



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

**ATTRACTION, DESCRIPTION AND THE  
DESIRE-SATISFACTION THEORY OF WELFARE**

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## Attraction, Description and the Desire-Satisfaction Theory of Welfare

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The desire-satisfaction theory of welfare says that what is basically good for a subject – what benefits him in the most fundamental, non-derivative way – is the satisfaction of his desires. One challenge to this view is the existence of *quirky* desires, such as a desire to count blades of grass, or to turn on every radio that is turned off.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to see why anyone would desire such things, and thus hard to believe that the satisfaction of such desires could be basically good for anyone. This suggests that only *some* desires are basically good when satisfied, and that desire satisfactionists owe us an account of which desires these are, and why.

In a recent paper in this journal, Donald Bruckner proposes such an account.<sup>2</sup> On his view, a desire is welfare-relevant (i.e., such that its satisfaction would be basically good for its subject) if and only if and because its subject could describe its object in a way that makes it comprehensible what about the object attracts him or appeals to him. We are inclined to view quirky desires as welfare-irrelevant because we assume that their objects cannot be described in such a way. But if there were a quirky desire whose object could be so described by the subject whose desire it is, then this desire would be relevant to that subject's welfare.

I will argue that while Bruckner's view delivers plausible verdicts about the cases to which it is meant to apply, its account of what *makes* a desire welfare-relevant is unmotivated and implausible. Desire satisfactionists can retain what is plausible about his view while endorsing a better explanation of why welfare-relevant desires have that status if they accept the following account instead: a desire is welfare-relevant if and only if and because something about its object attracts, or appeals to, the subject who has the desire.

### 1. Bruckner's Account

Let me begin by stating Bruckner's account in greater detail. Bruckner writes that for any subject,  $S$ , who has a desire,  $D$ , whose object is  $p$ , the satisfaction of  $D$  would be basically good for  $S$  if and only if and because  $S$  could, if called upon, describe  $p$  "in such a way that makes it comprehensible to others what  $S$  sees in  $p$  as positive, worthy of pursuit."<sup>3</sup> This language might suggest that the relevant description must make comprehensible which of  $p$ 's properties  $S$  believes to be *good* (or to *warrant* pro-attitudes toward  $p$ ), but Bruckner does not have anything so intellectualized or evaluative in mind. Elsewhere,

<sup>1</sup> Rawls (1971: 434); Quinn (1993: 32).

<sup>2</sup> Bruckner (2016).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 5.

he says that the relevant sort of description is one that “makes it clear to us what appeals to *S*” about *p*.<sup>4</sup> He also writes that the right kind of description explains *S*’s “attraction” to *p* and “supports the claim that there is something positive for the agent in it.”<sup>5</sup> It is evident, then, that the relevant sort of description is merely one that makes it comprehensible what it is about the object of the desire that *attracts*, or *appeals to*, *S*.

Comprehensibility, in the sense at issue here, is a very minimal requirement. You can render your desire to listen to heavy metal comprehensible simply by saying that you enjoy it, even if you cannot identify any specific aspect of the music that gives you pleasure. Likewise, you can make your desire to eat chocolate ice cream comprehensible simply by saying that you like it.<sup>6</sup> A desire can be comprehensible even if its object does not warrant desire and is not objectively good.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it turns out that we need not ask which “others” a desire must be made comprehensible to: there is “a standard for comprehensibility independent of being comprehended,” and there are objective facts about what is comprehensible *tout court*.<sup>8</sup>

The comprehensibility requirement is not trivial, however. You can desire something – in the sense of being motivated to bring it about – without being able to describe it in the relevant way. After all, you can find yourself with a behavioral compulsion to do something that does *not* appeal to you (e.g., turning on radios), and it is impossible to make comprehensible what appeals to you about something that does not appeal to you. Besides, a subject might lack the capacities that he needs to describe what appeals to him about the things that appeal to him: none of a newborn’s desires can meet the comprehensibility requirement, since a newborn cannot describe anything.

With the foregoing clarifications in mind, we can state Bruckner’s view as follows:

**Bruckner’s Account:** A desire, *D*, whose object is *p* is welfare-relevant if and only if and because the subject who has *D* could, if called upon, give a description of *p* that makes it comprehensible what it is about *p* that attracts him or appeals to him.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 7, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Bruckner usually leaves the explanatory aspect of his view implicit, but he writes on p. 25 that “what *makes* something valuable on my view is that it is desired and the desirer can render the object of desire comprehensible.”

You might worry that this view is too permissive, since it does not exclude immoral, ill-informed or irrational desires. But, as Bruckner notes, Heathwood (2005) has convincingly argued that such desires can be welfare-relevant. Even if you disagree, however, you can

The desire-satisfaction theory claims that the satisfaction of a subject's welfare-relevant desires is the only thing that is basically good for him. Thus, according to the version of this theory that accepts Bruckner's account, the only thing that is basically good for a subject is the satisfaction of those of his desires whose objects he could describe in a way that makes it comprehensible what attracts him or appeals to him about them. On this view, which we can call Brucknerian Desire Satisfactionism (BDS), quirky desires are not in general welfare-irrelevant: a desire to count blades of grass could be relevant, as long as you could give the right kind of description of its object (e.g., "It's soothing, like walking on the beach").<sup>10</sup> But if you could not give such a description for one of your desires, then its satisfaction would not be basically good for you, whether it is quirky or not.

