

## Desire that Amounts to Knowledge

Allan Hazlett

We are familiar with the idea that belief sometimes amounts to knowledge – i.e. that there are instances of belief that are also instances of knowledge. Here I defend an unfamiliar idea: that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge i.e. that there are instances of desire that are also instances of knowledge. My argument rests on two main assumptions. First, I assume a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge in general, on which knowledge is identified with apt representation. Second, I assume a version of the “guise of the good thesis,” on which desire is a species of evaluative representation. With those assumptions made, I’ll explain how desires can amount to instances of apt representation.

The conclusion that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge is an appealing one, because it enables us to resolve an apparent dilemma arising from a Peripatetic platitude and a Pyrrhonian insight. The Peripatetic platitude is that you won’t easily live a good life unless you know what is good, for without prior knowledge about the good, realizing goodness in your life could only be the result of luck or grace, both of which are unlikely. The Pyrrhonian insight is that living a good life doesn’t require theoretical knowledge – e.g. knowledge of the truth of some philosophical theory of the good – it just requires having wise instincts and a friendly social environment. The apparent incompatibility of these two thoughts has informed much of the history of philosophical ethics – debates between Stoics and skeptics, between rationalists and sentimentalists, and between cognitivists and non-cognitivists all presuppose something like this dilemma. The conclusion that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge puts us in a position to see that the dilemma is merely apparent, and to affirm both horns: the knowledge of the good that living well seems to require is a species of desire that amounts to knowledge.

### **Knowledge as apt representation**

What is knowledge? I intend here a question not about propositional knowledge (i.e. knowing that  $p$ ), in particular, but about knowledge, in general, even if the correct answer entails that all knowledge is propositional knowledge.<sup>1</sup> There are species of knowledge whose status as species of propositional knowledge is unclear, including explanatory knowledge (i.e. knowing why  $p$ ), topical knowledge (knowing about  $x$  or knowing  $x$ , where  $x$  is some topic, field, subject matter, etc.), personal knowledge (knowing  $S$ , where  $S$  is a person), and practical knowledge (knowing how to  $\phi$ , where  $\phi$ ing is some action, activity, thing that can be done, etc.). What do all the instances of all these species of knowledge have in common, which makes them all instances of knowledge?

The answer I assume here is that they are all instances of apt representation. What does this mean? We can illustrate this with a familiar theory of propositional knowledge. First, note that (propositional)<sup>2</sup> belief is a species of representation, in this sense: a representation is the kind of thing that can be correct

---

<sup>1</sup> The question of whether all knowledge is propositional is fraught with difficulty in virtue of the fact that it is not at all clear what we mean by “propositional” in this context.

<sup>2</sup> I allow for other species of belief, e.g. believing someone, in the sense of deferring to them; believing in someone, in the sense of having faith in them; etc.

or incorrect.<sup>3</sup> Is it easy to articulate the conditions under which beliefs – i.e. instances of believing – are correct or incorrect:

**CB:** It is correct to believe that p if and only if it is true that p (and incorrect otherwise).<sup>4</sup>

We could just as well say: a belief, whose content is the proposition that p, is correct if and only if it is true that p.

In what sense are all and only true beliefs “correct”? We mean here *representational correctness*, i.e. the property had by representations when they are accurate or right, by contrast with *representational incorrectness*, i.e. that had when they are inaccurate, wrong, mistaken, or in error.

Note that representational correctness and incorrectness are not prescriptive concepts. What I mean, in the case of belief, is that there are cases in which it is not the case that you ought to believe that p even though it would be correct to believe that p (e.g. when you have no evidence that p) and cases in which you ought to believe that p even though it is incorrect to believe that p (e.g. when you have misleading evidence that p). That all and only true beliefs are correct does not imply that you ought to believe all and only truths. For this reason, CB does not provide an account of rational belief, reasonable belief, justified belief, warranted belief, and so on.

