THE OBJECT OF DESIRE

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1. There is a doctrine of long philosophical standing which
Donald Davidson has recently told us to have 'an air of self-
evidence': namely, 'that, in so far as a person acts intentionally
he acts, as Aquinas puts it, in the light of some imagined
good'.[1] (Clearly, 'imagined' here must be understood to be
free of any suggestion of inevitable error.) That doctrine
about the nature of intentional action invites another about
the form of understanding intentional actions as intentional
actions: namely, that the rationalization of some given inten-
tional action should reveal the imagined good in the light of
which the agent performed that action. Relying upon con-
temporary orthodoxy about the structure of such rationali-
zation,[2] and simplifying away from some very important but
here irrelevant complexities, we might take that requirement
to be met, if met at all, by some suitable specification of the
content of whichever desire is invoked within a fully articu-
lated rationalization of the intentional action concerned.

Not all desires are acted upon, nor are all desire ascriptions
made as part of producing putative rationalizations of inten-
tional actions. Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny that the
suitability of desire ascriptions for the outlined role within
rationalizations of intentional actions is essential to the point
of the concept of desire. The preceding therefore suggests
adoption of the following general condition upon desire

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[1] 'How is weakness of the will possible?' in Davidson's *Essays on Actions and
Events* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 21-42, at p. 22.

[2] For a classic exposition of the orthodoxy, see Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons.
and Causes', *op. cit.,* pp. 3-19.

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ascriptions: an explicitly acceptable ascription of some specific desire to an agent is one which, in virtue of the specification of the content of the desire, serves to reveal the imagined good in the light of which the agent would act were he indeed to act upon that desire.

When we reach ground-level in philosophy, the task of justification is scarcely distinguishable from that of elucidation. The present task is to say what the condition just stated upon desire ascriptions amounts to. Specifically, what would it be 'to reveal the imagined good' through the specification of the content of a given desire? G.E.M. Anscombe once claimed that it would be 'fair nonsense' to say: "Philosophers have taught that anything can be an object of desire; so there can be no need for me to characterize these objects as somehow desirable; it merely so happens that I want them".[3] Although Miss Anscombe's concern was somewhat different from the present one, I hope it no injustice to attribute to her the following view: a necessary condition of the acceptability of an ascription of some specific desire to an agent is that the ascriber have 'reached and made intelligible' some 'desirability characterization' of the (potential) state of affairs there specified. That desirability characterization will directly reveal what the imagined good is in the light of which the agent acts if he does in fact act upon the desire.

2. The connection just hinted at between Aquinas' talk of the imagined good and Miss Anscombe's notion of a desirability characterization might appear an attempted elucidation of the obscure by the impenetrable. So before continuing with theoretical speculation it may be useful to pause first to undertake a more modest and piecemeal examination of some conceptual resources pre-philosophically available to us in our thinking about desires, which resources can then serve to illuminate the notion of a desirability characterization.

In trying to be clear upon the seemingly simple although in fact mysteriously elusive, recourse must generally be had

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[3] *Intention* (2nd. ed.; Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 71.

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to the First Word. A familiar danger lurks here. Given the vagaries of much ordinary thought and talk in this area, much of what I shall say may smack of terminological legislation. Some of the key terms in my discussion are nowadays often used more or less interchangeably; but I shall emphasize what I take to be the pre-philosophically distinctive uses of each of these terms. It may seem that in so doing I am brazenly presenting 'a sharply defined picture "corresponding" to a blurred one'; yet the appearance of blur may say more about the eye of the beholder than about the subject beheld. Due charity, here amounting to respect for commonplace linguistic ways, needs tempering with due prudence; and prudence in philosophy is precision.

3. Desires are distinct from needs and wants. The most general notion of a need for something applies when that something is necessary for, is needed for, the realization of some state of affairs. The term 'needcessity' in usage in the South of the United States of America until at least the end of the last century is as pleasing in its resurrection of this Aristotelian thought as its embodiment of that thought is ugly. A less jarring idiom capturing the same idea of a necessity arising from the facts of the case is 'it is needful that. . .'. There is perhaps some reason for thinking that most general notion of a need to be derivative from a somewhat narrower notion: namely, that of a basic need which applies when the something needed is necessary for the flourishing and well-being of the subject of the attribution of the need.[4] For we ought surely to be impressed by the fact that ascriptions of needs with that more specific, but perhaps unstated, relativization are in general independently intelligible, whereas ascriptions relying upon the completely general notion of a need require for their intelligibility specific contextual guidance as to what the relevant relativization is, thus often inviting a demand for explicit statement of that relativization at pain of unintelligibility.

[4] Cp. David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 183.

The distinctive notion of a want is grasped by all those duly appreciative of the first line of Psalm 23: 'The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want'. Amongst other places, that version is found in *Scottish Metrical Psalms* of 1650; the 1662 *Prayer Book* spells things out, albeit at a heavy poetic price: 'The Lord is my shepherd: therefore I can lack nothing'. A want is a lack: my want now is intelligence, yours is probably patience. (Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* defines a *wantwit* as a fool or an idiot.) Unsurprisingly there is a corresponding distinctive verb form, although the not uncommon neglect of prepositions as parts of verbs can lead to a confusion of that form with the verb most naturally used in talk of desires: thus I want for intelligence, you for patience. Alexander Pope was clearly trading upon the potential confusion when he wrote:

"With ev'ry pleasing, ev'ry prudent part,
Say, what can Cloe want?" —She wants a heart.

