J Value Inquiry (2012) 46:417–434
DOI 10.1007/s10790-013-9360-6

# The Normative Significance of Desires

**Dalia Drai**

Published online: 13 March 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

## 1 Introduction

My desire not to get wet motivates me to take an umbrella. The very same desire also justifies my doing so. This straightforward description is accepted as accurate in most ordinary contexts, less so in philosophical circles where we find highly influential arguments to the effect that my desire, whether or not motivating my action, lacks normative force.[1]

Our ordinary descriptions – taking desires as justifying actions – are adequate. In what follows there will be no direct argument in defense of this highly plausible connection between desire and action. However it will be shown that the arguments mounted in the philosophical literature against our ordinary talk about desires fail. In showing their inadequacy the thesis that desires are normatively significant will be advanced in two ways. Firstly there will be less motivation to deny the thesis that desires are normatively significant, and secondly, the details of the criticism will point towards a positive account of the normative force of desires.

Theses about normativity in discussions on practical reasoning are often formulated using the term "reasons for action." This is because the balance of the reasons for action determines whether the action should be done, and whether an action should be done is what normativity is about. Theses similar to the one

[1] J. Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 2; D. Parfit, "Reasons and Motivation", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1997: suppl., 71:99–130; W. Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place", in Quinn, Lawrence and Hursthouse (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 181–208; J. Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency", in his *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 46–66; T. Scanlon, *What we Owe to Each Other*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); M. Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 41–49.

D. Drai (✉)
Beer Sheva University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel
e-mail: ddrai@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

defended in this paper have been formulated using the notion of reasons for action in various ways. For example: desires are reasons for action, desires provide reasons for actions, desires are the source of reasons for action, and reasons for action are based on desires. There might be important differences between these different formulations, but for the purposes of this paper these differences are peripheral since they all guarantee that when S has a desire he (normally) has a reason to act according to it. Hence, the term "reasons for action" does not delineate the specific relation between desires and reasons for action.

According to Williams' internalism, reasons are based only on desires (in this paper the term "reason" will be used to mean "reason for action").[2] This position might be true but it is stronger than the claim put forward here. The thesis advanced is that in normal circumstances one's desires are relevant to what one has reason to do, so that the phenomenon of taking desires seriously as guides for action should be accepted at face value and saved from an error theory.

There are many powerful arguments against Williams' claim that desire is the *only* source of reason.[3] The objection in this paper is only to those cognitivists who insist that desires never provide reasons, or provide reasons only in very marginal cases, implying that one's desires are irrelevant to the question of what one should do. "Cognitivism" is used to refer to this strong claim and "Humeanism" to refer to the opposite claim that desires normally have normative power. The structure of the main arguments for the strong cognitivist claim is roughly the following. In the first stage the wide range of desires is divided into two kinds: on the one hand we have desires which are somehow defective, sometimes they are so defective we are unwilling to call them desires (brute desires, urges, thought independent desires, obsessive desires and so on); on the other hand we have more respectable desires (motivated desires, thought-dependent desires, reason-based desires, desires which are directed towards the good and so on). In the second stage we are invited to share the intuition that desires of the first kind do not have normative power, thereby we agree that only respectable desires can play a normative role. The third stage is to identify an essential element which is always present in the respectable desires and to claim that whenever it seems that a desire is normatively significant, it is not the desire but this essential element that does all the normative work. It is the thought upon which the desire depends, or the reason upon which the desire is based, or the good towards which the desire is directed which is normatively significant, and not the desire itself.

These arguments suffer from two faults. The first is diagnostic and consists of finding an element common to the respectable desires which is missing from the defective ones; and then explaining the defectiveness in terms of the lack of this element. This diagnosis will be called The Missing-Element Diagnosis, and it will

[2] See B. Williams, "Internal and External Reasons", in Harrison (ed.), *Rational Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[3] See J. Hampton, *The Authority of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); J. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason", in his *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); E. Millgram, *Practical Induction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); T. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Quinn, 1998, op. cit., pp. 181–208; Scanlon, 1998, op. cit., pp. 41–49.

be argued in this paper that it is mistaken. The second fault is a fallacy which will be called the Transfer Fallacy; and it consists in transferring a property that applies to an entity *A* to another entity *B*, because *B* makes an essential contribution to the obtaining of the property by *A*. A special case of this fallacy occurs when we transfer a property from the whole to one of its parts. In this case we attribute a property that applies to the compound, to one of its components, because the existence of the component has an essential role in the explanation of why the compound has the property. For example, if lacking a certain enzyme is the correct diagnosis of a disease, then this enzyme's existence plays an essential role in the explanation of the person's health. Still, attributing the property 'healthy' to this enzyme is unjustified and involves what is called here the Transfer Fallacy.

After elaborating the claim that desires are normatively significant in section 2, two representative arguments, Quinn's in section 3 and Dancy's in section 4 will be presented. The detailed criticism of these arguments will lend plausibility to the claim that a similar criticism applies to other cognitivist arguments which will be mentioned only briefly. In the fifth and final section an outlined account of the normative power of desires will be presented.

## 2 The Thesis Explained

"Desire" is used as a non-technical term, relatively close to the everyday sense of the term "want" (desire without the sexual connotations), as in:

S wants to drink a cup of coffee.
S wants to have a family of four kids.
S wants her friend to have tenure.
S wants peace in the Middle East.

