

Forthcoming in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, doi: [10.1080/00048402.2020.1822424](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2020.1822424).  
Preprint.

# Desire and What it's Rational to Do

Ashley Shaw\*

Accepted Aug. 25. 2020

It is often taken for granted that our desires can contribute to what it is rational for us to do. This paper examines an account of desire that promises an explanation of this datum, the guise of the good. I argue that extant guise-of-the-good accounts fail to provide an adequate explanation of how a class of desires—basic desire—contribute to practical rationality. I develop an alternative guise-of-the-good account on which basic desires attune us to our reasons for action in virtue of their biological function. This account emphasises the role of desire as part of our competence to recognise and respond to normative reasons.

**Keywords:** Desire, Rationality, Practical Rationality, Evaluative Judgment, Reasons, Guise of the Good

## 1 Introduction

Many of our desires spontaneously arise without prior decision or deliberation. Such desires can contribute to what it is rational for one to do. Take, for instance, a desire to go for a stroll, a desire to eat a sweet snack, or a

---

\*For comments and helpful discussion, thanks to Johannes Brandl, Alex Grzankowski, Poppy Mankowitz, Lucy O'Brien, Johannes Roessler, Richard Rowland, two anonymous reviewers, and the editors of this journal. This research was funded by an AHRC Doctoral Research Studentship.

desire to hug a loved one. There is a distinctive kind of influence that such desires exert from the perspective of the agent. Other things being equal, it is natural to hold that these desires can *rationalise* corresponding intentions and actions.

However, an explanation of *how* such desires can rationalise actions remains elusive. This paper examines a pedigreed approach to explaining this datum—the ‘guise of the good’—according to which desire involves a representation of its objects as, in some sense, normatively favoured.

The plan is as follows. Section 2 clarifies the notion of desire and practical rationality at issue, and further substantiates the intuition of rational significance. Section 3 argues that extant guise-of-the-good accounts fail to accommodate a particular class of desire or provide a satisfactory explanation of their rational significance. Section 4 develops an alternative explanation within the spirit of the guise of the good. This account appeals to the biological function of such desires and motivates the view that they comprise an important part of our capacity to respond to normative reasons for action. I argue that this account evades the problems I identified for its rivals.

## 2 The Rational Significance of Desire

Two preliminary clarifications are needed. The first concerns the relevant notion of *desire* at issue. I distinguish between pro-attitudes and desires and isolate several marks of the class of desire that will be our focus. The second concerns the relevant notion of *rationality* at work and clarifies the intuition concerning desire’s rational significance.

### 2.1 Desire

In its broadest sense, the term ‘desire’ is used generically to denote any motivational state; it is synonymous with a dominant usage of the term ‘pro-attitude’. This category includes a wide range of mental states including intentions, hopes, wishes as well as transient psychological episodes like a

passing urge, or a wave of anger or fear. Arguably, beliefs or judgments about what is good or valuable would qualify as desires.

However, ‘desire’ can also be used more narrowly to denote a proper subset of pro-attitudes (for example, ‘desires proper’ in Schueler (1995)). For clarity, I reserve the term ‘desire’ for this subset of pro-attitudes. Philosophers disagree over which features or functional role a pro-attitude must possess to count as a desire. Some claim that desires are pro-attitudes that play a role in the production of rational *goal-directed* behaviour (Stalnaker, 1984; Smith, 1994) or behaviour sensitive to *reward-based learning* (Schroeder, 2004). Others isolate affective *phenomenology* as essential to desires (Strawson, 1994). For the present purposes, I stay neutral on this issue by accepting a substantial degree of heterogeneity within the class of desire (cf. Schroeder, 2004, p. 162). We can then frame the operative question as follows:

Q1. *which* desires are rationally significant, and *in virtue of what* are those desires rationally significant?

Many working on this issue assume that there is a unique feature that explains the rational significance of every desire. However, we should not foreclose on the possibility that multiple features jointly provide different explanations of why distinct subsets of desire are rationally significant. Whilst extant guise-of-the-good accounts are successful in explaining why some desires can rationalise action, I argue here that these explanations fail to generalise to a particular class of desires that I call *basic* desires.

To fasten upon basic desires, consider some canonical examples, for example, paradigmatically *appetitive* desires like the desire to eat when hungry or drink when thirsty. Closely related are desires connected to bodily needs, though with more specific contents; for instance, the desire for foods with particular flavours or appearances. Other basic desires are not necessarily tied to homeostatic needs; for instance, sexual desires. However, not all basic desires have objects related to biological function fulfilment. Humans are capable of developing more idiosyncratic basic desires ontogenetically;

for instance, desires to accumulate money, to consume drugs, to visit Mars, etc.

Reference to the *objects* of basic desire can only take us so far. A more promising strategy will be to highlight several criterial features or ‘marks’ of basic desires. Without loss of generality, I consider a paradigmatic appetitive desire to eat something sweet.