Enough of the dictionary of quotations. Not just any absent item, any gap, constitutes a want or lack. I no more lack, say, malnutrition than I need it. Indeed, that suggests a surprisingly tidy formula as to when it is that an absence amounts to a want; when and only when that which is absent is needed. Entertaining that suggestion we shall immediately be struck by the parallelism obtaining between ascriptions of wants or lacks and ascriptions of needs in terms of the varying roles of, and the varying needs for reference to, specific contextual considerations, including particular relativizations, in the rendering intelligible of those ascriptions. So, for example, those considerations due appreciation of which would be necessary in some particular case to make sense of the thought that I need a cold would also have to be invoked in making similarly intelligible in that same situation the idea that I want for a cold. The difference between the concept of a need and that of a want might then seem, roughly speaking,

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to turn upon the anodyne point that while I can need what
I in fact have yet I cannot want for it.[5]

4. If all that, once said, seems boringly obvious then, boredom
aside, so much the better: the First Word, once said, should
be obvious. But more has to be said before the obvious can
be put to work.

Ascriptions of needs and wants can intelligibly be made to
things lacking the capability of intentional action, and even
to things lacking a mental life altogether. Even when the
subject of such ascription is a normal human being, the as-
cription need imply nothing whatever about the mental life
of the subject. Cloe's want of a heart says much about her
mental life, whether or not she herself recognizes the truth
of what is said; but that is so just because this is a case in
which the lack concerned is a spiritual one. Simply eliminate
the metaphorical aspect (if that it still be), arrange for the
blood to be pumped through her body in some other, efficient
way, and then nothing follows about Cloe's state of mind
from the fact of her heartlessness.

That serves at least to call into doubt any claim to obvi-
ousness of the thought that self-ascriptions of wants and needs
are in general grounded upon some distinctive "epistemologi-
cal relation" in which each subject of mental states is deemed
to stand to his own mental states. Instead, the thought is
invited that the capacity for such self-ascription may merely
reflect the fact of the subject's sensitivity towards the rela-
tions obtaining between his present circumstances and his
(potential or actual) well-being. The grounds of self-ascriptions
of wants or needs may be no different from those of compa-
rable other-ascriptions. Thus the possibility is left open that,
for any of a number of reasons, others may be better placed
to adjudicate the subject's needs and wants than he is himself.

Consider self-ascriptions of specifically mental wants or

5 Cp. David Wiggins, 'Claims of Need', in Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and
Objectivity: A Tribute to J.L. Mackie* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp.
149-202, fn. 9 at p. 189.

lacks. Involved in such cases is, in part, putative recognition of some mental absence, some gap in the mental life. It would be evidently wrong-headed to hold that such absences must, even other things being equal, be self-intimating. No recourse is needed to the paraphernalia of self-deception, the subconscious, and so on, in order to understand the possibility of Cloe's remaining unaware of a central truth about her mental life, her heartlessness. Silences need not call themselves to our attention. Moreover, even if Cloe, after much introspective rummaging, ascribes heartlessness to herself, there is no general reason to think her claim incorrigible. Soul-searching, however exhausting, need not issue in an exhaustive inventory of the soul's contents. Failure to hear anything need not establish that silence truly reigns.

5. An agent's recognition, or misrecognition, of some need or want of his can give rise to a corresponding desire. And any puzzlement we might feel about some particular apparent desire of an agent can be eliminated by our coming to see that desire as arising from the agent's recognition, or misrecognition, of some corresponding need or want.

Two disclaimers must immediately be entered. I am not maintaining that needs or wants only give rise to desires through the agent's recognition of those needs and wants. There seems nothing impossible, for example, about an agent's being led to appreciate some need or want of his through reflection upon some desire he has which arose from that (unrecognized) need or want. Nor am I maintaining that all desires can be understood as arising from agents' (recognized or unrecognized) needs or wants. Such a view can seem defensible only through either a total disregard of the varieties of human desire or a wilfully *ad hoc* postulation of human needs and wants. Rather, this discussion of needs, wants and desires is meant to draw attention to one, relatively straightforward, way in which we understand *some* desires; although attending to that way can lead, I think, to general conclusions about the understanding of desire.

Many needs and wants arise only consequently upon par-

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ticular desires had by agents, which desires may have to be cited in elucidation of the claim that the agents have those needs and wants. But basic needs and wants, those necessary for the flourishing and well-being of the subject, are not thus consequent upon the subject's desires. That is why such needs and wants can intelligibly be ascribed to things lacking a mental life altogether.

Although the question of quite what a given individual's basic needs and wants are may be a tendentious one in many areas, it nonetheless remains true that claims in answer to that question purport to be objective in character. This is not because such questions are the domain of some supposedly value-free scientific investigation. Doubtless, consideration of the *kind* of thing exemplified by a given individual –plant, human being, Bengal tiger– can reveal some of that individual's basic needs and wants through appropriate scientific investigations. But there can be, and should be, formidable disputes about what exactly constitutes, say, an individual human being's flourishing and well-being; and it is the worst kind of blinkered scientism to insist that all such disputes are only properly resolved through further value-free scientific investigation. Any such total account of the matter will indeed be valueless; although not of course in the sense favoured by proponents of such accounts. Rather, once we move beyond consideration of conditions for mere survival, we shall be immediately immersed in matters of value, matters resolvable only by employment of distinctive resources like imagination and empathy. In considering questions such as what it would be to live a life like *that,* we may learn considerably more from, say, the products of a novelist than from the outpourings of a natural scientist. Yet with all the difficulties and complexities thereby introduced, objectivity is by no means immediately banished; for none of those difficulties and complexities should blind us to the considerable amount of agreement upon these matters even for beings as complex as ourselves, nor to the considerable amount of agreed resources and procedures available to those engaged in disputes upon these matters.