Second, consider a familiar virtue-theoretic account of propositional knowledge:

**VPK:** Propositional knowledge is apt belief.

Where your belief that p is *apt* if and only if it is correct and its correctness manifests one or more of your doxastic virtues, where *doxastic virtues* are reliable capacities to form correct beliefs and to avoid forming incorrect beliefs.<sup>5</sup> VPK is motivated by two central ideas. The first is that propositional knowledge requires that the believer be reliable vis-à-vis the proposition known, which serves to replace insufficiently naturalistic versions of the traditional justification condition on propositional knowledge. The second is that propositional knowledge requires a distinctive connection between the reliability of the believer and the correctness of the belief that they form, which serves to address both the Meno problem and the Gettier problem. Note that, with the possible exception of the Gettier considerations, these motivations are not derived from the project of giving a conceptual analysis that jibes with ordinary uses of sentences of the form <S knows that p>. Objections based on VPK’s counter-intuitive consequences in particular cases, therefore, somewhat miss the mark.

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that this allows for representations of necessary truths and necessary falsehoods.

<sup>4</sup> The spirit of CB is uncontroversial, although its explanation isn’t. Our options are roughly three: appeal to the constitutive normativity of belief (e.g. Shah 2003), appeal to the constitutive teleology of belief (e.g. Steglich-Petersen 2006), or give a naturalistic reduction of correctness in functional terms (e.g. Papineau 2013). Much depends on whether we are cognitivists about belief attribution; the constitutive normativity of belief is easier for naturalists to swallow if they are non-cognitivists about belief attribution (cf. Dennett 1971, pp. 102-3; Shah and Velleman 2005, pp. 508-11).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sosa 1988, 2004, 2015, Zagzebski 1996, Greco 1999, 2003, 2010, Turri 2011, Miracchi 2015.

My argument in this paper assumes a generalized form of VPK<sup>6</sup>, i.e. a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge in general:

**VK:** Knowledge is apt mental representation.<sup>7</sup>

Where a mental representation is *apt* if and only if it is correct and its correctness manifests one or more representational virtues (relative to its content) of the person who makes it, where a *representational virtue* (relative to some content) is a reliable capacity to make correct representations (and to avoid making incorrect representations) with that content.

What takes some doing, in particular cases, is figuring out what the relevant species of mental representation is. For example, in the case of explanatory knowledge, it is something like a representation of the explanation of the fact that p.<sup>8</sup> For another, in the case of practical knowledge, it is something like a representation of how to  $\phi$ . There are epistemological debates about just what species of mental representation is involved in various cases, with an emphasis on whether such representation is distinct from belief.

On VPK, beliefs that amount to propositional knowledge will typically be safe, where someone's belief (that p) is *safe* if and only if they would not easily believe that p (in the same way that they actually did) unless it were the case that p.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, given VPK, the safety of a correct belief is defeasible evidence that it amounts to knowledge, for a natural explanation of why a correct belief is safe is that its correctness manifests the doxastic virtue of the believer. Of course, there *might* be some other explanation – guardian angels, benevolent wizards, doubly-lucky circumstances, etc. – but the default assumption will be that safety is a sign of knowledge. The same point seems true about knowledge in general, *mutatis mutandis*. We can say that a mental representation is *safe* if and only if the person making it would not easily make it (in the same way that she actually did) unless its correctness condition were satisfied. Given VK, then, the safety of a correct mental representation is defeasible evidence that it amounts to knowledge.

### **The guise of the good thesis**

I assume what is known as the “guise of the good thesis,” and I follow G.E.M. Anscombe (1963) in formulating it:

---

<sup>6</sup> I do not assume VPK, only because my argument posits a non-doxastic species of propositional knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> I have formulated VK in terms of *mental* representation. The idea is that knowledge is, at least in the paradigm case, a relation between *mind* and world. Thus, given VK, non-mental representations – sentences and pictures, for example – cannot amount to knowledge, although their content may be saliently known, and we might felicitously call them items of “knowledge” in that case, in the same way that we call propositions “knowledge” when they are saliently known.

<sup>8</sup> See Hazlett 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sosa 1999; cf. Nozick 1981, pp. 176-7.

The conceptual connection between ‘wanting’ ... and ‘good’ can be compared to the conceptual connection between ‘judgment’ and ‘truth’. Truth is the object of judgment, and good the object of wanting. (p. 76)<sup>10</sup>

Or, as I shall put it:

**CD:** It is correct to desire  $x$  if and only if  $x$  is good (and incorrect otherwise).<sup>11</sup>

We could just as well say: a desire, whose content is  $x$ , is correct if and only if  $x$  is good. Desire is thus, like belief, a species of representation.

