Kant on the Nature of Desires

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1.

In this paper I analyze the idea of desire in Kant, and argue that it is based on what I call a misconception of the nature of desires. I shall argue that Kant’s concept of desire shows four characteristics that made him exclude natural desires from moral motivation and reject the possibility of their serving as a basis of moral obligations: (a) desire for Kant means a natural empirical motive; it is an empirical causal force not only implying determinism, but also essentially outside rational control; (b) desires are subjective and contingent states, they provide an ill basis for moral motivation and for objective and universal moral rules; (c) Kant’s concept of desire is hedonistic: pleasure is “necessarily connected” with desires – these always look for empirical or practical pleasure; as a result of this follows (d) desires are self-interested, and any action motivated by desires will be so. These four characteristics provide a notion of desire that is sufficiently negative to lead Kant to reject their inclusion in the grounding of moral obligations, but also into any account of moral motivation – they take away any moral worth our actions may have. Instead he will argue for the possibility of pure reason being practical, that is, a form of rational motivation that works without the intervention of any desire or empirical inclination.¹ According to Kant, we can do without the conative elements that were the main source of motivation in previous theories; we have to, if we want to save the ideas of objectivity, freedom of the will and autonomy.

In the second half of this paper, I shall try to provide some arguments against the Kantian fear of including desires in the realm of moral

¹ When talking about “desires” I am referring to “natural desires”, and to all the “propensities”, “instincts”, “passions” and “empirical inclinations”. For more on Kant’s notion of desire and these distinctions, see Allen Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought (New York: 1999), chap. 8; see also Maria Borges, “What can Kant Teach us About Emotions?”, The Journal of Philosophy 101 (2004).
motivation. I shall reject the characterization of desires in hedonistic or self-interested terms. Also, if we want to save the Kantian concern about the possibility of objectivity and autonomy, we should not accept a Humean notion of desires. I shall argue that we can provide a characterization of desires in Kantian terms. My contention is that Kant could have developed an adequate account of desires from some ideas already present in his philosophy. I try to provide a redefinition of the notion of desires in what I take to be a Kantian spirit. Basically, I sketch the possibility that principles or norms of reason play a primary role in the explanation of the formation of desires and preferences. I do this by arguing that the understanding is already involved when desires are brought about. However, even though I argue for the inclusion of desires in a Kantian theory of motivation, this does not mean that moral motivation and moral obligations should depend on desires. What is the benefit of this inclusion, then? In my view, it would result in a more realistic picture of our moral psychology – and hopefully, a more Kantian one as well.

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant showed that freedom must presuppose that we are free from empirical determination in order to justify our sense of moral obligation and responsibility (A 547/B 575). He also claimed that human beings must regard themselves as both empirically determined and noumenally free, insofar as they see themselves as moral agents. Reason and understanding, conceived as noumenally free, are not part of the nexus of empirical causal relations; they enable us to justify the attribution of freedom to the agent. Kant’s free agent is a transcendent being, beyond the realm of natural causality. But human beings also participate in the empirical world where causally determined relations take place. This is the realm of empirical causality and determinism, but it is not possible to derive any notion of freedom from it. Here is where Kant includes desires. Throughout his philosophy, Kant always identifies desires as part of the empirical world, as subject to the empirical causal relations that take place in it.2

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2 Kant does not deny that intentional moral actions have causes, but he makes a distinction between two different sorts of causation: the empirical causation of actions involving desires, which is phenomenal, and actions involving only a
Desires are forces over which agents have no control; agents cannot control the laws of nature, and these are the laws that regulate desires. No one who acts from his own desires is a free, autonomous agent in Kant’s sense. Desires make us passive and subject to heteronomy. Heteronomy is dependence on external factors, the liability to be a plaything of the natural world over which we are not sovereign. Desires are natural forces that we passively endure; they control and “enslave” us. This is how Kant sets forth this view: “Inclination is blind and servile, whether it is kindly or not; and when morality is in question, reason must not play the part of mere guardian to inclination but, disregarding it altogether, must attend solely to its own interest as pure practical reason”. When it comes to moral matters, reason must lift us above the world of empirical causality and completely disregard inclinations. Freedom is based on reason and this must not be restrained by forces over which we have no control, forces that enslave and blind us.

