

Distinctions among Desires and Motivation

In this paper I will explore the relations between three distinctions between desires that seem to be in the same ballpark, but not clearly so. The unifying theme among these distinctions is, I will claim, the relation of each kind of desire to motivation. Audi's distinction between desires and wants, Davis' distinction between appetitive and volitive desires and Marks' distinction between genuine and formal desires distinguish different desires by their relation to motivation. In Audi's case, the desire-want distinction is a species-genus distinction in which a desire is a species of want, the genus encompassing motivating states. In Marks' case, the distinction between desires is between states that account for motivation, genuine desires, and states that reflect that the subject is motivated, formal desires. Davis' distinction looks like it might track either distinction. I argue that it tracks Marks' rather than Audi's. This is because, as I will argue, Davis' volitive desires cannot be Audi's wants. Thus, while only Marks' distinction is explicitly about motivation, I will argue that the best way to unify the distinctions of Davis, Audi and Marks is by their relation to motivation.

I will first lay out Davis' and Audi's distinctions and then argue that Davis' volitive desires cannot be Audi's wants but are instead what Audi calls wants on balance. Taking this parallel, I will connect up Audi's wants on balance and Davis' volitive desires with Marks' formal desires. So, while Davis' distinction tracks Marks' rather than Audi's, Audi does have the resources to account for volitive/formal desires, and Davis can, in some sense, accommodate Audi's wants.

The distinctions

Audi distinguishes wants from desires in the context of defending his thesis that intending entails wanting. The intending-wanting thesis is often rejected as a result of failing to distinguish wants from desires because the latter are not obviously entailed by intending (Audi, 21). However, distinguishing desires from wants does not prevent us from maintaining a genus/species relation between wants and desires: "nor may we infer that desires are not a proper subset of wants" (22). In addition to wants and desires, Audi invokes the notion of a want on balance (WoB): "my account concerns relative strengths: a want on balance is one not equaled or outweighed in strength by an incompatible want or set of incompatible wants" (22). It is wanting in the form of wanting on balance that is entailed by intending (18).

Distinguishing between appetitive (AD) and volitive desires (VD) is the subject of Davis' entire argument, so I cannot neatly recapitulate it here. His initial wedge of distinction is that AD are most naturally ascribed in locutions of the form, 'S has a desire that/to p/ϕ ', while VD are most naturally in locutions of the form, 'S desires that/to p/ϕ ' (Davis, 63-65). Beyond this linguistic wedge, Davis also offers some important conceptual distinctions. Though I do not have the space to argue here, the following features of AD and VD seem central to Davis' distinction. A characteristic mark of AD is that when S has an AD, the object of the desire is appealing to S, whereas the objects of a VD need not be appealing (66).¹ A characteristic mark of VD, on the other hand, is its unique relation to intending; intending entails VD but not AD (73).

¹ Davis sometimes seems to suggest that the object of a VD will be appealing only when it is also the object of an AD.

Wanting, WoB, and VD

While introducing Audi's distinction, I suggested that the relation between desires and wants is that of species to genus on the grounds that it saves his intending-wanting thesis. I will now argue that Davis' AD/VD distinction cannot be a species/genus distinction and so cannot be the same as Audi's desire/want distinction.

Davis begins by pointing out that, "the following principle seems self-evident: the desire to do A and the desire not to do A are mutually exclusive" (Davis, 68). The self-evidence of this principle apparently conflicts with the possibility of truly claiming to want and not want to do A.² Faced with the paradox brought on by combining the self-evident principle and the want/not-want possibility, we have several options. We can abandon the principle or explain away the paradox as merely apparent. Taking the second option, we again have choices.

First, if you claim that you want and want not to do A, you may really mean that you want to do A and you want to do B and believe that you cannot do both A and B. In this case, you don't *really* mean that you want not to do A, but rather that you want to do B and recognize the impossibility of doing both. Davis' AD/VD distinction provides another way to explain away the paradox while keeping the principle.³ When you say you want and want not to do A, your apparently contradictory desires are really of different types and so there is no real conflict. This option is particularly promising for cases in which insisting that there is some B that a subject also wants to do is less plausible as it allows that subject really have both a desire (in one sense) to do A and a desire (in another sense) not to do A. So, for Davis, you cannot have a VD to do A and a VD not to do A. You can either have a VD to do A, a VD to do B and believe doing A and B to be mutually exclusive, or have an AD/VD to do A and a VD/AD not to do A.

Given this approach to the dismissing the paradox of wanting and wanting not, AD cannot be a species of VD. Suppose you are hungry and so have an AD to eat. If AD are a species of VD, then you also therein have a VD to eat. However, it is possible to have an AD to eat and a VD not to eat according to Davis, as when eating is appealing to you but you decide it would be better to stick to your diet and so do not want to eat (67). If you are hungry and committed to your diet, then there are only two possibilities with respect to your VD to eat or not to eat. If AD are a species of VD, then if you have an AD to eat, the laws of metaphysics, as it were, bear down upon you to prevent you from forming a VD not to eat. Alternatively, if AD are not a species of VD such that your AD to eat is not therein a VD, then your commitment to your diet can lead you to want not to eat. The second option is more plausible in not requiring us to invoke the 'laws of metaphysics' to intervene on what you can want. So, AD aren't a species of VD.

