

Desire Accounts of Value: Actual versus Informed

It is widely taken for granted that whatever their overall merit, the informed version of desire satisfaction accounts of value or well-being presents a comparative improvement over the actual version. I will argue that this is not the case. My thesis is that with respect to the actual version of desire satisfaction accounts (ADA), the informed version (IDA) offers help where it is not needed and where needed does not offer any help. I attempt to show that no comparative advantage accrues to IDA by going through three objections commonly raised against ADA, and arguing that in each case moving from ADA to IDA fails to make things better. The first objection charges ADA to be too inclusive. The second objection is that ADA presents a counterintuitive solution to practical problems, namely to achieve a state of perfect satisfaction by eliminating all ambitious or factually dissatisfied desires. The third objection is that we can and do desire what is bad for us, and that hence satisfaction of actual desires cannot *constitute* what is good for us. I will start out with a look at the nature of IDA.

What distinguishes IDA from ADA is that the former accords value only to what satisfies *informed* desires rather than *actual* desires. But what are the features that make desires informed? Following Railton, I will understand informed desires as desires a counterfactual and idealized version of ourselves would want our actual version in our actual circumstances to have.^{1, 2} The question, then, is what counts as an informed version of ourselves. Although Railton does not address this question in much detail, the only informative answer I'm aware of proceeds

¹ This is roughly Railton's version of informed desire accounts, which appears to be currently the most popular version. Cf. Railton, *Facts, Values and Norms*, Cambridge University Press 2003.

² The reason why informed desires are usually construed as desires the idealized version would want our actual version to hold rather than just desires the idealized version would hold for herself is quite straightforward. Otherwise desires such as to acquire further knowledge, presumably a good candidate for an informed desire, could not be accommodated as informed within this framework, since naturally, an already fully informed agent would not have such a desire for herself.

in broadly causal terms. On this account, the system of desires held by our idealized version would be one causally generated by a hypothetical process in which our actual beliefs are progressively updated and revised. Accordingly, this process of updating and revision would causally change our actual desires, and would be continued until a stable and suitably enlightened state is reached. The resulting desires of that state would be deemed informed.

First Problem: Inclusiveness

One common criticism of ADA concerns its unlimited inclusiveness, and is strongest when ADA is more narrowly construed as a theory of well-being rather than more broadly as a theory of value in general. Since virtually anything can be an object of desire, ADA places no restrictions whatsoever on what can prudentially matter or bear on someone's well-being. Yet as the objection goes, many of our desires, especially those concerning rather distant objects, do not have such bearing on our individual well-being.

Griffin gives an example which nicely illustrates the point.³ Suppose I overhear a conversation of a stranger in a train who I've never met before, and whom I will never see again. Since he seems to be a nice person, I spontaneously form the desire that his plans will succeed. Would the satisfaction of this desire about the stranger contribute to my well-being? To many that would seem odd.⁴

³ Griffin, *Well-Being*, Oxford 1986. Cf. also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford 1986. There are many similar examples in the literature. Kagan imagines a lover of prime numbers who desires the number of atoms in the universe to be prime (*Normative Ethics*, p.37). Scanlon imagines a person who wishes the stars to have a specific chemical composition (*What We Owe to Each Other*, p.120).

⁴ There is actually something rather odd about the objection, namely the sort of discontinuity it seems to presuppose. That is, the objection seems to assume that while satisfaction of desires concerning those closest to us could indeed make our lives go better, satisfaction of desires concerning those far away would fail to make even the tiniest bit of such a contribution. In order to see why this assumption is awkward, consider a continuum which orders desires in terms of their degree of strength and relatedness of their objects to us, thus ranging from desires concerning our own children over friends and relatives to acquaintances and finally total strangers. The impact that the satisfaction of such desires has on our own well-being would presumably be controlled by or be a function of the relative strength

Yet it is unclear whether IDA manages to do better with respect to the problem of inclusiveness. If it is admitted that satisfaction of my desire concerning the stranger's well-being will not affect me prudentially, the only option available for IDA seems to be to demote this desire as uninformed. According to IDA, satisfaction of uninformed desires would fail to make any contribution to well-being. But the prospects for this move appear rather low. Consider the case where further information would corroborate my initial good impression of that stranger. Furthermore, additional information might bring out more clearly why success in his projects is so important for the stranger. Under those circumstances, if anything, further information seems to strengthen my desire concerning his success, not remove it. Anyway, it is hard to see why from a more informed perspective we should become unable to form desires concerning distant persons.