As in the case of CB, we mean representational correctness and incorrectness here. CD is not an account of obligatory desire, permissible desire, rational desire, reasonable desire, virtuous desire, and so on.

The content of a desire,  $x$ , might be a proposition, or (if this amounts to something substantially different) an event or state of affairs. When we speak of desiring an individual, like a steak tartare, it is natural to think that a more perspicuous rendering of our desire would explicate its content as a proposition, event, or state of affairs, e.g. the centered proposition that I in the near future eat a steak tartare.<sup>12</sup>

What is it for something – a proposition, say – to be good? A deep question, surely, or at least one no less deep than the question, which we might ask in connection with CB, of what it is for a proposition to be true. However, I do not think the defender of CD is on the hook to give an account of goodness, any more than the defender of CB is on the hook to give an account of truth. Of course, there are accounts of goodness that would render CD implausible – e.g. if you said that  $x$  is good if and only if  $x$  is desired by someone, then CD would be implausible, in the same way that, if you said that  $x$  is true if and only if  $x$  is desired by someone, then CB would be implausible. Elsewhere, I have argued that the defender of CD ought to understand “good” as referring to absolute goodness and that the guise of the good thesis cannot plausibly be combined with a “fitting attitudes” or “dispositional” account of desire.<sup>13</sup> In assuming CD, I also assume the falsity of any account of goodness that is incompatible with CD.

My argument in this paper assumes the guise of the good thesis. But it is worth mentioning why defenders of the guise of the good thesis find it appealing. At least one reason is that the truth of the guise of the good thesis explains where Hume went wrong in his argument that there would be nothing wrong with his preferring the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger.<sup>14</sup> Hume’s argument for this is based on the premise that “a passion ... contains not any representative quality,” and as such cannot be

---

<sup>10</sup> See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a29-b4. See also Davidson 1963/2001, pp. 3-4, 1970/2001, p. 222. Many defenders of the guise of the good thesis draw an analogy not between desire and belief but between desire and sense perceptual experience; see Plato, *Gorgias*, 466e-468d, *Meno* 77c-78b; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.2, 1113a22, 1136b7, 1155b25, 1165b14, *De Anima*, 433a27; Stampe 1987; Oddie 2005, §2.6-7; Tenenbaum 2007, Chapter 1, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> This formulation assumes that desire for the non-good is incorrect; this is a simplifying assumption, given that some things are neither good nor bad, and thus plausibly neither correct nor incorrect to desire.

<sup>12</sup> On my view, the content of a desire is always a proposition, but sometimes a centered proposition. Note that “ $x$  is good” is a technical expression, covering cases of false propositions, where we would normally say that it *would be* good *were it* the case that  $p$ .

<sup>13</sup> Hazlett forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, Section III (at p. 416 in Hume 1978).

correct or incorrect.<sup>15</sup> The guise of a good thesis provides a simple diagnosis of Hume's error: passions *are* representations, and as such *can* be correct or incorrect. There would, after all, be *something* wrong with Hume's preferring the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger, since the destruction of the world would not be better, and would need be much worse, than the scratching of his finger.<sup>16</sup> That diagnosis, however, assumes some version of the guise of the good thesis.

### Conative knowledge

We are now in a position to articulate an account of desire that amounts to knowledge, or *conative knowledge*. I propose:

**VCK:** Conative knowledge is apt desire.

Where your desire for *x* is *apt* if and only if it is correct and its correctness manifests one or more of your conative virtues, where *conative virtues* are reliable capacities to form correct desires (and to avoid forming incorrect desires). To put this another way, if you correctly desire *x*, said desire amounts to knowledge if and only if it is apt. And to put that another way, apt desire is a species of knowledge. Therefore, desire sometimes amounts to knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Given CD, conative knowledge is (a species of) evaluative knowledge, i.e. knowledge of what is good. If you aptly desire *x*, you know that *x* is good. Conative knowledge is thus a species of propositional knowledge. This isn't quite entailed by VK and CD, but it might as well be: according to CD, desire represents its object as good; and it is hard to imagine how an apt representation of *x* as good could fail to be, at the same time, an apt representation of the proposition that *x* is good as true. We can imagine a representation that aptly represents one thing but does not aptly represent something else – e.g. a painting that aptly represents Gladstone's copious whiskers but does not aptly represent Gladstone's surly grimace. But *x*'s being good and the proposition that *x* is good are not sufficiently distinct – unlike Gladstone's whiskers and his grimace – for us to be able to imagine how a representation could aptly represent the one without also, at the same time, aptly representing the other.