1. Basic desires take two forms, *standing* and *occurrent*. Standing basic desires are dispositional states. A standing basic desire to eat something sweet is a dispositional state that we colloquially describe as having a ‘sweet tooth’. Specifically, it is a disposition to undergo a psychological event or process with characteristic phenomenology (more in section 4) under certain triggering conditions. This transient episode is the corresponding occurrent form of the basic desire to eat something sweet.
2. Basic desires are a proper subset of *intrinsic* desires. As standardly formulated, the objects of intrinsic desires are wanted ‘for their own sake’ (Schroeder, 2004, p. 5). In contrast, the objects of instrumental desires are wanted as a means to some desired end. This distinction means that basic desires cannot be demarcated simply at the level of content. The motivational state that we can accurately describe as a desire for something sweet could be instrumental if it is a desire to eat something sweet because it would serve some other desired end.<sup>1</sup>
3. Discussions of basic desire in occurrent form often focus on their distinctive etiology which is *non-volitive*, that is, that they are not the product of our agency. A basic desire to eat something sweet arises not as a result of a ‘decision or deliberation’, but ‘simply assail[s] us’ (Nagel, 1970, p. 29) or ‘come[s] upon us’ (Schafer, 2013, p. 260) under certain conditions.

---

<sup>1</sup>My reason for saying that basic desires are a *proper subset* of intrinsic desires is that there can be intrinsic desires that do not exhibit a further characteristic feature that I discuss in section 3.2.1: the possibility of their being recalcitrant to normative judgement.

4. When occurrent basic desires spontaneously arise, there is a phenomenologically familiar sense in which such desires are *motivational*. When they strike, such desires spur us to act. Philosophers have described this aspect by calling occurrent desires ‘action-oriented’ Schapiro, 2009, p. 230.

I stress that features (1 – 4) are characteristic features to help us latch on to the kinds of states of interest. Ultimately, the category of basic desire will be demarcated etiologically by appeal to underlying mechanisms that generate them (section 4). For now, I want to turn to the question of the sense in which such desires can contribute to what it is rational for one to do.

## 2.2 Rational Significance

In what sense are desires rationally significant? A reasonable starting point is that evaluations of practical rationality are concerned with whether an agent’s responses make sense *relative to her perspective*. In this respect, rationality is distinguished from *correctness*, where an agent *A*’s responding in way  $\phi$  in circumstance *c* is correct if and only if the total balance of normative reasons favour *A*’s  $\phi$ -ing in *c*. An action that is correct in this sense is one that we objectively ought to perform: objective oughts are ‘decisive reason-implying’ (Parfit, 2011, p. 33). To illustrate how rationality and correctness diverge, consider cases where an agent has a partial or mistaken epistemic state. Suppose that *A* falsely believes that amber liquid before her is beer when it is instead gasoline (Williams, 1979). *A*’s rationality cannot be impugned if she were to act on her desire for beer by taking a sip of the gasoline even though it is not the correct thing to do. There is an intuitive sense in which taking a sip of the liquid would be rational to do given her mistaken belief that doing so would quench her thirst.

Even distinguishing rationality from correctness, there remains controversy about whether rationality requires responsiveness to apparent reasons (Sylvan, 2014; Alvarez, 2018; Lord, 2018) or whether it is entirely a matter of compliance with certain ‘structural’ requirements governing combinations

of attitudes (Broome, 2013). Given this controversy, I will avoid foreclosing on which notion of rationality is relevant to understanding the rational significance of desire.

Finally, it is important not to draw an overly strong conclusion from the kinds of cases considered at the outset. Suppose that one is deciding whether to have a salty or sweet snack when an occurrent desire for the sweet option strikes. Such a desire may not rationalise all things considered; for example, if one were also to learn of a serious health issue, or if one had stronger competing desires. So whilst a basic desire to  $\phi$  may rationalise  $\phi$ -ing, it does so *defeasibly*, absent countervailing conditions.

### 3 Desire and the Guise of the Good

This section considers accounts that explain desires' rational significance by appeal to desires' objects' being under the *guise of the good*. I begin by clarifying the core commitment of guise-of-the-good accounts of desire. I then outline two formulations of the view, arguing that they fail to accommodate the kinds of desires discussed in section 2.1.

#### 3.1 The Basics

The guise of the good can be understood as a broad thesis about the nature of rational agency as such, or as a narrower thesis about desires and their influence on rational agents. The broad thesis claims that what distinguishes the intentional actions of rational agents is that they are the product of what the subject takes to be, in some respect, normatively favoured. This thesis articulates a 'formal' constraint on rational agency (Boyle and Lavin, 2010). I will focus instead on narrower versions of the guise of the good as concerned with the nature of *desires*. According to this thesis, desire constitutively involves representing its object as normatively favoured in some respect.<sup>2</sup> We may unpack this idea with two questions:

---

<sup>2</sup>For discussions of guise-of-the-good theories of desire, see Stampe (1987), Hawkins (2008), Schapiro (2009), Schafer (2013) and Gregory (2016).

Q2. In what way does desire *represent* its objects as normatively favoured?

Q3. What is the notion of *normative favouring* involved?