Indeed, were the introduction of questions of value to herald the banishment of objectivity, not even the basic survival needs and wants uncovered by scientific investigations could avoid the stigma of subjectivity. For that uncovering trades crucially upon ideas of 'coherence, comprehensiveness, functional simplicity, and instrumental efficacy'[6] which are themselves value-notions. They guide the practices of scientists, they figure in the accounts scientists themselves give of their reasons for acting as they do —and they are, moreover, matters of as tendentious dispute as are those involved once we move beyond consideration of more survival basic needs and wants. It is not just that a value-free scientific account of basic needs and wants would fall short of comprehensiveness; rather, there is no such account available to us.

6. One paradigm of a desirability characterization is a specification of the object of desire in terms which reveal that object to be suitable to meeting some need or want which the agent recognizes himself to have. Such a specification brings to an end the questioning of why the agent has that desire: we are in agreement in such cases that the question has been answered. (In the case of some non-basic need or want our questioning may simply be transferred to some other desire of the agent's; but no such possibility arises for basic needs and wants.) And we are in agreement in such cases that the question has been answered precisely because *we can now understand the agent's desire as having been elicited by his recognition of the desirability of the object.*[7] The desirability characterization of the object of desire is one adequate to the communication of that object's desirability; once given that characterization, the imagined good has been revealed to our

[6] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: University Press, 1981), p. 134. This undermines the somewhat different accounts of moral thought and discourse presented by J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, 1977), and by Simon Blackburn, *Spreading The Word* (Oxford, 1984).

[7] *Cf.* Mark Platts, 'Moral reality and the end of desire' in Platts (ed.), *Reference, Truth and Reality* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 69-82.

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eyes. And what we have been given purports to be a wholly objective specification of the object of desire.

Those features of a desirability characterization cast in terms of an agent's recognition of some need or want of his are, I claim, subject to one important qualification, general features of desirability characterizations. Nearly all such characterizations aim to bring to an agreed end the questioning of why an agent has some desire by characterizing in an objective way the object of that desire so as to communicate the agent's perception of the desirability of that object, thus revealing his desire as a response to that desirability.

But let me add, to guard against a serious misunderstanding, that such a desirability characterization may be something that can be 'reached and made intelligible' only by considerable effort. It is no part of my view that another must be treated as 'a dull babbling loon'[8] simply because we cannot immediately understand his desires in terms of our own antecedently accepted desirability characterizations. The genuine effort to attain to understanding of others might as surely extend the range of desirability characterizations we ourselves accept as it might deepen our understanding of those desirability characterizations we anyway accepted. We might be led, for example, to recognize some human need or want which we had previously overlooked, or we might be led to a deeper appreciation of some antecedently recognized need or want. Indeed, nothing can rule out *a priori* the possibility that the effort to understand the desires of others and their reciprocal efforts to understand our own lead to our recognizing that at least some of our antecedently accepted desirability characterizations served to distinguish *merely* imagined goods. Error and complacency remain persistent bedfellows.

7. Earlier, fairly or unfairly, I attributed to Miss Anscombe the following condition upon desire ascriptions: a necessary condition of the acceptability of an ascription of some specif-

[8] Anscombe, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

ic desire to an agent is that the ascriber have 'reached and made intelligible' some 'desirability characterization' of the (potential) state of affairs specified by the content of the desire so ascribed. My attempted elucidation of that condition has all been cast in terms of ascriptions of desires to others; now we need to consider self-ascriptions of desires.

Consider the case of an outsider engaged in non-colonialist manner in the project of trying to come by an understanding of the desires of the people within some alien culture. After entering into their practices, he might reach the point of being himself moved, independently of his adopted project, to engage in some ritual activity —the gnawing of the bones of the dead, the polishing of the car of a Sunday morning— without yet being able to produce any characterization of that activity which seems to him adequate to revealing, to capturing, its desirability. He sees the ritual activity 'as somehow desirable'; he has, so to say, been infected with the desires of those in the, now not so alien, community; yet those perceptions of desirability, those desires, predate attainment by him of forms of expression adequate to the communication of those perceptions as specific desirability perceptions of the objects of those desires. (Maybe, for example, he has not reflected enough upon the role of the ritual activity within the life of the community.)

Admittedly, such a position will represent a halfway house in the enquirer's pursuit of understanding. Yet it does not seem to me 'fair nonsense' to think that some level of understanding has been achieved. Our enquirer will now be as puzzled by himself as he is by those around him; but that puzzlement will be of a quite different character from that which he experienced upon first encountering the alien community's activities, and quite different again from that felt upon confrontation with an individual who claims simply to "want" a saucer of mud.[9] While individual eccentricities with utterly

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[9] Exactly what is the object of this individual's desire? That he be given a saucer of mud? That he own a saucer of mud? That a saucer of mud be at his free disposal? Where the content of a "desire" is so opaque, it is scarcely surprising that the "desire" be puzzling and untransmissible. Simpler, then, to consider cases

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opaque contents can perhaps on occasion be dismissed, trans-missible communal practices with clear contents cannot; and reception of a transmissible desire constitutes a challenge to shape some communicable expression of the perception of desirability in the object of that desire.