In all these cases one has a desire. The desires are different in how they feel; in the role they play in one's mental life and in the ways in which they guide one's behavior. As these examples make clear, the class of mental states referred to as desires is much wider than those mental states expressed by saying "I just feel like it." However, it is probably narrower than the class of mental states referred to by the technical term 'pro-attitudes'. The use in this paper of the term desire is quite similar to Scheuler's use of the term 'proper desire'.[4] The argument here is not against the existence of a pro-attitude that is wholly cognitive. The aim is merely to defend the claim that non-cognitive pro-attitudes (specifically desires) have normative power.

There is no assumption in this paper that every time one acts intentionally one has a desire to act this way. On the contrary, the common sense truism that sometimes one does what one does not want to do is respected. Moreover, there is no assumption that every time one acts intentionally this act will serve one's desires. Therefore the debate between Humeans (about motivation) and motivational

[4] See G.F. Schueler, *Desire* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), pp. 29–38.

cognitivists is left open. This is as it should be, as the debate is substantial and not terminological.

The intuitive claim defended here is that desires, understood in the above pre-theoretical way, are in many natural contexts normatively significant: they are relevant in determining what one should do (or what one has reason to do). The question "what should one do?" can be asked from three perspectives:

1. **First person perspective** (what should *I* do?): In deliberating about what to do, one thinks about reasons for and against a possible action and negotiates between them.
2. **Second person perspective** (what should *you* do?): In recommending an action one thinks about reasons the agent has for this action (whether the agent considered those reasons in his deliberation or not).
3. **Third person perspective** (did *he do* what *he* should have done?): In justifying an action, one examines the reasons for which it was done and evaluates the action in light of those reasons, and in light of other reasons that the agent should have considered, but perhaps did not.

The thesis that desires are normatively significant means that they play an important role in each of those normative contexts. On the face of it the relevance of one's desires to what one has reasons to do is clearly manifested in all those contexts.

1. In deliberating whether to go to the party one takes into account the fact that one wants to have a quiet weekend. This desire might appear only in the background of the deliberation, sending to the foreground a representative such as, "It will be better for me to stay at home and rest."[5] It is true that desires do often effect deliberation in this way. However, sometimes the desire appears in the foreground of the deliberation as when one asks oneself if what one really wants to do this weekend is to rest, or whether one is just succumbing to laziness. Whether in the foreground or in the background, desires undoubtedly play an important part in deliberation.
2. In advising an agent not to drink the liquid in the bottle because it is petrol, one clearly takes into account the fact that the agent wants to drink gin and not petrol.
3. In justifying the agent's drinking paint, one will ask oneself whether wanting to drink paint (or wanting some other end that drinking the paint will serve, like proving that the paint is not poisonous) is a good reason to drink it, and whether the agent rightly balanced between this reason and other reasons for and against drinking paint.

In all these normative contexts the desires referred to contribute to the intelligibility and the reasonableness of the action. But some philosophers hold that the apparent relevance of desires in all these contexts is misleading and that desires do not have any normative role in these contexts. The most interesting and challenging arguments for this claim are presented by Quinn and Dancy. Quinn's argument will be discussed in the next section and Dancy's in the following.

[5] See P. Pettit and M. Smith, "Backgrounding Desire", *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 99, 564–592 (1990).

## 3 Quinn: Desires, as Opposed to Beliefs, are not Normatively Significant

Quinn's starting point is that if desires are conceived as dispositions to act they cannot rationalize action: "How can the fact that we are set up to go in a certain direction make it (even *prima facie*) rational to decide to go in that direction?"[6] The general issue here is according to Quinn: "whether pro and con attitudes conceived as functional states that dispose us to act have any power to rationalize those acts." (*Ibid*) it is not clear what exactly Quinn means by his technical term "rationalize," but here are my interpretative assumptions:

1. Mental states like beliefs (or desires, if they are construed as cognitive states), can rationalize; Quinn is not claiming that objective facts rationalize action independently of our attitudes to those facts. In this sense Quinn is not anti-psychologistic about reasons (unlike Dancy).
2. Mental states rationalize actions by showing "something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action- some feature, consequence of the action the agent wanted…"[7] This interpretation of the notion of rationalization will be labeled "the psychological reading" and it fits with what T Schapiro calls: "a very modest notion of rationalization."[8]
3. When Quinn writes that a mental state rationalizes only when correct, he vacillates between the objective reading rejected in 1 and the psychological reading suggested in 2.[9]

The psychological reading of rationalization does more justice to Quinn's argument since Quinn's aim is to show that desires, as conceived by Humeans, cannot rationalize; but cognitive desires (those accompanied by a suitable belief) do rationalize. Quinn's conclusion seems to be that rationalization is a normative role that beliefs can do while (Humean) desires cannot. This conclusion is exactly the target of the criticism presented in this section.

Quinn wants to show that if desires are non-cognitive dispositions they cannot rationalize an action In order to understand what Quinn means by a non-cognitive functional state, one can look at his (somewhat bizarre) example of the state that disposes one to turn on all the turned off radios that one sees. The person in question doesn't turn the radio on in order to hear something. In fact she has nothing to say in favor of turning on the radio, not even that it gives her pleasure. This is Quinn's example of a non-cognitive functional state, and he opens his argument with the premise that this functional state has no normative power. It may explain the person's turning on the radio, but it cannot rationalize her action. The premise that a crazy desire, like the above bizarre functional state, does not have any normative power is accepted. But there is a further question – a diagnostic one – relating to the source of the craziness of this desire, and to the implications drawn regarding the

[6] Quinn, 1998, op.cit., p. 189.

[7] D. Davidson, "Actions Reasons and Causes" in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 3.

[8] T. Schapiro, "The Nature of Inclination", *Ethics*, Vol. 119, 229–256 (2009).