As with VPK, there is going to be a connection between safety and knowledge here. First, given VCK, desires that amount to conative knowledge will typically be safe, where someone's desire (for *x*) is *safe* if and only if they would not easily desire *x* (in the same way that they actually did) unless *x* were good. Second, and more important, given VCK, the safety of a correct desire is defeasible evidence that it

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (at p. 415 in Hume 1978); see also Book III, Part I, Section I (at p. 458 in Hume 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Another potential source of appeal comes from the fact that CD can explain why desire has the motivational profile that it has – why desiring something inclines you to act in *favor* of *x*, rather than *against* it. However, some philosophers build the motivational profile into the nature of desire (see e.g. Smith 1987, §6). So this point doesn't speak in favor of CD as against that kind of view.

<sup>17</sup> I said that I would defend the idea that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge. There's a sense in which I haven't done that. Consider the idea that belief sometimes amounts to knowledge. There's a sense in which a philosophical skeptic might deny that claim, without denying that there is, as it were, *such a thing* as propositional knowledge. And, likewise, someone might deny that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge, without denying that there is *such a thing* as conative knowledge. All I'll defended here is the idea that there is such a thing as conative knowledge, on a par with propositional knowledge; I've not engaged with skepticism about either propositional or conative knowledge.

amounts to knowledge, because a natural explanation of why a correct desire is safe is that its correctness manifests the conative virtue of the believer.

Consider Smith, a prejudiced jailer. Smith holds an extremely negative view of the moral status of her prisoners, who belong to a marginalized outgroup (class, caste, race, etc.), such that, specifically, she believes that their suffering is not intrinsically bad. As a result, she generally treats them very roughly. However, despite her prejudice, Smith finds her work distasteful. She does not like it. She finds herself wanting to go easy on her prisoners – i.e. to refrain from hitting them, depriving them of food, forcing them to do degrading tasks, etc. – even though she believes that she has no reason to do so. Smith is embarrassed by her desire to go easy on her prisoners, which she attributes to a lack of discipline, believing, as she does, that going easy on her prisoners would not be good. But she is wrong about the source of her feelings: her desire to go easy on her prisoners actually manifests *compassion* for them. To put that another way, her desire is a *response* to intrinsic badness of their suffering, to which she is, in spite of her prejudice, sensitive. This responsiveness is evidenced by the fact that she is not generally tempted not to do her job – she doesn't mind passing out the prisoner's mail, sweeping the floors, or filing paperwork. It is only when her job calls for rough treatment of the prisoners that she finds herself wanting to shirk her duties. (Alternatively, compare Smith to an extremist jailer who wants not to treat her prisoners roughly because she finds any interaction with them intolerable, including interactions that do not involve treating them roughly.)

Smith's desire to go easy on her prisoners is apt, i.e. it manifests a reliable capacity for desire-formation, namely, her compassion. We can bolster our sense of the desire's aptness by imagining this as a case of *safe* desire, i.e. that Smith would not easily desire to go easy on her prisoners unless going easy on her prisoners were good. Smith's desire thus contrasts with that of her undisciplined or extremist counterparts, who would easily desire to go easy on their prisoners even were doing so not good. Given VCK, therefore, Smith's desire to go easy on her prisoners amounts to conative knowledge that going easy on her prisoners would be good.