If desires are to be understood as natural causal forces, if we accept that we are moved by them and that they are not susceptible of being rationally modified, the very idea of agency is in question. The agent would be passive in the face of his own desires, and would regard them as the result of the operation of natural forces on him; as Kant claims: “He does not hold himself accountable for the former [inclinations and impulses] or ascribe them to his proper self” (GMS, AA 04: 458). If all we do is determined by existing natural circumstances, and our choices play no role in determining our actions (or if they are determined by nature as well), then they are not truly our own and we are not self-governed. This is the core of the notion of autonomy, and this is a necessary condition of moral agency.

Since desires are not subject to any rational constraints, they are, say, “loose”: not susceptible to reasonable argument, and it would be very difficult to reach any agreement on them. What Kant says about feelings can be extended to desires: “It is impossible to reach a common

\[3\] Critique of Practical Reason, trans. by Mary Gregor, in Practical Philosophy (New York, 1996), AA 05:118, emphasis added. All subsequent references to this Critique (KpV), The Metaphysics of Morals (MS), and the Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (GMS), will be to this edition. For the Critique of the Power of Judgment (KU), I use the translation by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: 2000). Page numbers refer to the Akademicausgabe.
agreement on feelings, because feeling is by no means uniform.\textsuperscript{4} Desires are not uniform and vary from person to person. Feelings, desires and empirical inclinations are contingent and do not provide an objective basis for grounding moral obligations; the basis they provide is subjective and contingent, and they cannot create moral obligations able to bind everybody in a necessary way. This is why they would provide an ill basis for moral obligation, if we want this to be objectively based and universally binding. If we accept desires as the determination of our moral obligations, their contingent nature may occasion variety in the rules. As Kant tells us:

For then the will of all has not one and the same object but each has his own (his own welfare), which can indeed happen to accord with the purposes of others who are likewise pursuing their own but which is far from sufficing for a law because the exceptions that one is warranted in making upon occasion are endless and cannot be determinately embraced in a universal rule. (KpV, AA 05: 28)

3.

Kant shares the idea, already present in most of the psychological theories of his time,\textsuperscript{5} that associates the concept of desire with the concept of pleasure, in such a way that anything motivated by desire is connected with pleasure. "Kant's theory of desire is hedonism", says Lewis White Beck.\textsuperscript{6} As Kant himself claims in the \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgment}:

"to wish for something and to have satisfaction in its existence, i.e., to take an interest in it, are identical" (KU, AA 05: 209). Desires are directed to something, the realization of which is expected to give pleasure. Desires, in Kant's theory, always have an antecedent expectation of pleasure as their cause, although the contrary does not hold: pleasure is not always linked to desires – such as in the case of aesthetic pleasure, where pleasure is "devoid of all interest" (KU, AA 05: 204).\textsuperscript{7} In the \textit{Metaphysics of Morals} of 1797, he claims:

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\item Kant himself says that the "explication [of the faculties of desire and pleasure] as given in psychology could reasonably be presupposed" (KpV, AA 05: 09 n).
\item \textit{A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason} (Chicago: 1960), 92.
\item In the third \textit{Critique}, Kant distinguishes between two different feelings of pleasure: sensuous, empirical or practical pleasure and non-empirical or contemplative. The latter is the basis of aesthetic judgment and can arise from
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pleasure or displeasure, susceptibility to which is called feeling, is always connected with desire or aversion; but the converse does not always hold, since there can be a pleasure that is not connected with any desire for an object but is already connected with a mere representation that one forms of an object (regardless of whether the object of the representation exists or not). [...] The pleasure which is necessarily connected with desire (for an object whose representation affects feeling in this way) can be called practical pleasure. (MS, AA 06: 211; see also KU, AA 05: 206)

Desire is always connected with pleasure, but pleasure is not always connected with desire. Empirical or practical pleasure is properly the basis of desire. This kind of pleasure is not disinterested; desires aim at their satisfaction and at empirical pleasure. “The satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object is called interest. Hence such a satisfaction always has at the same time a relation to the faculty of desire, either as its determining ground or else as necessarily interconnected with its determining ground” (KU, AA 05: 205). The link between desires and empirical pleasure is, by definition, a link between desire and interest, and ultimately, is self-interested. 8

Under a hedonistic characterization of desires, to seek for the satisfaction of desires is basically directed at producing pleasure in the agent experiencing the desire, and this is usually regarded as a self-interested search. My desires are my own desires and not somebody else’s; whenever I act on the basis of my desires, I am necessarily pursuing my own interests. Any action motivated by my own desires and pleasure is self-interested. In Kant’s characterization of desires, pleasure and the search for one’s own happiness always appear mixed up, but instead of talking about self-interest, Kant talks about “self-love” (Selbstliebe).

