

Desire

INTRODUCTION

IN Darwin, J. S. Mill, William James, and Freud, at the modern end of the great tradition, the word "desire" primarily signifies a cause of animal and human behavior. It is one of the basic terms in psychological analysis, covering that whole range of phenomena which are also referred to by such terms as *wanting, needing, craving, wishing, willing*, all of which are discussed in connection with theories of instinct and emotion, libido and love, motivation and purpose.

"All of us have desires," Dewey declares, "all at least who have not become so pathological that they are completely apathetic. These desires are the ultimate moving springs of action . . . The intensity of the desire measures the strength of the efforts that will be put forth." The range and variety of desires is enormous; and in the great books, authors differ about whether the desire for sexual pleasure, wealth, power, or knowledge tends to predominate.

If we turn to traditional beginnings, to the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Galen, and Plotinus, we find that the psychological consideration of desire is part of a much larger context. The ancients are, of course, concerned with the role of desire in causing animal or human behavior, and with the causes of such desire, but they are also interested in cravings which seem to be present in plants as well as animals. Plato, for example, attributes to plants "feelings of pleasure and pain and the desires which accompany them." The vegetative activities of nutrition, growth, and reproduction seem to spring from basic appetites—or, in modern phraseology, "biological needs"—inherent in all living matter.

Because hunger and thirst so readily symbol-

ize the essence of desire (or certainly represent its most general manifestation in living things), the words "appetite" and "desire" are frequently used as synonyms in the earlier phase of the tradition. As Hobbes observes, when he proposes to use "appetite" and "desire" as synonyms, desire is "the general name," and appetite is "oftentimes restrained to signify the desire for food, namely hunger and thirst." So, too, Spinoza says that "there is no difference between appetite and desire," yet he adds, "unless in this particular, that desire is generally related to men in so far as they are conscious of their appetites, and it may therefore be defined as appetite of which we are conscious."

Spinoza here seems to be reflecting the distinction made by earlier writers between natural appetite and conscious desire, which we today would, perhaps, express in terms of "need" and "wish." The ancient conception of tendencies inherent in all things—inanimate as well as living—which seek a natural fulfillment broadens the meaning of appetite or desire. When Aristotle says that "each thing seeks its own perfection" and that "nature does nothing in vain," he is thinking of nonliving as well as living bodies. Wherever in the physical world things seem to have a natural tendency to move in a certain direction or to change in a certain way, there appetite, belonging to the very nature of the moving thing, operates as a cause. Adopting this view, Dante declares that "neither Creator nor creature . . . was ever without love, either natural or of the mind"; and in his *Il convivio* he shows how each thing has its "specific love." The love, or desire, of the elements is their "innate affinity to their proper place"; minerals desire "the place

where their generation is ordained" with the result that "the magnet ever receives power from the direction of its generation."

According to this view it is possible to speak of the natural desire of raindrops to fall or of smoke to rise. Such a manner of speaking may at first seem metaphorical—an expression of primitive animism or anthropomorphism—but the ancients, observing different natural tendencies in heavy and light bodies, mean this literally.

The sense of such statements is no different from what is meant when it is said that the sunflower, without consciousness, naturally tends to turn toward the sun, or that all men by nature desire to know.

FROM ITS NARROWEST meaning with reference to the behavior of animals and men, desire gains a wider connotation when it is conceived as covering the appetites found in living organisms. But in its broadest significance, it refers to the innate tendency inherent in matter itself. As we shall presently see, appetite, desire, or tendency is seated in matter according to that conception of matter which identifies it with potentiality or potential being. These considerations are more fully treated in the chapters on BEING, CHANGE, and MATTER, but their significance for the notion of desire can be briefly indicated here.

Plotinus suggests the basic insight when he describes matter as "in beggaredom, striving as it were by violence to acquire, and always disappointed." Matter is that in natural things which is the reason for their motion and change. Considering natural change, Aristotle names what he thinks are its three principles. In addition to "something divine, good, and desirable," he writes, "we hold that there are two other principles, the one contrary to it, the other such as of its own nature to desire and yearn for it." These are respectively form, privation, and matter. The relation between matter and form is expressed by Aristotle in terms of desire. "The form cannot desire itself," he says, "for it is not defective; nor can the contrary desire it, for contraries are mutually destructive. The truth is that what desires the form is matter, as the female desires the male."

Conceived most generally as natural appetite or tendency, desire becomes a physical or metaphysical term. "*Natural appetite*," says Aquinas, "is that inclination which each thing has of its own nature." The significance of desire in this sense extends, far beyond psychological phenomena, to all things in motion under the impetus or inclination of their own natures, rather than moved violently by forces impressed on them from without.

In ancient physics every natural tendency has an end or fulfillment in which the motion governed by that tendency comes to rest. *Eros* and *telos*—desire and end—are complementary concepts, each implying the other as principles of physics, *i.e.*, as factors operating together throughout nature in the order of change. The *telos* of each thing is the perfection which satisfies the tendency of its nature. That nature does nothing in vain means simply that no natural desire—need or appetite—exists without the possibility of fulfillment.

CONSIDERING THE DESIGN of the universe and the relation of creatures to God, theologians like Augustine and Aquinas use the concept of desire in both its psychological and its metaphysical sense.