Second Problem: The Problem of the Stoic

Another objection against ADA, which I will call the stoic problem, addresses a counterintuitive solution to practical problems that ADA appears to generate. If satisfaction of our desires is what makes our lives go well, why not achieve a state of maximum desire satisfaction by bringing our desires into perfect fit with what is already the case, or simply by eliminating ambitious desires altogether? According to ADA, any dissatisfied desire would have and the degree of closeness of the objects of those desires. Yet given the continuum in the input of that function, the natural thing to expect is a continuum of the output as well, which is to say it would be natural to expect the function to be continuous rather than discrete. As one goes along the continuum from desires regarding those closest to us to those not so close, the relative impact of those desires would be gradually diminishing as the strength and relatedness decreases, rather than just abruptly dropping to zero once one reaches strangers. Such an abrupt drop to which someone who holds that the satisfaction of a desire concerning a stranger in the train has no bearing on one's well-being whatsoever is committed to appears to be completely unexplained by either the strength or the degree of relatedness of its objects. According to this view, the impact drops to zero, despite the values for strength and relatedness being still above zero. This seems arbitrary and counterintuitive. Instead of just saying that satisfaction of a desire concerning a stranger does not count as much as a desire concerning someone closer, the position at hand seems to be such a desire counts for nothing at all.

to count as a minus, and dropping such a desire could at least not make ones life go worse. Yet a life void of all ambitious desires appears to be an impoverished and consequently poor one, despite the fact that such a life (and maybe such a life alone) is able to achieve perfect desire satisfaction.⁵

Now, is IDA better situated than ADA in dealing with the stoic problem? Again, it is clear enough what the strategy would be for IDA to salvage the stoic problem. IDA would argue that an informed version of myself would not want my actual version to have a life of perfect satisfaction without ambition instead of a slightly more ambitious yet slightly less satisfied alternative. Thus, IDA would solve the stoic problem if it was true that my informed version would want my actual version to sustain some of my ambitious desires, even if dropping them would increase overall desire satisfaction. Thus, in virtue of granting some of my ambitious desires the status of being informed, IDA would be able to resist the stoic drift into total annihilation of ambitious desires precisely by making some of them immune for such annihilation.

It is important to notice the generality in the description of this task. In presenting the intuition that the stoic solution is inadequate as a problem for ADA, no reference has been made to any particular personal or situational details. Thus, in the context of our discussion, we have taken it for granted that a life of some ambition is *generally* better than one completely lacking in ambition. Consequently, in order to solve the stoic problem, the required thesis IDA needs to

⁵ Notice that the objection does not presuppose a denial of the limited control we can exert over our desires. For biological reasons at least, we might be incapable of voluntarily adjusting our desires to what is the case, just as we are incapable of believing whatever we want. Yet the probable impracticability of the stoic solution does not undermine the validity of the objection. The level of analysis of prudential value offered by actual desire satisfaction accounts is suitably metaphysically deep, and concerns the very nature of value. Thus, those accounts can be hold answerable to counterintuitive implications generated by purely theoretical thought experiments. If the nature of prudential value is *constituted by* what satisfies actual desires, then a minimally ambitious life with maximal satisfaction could at least not be any worse that than an ambitious one with an overall lower level in satisfaction, which yet appears to be the case.

substantiate is that *in general*, informed versions would hold a desire to maintain some ambitious desires in their actual versions. What is thus required is a kind of convergence of idealized versions in their desire for a suitably ambitious life lived by their actual versions.

Now, let me first point out one tempting way to take up this task which is not available for IDA. One cannot claim that an informed version would want her actual version to sustain some ambitious desires *because* doing so makes for a better life. This claim would presuppose objectivism, and thereby reverse the direction of explanation of desire and value taken for granted by both the actual as well as informed version. Instead, according to IDA, one would have to suppose a life of some ambition to be better than one without exactly *because* an informed version would want it so.