[9] Quinn, 1998, op. cit,. p. 185.

normative force of normal desires (desires that are not crazy). At this stage the distinction between crazy desires and normal ones is methodological. Both sides agree about the claim that crazy desires lack normative power, so this claim serves as a premise in the argument, the disagreement is about the conclusion of the argument, whether normal desires are normative. Quinn moves from the premise that crazy desires lack normative power to the conclusion that normal desires lack normative power through the Missing-Element Diagnosis. The missing element, according to Quinn is the belief that there is something good in turning the radio on, or that turning the radio on is the right thing to do, or that there is a reason to turn the radio on.

Quinn's insight is very important: a desire is normatively significant only if it is not a mere tendency, in order to distinguish desires from mere disposition to act, Quinn rightly looks for the ties between the desire and other mental states, including cognitive mental states. However, Quinn takes this insight too far in explicating the distinction between a desire and a mere tendency by means of a specific cognitive component that desires have and mere tendencies lack. Quinn's diagnosis will be criticized by showing that the problem with the crazy desire is not that it lacks a specific component, but that it is completely isolated from the agent's mental states. A normal desire is connected in various ways to various mental states, but it is wrong to look for one specific connection to one specific mental state and then base the distinction between a desire and a mere tendency on the presence or absence of this specific connection. Given that both a normal desire and a crazy one involve dispositions to act, it will be suggested that the normative difference between them lies in the structures of the dispositions involved.

The diagnosis proposed is that a crazy desire lacks normative force because it is isolated from the agent's other mental states. By contrast a normal desire is integrated in the sense that it is connected in various ways with the agent's beliefs (factual and evaluative) and desires. Saying that a disposition is well integrated is not to be confused with saying that it is specific. If Alf turns the radio on only on dates that are prime numbers except when he hears a bus or rain or whatever, it does not mean that the disposition is integrated.

In what follows it will be shown that it is the isolation of the disposition to turn on the radio (and not the lack of an evaluative belief) that makes it normatively impotent.

### 3.1 If the Disposition is Integrated Enough the Evaluative Belief is not Necessary

Imagine that Alf is in the functional state that Quinn describes and he approaches a radio that is turned off. Before he reaches his hand to turn it on, I tell him to stop because his friend is asleep and it will wake him up. According to Quinn's description of the disposition, Alf will not even stop and reconsider his intention to turn the radio on; he just does it as if no objection was raised. This by itself is very strange, but it still does not mean that Alf's functional state is not a normal desire. It might mean that it is a very strong desire; much stronger than Alf's desire not to wake up his friend, so that the fact that his friend is asleep is not even a reason to

rethink the idea. In more extreme cases Alf might hear that turning on the radio will kill his friend, or that his friend will kill him if he turns the radio on. In all these cases the same will happen, Alf will turn on the radio as if nothing happened. This is what is implied by Quinn's description of the disposition.

The fairness of this reading of Quinn's crazy desire can be challenged. It may seem that it ignores the following important clause in his description of the desire: "Given the perception that a radio in my vicinity is off, I try, all other things being equal, to get it turned on."[10] Of course in the extreme cases described, other things are not equal. Taking this clause seriously might change our description of Quinn's bizarre functional state: Given the perception that a radio in my vicinity is off, I try, as long as it does not conflict with my other desires, values and beliefs, to turn it on. In other words I turn the radio on only when it is not unreasonable to do so.

This is an integrated disposition, but if this reading of Quinn is correct, then the first step of his argument fails. Such a desire is indeed bizarre but not bizarre enough. The desire to turn radios on, according to such a reading of Quinn, is similar to many plausible desires, like for example Ben's inclination to caress a dog whenever he sees a dog around. This desire is integrated enough; Ben will not caress a dangerous dog and will not caress a dog if he is in a hurry because of an emergency. To claim that such a desire lacks normative power is to beg the question against Humeans. Quinn's strange functional state can serve as the starting point of an argument against Humeans only if it is more bizarre than Ben's desire to caress every dog in his vicinity, that is, if it is bizarre enough to elicit a universal agreement about its non–normativity. But such an agreement, is elicited only when the disposition is isolated. Whether or not Quinn meant his bizarre functional state to be isolated or integrated, the only reading under which his argument does not beg the question is that in which the disposition is isolated.

To sum up, the reaction to this important objection to the interpretation of Quinn presents the following dilemma: If the desire to turn the radio on is isolated, then it has no normative power. But this deficiency stems from its isolation, not from the lack of a cognitive component. If, alternatively, the desire is integrated, then it is much like normal desires. The question whether normal desires have normative force is exactly the one at issue here; a negative answer to which should be the result of Quinn's argument, not presupposed by it.

But still, Quinn might claim that Alf's complex disposition is different in an important way from Ben's. Alf cannot point to an aim that the action serves, or more generally Alf cannot point to (desire-independent) desirability characteristics of his turning the radio on, while Ben can. But this difference is illusory; Ben does not have to hold an evaluative belief in favor of caressing dogs. He might hold such beliefs and he might not; Ben might lack the evaluative belief that he should caress the dog because he did not think about his behavior in these terms. This does not imply that when asked why he caressed the dog he is speechless. He might give one of the following answers: I want to caress the dog; I feel like it, the dog looked at me in a certain way, I love dogs etc. Those answers do not have to include the belief that this is what Ben should do, or has a reason to do. Ben's disposition to caress

[10] Quinn, 1998, op. cit., p. 189, emphasis added.

every dog that he sees is connected in various ways to Ben's other mental states; this is enough to make sense of his caressing any dog that is in front of him. Ben's desire rationalizes his action without being accompanied by the suitable evaluative belief. Notice that although Ben's desire is not connected to a specific cognitive state, it is connected to various beliefs; this is implied by the fact that Ben's desire is well integrated. This cognitive component is arguably necessary for the desire's coherence and hence for its normative force; and this observation could be formulated as the cognitive component **adds** the normative force. However, this is not the same as saying that the cognitive component **owns** the normative force. The difference is crucial, in the second formulation the normative force is attributed to the cognitive component and this involves the Transfer Fallacy.