The literature centres on two main answers to (Q2). We need to clarify *which* representational state we look to in the theoretical domain as our model of desire. The two main contenders are belief and perception, both arguably states that involve representing the world to be a certain way. Cutting across this distinction is whether we think of the relevant representation as having a normative content. According to *content-based* formulations, a desire to  $\phi$  represents the act-type  $\phi$  as normatively favoured by being a representational state with the content *that  $\phi$ -ing is  $F$* , where  $F$  is the notion of normative favouring settled by (Q3). The alternative is an *attitude-based* formulation, typically glossed by its proponents as the claim that a desire to  $\phi$  consists of a certain kind of attitude—*representing-as- $F$* —that the subject stands in to the content  $\phi$  (Tenenbaum, 2007; Tenenbaum, 2008; Schafer, 2013; for discussion, see Schroeder, 2008).

Several answers to (Q3) are available. Scholastic formulations focussed on *goodness* as the relevant way in which desire represents its objects as normatively favoured. However, the threat of seeming counterexamples involving cases of bad, evil, or whimsical desires has motivated the rise of alternatives that construe the relevant representation as one involving deontic contents (Schafer, 2013) or contents about normative reasons (Gregory, 2013; Gregory, 2016; Gregory, 2018). This paper will not arbitrate between these answers to (Q3) and the negative portion of this paper will be general enough to cover any variation in how we understand ‘normative favouring’.

Now that we have a sense of the various theoretical possibilities, we can consider concrete examples of guise-of-the-good accounts of desire in the literature that aim to explain how desires rationalise action.

### 3.2 Desire as Belief about Reasons

In a series of recent papers, Alex Gregory argues that desire is belief about normative reasons (Gregory, 2013; Gregory, 2016; Gregory, 2018):

**Desire as Belief with Normative Content (DAB)** ‘To desire to  $\phi$  is to believe that you have normative reason to  $\phi$ .’ (Gregory, 2016, p. 201).

Gregory explains the rational significance of desire by appeal to the principle that rationality requires responsiveness to one’s *de dicto* normative beliefs (beliefs with normative content). This requirement of rationality is typically captured by what is called an ‘enkratic’ principle (Broome, 2013), which Gregory formulates as the claim that ‘[r]ationality favours  $\phi$ -ing to the extent that you believe you have reason to  $\phi$ .’ (Gregory, 2018, p. 1072). Given DAB’s identification of desire with normative belief, we can explain why desiring to  $\phi$  can rationalise one’s  $\phi$ -ing in terms of the fact that rationality favours, to some degree, your  $\phi$ -ing if you believe that you have reason to  $\phi$ .

Whilst this account might well apply to some desires— there is, after all, a broad sense of ‘desire’ that might include normative beliefs— I will argue that the account is implausible when considering basic desires. Without loss of generality, I will take as an illustrative example the typical desire to eat some chocolate.

### 3.2.1 Problem 1: Basic Desires Aren’t Normative Beliefs

Many philosophers have questioned whether desire necessarily involves normative beliefs. Some focus their critical attention on issues concerning the preconditions for concept possession (Velleman, 1992; Hawkins, 2008). However, the characteristic way that occurrent basic desires may be recalcitrant to normative judgement can establish this without weighing in on controversial issues about the thresholds for concept possession. Take, for instance, a desire to eat chocolate whilst on a diet. However, for such cases to be counterexamples to DAB, they must be controlled to ensure that the subject genuinely lacks any belief that she has a reason to eat chocolate as opposed to such a belief’s rational force being outweighed by other reasons (e.g. transient pleasure-based reasons). I offer:



**Chocolate Cake:** At time  $t_1$ , Tom, a lover of chocolate and is presented with a cake. What strikes him is the cake's lavish chocolate coating with the sponge looking rather dry. Tom is struck by an occurrent desire to eat a slice of cake. At  $t_2$ , a scientist alters Tom to induce a painful reaction upon contact with the chocolate that would instantaneously neutralise any pleasure response. On the reliable scientist's testimony, Tom comes to believe that the fact the cake is coated with chocolate now counts *against* eating it. Nevertheless, looking at the cake's chocolate coating, he still feels inclined to eat the cake.

It is relatively uncontroversial that a rational subject's beliefs are regulated by her take on the evidence for or against the truth of the belief (see Scanlon, 1998, p. 20 on 'judgement-sensitivity'). So after the scientist's intervention, Tom's subsequent judgement that the only apparent good-making feature of the cake now counts decisively *against* eating it should lead him to abandon the belief. This entails abandoning the desire if DAB is true. So normative beliefs are not a necessary part of the kind of desire Tom continues to possess.

Gregory (2016) considers a similar counterexample involving a heroin addict who wants to shoot up but believes that she has no reason to. Gregory responds that to the extent that this conative state is not reasons-responsive, it is not a desire but a 'primitive compulsion or drive' (Gregory, 2016, p. 210). There is a danger of special pleading against those who think that *Chocolate Cake* constitutes a counterexample. Gregory should not deny that the appetitive inclination Tom feels is a desire simply *because* it is recalcitrant to countervailing normative judgement. Moreover, it is dubious whether reflection on addiction cases can be of any help. It is far from obvious that addictions are not kinds of *desires*; indeed, some accounts of states of addiction involve abnormally powerful desires (Holton and Berridge, 2016). Nor is it necessary to think that Tom has an addiction to chocolate with the host of exaggerated properties of addictive states.

### 3.2.2 Problem 2: DAB Over-intellectualises Rational Support

This section argues that Gregory’s explanation of how desires rationally support action is objectionably over-intellectualised.

