p. What he intends is rather that having a desire in the directed-attention sense that p is a matter of having one's attention directed insistently to considerations that favor . . . favor what? Desiring that p? This would make a desire in the directed-attention sense that p a strange sort of self-referential attitude, an attitude the like of which I have to confess I can make little sense. Intending to bring p about? That would make it impossible to have a desire in the directed-attention sense that p when you believe that there is no way of bringing p about.

The answer Scanlon should give, of course, is that a desire in the directed-attention sense that p is simply a tendency to have your attention drawn towards considerations that present themselves as being either reasons to be disposed to have some positive affect, or to like it, when p (this is why it is possible to have such a desire while believing that there is no way to bring p about) or reasons to be so disposed behaviorally to bring p about (this is why what Scanlon calls desire in the directed-attention sense is not a strange sort of self-referential attitude: the tendency to see reasons to be disposed to bring p about is a different psychological state from the disposition to bring

p about). The trouble, however, is that as soon as we understand desires in the directed-attention sense in these terms it becomes clear that they too will succeed in explaining actions only if they first of all bring about desires understood as behavioral dispositions. The tendency will play its role in explaining action only if the behavioral disposition plays its.³⁷ The upshot is that even if we agree with Scanlon that there is a distinctive class of desires in the directed-attention sense, as he characterizes them, their existence creates no problem at all for the idea that desires, understood as behavioral dispositions, play a crucial role when it comes to the explanation of action.

CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning, Scanlon tells us that he has "become convinced that insofar as 'having a desire' is understood as a state that is distinct from 'seeing something as a reason,' it plays almost no role in the justification and explanation of action."³⁸ But as we have seen, even when psychological states distinct from desires, so understood, do play a role in explaining actions, they either do so by combining with such desires—this is how means-end beliefs get to play a role in explaining actions when they combine with intrinsic desires—or they do so by way of explaining such intrinsic desires or means-end beliefs. In both cases, desires understood as behavioral dispositions, and means-end beliefs so understood too for that matter, play a crucial explanatory role in the production of action. Nor should this be surprising. For, to repeat the message conveyed earlier on, what makes certain bodily movements actions is the fact that they are caused in the right way by intrinsic desires and means-end beliefs, where both are understood as behavioral dispositions.³⁹

NOTES

1. T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 18.
2. See, for example, David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1740/1968); Carl G. Hempel, "Rational Action" in *Readings in the Theory of Action*, ed. Norman S. Care and Charles Landesman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 281–305; Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3–20.
3. Scanlon *What We Owe*, 39.
4. The first four paragraphs in this section draw on my "The Standard Story of Action: An Exchange," in *Causing Human Action: New Perspectives on the Causal Theory of Action*, ed. Jesús H. Aguilar and Andrei A. Buckareff (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).
5. See Arthur C. Danto, "What We Can Do," *Journal of Philosophy* (60) (1963): 434–45.
6. See my "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* (96) (1987): 36–61.
7. Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 15.
8. For an attempt to explain what it is for an agent to exercise his capacity to be rational in a way that is consistent with the standard story see my "Rational Capacities," *Weakness of Will and Varieties of Practical Irrationality*, ed. Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17–38.

9. For more on this see my "The Explanatory Role of Being Rational," in *Reasons for Action*, ed. David Sobel and Steven Wall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 58–80.
10. For more on the idea that action requires the *differential* explanation of behavior by desire and means-end belief see Christopher Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
11. See also Galen Strawson's discussion of the Weather Watchers in chapter 9 of his *Mental Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994). In my "Galen Strawson and the Weather Watchers," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (58) (1998): 449–54, I attempt to explain how even these desires might be behavioral dispositions, albeit where the connection that they have with behavior may be very nonobvious. My current view is supposed to be agnostic on whether such desires have even nonobvious connections with behavior.
12. This seems to be the view of the psychologist Kent Berridge, a view endorsed and built upon in the philosophical literature by Richard Holton. See Kent C. Berridge, "Wanting and Liking: Observations from the Neuroscience and Psychology Laboratory," *Inquiry* (52) (2009): 378–98; Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For earlier presentations of these ideas see Lloyd Humberstone, "Wanting, Getting, Having," *Philosophical Papers* (19) (1990): 99–118; and Peter Railton, "Kant Meets Aristotle Where Reason Meets Appetite," in *Argument & Analyse*, Proceedings of the 2000 Congress for the Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie, ed. C.U. Moulines and K.-G. Niebergall (Paderborn: Mentis, 2002): 275–293.
13. See the later discussion of Warren Quinn's radioman (§4), a character Quinn discusses in his "Putting Rationality in Its Place" in his *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
14. For more on this see Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Freedom in Belief and Desire," *Journal of Philosophy* (93) (1996): 429–49.
15. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 50–55, 363–73.
16. *Ibid.*, 20.
17. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
18. *Ibid.*, 20.
19. *Ibid.*, 21.
20. *Ibid.*
21. See Michael Bratman, *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*.
22. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 37.
23. *Ibid.* See also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970).
24. Hume, *Treatise*, 415.
25. *Ibid.*, 417.
26. See my "Instrumental Desires, Instrumental Rationality," *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (78) (2004): 93–109.
27. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 17.
28. Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Normativity* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2008), 130.
29. Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*.
30. For my own preferred way of making sense of the idea of there being reasons for intrinsically desiring certain things to a certain extent see my "Beyond the Error Theory," *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (New York: Springer, 2010), 119–39.

31. In the terms in which Scanlon himself puts it in his Appendix on Bernard Williams's distinction between internal and external reasons, this would be to suppose that all reasons have "subjective conditions" (Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 367).
32. This point is further developed in my "The Possibility of Philosophy of Action," in *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*, ed. J. Bransen and S. Cuypers (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 1998), 17–41.
33. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 39.
34. *Ibid.*, 38–39. See also Quinn's "Putting Rationality in its Place" and Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism*.
35. Berridge, "Wanting and Liking."
36. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 39.
37. See again my "The Possibility of Philosophy of Action."
38. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, 18.
39. I would like to thank Ruth Chang, Sebastian Muders, and R. Jay Wallace for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.