### 3.2 If the Disposition is Isolated Adding the Evaluative Belief will not Help

The following scenario will show that an evaluative belief is also not sufficient. Alf has an isolated disposition to turn on the radio, but this time he also has an evaluative belief about turning the radio on. He believes that it is highly important to turn radios on, or that he should turn the radio on or that he has very good reasons to turn the radio on. It is claimed here that when attached to an isolated disposition, this belief does not give the crazy desire the normative power that it lacks. This is so as long as we think of this belief as similar to the crazy desire; Alf's belief about the value of turning the radio on is not derived from other beliefs, it is basic and he has nothing to say in favor of this evaluative belief. In this case there is no normative difference between the crazy desire on its own and the crazy desire plus the crazy belief.

It is not clear from Quinn's paper how he would respond to this criticism of his diagnosis. Quinn would have to say that the crazy belief does show the favorable light in which the agent saw the action. Hence in this minimal sense the crazy belief rationalizes the action while the crazy desire does not. But what favorable light is really shed on the action by the belief "I should do it"? Do I really understand Alf better now? An isolated belief sheds no more light on the action than an isolated desire. As long as I cannot connect the belief or desire with Alf's other mental states, I cannot understand Alf enough in order to make his turning the radio on intelligible. The minimal intelligibility that is supplied by Alf's belief that he should turn on the radio is supplied also by Alf's desire to turn the radio on. It seems that as long as we remain within the limits of the psychological reading of the notion of rationalization, an isolated belief has no normative advantage over an isolated desire. Moreover, our hesitation whether a completely isolated desire is really a desire, is present also in the case of belief. If Alf only acts on this belief, namely, turn the radio on whenever it is possible, but cannot say anything about what is involved in his belief, we will hesitate whether to call his functional state a belief.

It is only when we move a bit toward the stronger reading of rationalization that the existence of a normative advantage of beliefs over desires seems plausible. The crazy belief rationalizes because if it were correct, turning the radio on would have been the right thing to do; and the notion of correctness applies to beliefs and not to desires. It is assumed here that there is stronger sense of justification on which the

weaker notion of rationalization depends. A belief rationalizes because when it is true (or justified) it justifies in the strong objective sense. So when Alf believes that he ought to turn the radio on, he sees his action as justified in the strong-objective sense. However, when Alf only desires to turn the radio on, he does not see his action as justified, and this explains the normative difference between beliefs and desires. So according to this response even an isolated belief rationalizes an action. This response seems faithful to Quinn's view that there are objective constraints even on the modest conception of rationalization.[11] The constraint is that a mental state rationalizes only if it can be correct. But a Humean would question this constraint, and the role of Quinn's bizarre functional state is to address this question. Mental states to which the notion of correctness cannot be applied look like the bizarre functional state, and like this state they cannot rationalize. The criticism presented here of Quinn's diagnosis showed that the normative insignificance of the crazy desire does not support the constraint; and without support to this constraint Quinn cannot answer the objection that adding a normative belief does not rationalize Alf's behavior.

### 3.3 Why Does Integration Matter to Normativity?

In order to answer this question, consider again our three main normative contexts:

1. Desires play an important part in deliberation, whether in the background or in the foreground. Quinn's crazy desire cannot play this role exactly because of its isolation, being in the functional state that disposes me to turn the radio on whenever I see that it is turned off makes deliberation irrelevant. Whatever my considerations for or against will be, I will turn on the radio. This is because my disposition is isolated, it always directs me from believing it is possible to turn on the radio to the action, no matter what thoughts or reasoning occurred.
2. If Quinn's agent was my friend and had asked my advice whether to turn the radio on, I would, from the perspective of a caring advisor, wish her to seek professional help. I don't really take her desire into account. I take this desire as an indication that my friend is in bad shape, and not as a reason to satisfy it. I treat the crazy desire in this patronizing way, not because it is directed to a non-fitting object, nor because it is not accompanied by the suitable belief about the value of turning radios on, but because this desire is completely unconnected to the agent's mental life. By contrast, in normal circumstances, if a friend asks my advice whether to turn on the radio, given that this is what she desires, I will take her desire into account. I may be puzzled about this desire, but as a caring advisor I will recommend to turn the radio on, as long as I don't know of any reason against it. Notice that as an advisor I do not care whether the agent attaches to the desire the suitable belief. What I care about is the kind of mental state the desire is and the place it occupies in the psychology of the agent. This means that what matters to the advisor about a desire relates to its integration. If the desire is completely isolated, the advisor will not take it into account; in the

[11] See Quinn, 1998, op.cit.

other cases she will. That the advisor will take the desire into account does not mean that the recommendation will always be to satisfy the desire. It means that the desire of the agent will be taken into consideration together with other desires and facts.