Notice that on Gregory’s explanation, it is not the apparent reason that one believes oneself to possess, but the content *that those considerations are reasons*, that does the rationalising. The problem is that this makes it a necessary condition on desire’s having the power to rationally support action that the subject possesses the capacity to form beliefs about normative reasons. I take this to be an unattractive consequence of the view because it introduces an unmotivated gulf between the desires of subjects with the sophisticated capacity to form normative beliefs and those of subjects without this capacity. Many of the intuitions that led us to think that desires can rationally support action apply just as naturally to children without the capacity to think about justificatory reasons. Take young Uma who forms an occurrent desire for the ice cream at the restaurant. It seems unmotivated to hold that such desires have the power to rationalise the choice of ice cream in a conceptually mature subject yet deny Uma’s desires that same power.

### 3.3 Desire and the Perceptual Analogy

This section evaluates guise-of-the-good accounts of desire that model the representational state in question on perception. The turn to perception is motivated by the promise of explaining how desire may be recalcitrant to normative belief on the model of how it may perceptually appear to one that  $p$  even if one believes that not- $p$  (under the Müller-Lyer illusion, for example).

Two formulations of this view are discussed, content-based and attitude-based. I argue that the *content-based* variant faces a similar problem to DAB, while extant versions of the attitude-based variant are explanatorily inadequate.

### 3.3.1 Content-Based Perceptualism

According to the *content-based* variant:

**Desire as Perception, Content-Based (DPC)** to desire to  $\phi$  is for it to appear to one that some property  $F$  or consideration  $C$  pertaining to one's  $\phi$ -ing is a reason for one to  $\phi$ .

Arguably, the account of unmotivated desire given in Scanlon (1998) is a version of (DPC).<sup>3</sup> According to Scanlon, such desires involve dispositions for one's attention to be 'directed insistently toward considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P' [ibid.: 39]. Scanlon claims to be able to accommodate the possibility of recalcitrance which is analysed as involving a 'strong and recurrent tendency to see something as a reason' contrary to a 'firm considered opinion... that it is not such a reason' [ibid.: 40].

For this reason, I focus on extending the second objection I raised for DAB concerning its over-intellectualised explanation of how desires rationalise action. For it to quasi-perceptually appear to one *that a consideration is a reason for action*, one must exercise the concept of a reason. So, to the extent that desires rationalise in virtue of consisting of a perception with normative content that one then endorses, only the desires of those who possess the concept of a normative reason have the power to rationalise action. This introduces an unmotivated gulf between subjects who possess and those who lack the concept of a normative reason, despite the initial intuitions about desire's rational significance seeming to apply equally to both types of subjects.

### 3.3.2 Attitude-Based Perceptualism

Those who wish to pursue the perceptual model would do well to avoid content-based formulations. I will consider two recent attempts to develop what I have called 'attitude-based' formulations.

---

<sup>3</sup>Scanlon glosses the desire to buy a new computer as 'ha[ving] clear *normative content*... *that I have reason to buy a new computer*' [Scanlon 1998: 43. Italics mine].

Schafer (2013) argues that a content-based formulation breaks the analogy with perception. When a perception that  $p$  rationalises a corresponding belief, one does not perceive that *it is true* that  $p$ . Analogously, a desire to  $\phi$  rationalises an intention to  $\phi$  not by presenting the *content that  $\phi$ -ing is good/ought to be done/etc.* Instead, there is a ‘manner in which [desires] present their content to the subject’, their ‘imperatival’ Fregean ‘force’ [ibid.: 270] which presents courses of action as ‘something [one] ought to do’ [ibid.: 275]. On Schafer’s view, desires rationalise intentions because desires ‘[have] *the same force and content* as an intention to  $[\phi]$ ’ [ibid.: 276. Italics mine]. An intention to  $\phi$  is ‘simply an *endorsement* of the way [desire] already presents  $[\phi$ -ing] to the subject’ [ibid.: 275. Italics mine]. Similarly, Tenenbaum [2008] appeals to the idea that desires are ‘prima facie’ attitudes involving ‘an inclination to *hold* a certain content good’ [ibid.: 135]. The rational transition from desire to intention is one of *endorsing a prima facie* attitude in forming an ‘all-out’ attitude, intention. By making the relevant normative property part of the *relation* that the subject stands in to the content in question, we neatly evade the problem of over-intellectualising our explanation of how desires rationalise action (cf. Schroeder, 2008, p. 123).

The central problem for extant versions of the Attitude View is that they are too underdeveloped to provide a satisfactory explanation of how desires rationalise intention and action. The issue centres on the attitudinal relation that carries almost all of the explanatory weight, the notion of ‘imperatival force’ (Schafer) or inclinations to ‘hold as good’ (Tenenbaum). What exactly is this good/ought-involving relation?