This is an appealing result, for at least two reasons. First, suppose that Smith acts on her desire to go easy on her prisoners. In that case, that Smith knows that going easy on her prisoners would be good explains why is rational and virtuous for her to act as she does.<sup>18</sup> Acting on her desire to go easy on her prisoners is not be a case of “giving in to temptation” or “letting her emotions get the better of her” – even though Smith is inclined to describe things that way. When Smith acts on her desire, she is wisely trusting her reliable feelings, despite their conflict with her bigoted ideology. If Smith did not know that going easy on her prisoners would be good, we could not easily make sense of her actions as rational or virtuous. We might welcome her actions as fortuitous, but we could not plausibly praise Smith for her rationality or virtue. But that would miss something important about the difference between Smith, as described, and her undisciplined and extremist counterparts. The undisciplined or extremist jailer who goes easy on her prisoners out of laziness or disgust enjoys a kind of moral luck – she ends up doing the right thing, but does not deserve credit for it. Smith, by contrast, deserves credit for going easy on her prisoners on the

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Audi 1990, MacIntyre 1990, Arpaly 2000, 2004.

basis of her apt desire to go easy on them. That is best explained by the hypothesis that she knows that going easy on them would be good.<sup>19</sup>

Second, suppose that Smith does not act on her desire to go easy on her prisoners, and continues to treat them roughly. In that case, that Smith knows that goes easy on her prisoners would be good explains why she is morally culpable for her actions. Smith's cognitive commitment to the worthlessness of her prisoners' lives does not excuse her conduct, given her conative awareness of their lives' worth. There is an important moral difference between Smith, on the one hand, and the *wholehearted* prejudiced jailer, whose desires are in line with their bigoted beliefs. Smith is blameworthy in a way that the latter isn't. This is not to say that the wholehearted prejudiced jailer isn't blameworthy – perhaps they are, e.g. in virtue of the fact that they are responsible for their uncritical acceptance of their negative beliefs about the targeted outgroup. But they are not blameworthy in the way that Smith is blameworthy: Smith is *aware* that her prisoners' suffering *is* intrinsically bad, and, to that extent, she is aware that her negative beliefs about the targeted outgroup are false. That she continues to treat her prisoners roughly despite such awareness betrays a kind of vice that is not present in the case of the wholehearted prejudiced jailer. All this suggests that Smith knows that going easy on her prisoners would be good.

The present case has been constructed with the aim of making it intuitive that Smith does not *believe* that going easy on her prisoners is good.<sup>20</sup> That way, we have an intuitive illustration of the idea of conative knowledge. The idea here is not that you should accept VCK on the basis of the premise that Smith does not believe that going easy on her prisoners is good – that premise is too controversial to do that kind of dialectical work. The argument is rather that, assuming VK and CD, you should accept the idea of conative knowledge.

Are the cases of Smith and Jones cases of propositional knowledge without belief – i.e. cases in which someone knows that *p* but does not believe that *p*? I am inclined to say that they are. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend that claim. It is intuitive, as much as such things ever are, that Smith does not believe that going easy on her prisoners would be good. But there are reasonable philosophical theories of belief that would reject that intuition.

### **Desire as belief**

I said that, if you aptly desire *x*, you know that *x* is good. This seems to suggest that you can know that *p* without believing that *p*, since it seems like you can (aptly) desire *x* without believing that *x* is good. You

---

<sup>19</sup> On necessary connections between knowledge and rational action, see Hawthorne 2004, p. 30, Stanley 2005, p. 9, Fantl and McGrath 2007, p. 557, 2009, p. 59, p. 66, Stanley and Hawthorne 2008, p. 578.

<sup>20</sup> The intuition in this case depends on our unwillingness to attribute blatantly contradictory beliefs to Smith. For the only plausible way to attribute to Smith the belief that that going easy on her prisoners is good would be to attribute to her the belief that her prisoner's suffering *is* intrinsically bad. But we are reluctant to attribute such blatantly inconsistent beliefs. There is, of course, a kind of inconsistency here, given CD: Smith's belief about the intrinsic value of her prisoners' suffering and her desire not to beat her prisoner cannot both be correct, and in that sense her belief and her desire are inconsistent. But we are more reluctant to attribute inconsistency *within* a system of mental representations of one kind – e.g. beliefs, desires, etc. – than *between* two such systems. To put this another way, inter-system inconsistency strikes us as a rare and unusual thing, but intra-system inconsistency strikes us as familiar and ordinary. To see what I mean, consider the familiar kind of inconsistency between our beliefs and our visual experiences involved in optical illusions – for example, your visual experience of the Müller-Lyer lines represents them as different in length but you believe that they are not different in length.

might, for example, want to drink a can of paint, without thinking that your drinking a can of paint would be good in any way at all.<sup>21</sup> However, CD tells us that desire has a correctness condition, and in that respect are similar to belief. CD also tells us that the correctness condition for desire is the goodness of its content. But that means that desire and evaluative belief – i.e. belief that something is good – have the same correctness condition. If representations are individuated only by their correctness conditions<sup>22</sup>, it follows that desire and evaluative belief are the same thing.