All material practical principles as such are, without exception, of one and the same kind and come under the general principle of self-love or one’s own happiness. Pleasure arising from the representation of the existence of a thing, insofar as it is to be a determining ground of desire for this thing, is the mere contemplation of an object or from the experience of an idea in imagination. Aesthetic pleasure is best seen in the enjoyment of beauty, where the pleasure is characterized as being disinterested. On the other hand, empirical or sensuous pleasure is properly the basis of desire. It is to this kind of feeling that I will be referring when talking about pleasure. See KU, AA 05: 206. In the second Critique, Kant states the same distinction using different terms: practical and contemplative pleasure.

8 Kant makes a distinction between several kinds of interests, but he connects empirical inclinations and desire to what he calls a “pathological interest”, and it is on this kind that empirical practical reason is based. See H. J. Paton, The Categorical Imperative (Chicago: 1948), 83.
based on the receptivity of the subject, since it depends upon the existence of
an object; hence it belongs to sense (feeling) and not to the understanding,
which expresses a relation of a representation to an object by concepts, not to
the subject by feelings. It is, then, practical only insofar as the feeling of
agreeableness that the subject expects from the reality of an object determines
the faculty of desire. Now a rational being's consciousness of the agree-
ableness of life uninterruptedly accompanying his whole existence is
\textit{happiness}, and the principle of making this the supreme determining ground
of choice is the principle of self-love. Thus all material principles, which
place the determining ground of choice in the pleasure or displeasure to be
felt in the reality of some object, are wholly of the same kind insofar as they
belong without exception to the principle of self-love or one's own happiness.
\cite{KpV, AA 05: 22}

The idea of self-love is characteristic of the moral psychology of the
eighteenth century, where it is very often equated with happiness and
pleasure. Many will try to explain all our behavior in terms of self-love,
understood as the pursuit of one's own interests and happiness, and derive
an ethics from it. Nevertheless, the concept is usually regarded as
negative: as the preference of oneself to others. Rousseau, who Kant
seemed to have in mind when writing about the principle of self-love,
defined it in this way: "Self-love \textit{[l'amour propre]} is merely a sentiment
that is relative, artificial and born in society, which moves each individual
to value himself more than anyone else, which inspires in men all the evils
they cause one another […]\textsuperscript{9} Self-love is the preference of oneself over
others.

Kant follows this line of thought that explains all the material
practical principles of action in terms of the pursuit of happiness, but
taking care to exclude the field of morality. He recognizes that the
principle of one's own happiness or self-love is important from the point
of view of prudential reasons and of instrumental rationality, which
makes us find the means to get whatever we want, but he finds it
completely at odds with the principles of morals. The principle of one's
own happiness

\[ \text{[...] contributes nothing at all to the establishment of morality, since making}
\text{someone happy is quite different from making him good [...] it is the most}
\text{objectionable because it bases morality on incentives that undermine it and}
\text{destroy all its sublimity, since [it] only teaches us to calculate better, but quite}\]

\textsuperscript{9} Rousseau, \textit{Discourse on the Origin of Inequality} [1754], in: \textit{The Basic Political
Writings} (Indiana, 1987), note 15, p. 106.
obliterates the specific difference between virtue and vice. (GMS, AA 04: 442)

Kant sees this principle as a kind of calculating rationality, but an inadequate ground for morality. No feeling or desire could serve as a ground for moral principles, since they are defined in terms of self-interested hedonism. Moral principles have to be explained in terms other than these. People never act morally motivated by self-interested reasons; morality and self-interest are for Kant opposite concepts. If our actions were self-interested, then, among other things, there would be no way we could think about the possibility of a kingdom of ends in which we treated others always as ends and never as means, since the principle of self-love implies the pursuit of one’s own interest over the interests of others.

