
Desire, Action and Affect

Mathilde Cappelli*¹, Rachel Frenette*², Elodie Boissard*³, and Gaïa Vu Ngoc*⁴

¹Thumos (Université de Genève) – Suisse

²CNRS, IHPST – Université Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne – France

³CNRS, IHPST – Université Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne – France

⁴CAPHI – Université de Rennes I – France

Résumé

It is common to define desires as motivational attitudes. Such a definition has two implications. First, this motivational view should be comprehensive enough to fully capture the nature of desires. Second, desires should be able to explain many, if not all, of our actions and behavioral tendencies. Yet it seems like desires can neither be accurately reduced to a motivational attitude, nor can they explain all actions. In order to prove this, we will first defend that the strength of a desire should be separated from its causal power, that is its capacity to trigger action. Then, we will consider the examples of sexual and addictive desires to show that what characterizes them must also be in terms of their affective and phenomenological profiles. Having therefore shown that desires are something more than motivations to act, we will then argue that what motivates us cannot be reduced to desires either: people can be motivated in an emotionally distinct sense, such as when they care about or value things.

Mathilde Cappelli: Towards a new view of sexual desire

It is striking that while much philosophical analysis has been devoted to the moral and normative dimensions of sexual desire, very little attention has been paid to its nature. In this talk, I address the question of how we should understand the nature of sexual desire. I attempt to show that sexual desire cannot be understood as a behavioural desire, but that its nature is, at least in part, essentially affective, placing it in the category of "affective desire". Going one step further, I will explore the hypothesis that sexual desire could be best understood as an affective or emotional state rather than as a desire. I will suggest- in the light of an attitudinal theory of emotions (Deonna & Teroni 2012; Bayne 2009; Ballard 2020) – that sexual desire is sensitive to certain values. In this sense, when one feels sexual desire, one grasps values such as "sexually attractive", "sexually tempting", "sexually interesting", "sexually fascinating", "sexually promising", and so on. In short, sexual desire would be an affective response to certain 'sexual' values. In this sense, the role of sexual desire would not be limited to the disposition to act or choose, but sexual desire would "shape what is perceptually salient".

Rachel Frenette: The experience of addictive desires

Addictive desires (cravings) are frequently thought to be a subtype of desires that are intense and oriented towards drug-consumption (Tiffany & Wray 2012). But as cravings oftentimes lead one to act pathologically, that is, to act addictively, some take it they must be constitutively different to be marked as pathological. One hypothesis on the pathologicalness of cravings claims that they are irresistible (Papineau & Butlin 2016). This implies that one

*Intervenant

who experiences a craving is certain to act on it. Another hypothesis is that cravings are the result of a dysfunctional process (Holton & Berridge 2013). Yet I will show that both of these hypotheses are wrong. First, cravings are not irresistible, at least in a strong sense, as there are many counter-examples of addicted individuals who do in fact resist them. Second, they are not the result of a dysfunction, but rather an expected byproduct of the recurrent consumption of dopamine-heightening substances. Thus, cravings are not different from normal desires constitutively speaking, nor are they pathological in these ways. However, there remains a sense in which we must distinguish addictive desires from normal desires: cravings are different from normal desires, and perhaps even pathological, but solely in a phenomenological sense.

Elodie Boissard: The strength of desires

Can we define the strength of a desire as its causal power regarding the control of action? This means that one's desire is stronger than another if and only if one is disposed to act upon it rather than the other in a situation where one believes that each desire is satisfiable by a distinct action and that the two desires are not jointly satisfiable (Schroeder 2009). In some cases, this definition doesn't seem to apply. For instance, although my desire to succeed in my career is stronger than my desire to be well regarded by my colleagues, I may choose not to obey a tyrannical superior in a situation where it would be detrimental to some colleagues, losing an advantage for my career. I will claim that such cases invalidate the considered definition. I will argue that the definition of the strength of desires should imply that it is stable across situations, since we use the concept of strength independently of a particular situation. By contrast, the causal power of desires varies according to the context that modulates the salience of desires, directly or indirectly, by inducing a mood that has attentional effects (Alfano 2013).

Gaia Vu Ngoc: On what motivates us

In philosophical discourse, it is generally assumed that people's actions are motivated by a desire. Yet, this broad and ubiquitous notion obscures the diversity of motives that actually move us. Frankfurt (1982, 1998) was among the first to recognize it, arguing that, sometimes, people act not only because we have a desire but more particularly because we care about things – or, as he also puts it, because things matter to us. Indeed, what motivates actions such as visiting a friend at the hospital every day or acting rebelliously against a dictatorship seems best described as caring for a friend or the importance of freedom to one. Desires, in this case, are only caused by such attitudes. However, Frankfurt's account of caring in terms of higher-order desires is unsatisfying. I will argue instead that caring is a non-reflexive attitude, constituted by emotional and motivational dispositions (e.g. Helm 2001, Jaworska 2007). In this way, it becomes clearer that, although caring has an important role in our practical lives, one can disapprove of one's own caring. If we want to adequately explain some of people's most important decisions, I propose that we need another pro-attitude: valuing.

Mots-Clés: desire, action, motivation, affect, value, valuing, caring, addiction, sex, causal power, mood, craving, pathology, Frankfurt