Our enquirer's halfway house is, I think, where many of us live in relation to many of our own desires. A simple illus-tration of this would be provided by any case in which an unrecognized need or want gives rise directly to a desire. In many such cases little reflection is needed upon the agent's part for him to recognize the issuing need or want. But a large range of cases may be far less transparent even to a re-flective agent, may involve *deeply* obscure objects of desire. Of great importance here are what might be called *substitu-tion activities:* these range from the lonely husband who, away from home, kisses a photo of his wife before sleeping, through the case where, when alone, one continues the violent argument which has just driven one from the company of another, to at least the case of compulsive hand-washing. In few of these cases is it easy to come up with a plausible desirability characterization of the activity (and when it is easy, it is correspondingly difficult to make much sense of the beliefs consequently attributed to the agent).[10] Perhaps it is a recognition of the reality of such cases in one's own life which makes it natural to say of our enquirer in his halfway

where the content of the "desire" is clear and yet the puzzlement and untrans-missibility remain.

[10] A marvellous example of substitution is found in Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers:* 'Divine has introduced Our Lady to her. Some days later, showed her, decent girl that she was, a little "photomatic" photo of the murderer. Mimosa takes the photo, puts it on her outstretched tongue, and swallows it. "I simply adore that Our Lady of yours. I'm communioning her".' (Bantam edition, 1968, translation by Bernard Frechtman; p. 204). One philosopher told me there was no difficulty in understanding Mimosa's (intentional) action: Mimosa is simply acting upon the desire for oral sex with Our Lady. But that only works in a straightfor-ward way if we can also make sense of Mimosa's *then and there* believing herself to be *having* oral sex with Our Lady! More useful to one who wishes to understand this case is Barry Stroud's suggestion (in conversation) that the model for such understanding is provided by "conspicuous" voting in a known lost cause. (I cannot forbear echoing here Joe Orton's opinion that Genet is an outstanding example of an *unconscious* humorist.)

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house that he has achieved some level of understanding, that his puzzlement will then be of a different character.

When considering our enquirer's halfway house, Aquinas' visual metaphors seem exactly to the point. The aim of one trying to understand the desires of another is indeed to reveal to himself the imagined goods in the light of which the other acts if and when he acts upon those desires. By coming to share the desires of the other that revelation can at least partially predate the total, communicable understanding which of course remains the aim of the exercise —*of course* since the scope for misperception, for cases of *merely* imagined goods, will be considerably greater at the stage of the halfway house than when the journey is apparently completed. Yet the need to move on should not blind us to the progress which has been made.

8. 'Sisyphus, it will be remembered, betrayed divine secrets to mortals, and for this he was condemned by the gods to roll a stone to the top of the hill, the stone then immediately to roll back down, again to be pushed to the top by Sisyphus, to roll down once more, and so on again and again, *forever*.'[11] That, according to Richard Taylor, is 'a clear image of meaningless existence'. He goes on to present his favoured account of how that meaninglessness can be eliminated by the following example:

> Suppose that the gods, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in [Sisyphus] a strange and irrational impulse. . . to roll stones. . . To make this more graphic, suppose they accomplish this by implanting in him some substance that has this effect on his character and drives. . . they have by this device managed to give Sisyphus precisely what he wants —by making him want precisely what they inflict on him.[12]

[11] *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).
[12] *Ibid.*

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More generally, Taylor concludes that we can

> . . .reintroduce what has been resolutely pushed aside in
> an effort to view our lives and human existence with
> objectivity; namely, our own wills, our deep interest in
> what we find ourselves doing. . . The meaning of life is
> from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and
> it far exceeds in its beauty and permanence any heaven
> of which men have dreamed or yearned for.[13]

It is clear that Taylor takes himself unproblematically to
have described a case in which the gods do indeed induce a
desire "within" Sisyphus to roll stones. And his accompanying
talk of 'a strange and irrational impulse' and of 'drives' suggests
why Taylor takes himself to have done just that. For that
talk, like his general conclusions, suggests that Taylor tacitly
subscribes to a conception of desire as an active power, as a
mere disposition to act, *to the complete neglect of the con-
siderations consequent upon acceptance of Aquinas' doc-
trine.*[14] If a disposition to roll stones has been induced in
Sisyphus, then he unproblematically has a *desire* to roll stones.

What on earth, or elsewhere, does Taylor's Sisyphus want
to roll stones for? What does he see in it? The case would be
different if Sisyphus were concerned to appease the fury of
the gods in the hope of avoiding further punishment or
of ending his present one. It would be even more interestingly
different if he were concerned with, and convinced of, the
justice of their punishment. (Perhaps he excuses the form
of the punishment because of the gods' limited financial re-
sources.) Both would be cases where we could understand
what is "within" Sisyphus in terms of his perception of what
is "without". But in the case described by Taylor the only

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[13] *Ibid.*

[14] My use of 'suggests' is ocassioned by Taylor's shift from talk of what Sisyphus
wants to talk of the will and interests; but this need not now delay us. I have
discussed whether there is any interesting sense in which the presence of desire
implies the presence of a disposition to act in 'Desire and Action' (forthcoming in
Noûs); the present concern is with the converse implication.

way in which we can understand the supposed desire "within" Sisyphus is in terms of something literally within him, the substance implanted there by the gods: and that gives us no idea at all of any imagined good in the light of which Sisyphus supposedly acts. We have as yet no idea at all of how to understand his behaviour consequent upon his 'impulse' *as intentional action.*