However, instead of rejecting this self-interested hedonism in his characterization of desires, Kant accepted the argument from the psychology of his time and looked for an alternative way to explain moral motivation. If moral actions are to escape from being causally determined by the drive for pleasure and self-interest, the only feasible alternative is to exclude desires from the explanation of moral actions altogether. The practical character of pure reason has to be established; it has to be proved that the mere knowledge of a principle of reason by itself can move us to act, regardless of any empirical inclination. Only by acting on these principles we are free and autonomous. Only then could we escape empirical causal determinism, hedonism, egoism and all the other possible vices that the presence of desires implies. Desires so conceived also represented a threat to the ideas of objectivity and to the universality of the moral law, since they are “loose” states (without any rational constraints) and vary from person to person.

I want to subject to criticism this conception of desires and show that the perception of a threat was brought about by what I call a misconception of the notion of desires. First, I will address the issues of hedonism and the self-interested character of desires, leaving the issue of the threat that

10 Cf. Anth where he says that “all eudaemonists are practical egoists” (AA 07: 130).
desires pose to freedom to the end; this in its turn will throw some light on the issue of the subjectivity and contingency of desires.

Psychological hedonism and psychological egoism have been subjected to several criticisms and I do not have any new arguments to offer against them. The idea that desires are “necessarily connected” with pleasure rests on an ambiguous use of the notion of “pleasure”. It can be associated with a certain kind of sensation (physical or intellectual sensations), and in this case be the converse of “pain”, or it can be used simply as synonym for “satisfaction”. In its former sense, the link of desires with pleasure would be phenomenologically false, since we do not always derive pleasant sensations from getting what we want and we do not always base our desire on the fact that something is pleasant: think of the Russian soldiers at Stalingrad who doused themselves with gasoline, and threw themselves as flaming torches on German tanks. It is hardly believable that these people were pursuing their own pleasure. In the latter sense, “pleasure” used as synonym for “satisfaction”, the fulfillment of our desires would always imply pleasure as we are always satisfied when we get what we desire. In this sense, the relation of desire and pleasure would be true, but completely trivial.11

Now, psychological egoism is often thought to hold because each person is motivated by her own and not someone else’s desires; however, this does not imply anything about what we desire. To be motivated by one’s own desires does not mean that the agent pursues her own happiness or satisfaction. It is what the agent aims at that determines whether or not her desires are selfish. Usually this view has been contested under the assumption that even actions that seem to be altruistic, i.e., actions motivated by another person’s interests are, ultimately, actions from which we get pleasure. We derive pleasure even from unselfish actions. Here there is a confusion between selfishness and self-interest; these two concepts are not synonymous. We do lots of things, such as brushing our teeth or visiting the doctor when we are sick, in which we are acting in our own self-interest, but these are not selfish actions.

Selfishness means to ignore the interests of others, in circumstances in

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11 For a broader criticism of psychological hedonism and egoism, see Joel Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism”, in: S. Cahn and P. Markie (eds.), Ethics (New York: 1998), 562 (from which I take my example about Russian soldiers); see also James Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 4th ed. (New York: 2003), chap. 5. And, of course, the critique of this theory by Bishop Butler in his Sermons.
which their interests ought not to be ignored. But even if it is argued that we derive pleasure from these actions, it can be answered that there is a second confusion between self-interest and the pursuit of pleasure. People do many things because they enjoy them, without meaning that they are acting from self-interest. The chain-smoker who derives pleasure from smoking, despite being aware of the connection between smoking and cancer, is acting against his own best interests.

5.

There are many reasons for rejecting psychological hedonism and the self-interested nature of desires, but it is Kant's acceptance of a causal theory of desires that I find most problematic. This theory, in its Humean version, sees desires as isolated from reason and as natural active powers or natural causal forces that impel us to act; it thus gives rise to a purely instrumental conception of rationality. It is this theory that must be revised and subjected to criticism. What I find objectionable in this kind of account is not the claim that motivation always requires desires, but the claim that desires do not have any rational constraints and that they are not susceptible to rational argument – that they are “loose” and contingent.

A theory more in accordance with the spirit of Kantian philosophy would claim that the formation of desires and preferences can be accounted for by appealing to the possibility that principles of rationality have a constraining effect upon desires. We can provide such an account of desires when we no longer see them as states completely free of rational constraints which need to be brought into the agent's conception of the situation in order for him to become motivated. On this view, the agent's desires may themselves become permeated by his conception of a situation, and of principles or norms that we conceive as suitable to this situation. Principles or norms of reason can thus play a primary role in explaining the formation of desires and preferences.