I will now argue that Audi's wants can be contradictory and that the grounds on which Davis rejects the possibility of contradictory VD are the grounds on which Audi rejects contradictory WoB. This suggests that Davis' VD are Audi's WoB rather than

² The use of 'want' in this context is not meant to be the same sense as that which Audi means, it is supposed to reflect a neutral use.

³ There is a third possibility: you have good reasons both to do A and not to do A. However, according to Davis to express this fact with the claim that you do and do not want to do A would be received as an annoying attempt to "feign paradox" (68).

Audi's wants. Audi welcomes the species/genus distinction between desires and wants; it is instead WoB that are restricted regarding contradiction. Suppose that desires are a species of wants. In this case, your hunger can give you a desire to eat and therein a want to eat. Suppose, again that you are committed to a diet and as a result take it to be good not to eat.⁴ This 'taking to be good' can also count as a species of wanting, and therein give you a want not to eat. No metaphysical pressures prevent your forming this want even if your desire to eat constitutes a want to eat. What cannot happen, however, is that you have a WoB to eat and not to eat. Indeed, this is just a special instance of the impossibility of having WoBs with objects that are believed incompatible: "if one believes that x and y are not jointly realizable, one cannot want both on balance...to adjudicate between two wants vying for predominance...is to abandon one of them *as a want on balance*" (Audi, 23). Moreover, the nature of WoB as balances accounts for the impossibility of wanting on balance to do and not to do something.⁵

A similar story underwrites Audi's response to claims that intending does not imply wanting because while you cannot intend to do B, realize that doing A is necessary to do B, but not intend to do A, you can want to do B, realize that A is necessary to do B, and not want to do A. Audi first responds that the latter want transmission claim might rest on a failure to distinguish wants from desires and only truly apply to desires (24). But more importantly, whatever truth there is to the claim about intention transmission from end to means will also hold for WoB transmission from end to means (24). That is, Audi allows that while your wants might fail to transmit from end to means, your WoB will transmit whenever your intentions do. Thus you can want to do B (or WoB to do B), realize that A is necessary to do B, but want not to do A. This is compatible with a want or WoB to do B, realizing that A is necessary to do B, and WoB to do A. And when you do fail to have a WoB to do A, your intention to do B will also fail into an intention to do A. Thus, Audi's reply to the intention/want transmission asymmetry threat to his intention-wanting thesis is first to distinguish desires from wants and then wants from WoB. The second distinction reaffirms the possibility of wanting to do A and wanting not to do A, which would not be possible if Audi's wants were Davis' VD.⁶

VD, wanting, WoB and motivation

So, VD cannot be contradictory while wants can, though WoB cannot. It seems then that VD are WoB rather than wants. Further evidence comes from the connection to intending: VD are entailed by intention for Davis and WoB are entailed by intending for Audi. Of course, WoB requires wanting, so wanting is also entailed by intending, but this is by way of WoB. I would like to close by noting the similarity of these states to the formal desires (explanatorily vacuous regarding action) that Marks distinguishes from genuine desires (explanatorily informative regarding action) (Marks, 136). As I suggested in the introduction, formal desire are explanatorily vacuous because they

⁴ If 'taking to be good' is too close to something like, 'worth doing all things considered', then just weaken it, so that your diet leads you to judge that sticking to your diet by not eating is important, though not overwhelmingly so.

⁵ There may be some trouble here if the wants balance each other out so that neither is wanted more on balance than the other.

⁶ Or at least Audi's response to intention transmission does not in anyway rule out the possibility of wanting and wanting not to A.

reflect rather than provide, or account for, motivation. Audi's WoB fit this mold as they are *balances*. The balance does not motivate over and above the motivation provided by the balanced states. Moreover, it is the motivating state—the want—that does the heavy lifting for explaining action as it provides the motivation that is not outweighed; that is, wanting is the fundamental motivational notion, “wanting and believing [are] major building blocks in the philosophy of mind” (Audi, 33). Perhaps more interestingly, it seems that Davis' VD fit this reflective mold as well. For Davis, VD “are manifestations of the will, which most generally is the power or capacity to desire volitionally” (Davis, 76). Rephrased in terms of motivation, VD reflect one's overall motivational state on a question. There are various influences on the will, including, *inter alia*, AD and value judgments neither of which are species of VD. Conceived as such, VD are explanatorily vacuous—they reflect the agent's overall motivational state with respect to some act rather than account for it.

Summing up, then, Audi's wants are neither Davis' VD nor Marks' formal desires. Rather, VD, formal desires and WoB are all desires of a feather—reflecting the motivational state rather than account for it. The equivalent to Audi's wants within Davis' system seems to be something like ‘influence on the will’, of which AD are certainly a species. Thus, the distinctions of Audi, Davis and Marks can be tied together by focusing on how each kind of desire relates to motivation.