The claim that desire is evaluative belief (or that evaluative belief is desire) does not undermine our argument that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge, although it perhaps makes that conclusion less interesting. If desire is evaluative belief, and if belief sometimes amounts to knowledge, then we can easily make sense of the idea of desire that amounts to knowledge. (If desire is evaluative belief, only something about *evaluative* belief, in particular, something that precludes it from being apt, could prevent desire from sometimes amounting to knowledge.) So in what remains of this section I'll explore the possibilities for rejecting the claim that desire is evaluative belief – but without rejecting CD.

The only way the defender of CD can avoid endorsing the equivalence of desire and evaluative belief, it seems to me, is by, first, arguing that representations are *not* individuated only by their correctness conditions and, second, giving an account of the difference between desire and evaluative belief.

Rejecting the premise that representations are individuated only by their correctness conditions is easy. That two representations have the same correctness condition does not entail that they are the same representation; it only entails that they represent the same thing. Consider a picture that depicts the cat being on the mat and the sentence “The cat is on the mat.” They have the same correctness condition, but are not the same representation. It might be objected that the picture does not have the *same* correctness condition as your belief, since it represents more than merely the cat's being on the mat – it represents her shape, or her color, or the particular way she sits on the mat, and so on. But we can at least imagine a picture with a sufficiently impoverish content and a sentence with a sufficiently rich content such that their correctness conditions are the same. And yet they would not be the same representation – the one would be a picture, the other a sentence.

However, giving an account of the difference between desire and evaluative belief is hard. There are a few promising options that turn out to be problematic. First, consider the phenomenology of desire and belief. Cases of desire without evaluative belief, along with cases of evaluative belief without desire, are suggestive of a distinctive phenomenology of desire that are conspicuously present in the former cases and conspicuously absent in the latter cases. It is natural to describe desire as a feeling because it is paradigmatically something that we are conscious of feeling – as when we describe ourselves as “yearning” for something or as “desperately wanting” something. (Consider, alternatively, our sense in some cases of being “overwhelmed by” or “overcome with” desire.) However, it is unclear that desire *always* involves a distinctive phenomenology. Unconscious desires look like one kind of counterexample to the idea that desire always involves a distinctive phenomenology. Another kind of counterexample comes from desires that, though hardly unconscious, do not involve feeling – e.g. wanting, without any

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Davidson 1963, p. 686.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Velleman 2000.



great urgency, to have cornflakes for breakfast.<sup>23</sup> This seems to threaten any attempt to distinguish desire and evaluative belief in phenomenological terms.

Second, consider desire and belief vis-à-vis agency. It is tempting to argue that belief essentially involves the agency of the believer in a way that desire does not, if we make our paradigm case of belief that of a sober conviction arrived at through careful reflection and make our paradigm case of desire an unreflective, passionate yearning – or, better, an irrational and inexplicable yen to drink a can of paint. But this apparent difference only arises from our choice of examples. We have beliefs that are formed, sustained, and revised automatically and unreflectively – not to mention beliefs that are irrational and inexplicable – and we have desires that are arrived at through careful reflection. Both beliefs and desires are sometimes, but not always formed, sustained, and revised on the basis of deliberation, although neither believing nor desiring is (ever) under our direct control. Thus, it does not seem that we can distinguish desire and evaluative belief in terms of agency.