Doubtless it is possible to induce impulses and drives of the strangest kinds in human beings —and in parrots, rats, and sea-slugs. But we should not be too quick to help ourselves to the notions of desire and intentional action in describing the outcomes of such machinations, nor in describing the natural impulses, drives and behaviour of parrots, rats and sea-slugs. Compare Taylor's Sisyphus with the imagined case in which Sisyphus is concerned to appease the fury of the gods in the hope of avoiding further punishment or of ending his present one. The analogy which invites extension of the talk of desire to Taylor's Sisyphus is clear: in both cases the "behaviour" of Sisyphus is the same. But there are crucial differences too. The Sisyphus of my case may well come by his desire to roll stones, or may well be led to modify its strength, by what I have elsewhere called 'proto-practical deliberation' aimed at answering the question 'what do I most want to do?'[15] His desire, and its strength, may be consequent upon other beliefs, desires and conceptions of the world that he has. Moreover, the desire of Sisyphus in my case is no mere disposition to "behave" in some routine way: it can give rise to limitlessly various patterns of action depending upon the other desires and beliefs which Sisyphus has. If the Sisyphus of my case believes that other actions too will appease the fury of the gods, we may well find him attempting some of them; if the Sisyphus of my case comes to believe that the gods are dead, he will presumably cease his stone-rolling activity; if the Sisyphus of my case begins to doubt, and so wishes to test, his belief that his activity is appeasing the gods' fury, he may pause for a while in his

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[15] See 'Desire and Action', *op. cit.*

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labours; if the Sisyphus of my case becomes utterly exhausted and wishes to rest a while, he may arrange "accidentally" to break a wrist. In understanding any such cases of alternative actions it will prove necessary to make reference to the general desirability condition recognition of which first led my Sisyphus to particular stone-rolling actions: namely, the avoidance of further punishment or the termination of the present one. And that will requiere the attribution to Sisyphus of possession of the relevant *concepts*, as of course would the account of any proto-practical deliberation in which my Sisyphus might have engaged in coming by his desire. Whereas for Taylor's Sisyphus, or for a simple drivesoaked sea-slug, no such conceptual ascription is required or even invited. Taylor's Sisyphus need have no conception at all of his "activity"; he therefore need have no desirability conception of it. There is a contemporary echo here of the historical co-incidence of attachment to active power conceptions of desire and the tacit denial of the propositional attitude status of desires: a co-incidence which in consistency necessitates abandonment of the employment of the concept of intentional action.[16]

9. In his fascinating book *Ulysses and the Sirens* (Cambridge: Revised Edition, 1984), Jon Elster expresses interesting ideas about both 'the characteristic feature of man'[17] and the point at which *'mind* enters the evolutionary arena'.[18] Man is capable both of *waiting* and of using *indirect strategies:* that is, man is capable both of forgoing a favourable possibility now in order to have a yet more favourable one later on, and of embracing an unfavourable possibility now in order later on to obtain a very favourable one.[19] These two capabilities

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[16] In my remarks in this section I am heavily indebted to Gareth Evans' discussion of belief in his contribution to Steven H. Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), at pp. 131-2.

[17] *Op. cit.,* p. 15.

[18] *Op. cit.,* p. 16.

[19] *Op. cit.,* p. 9. Elster gives the examples within the economic sphere of the patent system as a case of waiting and of investment as a case of indirect strategies;

are constitutive of the capacity for what Elster calls *global maximization*. This capacity is found in some non-human animals too; but in such animals, 'globally maximizing behaviour. . . is found in highly specific and stereotyped situation'.[20] Whereas, Elster claims, 'the characteristic feature of man is. . . a *generalized capacity for global maximization* that applies even to qualitatively new situations'. Further, in cases of situation-specific global maximization, 'there is no need to appeal to intentional or mental structures'; but 'the use of globally maximizing strategies in novel situations must imply an analysis of the context, a scanning of several possible moves and finally a deliberate choice between them'.[21] Thus the generalized capacity for global maximization requieres the ability to relate to the future and the merely possible; and Elster suggests that 'with this generalized capacity *mind* enters the evolutionary arena'.[22]

The Sisyphus of my case, with his desire to roll stones being comprehensible in terms of his recognition of the desirability of the avoidance of further punishment or the termination of the present one, could well come to exemplify *in this particular but novel situation* his generalized capacity for global maximization. *Faced with novelty,* he might for example decline an offer of help in his labours since he can envisage that such aid, by increasing the gods' fury, might reduce his future possibilites of freedom (waiting). Or he might now elect the disagreeable option of rolling a heavier stone since he can envisage the possibility that, by appeasing the gods' fury, he thus increases his future possibilities of freedom (indirect strategies). Whereas for Taylor's Sisyphus, *as described,* there seems no intelligible way in which such possible diversity could be generated.

I am not here concerned to endorse the completeness of Elster's account in terms just of waiting and of using indirect

within the political sphere, anti-activism exemplifies waiting while antireformism is a case of an indirect strategy.

[20] *Op. cit.,* p. 15.
[21] *Op. cit.,* pp. 16-17.
[22] *Op. cit.,* p. 16.

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strategies. Nor am I concerned to deny the empirical element in the question as to whether 'the characteristic feature of man' is characteristic, is not also to be found in (some) other animals. Nor, finally, am I concerned to legislate "the correct usage" of the term 'desire' What I am concerned to do is to focus upon the differences between 'drives' and 'strange and irrational impulses', on the one hand, and full-fledged human desires on the other. The heart of that difference, to repeat, is that in the latter cases the agent concerned must have some desirability conception of the object of desire. It is through that conception that the agent is enabled to relate to the future and the merely possible, and enabled to make some deliberate choice amongst possibilites. That conception is thus what grounds, for example, the very possibility of the generalized capacity to which Elster has drawn attention.