## 2. Attraction and Description

I will now argue that there is a simpler view that is extensionally equivalent to Bruckner's Account when it comes to the cases to which that account is intended to apply (and about which it delivers plausible results): those involving normal human adults. Desire satisfactionists should prefer this view to Bruckner's Account because it provides a simpler and more plausible explanation of why welfare-relevant desires have that status.

As Bruckner admits, BDS is not a plausible theory of the welfare of subjects who, whether because of infancy or cognitive impairment, lack the capacity to describe the things that appeal to them in a way that makes it comprehensible what appeals to them about those things. For if BDS were applied to such subjects, it would falsely imply that nothing is basically good for them and that none of them is positive in welfare. Bruckner merely claims that his view is true of normal human adults – those who possess that capacity.<sup>11</sup> His view is attractive because it has plausible implications about *them*. Our judgment that the grass-counter does not benefit from the satisfaction of his desire seems to depend on the assumption that he could not describe the object of his desire in a way that makes it comprehensible what appeals to him about it. When we imagine that he could so describe it (e.g., by explaining that he finds it relaxing), this judgment no longer seems warranted. Thus, at least when it comes to normal human adults, it is plausible that a

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accept my criticism of Bruckner – though you will need to make appropriate modifications to the view that I will propose.

<sup>10</sup> Bruckner (2016: 8).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: 14–15. I believe that arguments of the sort that I present in Lin (forthcoming) create problems for Bruckner's view even when it is restricted to normal human adults. (Bruckner briefly discusses this possibility (15, n. 17), but it seems to me that he does not give it its due.) Moreover, I believe that the simpler view that I propose below is not threatened by such arguments. If this is correct, then we have further reason to prefer this view to Bruckner's. Unfortunately, I lack the space to defend these claims here.

desire is welfare-relevant if and only if its subject can describe its object in the way that Bruckner's view requires.

This biconditional does not entail Bruckner's view, however, since it is neutral on the question of what *explains* why the desires that are relevant to someone's welfare have that status. Bruckner claims that what makes a desire relevant to the welfare of the (normal adult) subject who possesses it is the fact that the subject could describe its object in the right way. But the aforementioned biconditional is also accommodated by the following view, which provides an alternative explanation:

**The Attraction View:** A desire,  $D$ , whose object is  $p$  is welfare-relevant if and only if and because something about  $p$  attracts, or appeals to, the subject who has  $D$ .<sup>12</sup>

This view is extensionally equivalent to Bruckner's Account when it comes to normal human adults. If a normal human adult who desires  $p$  can describe it in a way that makes it comprehensible what appeals to him about it, then obviously, something about  $p$  appeals to him. And if such an adult desires  $p$  but cannot give such a description of it, then nothing about  $p$  appeals to him. After all, a normal human adult is one who has the capacity to describe the things that appeal to him in a way that makes it comprehensible what appeals to him about them. If such an adult desires  $p$  but cannot describe  $p$  in the relevant way, this cannot be because he lacks that capacity. By hypothesis, if there were anything about  $p$  that attracted him, he would be able to describe  $p$  in a way that made this comprehensible. So his inability to describe  $p$  in the right way can only be due to the fact that nothing about  $p$  attracts him or appeals to him. Thus, if a normal human adult desires  $p$ , he could describe  $p$  in a way that makes it comprehensible what attracts or appeals to him about it *if and only if* something about it attracts or appeals to him.

Because the Attraction View is extensionally equivalent to Bruckner's Account in the cases to which that account is intended to apply (*viz.*, those involving normal human adults), it is as well supported by those cases as that account is. Earlier, I mentioned that when it comes to normal human adults, the following claim is plausible: a desire is welfare-relevant if and only if its subject can describe its object in the way that Bruckner's view requires. But in light of what I have just argued, that claim is equivalent to the following implication of the Attraction View: a desire is welfare-relevant if and only if something about its object attracts, or appeals to, its subject. Our intuitions about the conditions under which the desires of normal adults are welfare-relevant give equal support to both views.

What the Attraction View and Bruckner's Account disagree about is *explanation*. On the former, what makes some desires relevant to our welfare is

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<sup>12</sup> Heathwood (unpublished manuscript) defends a similar view.

just the fact that their objects attract us. On the latter, this is only half of the explanation – the other half being that we can describe their objects in a way that makes it comprehensible what attracts us to them. But I see no reason to suppose that the latter fact enters into the explanation. If a normal human adult desires to count blades of grass but cannot describe the object of this desire in the relevant way, that can only be because nothing about that object attracts him. It is the latter fact, not the former, that explains why his desire is not welfare-relevant. If, on the other hand, he can give a description of the right kind, then something about the object does attract him, and this suffices to explain why his desire is welfare-relevant. Whether he could describe the object of his desire in the relevant way merely plays an evidential role: it tracks the presence or absence of features of the object that appeal to him. From an explanatory point of view, it is a spare wheel.