Third, we might appeal to differences in dispositional profile (or “functional role”). Here is Michael Smith (1987) on the difference between desire and belief in general:

[T]he difference between beliefs and desires ... comes down to a difference between the counterfactual dependence of a belief and a desire that *p*, on a perception that *not p*: roughly, a belief that *p* is a state that tends to go of existence in the presence of a perception that *not p*, whereas a desire that *p* is a state that tends to endure, disposing the subject in that state to bring it about that *p*. (Smith 1987, p. 54)

However, this doesn't help us distinguish desire and evaluative belief.<sup>24</sup> First, a desire that *p* (like a belief that it would be good were it the case that *p*) tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception that it would not be good were it the case that *p*. Our desire, like our evaluative belief, is sensitive to evaluative perception. Of course, we are merely talking about a *tendency* here: it is possible to perceive that it would not be good were it the case that *p* and yet continue, perversely, to desire that *p*. Moreover, this possibility does not distinguish desire from evaluative belief: is possible to perversely believe that it would be good were it the case that *p*, despite perceiving that it would not be good were it the case that *p*, as when someone is brainwashed or deluded. Second, a belief that it would be good were it the case that *p* (like a desire that *p*) tends to dispose the subject to bring it about that *p*. Evaluative belief, like desire, motivates us to act.<sup>25</sup> Again, this is merely a tendency: it is possible to believe that it would be good were it the case that *p* and yet, through weakness of will or malaise, fail to be disposed to bring it about that *p*. Moreover, this possibility does not distinguish evaluative belief from desire: weakness of will and malaise are compatible with desire.

However, there seem to be at least two crucial differences between the dispositional profiles of desire and belief that can help us distinguish desire and evaluative belief. The first difference has to do with inference. Necessarily, someone who believes that *p* is disposed to believe that which is entailed (or otherwise evidentially supported) by the proposition that *p*. (As above, keep in mind that we are talking

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hume on the “calm passions” (op. cit., pp. 417-8).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Price 1989, pp. 119-21.

<sup>25</sup> Or, rather, in this dialectical context, we cannot assume otherwise.

about tendencies here.) This includes the case of evaluative belief: necessarily, someone who believes that  $x$  is good is disposed to believe that which is entailed (or otherwise evidentially supported) by the proposition that  $x$  is good. However, someone who desires  $x$  is not necessarily disposed to believe that which is entailed (or otherwise evidentially supported by) the proposition that  $x$  is good. That is not to say that we do not make inferences on the basis of our desires; perhaps we do, but the way in which desires serve as evidence for evaluative inferences is different from the way in which evaluative beliefs serve as evidence for evaluative inferences.<sup>26</sup>

The second difference has to do with emotion. Our desires are more tightly connected with our emotions than are our beliefs. In general, believing that  $p$  does not entail any particular emotional dispositions, whereas desiring that  $p$  does: it entails, roughly, being disposed to happiness given a perception that  $p$  and sadness given a perception that not- $p$ . However, this generalization about belief holds even in the case of evaluative belief: someone who merely believes that it would be good were it the case that  $p$  is not necessarily disposed to satisfaction given a perception that  $p$  and frustration given a perception that not- $p$ . Satisfied desire without happiness and frustrated desire without sadness are both exceptional – which is not to say they are unfamiliar – but satisfied evaluative belief without happiness and frustrated evaluative belief without sadness are the norm.

This is obviously just a sketch of the difference between desire and evaluative belief. And this is not meant to convince you that desire and evaluative belief are distinct; the can of paint example is meant to do that. But it is also obviously going to be a difficult task to give a satisfactory account of the difference between desire and evaluative belief – whether in phenomenological, agential, or dispositional terms.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

I have argued that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge, and, in particular, to knowledge what about is good. We are in a position where we can coherently affirm both the Peripatetic platitude that you won't easily live a good life unless you know what is good and the Pyrrhonian insight that living a good life doesn't require theoretical knowledge, by saying that living well requires conative knowledge.

## Bibliography

Anscombe, G.E.M. (1963), *Intention* (Harvard University Press).

Arpaly, N. (2000), "On Acting Rationally Against One's Best Judgement." *Ethics* 110 (2000), pp. 488-513.

Arpaly, N. (2004), *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Audi, R. (1990), "Weakness of Will and Rational Action," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68(3), pp. 270-81

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Oddie 2005, Chapters xx.