Tenenbaum (2008) suggests that the relation is not merely any relation for which goodness is a correctness condition [ibid.: 133–4]. Rather, it is *constitutively* connected with goodness. Tenenbaum asks us to consider Moore-paradoxical assertions of the form ‘I believe that  $p$ , but it is not true that  $p$ ’ which are paradoxical. This suggests that ‘truth is not just a norm of correctness for belief, but that believing  $p$  *involves holding  $p$  to be true.*’ [ibid.: 133–4. Italics mine]. Tenenbaum extends this thought to desire, claiming that desires involve *holding acts/outcomes to be good.*

Yet, for all Schafer and Tenenbaum say, this still leaves us without an

*account* of the relation expressed by placeholder constructions like ‘holding to be good’ or ‘presenting as ought to be done’. To draw out this point, we can probe at how the views distinguish force and content. What is the difference between standing in the presenting-as-*true* relation to the content *that  $\phi$ -ing is good* and standing in the presenting-as-*good* relation to the content  $\phi$ ? Extant attitudinal theories do not equip us with the resources to explain this difference. This is no trivial matter since the distinction is central to their explanation of the rational role of desire. Without an explanation of the cash-value of the distinction, it is not clear that we have a surer grip on the idea of attitudinal force than of how desires rationalise intentions.

### 3.3.3 Taking Stock

Doxastic and perceptualist views face difficulties. Whilst basic desire’s recalcitrance to normative belief favours perceptualist accounts, all content-based formulations objectionably over-intellectualise the rational import of basic desire. On the other hand, extant attitude-based formulations are not adequately explanatory. To be clear, the problem raised does not compel one to abandon attitude-based views altogether. Instead, it constitutes an invitation for those who are sympathetic to the view to articulate a clear account of what it is for a state to present content as ‘ought to be done’ in a way that distinguishes it from the content-based formulations. The following section takes up this task.

## 4 Desire as Attunement to Reasons

This section develops an explanation of basic desire’s rational significance by appealing to the role desires play in facilitating responsiveness to apparent reasons. The core idea is that occurrent basic desires play a role in determining our apparent reasons because our system of basic desires constitutes a competence to recognize, and respond to, (a subset of) one’s normative reasons for action.

The view will be developed in two steps. The first step will be to explain the idea of a ‘reasons-sensitive’ competence (section 4.1) and motivate the suggestion that the conative system of which basic desires are a part comprise just such a reasons-sensitive competence (section 4.2). This requires that we attend to the nature of the conative system at the sub-personal level, the categorical basis of this competence. The second step explains the operation of this system at the personal level, and describes how basic desires shape one’s apparent reasons for action thereby affecting what it is rational for one to do.

#### 4.1 Desire and Reasons-Sensitive Competence

Our system of desires, I propose, constitutes a reasons-sensitive competence. To unpack this, we need to say more about the notion of an *apparent* reason before explaining the idea of a reasons-sensitive *competence*.

Apparent reasons contribute to explaining the rationality of actions. Apparent reasons include *facts* of which one is aware that appear to favour certain responses. But as many have pointed out (Parfit, 2011; Sylvan, 2014; Alvarez, 2018), apparent reasons also include considerations that are ‘merely apparent’ (Parfit, 2011, p. 35). In the case of factual error discussed earlier, what *A* believes—*viz.* that the glass of amber liquid is beer—does not obtain and so is not a *fact* that favours taking a sip. Nevertheless, given *A*’s epistemic perspective, what she believes *rationalises* her taking a sip.

What are apparent reasons? Although still actively debated, I am sympathetic to understanding apparent reasons as a function of *competences* (Mantel, 2013; Sylvan, 2014; Kauppinen, 2019). Competences, like the skill of the archer to hit her target, are dispositions of an agent to succeed at a certain activity (Sosa, 2017, p. 72). A *reasons-sensitive* competence is a disposition to succeed in acting in response to normative reasons; specifically, ‘to treat considerations like objective reasons to do  $\phi$ -like things only if they are objective [normative] reasons to do  $\phi$ -like things’ (Sylvan, 2014, p. 604) On competence-based views, an agent’s apparent reasons are states of affairs that she is attracted to treat as a normative reason *in virtue of*

such reasons-sensitive competences. The view explains why *A* acts rationally in cases of factual error: *A* acts rationally because she *competently*, though incorrectly, treats what she believes as a reason.

Whilst credible, for present purposes I maintain only a weaker claim entailed by competence-based views: that *some* apparent reasons are a function of reasons-sensitive competences. I will appeal to competences to explain how desires provide us with apparent reasons in a way that enables us to avoid the problems of over-intellectualism. Indeed, the competence-based view of Sylvan (2014)—in particular, the concept of ‘treating as a reason’—is developed explicitly to avoid an over-intellectualised account of apparent reasons.

With this in mind, the core idea to be pursued now is that:

**Desire as Reasons-Sensitive Competence (DRC)** the system of conation of which basic desires are a part constitutes a competence to recognise a subset of normative reasons for action.

Two clarifications are needed. First, if DRC is true, then some considerations we take to obtain are apparent reasons in virtue of our occurrent basic desires. This is neutral with respect to the substantive issue in value theory about whether normative reasons are desire-based. Following Schafer (2013), I maintain an account that remains neutral on whether desires determine what one ‘objectively’ ought to do or what one has normative reason to do. Second, it should be emphasised that our overall competence to rationally respond to reasons consists of a *network* of ‘local’ competences which, *inter alia*, include the kind of competence DRC embodies (Kauppinen, 2019, p. 13). Local competences ground a particular domain in which we are competent reason-recognisers. For instance, the competence to see that proving a certain mathematical theorem favours a certain kind of approach draws on a competence that is developmentally distinct from perceptual competences to form judgements about colour [ibid.].