But would an informed version of every person in fact want that person to have some ambitious desires? To see why this assumption is problematic, it will be helpful to introduce an example. Consider Lisa, a person who over the years lost virtually all social contact, living a life of sheer isolation. Now we've taken it for granted that the stoic solution to Lisa's problems, the solution of improving her level of desire satisfaction by eliminating all of her social desires is inadequate. But recall that IDA will only be able to block this stoic drift so long as one can substantiate that an idealized version of Lisa would not want her actual version to lose her social desires as a response to her isolation.

So far we know next to nothing about Lisa and her particular situation. There are various ways in which we can fill in the details about her psychology and situation. In light of this considerable spectrum of variability, the generality built into the thesis that an informed Lisa would want the actual Lisa to maintain some social desires becomes rather intriguing. What this generality amounts to is no less than the claim is that however (reasonably) the details about her

life and her situation turn out, supplying Lisa with perfect information (perfect imagination, suitable time, no distraction, you name it) would hypothetically *cause* her to desire that her actual version sustains some of her social desires in her particular circumstances. Suppose there are a finite number n of ways in which those details about Lisa could be spelled out, from Lisa 1 to Lisa n . Now, what is required is considerably more than an existence proof to the effect that additional information *could* causally bring about such results, which is to say that there is some Lisa x , such that supplying Lisa x with suitable information would cause her to desire her actual version to sustain some social desires. Establishing this would present no deeper problem, since for all we know, given the complex causal network Lisa is situated in, possibly anything could have such effects. Rather, in order for IDA to be able to counter the stoic problem, the claim to be substantiated is that adding suitable information to Lisa would *guarantee* her to desire to maintain social desires for her actual version, in the following sense. For each x of the n variations in Lisa's psychological and situational position, supplying Lisa x with suitable information will causally bring about her to desire that her actual version maintains some social desires. And this, I argue, is a task informed desire accounts cannot comply with. Supposing otherwise amounts either to wishful thinking, or more likely, reveals the objectivist presupposition implicit in many accounts of informed desires, namely that better informed agents would simply know better what a good life consists in.

Third Problem: Desiring the Bad

The third objection is that ADA is unable to accommodate the widely acknowledged phenomenon of bad desires. Since ADA supposes states of affairs to acquire value in virtue of being desired, it is hard to see how something could be an object of desire and yet at the same time be of disvalue. The usual example used to illustrate this challenge is the drug addict who

harbors desires that would best be left unsatisfied in his own interest. IDA would remove the predicament of bad desires if informed versions would not uphold bad desires. Before addressing whether IDA can live up to this task, I will argue that the challenge of bad desires needs to be focused and understood as desiring the bad non-instrumentally and all things considered.

It is easy to see why instrumentally bad desires do not present a deeper problem for ADA. Satisfaction of mistaken instrumental desires does not deliver and sometimes even compromises the intended satisfaction of the non-instrumental desires on which the former are contingent. Such desires are deemed bad in ADA's own terms for their in fact decreasing effects on desire satisfaction. Moreover, ADA also retains suitable resources for explaining why some of our non-instrumental desires are best left unsatisfied. In order to give ADA a fair hearing, one must not overlook the crucial distinction between individual desire satisfaction and all-things considered desire satisfaction. Quite naturally, in cases where satisfaction of an individual desire comes at the expense of overall or all things considered desire frustration, such a desire is better not fulfilled in ADA's own terms. The positive value some state of affairs acquires by satisfying such a "bad" desire is outweighed by the negative value it acquires by frustrating many other desires. Along these lines, ADA can handle cases like the drug addict.

Thus, the challenge of bad desires is strongest if understood in non-instrumental and all things considered terms, as when an agent *fundamentally* desires the bad. Since ADA appears to run out of resources at this point, the question of whether IDA fares better on this score enters center stage. The task IDA faces, however, is quite demanding, going beyond optimizing instrumental desires or achieving maximal internal coherence with respect to a desire set of an agent. Rather, in order for IDA to succeed where ADA fails, additional information would have to causally bring about the "correction" of a fundamentally bad desire set. That is, additional

information would have to affect an agent with an internally coherent and instrumentally efficient yet still fundamentally bad desire set so as to produce an idealized version who would not want his actual version to uphold his fundamentally bad desire set.