<sup>27</sup> What about the argument that the distinctness of desire and belief is entailed by decision theory (Lewis 1988, 1996; cf. Pettit 1987, Price 1989, pp. 121-7, Oddie 1994)? That argument threatens the guise of the good thesis just as much as the view that desire is a species of belief, and therefore must be bracketed here.

- Brink, D.O. (2008), "The Significance of Desire," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3, pp. 5-45.
- Davidson, D. (1963/2001), "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press), pp. 3-19.
- Davidson, D. (1970/2001), "Mental Events," reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press), pp. 207-25.
- Dennett, D. (1971), "Intentional Systems," *Journal of Philosophy* 68(4), pp. 87-106.
- Fantl, J., and McGrath, M. (2007), "On Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75(3), pp. 558-89.
- Fantl, J., and McGrath, M. (2009), *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford University Press).
- Greco, J. (1999), "Agent Reliabilism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, pp. 273-96.
- Greco, J. (2003), "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," in M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (eds.), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford University Press), pp. 111-34.
- Greco, J. (2010), *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Oxford University Press).
- Hawthorne, J. (2004), *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford University Press).
- Hawthorne, J., and Stanley, J. (2008), "Knowledge and Action," *Journal of Philosophy* 110(10), pp. 571-90
- Lewis, D. (1988), "Desire as Belief," *Mind* 97(387), pp. 323-32.
- Lewis, D. (1996), "Desire as Belief II," *Mind* 105(418), pp. 303-13.
- MacIntyre, A. (1990), "Is Akratic Action Always Irrational?" in O. Flanagan and A. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (MIT Press, 1990), pp. 379-400
- Miracchi, L. (2015), "Competence to Know," *Philosophical Studies* 172(1), pp. 29-56.
- Nozick, R. (1981), *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press).
- Oddie, G. (1994), "Harmony, Purity, Truth," *Mind* 103(412), pp. 451-72.
- Oddie, G. (2005), *Value, Reality, and Desire* (Oxford University Press).
- Papineau, D. (2013), "There Are No Norms of Belief," in T. Chan (ed.), *The Aim of Belief* (Oxford University Press), pp. 64-79.
- Pettit, P. (1987), "Humeans, Anti-Humeans, and Motivation," *Mind* 96(384), pp. 530-3.

- Price, G. (1989), "Defending Desire-As-Belief," *Mind* 98(389), pp. 119-27.
- Setiya, K. (2007), *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton University Press).
- Setiya, K. (2010), "Sympathy for the Devil," in Tenenbaum, S. (ed.), *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good* (Oxford University Press), pp. 82-110.
- Shah, N. (2003), "How Truth Governs Belief," *Philosophical Review* 112(4), pp. 447-82.
- Shah, N., and Velleman, D. (2005), "Doxastic Deliberation," *Philosophical Review* 114(4), pp. 487-534.
- Smith, M. (1987), "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96(381), pp. 36-61.
- Sosa, E. (1985), "Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue," *The Monist* 68, pp. 224-45.
- Sosa, E. (1988), "Methodology and Apt Belief," *Synthese* 74(3), pp. 415-26.
- Sosa, E. (1999), "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, pp. 141-53.
- Sosa, E. (2007), *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume 1* (Oxford University Press).
- Sosa, E. (2015), "Mind-World Relations," *Episteme* 12(2), pp. 155-66.
- Stanley, J. (2005), *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford University Press).
- Stampe, D. (1987), "The Authority of Desire," *Philosophical Review* 96(3), pp. 225-81.
- Steglich-Petersen, A. (2006), "No Norm Needed: On the Aim of Belief," *Philosophical Quarterly* 56, pp. 499-516.
- Stocker, M. (1979), "Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology," *Journal of Philosophy* 76:12, pp. 738-53.
- Tenenbaum, S. (2007), *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason* (Cambridge University Press).
- Tenenbaum, S. (2008), "Appearing Good: A Reply to Schroeder," *Social Theory and Practice* 34(1), pp. 131-8.
- Turri, J. (2011), "Manifest Failure: The Gettier Problem Solved," *Philosopher's Imprint* 11(8), pp. 1-11.
- Velleman, D. (2000), "On the Aim of Belief," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 244-81.
- Williamson, T. (2000) *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford University Press).

Zagzebski, L. (1996), *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press).