3. We are dealing in this section with an internal conception of justification, the external conception of justification will be addressed in section 5, and internal justification reveals the favorable light the agent had on his action. Quinn's crazy desire cannot fill a role in such internal justification because of its isolation. The crazy desire is not intelligible enough as a propositional attitude, because it is not connected to other propositional attitudes of the agent. Functional states that cannot be interpreted as propositional attitudes cannot shed light on the agent's actions. They are not intelligible enough in order to make sense of an action. By contrast, a normal desire can make sense of an action by connecting the action to other desires and beliefs of the agent. Because the normal desire is connected to various mental states of the agent it plays a role in revealing the agent's perspective on the action. The important point to note here is, again, that what prevents a crazy desire from fulfilling a role in the context of justification is not the lack of an essential ingredient like the belief that turning on the radio is good, but the total isolation of the crazy desire from other desires and beliefs of the agent.

We saw that in all the three contexts, what makes Quinn's crazy desire normatively impotent is its isolation and not the lack of a cognitive ingredient. This concludes the criticism of Quinn's diagnosis (his first error). In order to illustrate Quinn's second error (the Transfer Fallacy) his argument is presented schematically:

1. A non-cognitive functional state lacks normative power.
2. The cognitive element is an essential element in the explanation of the fact that a normal desire has (or seems to have) normative power.
3. It is the cognitive component of the desire that does the normative work. (The cognitive component is the belief that there is something good in satisfying this desire.)
4. Hence, desires do not have normative power.

Quinn's Missing-Element Diagnosis of the defective desire serves as the second premise in his argument.[12] But even if this second premise were correct, the third and final stage of the argument sketched above exhibits a Transfer Fallacy. The argument is analogous to the following clearly fallacious argument:

1. A non-salty stew (a desire without the accompanying belief) is not tasty (normatively significant).
2. The existence of salt (the belief) is an essential part of the explanation of the fact that a salty stew (normal desire) seems tasty ("salty" is used here to mean having a suitable amount of salt).

[12] Raz commits the same mistake (see for example Raz op.cit. 58) and rests his argument against the normative force of desires on the same grounds.

3. It is the salt that is tasty.
4. Hence, stews are not really tasty.

In the case of the non-tasty stew, we might assume that the diagnosis is indeed in terms of a missing element. The absence of salt is responsible for the fact that the stew is not tasty, hence the second premise is true, but the move from the second premise to the third is a case of the Transfer Fallacy: we transfer the property (tasty) which belongs to the stew, to the salt.

This step is flawed because alternative explanations for the fact that stews with salt are tasty whereas stews without salt are not; are much more plausible than the claim that it is the salt that is tasty. We can say that although neither the salt nor the meat is tasty by itself, the combination of the two is. Or we can say that the salt, although not tasty by itself, helps to integrate the flavors of all the other ingredients of the stew. The only explanation that validates the argument is the one which identifies the taste of the salty stew with the taste of the salt alone. This explanation is absurd in the specific case of the salt: we have all tasted salt and we know that it does not have the same taste as the salty stew. The moment the absurd explanation is rejected the argument fails.

In much the same way Quinn's argument depends on the type of explanation we offer for the fact that crazy desires lack normative power. Quinn opts for an explanation which is based on the claim that all the normative work is done by the cognitive component of desires .This explanation is analogous to the absurd explanation in the case of the salt. However, in the case of Quinn's argument the absurd explanation is not as absurd as in the salt-argument. Remember that in the salt-argument the absurdity of the explanation was due to the fact that salt by itself is not tasty (or at least is not as tasty as the stew). But evaluative beliefs do have normative power. Moreover, the underlying assumption, namely, that the evaluative belief attached to the desire has the same normative force as the (normal) desire itself, is not absurd at all. Nevertheless, it will still be argued, that this assumption is wrong.

Accounts of desire which simply identify desires with the belief that it will be good to satisfy them are ignored. First, such accounts present no objection to the present argument since, if a desire is identical to a belief and a belief has normative power, so does the desire which is identical to it. Second, such an account runs against Quinn's argument, which presupposes a conceptual separation between the desire (the normal one) and the belief that it is good to satisfy it. This separation is needed in order to enable us to compare the normative force of the belief alone with the normative force of the desire combined with the belief (this is analogous to tasting the salt by itself and comparing its taste to the taste of the salty stew). If this separation is impossible either because the desire is identical to the belief, or because it is impossible to believe that something is good without desiring it, then Quinn's argument cannot even start.

The move from the second premise to the third assumes that the normative significance (the taste) of a normal desire (the salty stew) is identical to the normative significance of the evaluative belief (the taste of the salt). It will be shown now that this assumption is wrong. Imagine a case where one believes that there is

something good in x, yet does not want it. Here's a trivial example: Jacob believes that there is something good in having a glass of beer now, it will be relaxing, he likes the taste and so on; but he doesn't want it. In order to compare the normative power of the belief to the normative power of the desire we need to examine the difference in their role in the three main normative contexts mentioned earlier.

1. Deliberation: If Jacob asks himself whether to have beer now, his desire may enter as a further consideration. If he doesn't want to drink now, he will think about the taste of the beer, the change in mood it brings about and decide accordingly whether to drink or not. But when he wants to drink, his deliberation might be different, it might, that is, include also the fact that he wants to drink. This consideration needs only the assumption that the desire might sometimes come to the foreground of the deliberation. There is no need to deny the claim that desires are generally in the background.[13]
2. Advice: Suppose Jacob believes that the beer will be tasty and relaxing, but he does not want to drink it now. Remember that the possibility of this case is crucial for the absurd explanation and hence for Quinn's argument. Suppose, further, that Abraham believes that the beer will be tasty and relaxing and he does want to drink it. Imagine that Jacob and Abraham are your friends. You know all the relevant facts about them and their specific circumstances, and you want the best for them. If they ask your advice whether to drink beer now, you will, in standard circumstances, recommend the beer to Abraham, but hesitate to offer the same recommendation to Jacob.
3. Justification: Since motivational cognitivism is not denied here, it might be assumed that both Jacob and Abraham drink the beer. Jacob will be motivated by his beliefs whereas Abraham will be motivated by both his beliefs and his desire. They are both justified in drinking the beer, but the justifications will not be the same: when one justifies Jacob's drinking, one will refer only to Jacob's beliefs, whereas in justifying Abraham one will refer also to Abraham's desire to drink. In the case where both of them don't drink the beer, Jacob's not drinking the beer is justified by his lack of desire; while Abraham's not drinking the beer still waits for justification. The considerations so far apply not only to trivial questions like whether to drink beer now, but to our most important choices as well. Think of the dilemma whether to take morphine and die painlessly or remain lucid in the last days of your life. We need not assume a cognitive difference between the one who chooses the morphine and the one who chooses painful lucidity. It is highly plausible, that only their different desires make their choices reasonable.