## 4.2 Proper Functionalism about Desire

To make the case for (DRC), it is necessary to look at the entire conative system of which basic desires are a part, in particular, the underlying *desire-producing mechanisms* (DPMs) that play a role in producing and regulating our standing desires and, by extension, the occurrent basic desires that we are disposed to have.<sup>4</sup> This larger system constitutes the categorical basis or ‘seat’ (Sosa, 2017, p. 191) of the reasons-sensitive competence in question. I propose a teleo-functional account of this system and explain how it improves on the views considered in section 3.

### 4.2.1 Force and Function

Recall Schafer’s suggestion that desire rationalises intention because both share ‘imperative’ force; in this way, Schafer suggests that ‘desires play the role of *standard inputs* into our processes of practical reasoning, [just as] perceptual experiences play the role of standard inputs into our processes of theoretical reasoning.’ (Schafer, 2013, 264, italics mine).

There is a natural way to capture Schafer’s idea within a functionalist account of desire. We should think of occurrent basic desires as having a functional role that is *isomorphic* with that of perceptual experiences.<sup>5</sup> Both are *standard* inputs not by virtue of being a reliable cause of intention and belief respectively, but due to their having a *nature* such as to initiate intention and belief formation respectively. I suggest following the tradition that appeals to *functions* (Millikan, 1984; Burge, 2003; Graham, 2012). Just as perceptions are ‘standard’ inputs into processes that lead to belief formation in virtue of sharing a core function— to represent veridically (Burge, 2003; Burge, 2020)— occurrent basic desires are standard inputs into processes that lead to intention in virtue of sharing a core function with intention.

---

<sup>4</sup>My focus on desire-producing mechanisms is inspired by important insights developed in Stampe (1987).

<sup>5</sup>Obviously, by ‘isomorphic’, I do not mean that occurrent basic desires have an identical functional role with (e.g., visual) perceptual experiences, only that they have a functional role that mirrors each other in virtue of being coordinated by some overarching vertical function (more shortly).



The proposal is that we cash out parity of ‘force’ in terms of *coordination of function*.<sup>6</sup>

The general notion of function that I employ is *etioloical*: roughly, a token  $x$  of type  $X$  has an etioloical function to  $\psi$  if ancestral  $X$ 's having previously  $\psi$ -ed explains why  $x$  now exists; for example, by explaining its replication and proliferation (Wright, 1973; Millikan, 1984). For biological phenomena, this explanation is one of the effect's contribution to fitness under natural selection. Following Millikan, call this a device's *biological* or *proper* function.

It is important to note that functional items may possess distinct functions along distinct axes. For example, the human tongue possesses distinct functions along the ‘horizontal’ axis to enable the performance of activities like talking, tasting, swallowing, etc. (Graham, 2012, p. 458). A function on the vertical axis is one that contributes to the performance of some function on the horizontal axis. To illustrate, the tongue has the function to engage in a particular backward rolling motion in coordination with the soft palate to assist in discharging its function of swallowing food. Similarly, we can talk of horizontal and vertical functions of the conative system to which basic desires belong.

#### 4.2.2 Functions: Horizontal and Vertical

With this in mind, I want to start by considering an overarching *horizontal* function shared by basic desire-producing mechanisms (DPMs), standing basic desires and occurrent basic desires.

Very plausibly, what explains the existence of our DPMs and, by extension, our standing and occurrent desires is their having historically motivated subjects to do what is conducive to survival and reproduction. We can sharpen this thought by identifying *core* biological functions of whole organisms, such as eating, drinking, locomoting, foraging, fleeing, mating, etc., all of which are key to explanations of reproductive success. A key horizontal biological function of DPMs is to motivate the organism to realise

---

<sup>6</sup>This will require shifting to a variant of the functionalist view on which mental state types are individuated, not by their causal roles, but by their *teleofunctions* (Sober, 1985).

outcomes that conduce to the fulfilment of these core biological functions under Normal conditions.

Let us turn now to vertical functions, starting with DPMs. DPMs perform their biological function by performing a key *vertical* function: to produce and regulate standing desires in a certain manner that conduce to the fulfilment of core biological functions. To see how, note that for functional items in general, there is an etiological explanation of how producing a certain effect  $\psi$  contributed to its proliferation. Millikan calls these ‘Normal’ (capitalised) explanations. For a functional item, a Normal explanation specifies:

- *Normal Functioning*: how the item operated to produce the effect it was selected for,
- *Normal Constitution*: the internal structure of the item when functioning Normally, and
- *Normal Conditions*: conditions that obtain when it produced the effect that it was selected for.

