

The Ethics of Desire
PHI 524 / CHV 524
Graduate Seminar
Spring 2008
Tuesdays 12-2:50pm
Professor: Elizabeth Harman

We will look at some exciting recent work concerned with the following issues:

- In what ways, if any, can desires be mistaken or criticizable?
- Can desires be morally criticizable?
- Can desires be mistaken by being based on false beliefs?
- Is there a sense of "desire" in which there is nothing surprising or irrational in having two conflicting desires that one knows cannot both be satisfied?
- Is there a sense of "desire" in which it is surprising and irrational to have two conflicting desires that one knows cannot both be satisfied in whatever sense it is surprising and irrational to have two conflicting beliefs?
- Are desires subject to a "reflection principle"? A reflection principle for belief says that if you know you will believe *p* to a certain degree in the future, you should believe *p* to that degree now. How might a reflection principle for desire be stated? Is that principle true?
- Some philosophers have argued that it is irrational to have a bias for the future—that is, to prefer that good things happen in the future (rather than the past) and bad things happen in the past (rather than the future). Is this bias irrational?
- If a conditional desire is a desire for *e* given *c*, are all desires conditional desires in that sense? Are all desires self-locating desires?
- What are the implications of the fact that our desires and values change over time? Some such changes will happen no matter what we do; others happen as a result of our actions. Our actions can bring us to have experiences that shape our desires and values. And the fact that you are acting in a certain way can itself be information that shapes your desires.
- Are intentions desires? How if at all do the principles of rationality for intention differ from the principles of rationality for belief?
- Are intentions voluntary? Are desires voluntary? Must desires be voluntary in order to be criticizable? (Must beliefs?)
- Are considerations relevant to the appropriateness of desires also relevant to the appropriateness of beliefs? If love can make certain desires rational, can love also make certain beliefs rational? Can we be obligated to give friends the benefit of the doubt, where this means taking the fact that they are our friends to be a reason to believe differently from what the evidence would otherwise dictate? If so, does this show that a reflection principle for belief is false? (Might reflection principles for beliefs and desires fail for similar reasons?)

Visitors: Ruth Chang on Tuesday, February 26
Brad Skow on Tuesday, March 25
Andy Egan on Tuesday, April 15

Getting Credit for the Course:

Graduate students in the philosophy department can earn a unit in either of the following ways:

1. Take this course for credit: Do one class presentation, write one 5-6 page paper due in week six, and write one 15-20 page paper due during reading period (the week after classes end).
2. Take a written exam on the course material during reading period.

Graduate students in the politics department can take this course for credit and get a grade by taking option 1 above.

Any student auditing the course can give a class presentation.

Schedule:

Tuesday, February 5:

Introduction and Overview

Tuesday, February 12:

If a conditional desire is a desire for e given c , are all desires conditional desires in that sense? Are all desires self-locating desires?

Ben Bradley and Kris McDaniel, "Desires," *forthcoming in Mind*
Daniel Nolan, "Selfless Desires," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*
2006, 73.3: 665-679.

Tuesday, February 19:

Is every desire either irrational or rational?

Thomas Scanlon, "Chapter 1. Reasons" *What We Owe to Each Other*
David Copp and David Sobel, "Desires, Motives and Reasons: Scanlon's
Rationalist Moral Psychology" *Social Theory and Practice* 2002

Tuesday, February 26:

Continued discussion of desires and reasons.

Ruth Chang will be a visiting professor for this class.

Joseph Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency"
Ruth Chang, "Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?"

Tuesday, March 4 and Tuesday, March 11

What are the implications of the fact that our desires and values change over time? Some such changes will happen no matter what we do; others happen as a result of our actions. Our actions can bring us to have experiences that shape our desires and values; or that you are acting in a certain way can itself be information that shapes your desires.

Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*

Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*

John Collins, “Belief, Desire, and Revision”

Tuesday, March 18 – Spring Break

Tuesday, March 25:

Some philosophers have argued that it is irrational to have a bias for the future—that is, to prefer that good things happen in the future and bad things happen in the past to the reverse, good things happening in the past and good things happening in the future. Is this bias irrational?

Brad Skow will be a visiting professor for this class.

Derek Parfit *Reasons and Persons*

Brad Skow, “Time-biased Attitudes and Time-Biased Preferences”

Shelly Kagan, “The Present-Aim Theory of Rationality.” *Ethics* 1986, 96: 746–759.

Dan Moller, “Parfit on Pains, Pleasures, and the Time of Their Occurrence,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2002, 32: 67–82.

Tuesday, April 1:

Derek Baker, “Ambivalence and Consistency”

James Dreier, “Rational preference: Decision theory as a theory of rational preference”

Tuesday, April 8:

Are desires subject to a “reflection principle”? A reflection principle for belief says that if you know you will believe p to a certain degree in the future, you should believe p to that degree now. How might a reflection principle for desire be stated? Is that principle true?

If a reflection principle for beliefs fails, why does it fail? Does it fail for the same reasons a reflection principle for desires may fail?

Bas van Fraassen “Belief and the Will” *Journal of Philosophy* 1984

Adam Elga, “Self-Locating Belief and the Sleeping Beauty Problem”

Elizabeth Harman, “ ‘I’ll Be Glad I Did It’ Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires”

Tuesday, April 15:

How should we act and desire in light of the fact that our actions may affect our desires in that the fact that one is acting this way provides *information*?

Andy Egan will be a visiting professor for this class. (Sign up for the dinner.)

David Lewis, “Causal Decision Theory”

Andy Egan, “Some Counterexamples to Causal Decision Theory”

Frank Arntzenius, “No Regrets”

Tuesday, April 22:

Are desires voluntary? Must desires be voluntary in order to be criticizable?
(Must beliefs?)

Richard Swinburne, “Desire”

Pamela Hieronymi, “Responsibility for Believing,” *Synthese*

Richard Feldman, “The Ethics of Belief” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2000

Tuesday, April 29:

Are the sorts of consideration relevant to the appropriateness of desires also relevant to the appropriateness of beliefs? If love can make certain desires rational, can love also make certain beliefs rational? Can we be obligated to give friends the benefit of the doubt, where this means taking the fact that they are our friends to be a reason to believe differently from what the evidence would otherwise dictate? If so, does this show that a reflection principle for belief is false? (Might reflection principles for beliefs and desires fail for similar reasons?)

Jennifer Lackey, “Why There is No Epistemic Partiality in Friendship”

Simon Keller, “Friendship and Belief.” *Philosophical Papers* 2004, 33: 329-51.

Sarah Stroud, “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship.” *Ethics* 2006, 116: 498-524.