In all three contexts, it is clear that the belief without the desire (although not normatively impotent) plays a different role than the belief accompanied by the desire. This is enough in order to establish that the absurd explanation does not work. If the absurd explanation does not work, then there is no justification for the move from the second assumption of Quinn's argument (The Missing-Element Diagnosis of the crazy desires) to the third assumption (that it is the cognitive

[13] Pettit and Smith ,1990, op. cit., pp. 564–592.

component of a desire that does all the normative work.) In sum even if Quinn's diagnosis in terms of a missing element were correct, the argument would fail since it involves the Transfer Fallacy.

## 4 Dancy: Desires, as Opposed to Objective Facts, are not Normatively Significant

Being impressed with the ties between desires and cognitive states, Quinn and other cognitivists try to find a cognitive replacement for the desire, and this move, as has been shown, is misguided. Quinn is a psychologist about reasons, in the sense that he holds that mental states have normative significance, but only if they are cognitive. For him only beliefs are normatively significant; and desires are not, because they are not beliefs. But an attack on the normative significance of desires might come from another perspective, according to which mental states, whether cognitive or not, are not normatively significant (except in some marginal cases). Such is Dancy's perspective, he is an anti-psychologist (or an objectivist) in the sense that for him only objective facts have normative power and beliefs have normative power only derivatively through the facts that they represent, if they are true. This difference is relevant to my paper because it leads to different arguments against the normative power of desires. Anti-psychologist arguments also start with the classification of desires into two classes, defective and normal; noting thereafter that the defective ones lack normative power. But the diagnosis suggested for the non-normativity of the defective desires is different. The problem of the defective desires, according to the objectivist, is not that they lack a cognitive element, but that they lack an objective element, namely an objective reason. This element, which is present in normal desires, is then suggested as an objective replacement for desires in every normative context.

Dancy offers an elaborated argument of this kind which he sees as an improvement on Quinn's, but both share a similar structure and hence similar structural fallacies. Here are the essentials of Dancy's argument:

1. Some desires are based on reasons.
2. Only a desire that is based on reasons can be normatively significant.
3. When a desire is normatively significant; it is the desire's reason that does the normative work and not the desire itself.
4. Hence, desires do not have normative power.[14]

The first premise is not addressed here; the focus is on the second premise and on the move from it to the third premise. It will be shown that the faults in Quinn's argument reappear in Dancy's. The second premise involves a diagnostic mistake. It gives a wrong account of the fact that pathological desires do not have normative power and suggests that a pathological desire lacks normative significance because it is not based on reasons. The second fault is the transition from the second premise

[14] In Parfit, 1997, op.cit., his argument to the effect that desires never provide reasons is roughly the same.

to the third and to the fourth. It exhibits, as in Quinn's argument, the Transfer Fallacy. Quinn tried to infer from the (alleged) fact that a desire, which lacks the corresponding belief does not provide reasons for action, that it is only the belief that does the normative work. Similarly, Dancy infers from the (alleged) fact that a desire which is not based on reasons does not provide reasons for action; that it is only the reason (of the desire) that does the normative work. Both deny the normativity of the desire itself: Quinn by offering a cognitive replacement for the desire, and Dancy by offering an objective replacement for it. Both agree that though a desire seems to rationalize an action, it is ultimately an illusion, because there is some essential component of the desire that does the normative work.

The first mistake in Dancy's argument lies in the second premise which expresses a Missing-Element Diagnosis of pathological desires. The element that is missing according to Dancy is a reason for the desire. This diagnosis is mistaken since the distinction between pathological desires and normal ones does not coincide with the distinction between desires that are not based on reasons and those that are. For example, one's desire for coffee gives one a reason to drink coffee, but it is highly controversial whether this desire is based on reasons, and whether the appeal to pleasure or contentment helps.[15] The appeal to pleasure or contentment does not help if you think about it in the way that Dancy suggests in the following sentence: "But we desire contentment for a reason, namely what it is like to be contended…"[16] This empties the notion of reason completely. Even Quinn's urge to turn the radio on is based on a reason in this deflationary sense of reason: the agent desires to turn the radio on for a reason, namely what it is like to turn the radio on. If turning the radio on would be like counting blades of grass, maybe he would not have wanted to do it.

We saw that a desire that is not based on reasons can be normative. Worse still for Dancy's position, a desire based on reasons can be pathological, in the sense of not providing reasons for action at all. For example, most people would agree that *S* desiring to kill an innocent person does not provide *S* with a reason to kill him. However this desire might be based on a reason: this person is too noisy and disturbs *S*'s sleep, or again the desire might be based on the reason of what it is like to kill an innocent person. This pathological desire will not be entered into here; my contention is that at least in the loose sense of reasons for desire used by Dancy, this pathological desire is based on reasons. In sum, the fact that a desire is not based on reasons is not the right diagnosis of its pathology and this is the first error.