Elster's claims about the point at which *'mind* enters the evolutionary arena' make it clear that his concern is (implicitly) restricted to that part of the mental life in which he whose life it is is related to propositional contents. Sadly, pain enters the evolutionary arena long before the appearance of Elster's generalized capacity for global maximization. Taylor's Sisyphus, as described, stands in no such relation to a propositional content in virtue of his drive, his strange and irrational impulse. It is therefore most strange that anyone can maintain his impulse to be *irrational:* having no propositional content, not being a propositional attitude, the matter of rationality or irrationality simply cannot arise.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Taylor's conception of desire, like any conception which disregards the insights consequent upon Aquinas' doctrine, is that an adherent to it must simply have overlooked the different degrees to which, and different ways in which, we can understand the objects of desires. In his discussion of Taylor's views, David Wiggins gave some good examples: '. . .there is a difference between the life of a man who contributes something to a society with an ongoing history and a life lived on the plan of a Southern pig-breeder who. . . buys more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land. . .'. And again: 'It is much

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harder to explain what is so good about buying more land to raise more hogs to buy more land... than it is to explain what is good about digging a ditch with a man whom one likes, or helping the same man to talk or drink the sun down the sky'.[23]

If all that human desires amounted to were strange and irrational impulses, mere drives, it would be quite unintelligible that there be such clear, agreed and important differences between the activities of these two men. The only way in which a desire could be puzzling would be through being statistically unusual; in that way, I fear, it is not the Southern pig-breeder who would now ocassion puzzlement.

10. Earlier (§ 7) we were led to recognize the existence of a (much occupied) halfway house in an enquirer's pursuit of understanding: one in which the enquirer has come to see an activity 'as somehow desirable' while not yet having attained any desirability characterization of the activity concerned. The question therefore arises as to whether Taylor's Sisyphus might not occupy this halfway house, might not have a genuine desire —not a mere 'drive'— despite his lacking an appropriate desirability characterization of his stone-rolling activity. Well, of course he might; yet Taylor's description of the case gives us no reason to believe Sisyphus thus lodged. Still, more has to be said since, after all, one engaged for example in some ritual activity because of some desirability perception but who yet lacks any desirability characterization of that activity has been conceded to have a desire; but that desire seems to be just as isolated from interaction with the subject's other desires and beliefs as is the supposed desire attributed to Sisyphus by Taylor.

The worries here cannot be immediately dismissed by reference to our knowledge of how Sisyphus' supposed desire was induced (although that may give a clue). Rather, the following points should be stressed. We lack any reason to

[23] 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life', *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1976), at. pp. 342-3.

believe that an enquiring outsider joining Sisyphus in his activity will come, independently of his project of enquiry, to share Sisyphus' supposed desire. We lack any reason to believe that there is a desirability perception with a masked desirability characterization which connects with other actions performed by Sisyphus. And we lack any reason to believe that there is a desirability perception with a masked desirability characterization which were Sisyphus to discover it would lead, depending upon his other desires and beliefs, to any of a limitless variety of actions or to any form of proto-practical deliberation. Think how different the case would be were the implanted substance to work by heightening Sisyphus' unarticulated concern for his physical development. His desire would then be transmissible (to some at least); it would be likely to show itself in other actions of his; and even if it did not, it would be likely to do so were he to come to recognize that that was indeed what had moved him to engage in his stone-rolling. Moreover, were he to come by that recognition he would then be placed to engage in proto-practical deliberation which might issue in a changed appreciation of that desire's place within his scheme of things, a changed appreciation which might have innumerable ramifications within his conduct. Just so for our enquirer into the alien culture when lodged in the halfway house. He has come to see the ritual activity 'as somehow desirable'; the desire has been transmitted to him even though he yet lacks any desirability characterization of the ritual activity. But that novel desirability perception is likely to manifest itself in new, or modified, forms of behaviour on his part. And even if it does not so manifest itself, it is likely that it would do so were he to complete his journey, were he to come to recognize the masked desirability characterization of that activity. And such a recognition would permit proto-practical deliberation directed towards appreciation of that desire's due place within the enquirer's scheme of things. My point here is simply that Taylor's characterization of the case of Sisyphus is silent upon all these further considerations which might begin to ground employment for that case of the concept of desire.

One final possibility, with attendant complications, emerges from consideration of games and other "idle" activities. My modifications of Taylor's Sisyphus myth all invoked some matter *external* to the stone-rolling activity itself, which external matter served to furnish the desirability characterization of the activity. But not all desires are grounded in desirability characterizations *of this kind.* Many activities are in this sense *pointless.* But again, briefly, it is wrong for at least many of these many activities to assimilate their source to some mere 'drive' or 'strange and irrational impulse'. To mention just one important point: those engaged in such a pointless activity are often concerned to do it *well;* that concern will usually receive multiple behavioural manifestations. The point here is not to deny that Sisyphus' relation to his stone-rolling might be of this kind; it is rather once more to emphasize the absence within Taylor's description of his case of any mention of such considerations.

11. In an important paper,[24] Stephen Schiffer distinguishes two kinds of desire. His remarks about this (non-exhaustive) distinction are worth quoting at length.