There is a range of accounts in the literature of the Normal functioning and constitution of our DPMs. To take one, Tim Schroeder suggests that DPMs produce and regulate our desires as a function of an agent’s stock of standing desires in a process of contingency-based learning (Schroeder, 2004, p. 66). I highlight two features of Schroeder’s view. First, we have *innate* standing desires for objects that are reliably conducive to the fulfilment of core biological functions; for example, desires for food, warmth, etc. Second, DPMs produce novel desires based on their reward value, calculated as a function of the agent’s motivational priors (Schroeder, 2004, p. 147). In this way, we can see how DPMs produce and regulate desires that will retain an indirect connection to the fulfilment of core biological functions.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Reference to Schroeder’s view is merely illustrative. For present purposes, we can be neutral on the fine detail of this process provided that there is *some* mode of operation by which DPMs produce and regulate standing desires to be good-conducive under Normal conditions. The same points hold for rivals to Schroeder’s view (e.g., Butlin, 2017).

Turning now to standing basic desires. As products of DPMs, standing desires have the vertical function to interface with the subject's cognitive or sensory capacities to bring about occurrent basic desires. The details of the kinds of conditions under which standing desires give rise to occurrent desires is an empirical matter and depends on the nature of the standing desire in question. For example, whilst appetitive standing desires interface, *inter alia*, with the kinds of sensory capacities required for maintaining homeostasis, other standing desires (for sex, for example) will not. Given how standing desires are regulated by DPMs when functioning and constituted Normally, it should be clear how the fulfilment of this vertical function serves to advance their horizontal biological function to motivate the agent to bring about outcomes that satisfy core biological functions.

The final and most important piece in motivating DRC involves explicating the Normal functioning of *occurrent* basic desires. Occurrent basic desires, I claim, have the function to *attune* us to reasons. To illustrate what this involves, consider passing through a food market when a punnet of delicious, red, and plump strawberries catches your eye; at that moment, you experience an attraction to eat those strawberries.

There are two elements involved in this that should be phenomenologically familiar: an *attentional* and *motivational* component.

The attentional component involves a disposition to have one's attention exogenously drawn to some salient feature  $F$  of an outcome that one represents (Scanlon, 1998, p. 34). For example, when one has the occurrent desire to eat strawberries, one is disposed to have one's attention continually drawn to features such as the plump, red flesh of the strawberries one perceives, or to memories of the flavour of the strawberries.

The motivational component of an occurrent desire involves a 'non-alienating' (Schroeder, 2007, p. 156) felt impulse to treat the item's having property  $F$  as favouring a certain response; that is, as a *reason* for a certain response  $\phi$ . To treat an attractant's having property  $F$  as a reason to  $\phi$  is for the representation of the attractant's being  $F$  to influence practical reasoning by assigning some weight to the option of  $\phi$ -ing. For example, in virtue of one's desire to eat strawberries, one feels an impulse to treat the

fact that the strawberries have the appearance that they do as contributing some weight to  $\phi$ -ing in the course of determining what it is that one should do.

Let us now bring all of these elements together.

According to (DRC), our conative system with its stock of standing desires comprises a reasons-sensitive competence: a disposition to respond to a subset of one's normative reasons. The relevant reasons are *prudential*. Here I assume that there are prudential reasons for agents to fulfil core biological functions (to eat, drink, etc.). Our desire-regulating/producing mechanisms (DPMs) constitute the basis of a *competence* to respond to such reasons because they have the function to regulate an agent's motivation in prudentially good-conducive ways.

DPMs motivate action by producing standing desires for outcomes that are, to varying degrees, related to the fulfilment of core biological functions. Under certain triggering conditions, standing desires become occurrent. Occurrent basic desires are *manifestations* of the reasons-sensitive competence just as the archer's shot is the manifestation of the archer's skill. An occurrent basic desire to  $\phi$  sustains an attraction to treat certain features  $F$  of outcomes that we represent in perception or cognition *as a reason* to  $\phi$ . I suggest that this competent attraction to treat some feature  $F$  as a reason is nothing short of one's being presented with an apparent reason for action. To have an occurrent basic desire, then, is a way of being attuned to one's reasons.

### 4.3 How do Basic Desires Contribute to What it is Rational to Do?

We are now in a position to answer our central question head-on. To be in the grip of an occurrent basic desire is for features within one's perspective to appear as apparent reasons for action. In acting on a desire, one acts for the reason that the desire attunes one to. Desires contribute to what it is rational to do by affecting an agent's perspective on her apparent reasons for action.

How does the view here improve on the problems raised for extant guise-of-the-good accounts of basic desire?

I will start with the problem of over-intellectualisation. On the account developed here, basic desires are not beliefs about one's location in the space of reasons. When one responds to a basic desire to  $\phi$ , one simply represents the desideratum as having features that one is attracted to *treat* as a reason. Following Sylvan (2014, pp. 601–2), 'to treat P like an objective normative reason to  $\phi$  is to be disposed to respond to the appearance that P in . . . the ways that would be favored if P were an objective normative reason to  $\phi$ .' When one responds to an occurrent basic desire to eat strawberries, for example, one's (apparent) reasons for eating the strawberries are facts like the strawberries' being plump and red, and *not* the fact that these properties of the strawberries constitute reasons for one to eat them.

Moreover, we have explained how attitude-based perceptualist accounts may employ the idea of *coordination of function*. Perceptions involve a presentation of their objects 'as *true*' in the sense that they are states that have the function to represent veridically. Analogously, basic desires involve a presentation of their objects as normatively favoured in the sense that they are states with the function to produce desires for outcomes that are normatively favoured. Both are 'standard' inputs to belief- and intention-forming processes respectively in virtue of sharing the relevant overarching functions with those processes.