The second error is Dancy's move from the second premise, that only a desire that is based on reasons can rationalize an action, to the third premise, that it is the desire's reason that rationalizes the action. As it stands the move is a case of the Transfer Fallacy. The argument will work only if we add another premise; call it Dancy's Principle, which states that:

> If an attitude A which is based on the reason R, gives reason to another attitude $A'$; then it is R that gives reason to $A'$.

[15] See D. Sobel, "Pain for Objectivists: The Case of Matters of Mere Taste", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 8, 437–457 (2005).

[16] Dancy, 2000, op. cit., p. 42.

Applying this principle to a desire $A$ which is based on a reason $R$, brings Dancy to the conclusion that it is $R$ that rationalizes the actions that $A$ seems to rationalize. $A$ by itself has no normative power. But consider the following counter-examples to Dancy's Principle:

1. Suppose that $R$ is good evidence for a theory $A$, and we accept $A$ on the basis of this evidence. Since a theory always transcends the evidence,[17] $A$ implies statements that are not implied by $R$. This is true for deductive implications as well as for inductive ones. Let $A'$ be such a statement. Having accepted the theory $A$ we have a reason to accept $A'$. But in case we do not accept $A$, either because we did not think about it yet or because we accepted another theory which fits the partial evidence as well as $A$; we have no reason (Assuming that the other theory does not imply $A'$) to accept $A'$. The fact that we accepted theory $A$ changes our normative status *vis-à-vis* $A'$; and this is exactly what Dancy's principle denies. The same might be true about desires: the fact that one has a certain desire changes one's normative status *vis-à-vis* actions that promote this desire. The evidence for a theory cannot replace the theory; and similarly, reasons for a desire cannot replace the desire. This shows that the alleged fact that desires have normative force only if they are based on reasons does not support the claim that desires do not add normative force over and above the reasons that justify them.
2. Assume that $S$ knows all the axioms of Euclidean geometry (call their conjunction $R$). Assume further that $A'$ is a theorem that is derivable from $R$ *via* a complicated proof, and that $S$ missed the class in which it was taught. Does she have a reason to believe that $A'$? Dancy's principle implies an affirmative answer to this question: Let's assume that the first step in the proof is $A_1$, it is evident that $S$ has a (sufficient) reason to believe that $A_1$. Were Dancy's principle correct, the reason to believe that $A_2$ (the next step in the proof) is still $R$, because $A_1$ does not do any normative work; and so on till we reach $A'$. Hence $R$ is a reason to believe that $A'$, and $S$, who knows $R$, though ignorant of the proof, has a reason to believe $A'$. But the affirmative answer to the question is highly implausible; first no criticism of $S'$s rationality can be raised if $S$ does not believe that $A'$; and second, if $S$ does believe that $A'$, the fact that she knows the axioms is not enough to explain her belief in $A'$.
3. Moving from examples taken from the theoretical realm to an example from the practical one, let's say that $S$ decided to do $A'$, and that her decision ($A$) is based on reasons ($R$). It seems that before deciding to do $A'$, $S$ was under less normative obligation to do $A'$ than she is now. It is not easy to explain why, but the intuition is quite compelling.[18] Even if there is a conceptual link between

[17] See C.G. Hempel, "The Theoretician's Dilemma", in H. Feigl, M. Scriven and G. Maxwell (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Vol. 2), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958).

[18] See D. Velleman, "Deciding How to Decide" in Cuility and Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); R. Holton, "Rational Resolve", *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 113, 507–535 (2004); and M. Schroeder, "Means-end coherence, stringency, and subjective reasons", *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 143, 223–248 (2009).

> being a reason to do $A'$ and being a reason to decide to do $A'$, a reason to do is not always a reason to decide to do and *vice versa*. Hence, the decision to do might be a reason to do without being a reason to decide. (This is similar to a promise being a reason to do $A$ without being a reason to promise; although generally we promise to do things which we have some reason to do anyway).

The aim of these counter-examples is to show that on the face of it, Dancy's Principle is wrong, or at least that much work has to be done in order to defend it, given the counter-examples. Notice also that this principle entails the claim that, if a state is based on reasons, it cannot be a reason. It follows that mental attitudes, cannot be reasons since they are based on reasons. This claim is plausible only if strong objectivism about reasons, according to which only objective facts are reasons and not the mental attitudes towards them, is true. But this strong objectivism is supposed to be the final conclusion of Dancy's argument and cannot be used to ground his principle.

Another way to justify the transition from premise 2 to premise 3 is by claiming that even if the principle fails for beliefs and decisions, it is true about desires. Desires cannot bring to the balance of reasons more than the reasons that ground them. But this claim should be based on some relevant difference between desires on the one hand, and decisions and beliefs on the other. The only difference is that when we adopt a decision (or a belief) we are more active than when we adopt a desire; active in the sense that our reason is more involved in this process, not in the sense that we can decide (or believe) at will. Such a difference does indeed exist, however Dancy cannot exploit this difference, because admitting it is tantamount to admitting that decisions are based on reasons while desires are not, and this contradicts the first premise of Dancy's argument.

As long as Dancy's principle is not established, (either in a general formulation or applying specifically for desires), the transition from premise 2 (the diagnosis) to premise 3 is similar to Quinn's Transfer Fallacy. This time the normative power is attributed not to a component of the desire itself, but to a component of a property of the desire. The property of the desire is that it is based on reasons, and the component of this property is the reason itself. As in Quinn's case, we are led to commit the fallacy by the diagnosis: we are so convinced that the pathology of the non-normative desires is due to the absence of X, that we conclude that X is responsible for the normativity of normal desires, in the sense that X has normative power and the desire does not.