> There are two kinds of desires —those which are self-justi-fying and self-referring in a certain way, and those which are neither self-justifying nor self-referring at all; I shall tendentiously refer to the first as "reason-providing (r-p)" desires, and to the second as "reason-following (r-f)" desires.
> Should one's desire to ϕ be an r-f desire and should one in fact ϕ, then there will be a reason which is both the reason for which one desires to ϕ and the reason for which one ϕ's, and this reason will be entirely independent, logically, of the fact that one desires to ϕ. One thinks of one's ϕ-ing as being desirable in a certain way and it is because one's ϕ-ing is thought by one to be desirable in that

way that one both desires to ϕ and ϕ's; it is not because one desires to ϕ that one finds one's ϕ-ing desirable; when one's desire is an r-f desire one believes that even if one did not have the desire one would have a reason to have it. . . the ultimacy lies, so to speak, not so much in the desire as in its object.

Matters are quite the reverse when we turn to r-p desires. When it is an r-p desire to ϕ that one acts on, the reason for which one ϕ's and, typically, the only reason one has to ϕ, is provided entirely by one's desire to ϕ and. . . one's reason for ϕ-ing just is that desire. . .

It is. . . not because a thing is desirable in a certain way that one has an r-p desire for it; quite the contrary, it is desirable in that way precisely because one has the desire. . .

. . .(W)hen one acts on a r-p-desire one acts for the gain of pleasure and the relief of discomfort —usually both, always one or the other— that one's action affords. . .

So with r-p-desires generally: their *sine qua non* is that they are desires which, almost always, are both pleasurable to satisfy and discomforting to endure, always one or the other; in fact, the anticipated pleasure and relief of discomfort are nearly always inextricably related, in that what one anticipates is just the pleasurable relief of discomfort. . .

[If one's desire to ϕ is an r-p-desire,] one's desire to ϕ, one's desire to gain the pleasure of satisfying one's desire to ϕ, one's desire to relieve the discomfort of one's desire to ϕ —these are all one and the same desire. An r-p-desire is a self-referential desire for its own gratification; an r-p-desire to ϕ is a desire to ϕ to relieve the discomfort of that desire, a desire to ϕ for the pleasure of its own relief.

Three disclaimers must be inserted before we proceed. First, despite what Schiffer's remarks in the second of these passages might suggest, I do not think that the basic distinction he is drawing requires a further, general distinction between thinking one's ϕ-ing to be desirable and desiring to ϕ. Secondly, I do not think it impossible to give a reading to the claim that 'it is. . . because one desires to ϕ that one finds one's ϕ-ing

desirable' such that the claim is true for "reason-following" desires.[25] And thirdly, nothing that Schiffer says implies that the only possible relation between pleasure and desire is that which obtains in the case of "reason-producing" desires.[26] Bishop Butler held that *all* pleasure depends upon desire reaching its appropriate object, that *all* pleasure stems from, say, the fact that ϕ-ing satisfies the desire to ϕ.[27] But this is simply false: imagine that with your mind elsewhere, your smell is suddenly gratified with the fragrance of a rose.[28] Moreover, this once having occurred, you might naturally come to have a desire to repeat this pleasure without it yet being the case that the (anticipated) pleasure is accounted for in the terms suggested by Schiffer's discussion of "reason-producing" desires.

Augustine when young famously prayed: 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet'. Less well known is his reason for so praying: 'For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon of the disease of lust, which I wanted satisfied, not quelled'.[29] It is a nice question to ask about any desire why he whose desire it is should prefer that the desire be satisfied rather than quelled. What would be lost by the simple *ending* of the state of desire?

For "reason-following" desires the general answer is clear: he whose desire it is sees the object of desire as independently desirable, so that at least part of what would be lost, *very* roughly speaking, is some degree of likelihood of the independently desirable object's being realized.[30] With "reason-

25 The reading comes by stressing *finds*. *Cf.* 'Moral reality and the end of desire', *op. cit.*, p. 77.
26 Schiffer explicitly recognizes this disclaimer at p. 198.
27 *Sermons*, Sermon 11, sect. 6.
28 The example is Burke's. See N.J.H. Dent, *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues* (Cambridge: 1984), pp. 38 ff., to which I am indebted on this point.
29 *Confessions*, Book VIII, 7.
30 If the object of desire is that *I* intentionally ϕ, the degree of likelihood drops to zero. Note also that the claim in the text explains why a belief in the unattainability of the object of desire might make it reasonable to embrace quelling even for a "reason-following" desire in the face, say, of persistent feelings of frustration.

producing" desires the matter is more complicated. (To simplify things a little, I shall assume the agent correctly to believe it within his powers to choose between quelling and satisfying his desire; I shall also abstract from considerations about the "costs" of the means of quelling and of satisfying the desire.) If the case is one in which the desire is discomforting to endure yet not pleasurable to satisfy, then nothing would be lost by the simple ending of desire. Quelling is at least as reasonable as satisfying. If the desire is both discomforting to endure and pleasurable to satisfy, the matter turns in part upon the balance between discomfort and pleasure; but quelling is often a reasonable option.[31] While if the case is one in which the desire is pleasurable to satisfy but not discomforting to endure, then *considering this desire in isolation* and discarding certain eccentric moralities, quelling seems to have nothing in its favour. But any confident view on these questions, like any confident view about the very possibility of cases of the first and third kinds, would require far greater clarity about the nature of the "inextricable relation" which is supposed by Schiffer "nearly always" to obtain between anticipated pleasure and relief of discomfort. That is not a project that I shall here pursue.