Under the theory that sees desires as causal powers, they are not infrequently described as kinds of original existences, and in many cases their propositional content is denied. Desires are described as "feelings" (as Kant does), or as strong sensations or feelings of "aversion or propensity" of which we are "directly aware" (as Hume does). According to this kind of conception, a desire is a kind of "introspective something" or feeling, constituting a tendency or disposition to do something, which
contains no representation of any state of affairs. Against this conception, we can argue that many of our desires have no phenomenological character at all, like many long-term desires, for instance. But more importantly, unlike sensations and feelings such as pain or pleasure, desires have propositional content. It is always possible to say that desires are not impulses directed towards something unspecified or non-represented, and trying to find an object. Desires have intentionality, understood as the property of mental states of being about objects and states of affairs in the world. If someone has a desire, it must be a desire to do something or that something be the case. In desires, this intentionality is propositional. The content of our desires is always expressible and specifiable as a whole proposition or sentence. Desires are propositional attitudes, not mere causal forces.

The first step in arguing for the possibility of a redefinition of desires is accepting a description of this sort, rather than the one that sees them as blind and irrational forces or sensations. If desires were some kind of sensations or mere feelings, they would not be susceptible of being rationalized, and no reasons could be given for justifying them. The fact that desires have content and are linguistically expressible renders them meaningful and arguable. When we understand the meaning of the expression of a desire, we are in a position to give reasons for or against the contents of our desires, therefore, about our desires in themselves. In this way, desires can also be objects of practical deliberation – contrary to what Hume thought. The question concerning desires is not only how to satisfy them, but also what desires we have. This deliberation, for instance, may be about the values under which we see something as desirable or as valuable. Here desires may be the products of value judgments, commitments we have to certain values, such as moral standards.

If we see desires as natural active powers, something beyond our rational capacities, something that we receive from that part of the world that is our own nature, then we are taking them as something "given". Desires are given to the agent as inner episodes which occur to her without any prior concepts, beliefs, or process of learning; it is because the agent has such experience that she acquires a non-inferential (non-conceptual) representation of the object of her desire. From this point of view, desires would be conceived as inner sensations which can occur to agents without any prior intentional states. These would be something extending more widely than the space of reasons and would be out of the reach of any possible rational deliberation. The whole process would be
one of passive causal relations to the physical world. This would be the case if desires were mere sensations or blind forces, but if we take them as propositional attitudes, we are giving them the same status as beliefs and other intentional mental states of which reason is constituted. I take it that putting them at the same level as these is important if we want to allow other propositional attitudes to have a rational influence on desires. Desires are not atoms that emerge out of the blue, in a completely natural and non-inferential way, not presupposing any other elements of our mental life; they rather emerge in a background of other intentional states that also help to shape them. For instance, desires presuppose at least our knowledge either of particular matters of fact or of truths of reason. What I mean is that our desires are always permeated by our conceptual capacities and norms of rationality, they are not impacts from outside the realm of thought coming from our own bodily functions; our conceptual capacities are drawn on in desires or, in more Kantian terms, spontaneity is already involved when a desire is brought about — in the same way as happens with receptivity. The understanding is already operative in the constitution of desires, they are already conceptually shaped by it. Desires already have conceptual content, and this does not take us out of the space of reasons.

6.

If we accept a characterization of desires like the one I am sketching — and only sketching, given the short space I have — we should not be afraid of the inclusion of desires in accounts of moral motivation. Kant’s fear of including desires in his picture of moral motivation on the grounds of their being linked to pleasure and self-interest responds to a misconception. Desires are not necessarily linked to pleasure and self-interest. Also, assuming that the understanding is involved in our desires, we should accept that they are not subject to a mere natural causality. If desires are not free from rational constraints, this implies that desires are not “loose” and contingent, thus taking away the risk of subjectivism. On an account like this, desires are bound to reasons, to rational principles and to cognitive states, thus allowing a shared background that makes possible their deliberation, a reasonable resolution of divergences, and makes them susceptible to following moral principles.

Kant claimed that desires were subjective and contingent states not suitable to serve as grounds for moral obligations and moral motivation.
To be sure, placing desires within the bounds of the space of reasons does not make them a good and objective enough basis for moral obligations (making them depend on desires would turn our categorical imperatives into hypothetical ones), but at least it allows us to reintroduce them in the realm of moral motivation without Kantian fears. This could provide us with what I take to be a more realistic picture of our moral psychology. And perhaps a more Kantian one as well.\footnote{I am indebted to Dennis Schulting for useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.}