

Whyte on desire

fulfilment conditions:

a simple problem

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In ‘The Normal Rewards of Success’ Jamie Whyte offers us a disjunctive account of the fulfilment conditions of desires. He suggests that, for a number of desires (‘basic’ desires), fulfilment conditions can be captured in terms of desire extinction and behavioural reinforcement conditions. For those desires whose fulfilment conditions resist this kind of analysis (‘non-basic’ desires), he proposes a second strategy: fulfilment conditions are analysed in terms of the truth conditions of various beliefs, which themselves are analysed in terms of the fulfilment conditions of various basic desires. In what follows I would like to point out a simple problem with Whyte’s strategy for assigning content to ‘non-basic’ desires.

According to Whyte, we can apply, for a number of desires, what one might call a ‘reinforcement / extinction’ theory of desire contents. This theory draws on two widely observed features of the psychology of desire: (1) the occurrence of a desire D ’s fulfilment condition typically leads to its extinction and (2) the satisfaction of a desire D by means of an action A commonly reinforces a disposition to subsequently carry out A upon holding D .

Although no formal version of his account is presented, it would appear that the idea is somewhat like the following:

Des₁: *G* is the satisfaction condition of desire *D* iff (i) there is an action *A* such that *D* causes *A*, *A* causes *G* and *G* causes $\sim D$, and (ii) the occurrence of $\sim D$ raises the probability *D*'s causing *A* in the future.

The idea is straightforward. According to **Des₁**, when I want chocolate, it is *chocolate* that I want and not anything else because when, for instance, upon desiring chocolate, I go to the fridge and obtain some chocolate, it is my getting chocolate (and not anything else) that both (a) quenches my desire for chocolate and (b) will thereby make me more likely to go to the fridge next time I am in that state.¹

Whatever the flaws and merits of this approach, one thing is certain: as Whyte himself points out, there are a number of desires whose fulfilment conditions cannot possibly be given by **Des₁**. These include notably one's desire to be cremated or again one's desire for the prosperity of one's distant descendants, whose satisfaction is incompatible with the very existence of the desirer.² In order to deal with these recalcitrant desires, Whyte introduces a second content-determining principle:

Des₂: 'A desire's fulfilment condition is that condition which is guaranteed to result from any action caused by that desire, if the beliefs with which it combines to cause the action are true'

Des₂ makes desire fulfilment conditions hinge on belief truth conditions. Now belief truth conditions are given, according to Whyte, by the following principle:

Bel: A belief *B*'s truth condition is the possible state of affairs which would be sufficient for the fulfilment of any desire *D* by the action *A* which *B* and *D* would combine to cause (Whyte 1990).

According to Whyte then, for those desires whose fulfilment conditions aren't given by **Des₁**, content-assignment is a three-stage process: (i) **Des₁** gives us the content for a certain number of desires, (ii) from the content of these desires, by applying **Bel**, we can obtain the truth conditions for a certain number of beliefs, (iii) from there, by applying **Des₂**, we obtain the fulfilment conditions of the remaining desires:

'Suppose something else, independent of [**Des₂**] gives the content of some desire *D*. Then [**Bel**] would give the content of those beliefs with which *D* would combine to cause actions. [**Des₂**] would then invoke the contents of those beliefs to give the contents of the other desires with which they would combine. And so on... [**Bel**] and [**Des₂**] may not on their own give the contents of desires and beliefs; but as a few desires get their content in some other way, [**Bel**] and [**Des₂**] may be able to give content to the rest'

(Whyte 1991:65-66)

But Whyte's scheme simply can't work the way he suggests. Say we have used **Des₁** to get the satisfaction conditions for some desire *D*. Now, following Whyte's recommendations, we use **Bel** to obtain the truth conditions for the beliefs with which *D* can combine to cause actions. At this point, we have two possible scenarios: (1) the relevant beliefs do not cause actions in combination with any further desires, (2) the relevant beliefs *do* cause actions in combination with further desires. If (1) is the case, having used **Bel** to obtain the truth conditions of the beliefs, we cannot use **Des₂** to get the satisfaction conditions of any further desires: there are no further desires which are appropriately connected. But if (2) is the case, we couldn't have used **Bel** to get the truth conditions of those beliefs in the first place, given

the fact that we merely have the satisfaction conditions of *D*: to use **Bel** we need the satisfaction conditions of *all* the desires with which these beliefs could combine to cause actions, not just those of *D*. The fulfilment conditions of Whyte's 'non-basic' desires remain unaccounted for.³

References:

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¹ **Des₁** can be seen as an attempt to improve on theories that merely appeal to the notion of desire extinction, such as the one once offered by Russell (1921). These theories notably face the problem of accounting for the content of those desires that are extinguished by states of affairs which intuitively shouldn't figure in their fulfilment conditions. Indeed, a desire for food can be extinguished by a glass of sour milk as can a burning ambition by a lifetime of failure. However, if a desire for food might well be extinguished by a pint of sour milk, it won't be so in such a way as to encourage one to repeat the experience next time one is hungry. Dretske (1988) offers an account similar to **Des₁**.

² See also Papineau (1993), chapter 3.

³ In addition to the problem just raised one might also want to point out the dubious plausibility of **Des₂** itself: if the truth of one's beliefs is indeed sufficient for one's actions to bring about the states of affairs that one desires, it is surely, at least occasionally, sufficient for one's actions to bring about a whole lot *more* than what one cares about.