It would be a clear error to overlook the distinction marked by Schiffer, as it would also be to think that it is a distinction without a difference —that is, to attempt to assimilate one of the kinds of desire to the other. But recognition of *those* errors does not imply acceptance of any general view about the desirability *ranking* of the distinctive kinds of desirability thereby revealed. Reasonable views upon that require quite different kinds of supporting argument.[32]

Earlier (§ 6) I claimed that 'nearly all' desirability characterizations purport to characterize in an objective way the object of desire so as to communicate the agent's perception of the desirability of that object, thus revealing his desire as

[31] Not least since in many cases the discomfort persists far longer than the pleasure.

[32] For one rather florid attempt in this direction, see Platts, 'Moral reality and the end of desire', *op. cit.*

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a response to that desirability. We are now placed to appreciate why 'nearly' was needed in that claim.[33] For while talk of desire as a response to the object's desirability fits for "reason-following" desires, it clearly cannot apply to "reason-producing" desires: for in this latter case there is no *independent* desirability. But it should also now be noted that the remainder of the characterization given of desirability characterizations can still fit for "reason-producing" desires. The claim that ϕ-ing will indeed relieve the agent's discomfort, give him pleasure, or both, is an objective claim about which the agent can be sincerely mistaken,[34] and yet which is a claim that can indeed serve to communicate his perception of the desirability of his ϕ-ing (properly understood).[35]

Let us return once more to Taylor's Sisyphus. Might not his "drive", his "strange and irrational impulse", be a case

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[33] This is the 'important qualification' I there referred to. How close to *all* we are is of course an empirical question; but I doubt that 'nearly all' overstates the case.

[34] In *The Analysis of Mind*, during the course of a discussion of desire and feeling which seems to me fascinatingly wrongheaded, Russell gives a characteristic example of agent's error which could (not *must*) be of this kind:

Suppose you have been jilted in a way which wounds your vanity. Your natural impulsive desire will be of the sort expressed in Donne's poem:

When by thy scorn, O Murderess, I am dead,

in which he explains how he will haunt the poor lady as a ghost, and prevent her from enjoying a moment's peace. But two things stand in the way of your expressing yourself so naturally: on the one hand, your vanity, which will not acknowledge how hard you are hit; on the other hand, your conviction that you are a civilized and humane person who could not possible indulge so crude a desire as revenge. You will therefore experience a restlessnes which will at first seem quite aimless, but will finally resolve itself in a conscious desire to change your profession, or go round the world, or conceal your identity and live in Putney. . . [However], you will find travel disappointing, and the East less fascinating than you had hoped —unless, some day, you hear that the wicked one has in turn been jilted.

Obscurity of the object of desire can be found in both kinds of desire.

[35] It is a very good question indeed whether current orthodoxy about reasons for acting, as exemplified by Davidson's analysis in terms of desires (or "pro-attitudes") and beliefs, can be sustained in the light of the existence of "reason-following" desires. For such desires, there is at least a sense of 'reason for acting' in which that notion is in at least *one* sense "prior" to that of desire.

of a "reason-producing" desire? Might it not be just a more complicated case of this kind than Schiffer's desire to eat an ice-cream or to scratch his nose?[36] Well, again, it might; but two points should be noted. The less important, and by now tiresomely familiar, is that Taylor's *description* of his case gives us no reason for thinking that we are faced with a "reason-producing" desire. At the very least it would need supplementation in terms of Sisyphus' feelings of discomfort, anticipations of pleasure, or both. Such supplementation would then enable *us* to give for this case a desirability characterization (properly understood) of his stone-rolling activity. It would also introduce an intelligible possibility of *variety* in Sisyphus' manner of carrying out his activity (think of the subtleties of many "pointless" games). But the second point is far more important. Through his discussion of Sisyphus, Taylor wishes to reach completely general conclusions about value and 'the meaning of life'. But even with the envisaged supplementation, it is clear that it is a grave error so to generalize from the case of Sisyphus: for as a model of the human conditions, Sisyphus is flawed from the outset by the restriction of his desires to a (small) sub-set of human desires. While if "reason-following" desires were once to be added to the model, it is clear not only that Taylor's general conclusions would no longer follow but also that they would be undermined.

[36] *Op. cit.*, p. 198.

Aquino sostuvo que en tanto que una persona actúa intencionalmente, actúa a la luz de un bien imaginado. G.E.M. Anscombe ha tratado de elucidar el concepto de deseo en términos de la noción de 'una caracterización de deseabilidad'. Este trabajo es un intento de conectar, elucidar y, hasta cierto grado, modificar esas dos ideas.

Primero, se explican las nociones distintivas de *carencia* y de *necesidad* de alguien (§§ 3-5); luego se usan estas nociones para presentar una caracterización aproximada de una caracterización de deseabilidad (§ 6). La propuesta es que casi todas estas caracterizaciones buscan detener en un fin acordado la pregunta de por qué un agente tiene algún deseo caracterizando de manera objetiva el objeto de ese deseo, de modo tal que se comunique la percepción del agente de la deseabilidad de dicho objeto, revelando así su deseo como respuesta a esa deseabilidad. Más adelante se modifican algunos detalles de esa caracterización a la luz de la distinción de Stephen Schiffer entre "razón-produciendo deseos" y "razón-siguiendo deseos" (§ 11).

Hacia la caracterización final, el autor modifica una tesis fuerte de Anscombe acerca de la *necesidad* de haber logrado una caracterización de deseabilidad para entender la adscripción de un deseo específico a una persona (§-7). El autor critica también una concepción de deseo implícita en la discusión de Richard Taylor (en su libro *Good and Evil*) acerca del mito de Sísifo; con ello, se trata de aclarar las diferencias entre los deseos de seres humanos adultos y las disposiciones a "actuar" que se encuentran en otros animales (§§ 8-10).