Again, my argument is pessimistic. As I emphasized in my treatment of the stoic, the key issue is not whether an agent's fundamentally bad desire set *could* be suitably improved by a process of enlightenment. Rather, the crucial question is whether such a process would *guarantee* such an improvement. And again, in light of the potentially unlimited variety and contingency in why some agent might hold a fundamentally bad desire set, the belief that a process of acquiring additional information would adequately transform this set *whatever its exact nature* appears extremely unlikely. Yet since I do not want to rehearse what has been said before, I will present my concerns from a different angle.

For all we know, one cannot easily dismiss the possibility that additional knowledge could actually have detrimental effects for particular agents in particular situations, causally reshaping their desire sets negatively rather than positively, quite contrary to IDA. Psychologically sensitive creatures as we are, too much knowledge might do us no good, especially when it comes to an excessive and uncompromising awareness of ourselves and our shortcomings or our immediate social environment. Just as a doctor might spare her patient with the knowledge of a painless but fatal disease, occasionally we are wary to find out all there is to know about ourselves and our environment. It is not implausible to suppose that one among many reasons for this is that in light of excessive knowledge, some agents would not be able to sustain their commitments to their most important and meaning-providing projects, thus generating better informed versions which would see little point and worth for their actual

version to strive for anything substantial beyond perhaps immediate gratification, and consequently hold desires that are worse than the original ones.

To use familiar term, there might be cases where an increase in theoretical rationality is not accompanied by an increase in practical rationality, such as when a sprinter upholds a theoretically unreasonable but practically sensible belief that he can he can break the world record. If such a belief would both make him run faster and play a crucial motivational role in his basic athletic project, it might well be that revising that belief will alter his desire set unconstructively. In general, many worthwhile and meaning-giving projects might psychologically only survive by simultaneously downplaying their odds of failure while exaggerating their significance. To sum up, a broadly causal account of what additional information would do for us – an account that refrains from simply specifying informed agents as those who afford privileged insight into the nature of value – leaves plenty of room for such pessimistic speculations. Such are speculations, for sure, but so are claims to the effect that additional information would always generate idealizations of us who desire for the best of us.

Turning things around

The previous discussion challenged the view that IDA presents an improvement over ADA. In place of a conclusion, let me turn things around, and suggest a reason why one might actually favor ADA over IDA. For whatever its shortcomings, ADA at least makes it intelligible why the goals it accords value should engage us: They satisfy desires we actually have. Yet it is not clear whether IDA can maintain this crucial advantage. The desires of our idealized version are not ours, and consequently satisfaction of informed desires is not the same as satisfaction of what we actually care about. The greater the divergence between what we actually desire and

what we would want us to desire under idealized conditions, the more pressing the question becomes why it matters for us that our idealized rather than our actual desires are satisfied. It would certainly matter if we had such idealized desires, but given that we don't, why should we care about them?

This is an intricate question, and as a question I will leave it. But to give a bit more bite, I'd like to end with the following scenario. Suppose your idealized version of yourself manages to write you a letter across possible worlds. In this letter he or she recommends you to pursue a list of goals. The letter starts: "I'm a completely different person now. The way I see things now has no resemblance to how I saw them before, which is as you see them now. What I previously found important appears now to be vain. What previously appeared to be vain I find now important. I know you won't understand. I am very sorry to be unable to explain my reasons to you, which go beyond of what you can grasp. None of my explanations would make any sense to you. P.S.: Attached is a list of what you should desire from now on." As you quickly come to realize, the listed goals are diametrically opposed to what you care about most. While you aspire to become an academic, the letter recommends becoming a farmer. While you desire to have a family, it recommends a purely solitary life. While you seek a career in a middle sized western city, it recommends you settle to some unknown village far away. What reason could you possibly have to revise thus drastically your own most intimate goals?

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