To summarize: the Attraction View gets the same plausible results that Bruckner’s Account does in the cases to which that account is intended to apply, but it provides a simpler and more plausible explanation of why the desires that are welfare-relevant have that status. It has all the strengths of Bruckner’s Account while also having an explanatory advantage over it. Thus, desire satisfactionists should prefer it over Bruckner’s Account.

### 3. Objections and Replies<sup>13</sup>

One might wonder whether Bruckner’s Account and the Attraction View really are extensionally equivalent when it comes to normal human adults. Could there not be cases in which a normal adult desires something that appeals to him but cannot describe *precisely* what about it appeals to him? If so, then perhaps the verdicts about such cases that Bruckner’s Account delivers are different from, and more plausible than, those delivered by the Attraction View.

Clearly, there are such cases. As Bruckner writes, you could desire, and be attracted to, heavy metal music without being able to identify any “specific feature” of it that attracts you. You could desire, and be attracted to, chocolate ice cream without being able to describe precisely what about its flavor or texture appeals to you. But as I mentioned earlier, Bruckner claims that these are cases in which you *can* meet the comprehensibility requirement simply by saying that the object of your desire gives you pleasure.<sup>14</sup> Although it is not trivial, the comprehensibility requirement really is quite minimal. Cases like the ones just described are not ones about which the two views disagree, since they are not ones in which Bruckner’s Account deems the desires welfare-irrelevant. Indeed, Bruckner has confirmed that a normal human adult can describe the object of one of his desires in the right way *if and only if* something about that object attracts or appeals to him, and thus that

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<sup>13</sup> I thank Jason Raibley for raising the following objections.

<sup>14</sup> Bruckner (2016: 16-17).

his account is extensionally equivalent to the Attraction View when it comes to normal human adults.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, we can imagine a variant on Bruckner's Account on which desires *are* welfare-irrelevant if their subjects cannot articulate exactly what it is about their objects that attracts them. This variant obviously would deem fewer desires welfare-relevant than the Attraction View does, but it would be implausible for precisely this reason. Surely, your desires for chocolate ice cream and heavy metal are not irrelevant to your welfare simply on the grounds that you cannot articulate *exactly* what it is about these objects that attracts you.

One might wonder whether the aforementioned variant on Bruckner's Account is better than the Attraction View at handling the sorts of desire that motivated Bruckner in the first place: quirky desires. If it has more plausible implications than the Attraction View does about the circumstances in which quirky desires are welfare-relevant, that would be some reason to prefer it – a reason that would have to be weighed against the fact that it has implausible implications about ordinary desires, such as the desire to eat chocolate ice cream.

I do not think that the variant on Bruckner's Account does any better with quirky desires than the Attraction View does, however. It seems to me that our conviction that quirky desires are welfare-irrelevant depends precisely on the assumption that they are mere motivations to realize states of affairs that do not appeal to their subjects. We are incredulous at the idea that it could be basically good for someone to satisfy a desire to count blades of grass precisely because we find it difficult to believe that anyone could really be attracted to doing this. Once we stipulate that we are imagining someone who is genuinely attracted to this activity, it is no longer implausible that he would benefit from performing it – at least if we assume that some form of desire satisfactionism is true. Thus, it seems that the Attraction View says the right thing about quirky desires. By contrast, the variant on Bruckner's Account would wrongly deem some quirky desires to be welfare-irrelevant.

But suppose that, contrary to what I have just argued, the variant *is* better at handling quirky desires. Even so, I doubt that this advantage could come close to outweighing the fact that the variant has implausible implications about ordinary desires (e.g., that your desire for chocolate ice cream is not relevant to your welfare because you cannot describe precisely what about its object appeals to you). The Attraction View would remain the better view on the whole, and it would also remain superior to the original version of Bruckner's Account.

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<sup>15</sup> Personal communication.

#### 4. Conclusion

If desire satisfactionism is correct, then I agree with Bruckner that quirky desires can, in principle, be welfare-relevant. Moreover, I find the following implication of his view plausible: when it comes to normal human adults, the welfare-relevant desires are exactly the ones whose objects have some feature that attracts, or appeals to, the subjects who have those desires. But I submit that what best explains this is not Bruckner's Account, but the Attraction View: what makes a desire relevant to a subject's welfare is the fact that some feature of its object attracts that subject. By endorsing the Attraction View, desire satisfactionists can retain the virtues of Bruckner's Account while availing themselves of a better explanation of why welfare-relevant desires have that status.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I thank Donald Bruckner, Richard Yetter Chappell, Chris Heathwood, Anthony Kelley, Barry Maguire and Jason Raibley.



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