I end this section with a clarification concerning the conditions under which desires rationalise action. One might object that my view objectionably lowers the bar for *rational* responsiveness because it misclassifies *non-rational* responses to a basic desire as rational. For example, one could absent-mindedly act on a desire for coffee, competently treating relevant features of one's perceived environment as a reason to act in a certain way. This objection, however, fails to account for an important qualification. Desires defeasibly rationalise actions only given certain *enabling* conditions, specifically when one is suitably sensitive to conditions that would diminish reasons that there are to pursue the desired course of action. Here there is parity with visual perception, which rationalises perceptual judgements

against certain enabling conditions; for instance, causal sensitivity to ambient lighting conditions.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has focussed on how to explain the simple thought that occurrent basic desires are capable of rationalising intention and action.

Extant guise-of-the-good accounts face one of two problems: either they cannot explain the recalcitrance of occurrent basic desires to cognitive evaluations, or they over-intellectualise how basic desires rationalise action. On the view that I defend, our desire-producing mechanisms comprise part of our competence to recognise and respond to normative reasons in virtue of their biological function. Occurrent basic desires, I argue, are manifestations of this reasons-sensitive competence and play a role in providing one with apparent reasons for action. I argued that my view avoids the problems facing rival accounts.

## References

- Alvarez, Maria (2018). “Reasons for Action, Acting for Reasons, and Rationality”. In: *Synthese* 195.8, pp. 3293–3310.
- Boyle, Matthew and Douglas Lavin (2010). “Goodness and Desire”. In: *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*. Ed. by Sergio Tenenbaum. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Broome, John (2013). *Rationality Through Reasoning*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Burge, Tyler (2003). “Perceptual Entitlement”. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67.3, pp. 503–548.
- (2020). “Entitlement: The Basis for Empirical Warrant”. In: *New Essays on Entitlement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 37–142.
- Butlin, Patrick (2017). “Why Hunger Is Not a Desire”. In: *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 8.3, pp. 617–635.
- Graham, Peter J. (2012). “Epistemic Entitlement”. In: *Noûs* 46.3, pp. 449–482.
- Gregory, Alex (2013). “The Guise of Reasons”. In: *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50.1, pp. 63–72.
- (2016). “Might Desires Be Beliefs About Normative Reasons for Action?” In: *The Nature of Desire*. Ed. by Julien Deonna and Federico Lauria. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2018). “Why Do Desires Rationalize Actions?” In: *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 5.
- Hawkins, Jennifer (2008). “Desiring the Bad under the Guise of the Good”. In: *Philosophical Quarterly* 58.231, pp. 244–264.
- Holton, Richard and Kent Berridge (2016). “Addiction Between Compulsion and Choice”. In: *Addiction and Self-Control: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience*. Ed. by Neil Levy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kauppinen, Antti (2019). “Rationality as the Rule of Reason”. In: *Noûs*.
- Lord, Errol (2018). *The Importance of Being Rational*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Mantel, Susanne (2013). “Acting for Reasons, Apt Action, and Knowledge”.  
In: *Synthese* 190.17, pp. 3865–3888.
- Millikan, R.G. (1984). *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism*. Bradford.
- Nagel, Thomas (1970). *The Possibility of Altruism*. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Parfit, Derek (2011). *On What Matters: Two-Volume Set*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, Thomas (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Schafer, Karl (2013). “Perception and the Rational Force of Desire”. In: *Journal of Philosophy* 110.5, pp. 258–281.
- Schapiro, Tamar (2009). “The Nature of Inclination”. In: *Ethics* 119. January, pp. 229–256.
- Schroeder, Mark (2007). *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2008). “How Does the Good Appear To Us?” In: *Social Theory and Practice* 34.1, pp. 119–130.
- Schroeder, Tim (2004). *Three Faces of Desire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schueler, G. F. (1995). *Desire: Its Role in Practical Reason and the Explanation of Action*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Smith, Michael (1994). *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sober, Elliott (1985). “Panglossian Functionalism and the Philosophy of Mind”. In: *Synthese* 64. August.
- Sosa, Ernest (2017). *Epistemology*. Princeton University Press.
- Stalnaker, Robert (1984). *Inquiry*. London: MIT Press.
- Stampe, Dennis W. (1987). “The Authority of Desire”. In: *Philosophical Review* 96.3, pp. 335–381.
- Strawson, Galen (1994). *Mental Reality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Sylvan, Kurt (2014). “What Apparent Reasons Appear to Be”. In: *Philosophical Studies* 172.3, pp. 587–606.



- Tenenbaum, Sergio (2007). *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason*. Cambridge University Press.
- (2008). “Appearing Good: A Reply to Schroeder”. In: *Social Theory and Practice* 34.1, pp. 131–138.
- Velleman, J. David (1992). “The Guise of the Good”. In: *Nous* 26.1, pp. 3–26.
- Williams, Bernard (1979). “Internal and External Reasons”. In: *Rational Action*. Ed. by Ross Harrison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 101–113.
- Wright, Larry (1973). “Functions”. In: *The Philosophical Review* 82.2, pp. 139–168.