## 5 Towards a Positive Account

As established in section 3, the right diagnosis of the defectiveness of crazy desires has to do with the fact that they are not well integrated in the subject's mind and not connected enough to her other desires and beliefs. The diagnosis presented here can explain why pathological desires often seem to us ungrounded by reasons; in other words, why Dancy's diagnosis has an air of plausibility. When a desire is completely cut off from other mental states of the subject, the subject fails to supply

reasons for her desire; she has no answer to the question, what do you want it for. The subject will not be able to say anything in favor of this desire (or its content); as the only candidates for a good answer inevitably connect the desire to her other mental states. For example in explaining my desire to go to the market by pointing to the fact that the fruits there are better, I connect my desire to go to the market with my desire for good fruits and to my beliefs about the market. The more I have to say about my desire to go to the market, the more this desire is integrated with my other mental states. In a similar way, the diagnosis presented explains the initial plausibility of Quinn's diagnosis as well.

Showing that both Quinn and Dancy are wrong in their diagnoses is enough for the negative purpose of this paper. Moreover, it has been shown in the previous sections that the proposed diagnosis, namely, that crazy desires are completely isolated, explains their lack of normative power. This diagnosis of the pathological desires in terms of their isolation from other mental attitudes points the way to a positive account of the normative power of desires in terms of their integration in the agent's mind. Of course, more work has to be done in order to explain how normal desires are integrated, what kinds of connections to other desires and beliefs constitute this integration, and how in general integration is connected to normativity.

In conclusion the strongest objection to the proposed diagnosis will be addressed: what about those desires that are very well integrated in the subject's mind, cohere with her normative and descriptive beliefs, as well as with her other desires, the subject takes them into consideration in her deliberations about what to do in a way that makes her behavior according to them intelligible; and yet these desires are silly or immoral? If the diagnosis of the defective desires in terms of their isolation from other mental states is correct, then this agent's desires do have normative power. But this, according to the objection, is absurd: people do not have any reason to do silly or immoral things. This charge of absurdity requires further investigation.

Let's start with the silly desires. The repertoire is well known: Quinn's agent wants to turn the radio on; Rawls' agent wants to count blades of grass and Raz's agent paints potatoes green. Those silly desires lack connection to other mental attitudes of the subject. Now we are invited to imagine those desires well integrated in the subject's mind, and ask ourselves what will happen to their normative status. According to the proposed diagnosis their normative status will change (improve). According to the objection outlined above this change in normative status is absurd. In what follows there will be an attempt to mitigate the charge of absurdity and it will be advanced in three stages.

First, note that it is quite hard to imagine how a desire to paint potatoes green is well integrated in the subject's mind. It is easy to imagine someone painting potatoes green, but harder to conceive a coherent place for this desire in people as we know them. This difficulty is part of what makes this desire a good example of a silly desire.

Second, we can try harder and imagine this desire well integrated in a person's mind: it is a relaxing hobby, green is a beautiful color and a collection of green potatoes is pleasant to the eye and so forth. The more we integrate this desire in the subject's mind the less silly this desire seems. It becomes more similar to the desire

to play golf or to meditate. Consequently, there is no absurdity in the claim that this desire provides reason for action, exactly like the desire to play golf provides reason to play golf or the desire to meditate provides reason to meditate.

Third, the objector will point to the possibility that the integration of the desire to paint potatoes green does not render this desire less silly. It might happen, so the objector says, that we will succeed in relating this desire to other mental states of the agent and that those other mental states are just as silly. The subject wants to paint apples black, she is convinced that what she is doing adds color to the world, and she admires her neighbor who painted his entire garden purple. It is not clear that there is a genuine possibility here, such that on the one hand the desire to paint potatoes is so well integrated in the subject's mind that it is intelligible to us as a desire; but on the other hand this case does not collapse into the second case making the activity of painting potatoes quite similar to gardening. For the sake of argument, let's assume that such a case exists: the subject is engaged in a coherent but silly life project, a project that coheres with all her other mental attitudes. In this alleged case this person is so different from us that there is no absurdity in the claim that the actions she has reasons to do are very different from the actions we have reasons to do. On the contrary, this contention is much more plausible than insisting that this person has a reason to read *Ulysses* only because we have.

The case of immoral desires may be treated in the same way as the silly desires. However, the third stage where we have to admit that the reasons which a completely immoral person has are different than the reasons we (relatively moral persons) have, is harder to swallow. An internalist like Williams will have no problem with admitting the claim that immoral persons can have immoral reasons, but the thesis defended in this paper is consistent with a less radical internalism that makes the claim about immoral reasons easier to swallow. According to this less radical internalism, desires provide reasons, but they are not the only source of reasons, morality is another source. Hence, the immoral person has reasons to do immoral things but he also has other reasons that conflict with them, so the balance of his reasons might point to the moral action. This position is similar to the position most empiricists accept in the theoretical realm; perception (desire) is the main source of reasons for beliefs (actions), but logic (morality) is another source of reasons. This analogy is misleading since the role of logic in theoretical reason is completely different from the role of morality in the practical realm. However, there is no argument against this quasi-internalist position in this paper, so the response that is based on it cannot be dismissed. The important thing to note is that even if morality is another (and external) source of reasons, this is not a threat for the thesis defended in this paper, that desire is a source of reasons for action.