Considered metaphysically, desire can be present only in finite beings, for to be finite is to be in want of some perfection. Hence desire can in no way enter into the immutable, infinite, and perfect being of God. In desire, Aquinas points out, "a certain imperfection is implied," namely, the lack "of the good which we have not." Since God is perfect, desire cannot be attributed to Him, "except metaphorically." Love, however, implies perfection rather than imperfection, since it flows from the act of the will "to diffuse its own goodness among others." For that reason, although the infinite perfection of God precludes desire, it does not preclude love.

The theologian goes beyond the metaphysician or physicist when he carries the analysis of desire to the supernatural plane. As God is the supernatural efficient cause of all created things, so God is also the supernatural final cause—the end or ultimate good toward which all creatures tend. The metaphysical

maxim that each thing seeks its own perfection is then transformed. "All things," Aquinas writes, "by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many similitudes of the divine being . . . Of those things which desire God, some know Him as He is Himself, and this is proper to the rational creature; others know some participation of His goodness, and this belongs also to sensible knowledge; others have a natural desire without knowledge, as being directed to their ends by a higher intelligence."

The existence in the creature of a desire for God raises difficult questions concerning the manner in which this desire is fulfilled. A supernatural end cannot be attained by purely natural means, *i.e.*, without God's help. The vision of God in which the souls of the blessed come to rest is, according to the theologian, the ultimate gift of grace. Hence, in man's case at least, it becomes necessary to ask whether he can have a purely natural desire to see God if the goal of such desire cannot be achieved by purely natural means.

The question is not whether men to whom God has revealed the promise of ultimate glory can *consciously* desire the beatific vision. Clearly that is possible, though to sustain such desire the theological virtue of hope, inseparable from faith and charity, may be required. Rather the question is whether the beatific vision which is man's supernatural end can be the object of natural desire. On this the theologians appear to be less clearly decided.

Aquinas holds that "neither man, nor any creature, can attain final happiness by his natural powers." Yet he also seems to maintain that man has a natural desire for the perfect happiness of eternal life. "The object of the will, *i.e.*, of man's appetite," he writes, "is the universal good, just as the object of the intellect is the universal truth." Man's natural desire to know the truth—not just some truths but the whole truth, the infinite truth—would seem to require the vision of God for its fulfillment. Aquinas argues similarly from the will's natural desire for the infinite good. "Naught can lull man's will," he writes, "save the universal good . . . to be found not in any

creature, but in God alone." Some writers find this confirmed in the fact that whatever good a man sets his heart upon he pursues to infinity. No finite amount of pleasure or power or wealth seems to satisfy him. He always wants more. But there is no end to wanting more of such things. The infinity of such desires must result in frustration. Only God, says the theologian, only an infinite being, can satisfy man's infinite craving for all the good there is.

Seeing man's restlessness, no matter where he turns to find rest, Augustine declares to God: "You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in You." Pascal reaches the same conclusion when he considers the ennui of men which results from the desperation of their unending search. "Their error," he writes, "does not lie in seeking excitement, if they seek it only as a diversion; the evil is that they seek it as if the possession of the objects of their quest would make them really happy." With regard to the frantic pursuit of diversions, he claims that "both the censors and the censured do not understand man's true nature" and the "misery of man without God." In such restlessness and vain seeking, the theologian sees evidence of man's natural desire to be *with* God.

Admitting the same facts, the skeptics interpret the infinity of man's desire as a craving to *be* God. If this is not every man's desire, it is certainly Satan's in *Paradise Lost*. Skeptic or believer, every man understands the question which Goethe and Dante among the great poets make their central theme. At what moment, amid man's striving and restlessness, will the soul gladly cry, "Remain, so fair thou art, remain!" Confident that there can be no such moment, Faust makes that the basis of his wager with Mephistopheles.

The two poets appear to give opposite answers to the question. Faust finds surcease in an earthly vision of progressive endeavor. Heavenly rest comes to the soul of Dante at the very moment it relinquishes its quest, winning peace through surrender.

IN THE BROADEST OR theological sense of the word, God alone does not desire. In the narrowest or psychological sense, only animals

and men do. The contrast of meanings is useful. Natural appetite or tendency throws light on the nature of conscious desire.

In order to "determine the nature and seat of desire," Socrates in the *Philebus* considers such things as "hunger, thirst, and the like" as "in the class of desires." He points out that "when we say 'a man thirsts,' we mean to say that he 'is empty.'" It is not drink he desires, but replenishment by drink, which is a change of state. This insight Socrates generalizes by saying that "he who is empty desires . . . the opposite of what he experiences; for he is empty and desires to be full." In the *Symposium*, using the words "love" and "desire" as if they were interchangeable, Socrates declares that "he who desires something is in want of something" and "love is of something which a man wants and has not."

In the psychological sphere, desire and love are often identified—at least verbally. The one word is frequently substituted for the other. Here the fact already noted, that God loves but does not desire, suggests the root of the distinction between desire and love. Desire always involves some lack or privation to be remedied by a change; whereas love, certainly requited love, implies the kind of satisfaction which abhors change. Love and desire are, of course, frequently mixed, but this does not affect their essential difference as tendencies. They are as different as giving and getting. Love aims at the well-being of the beloved, while desire seeks to enjoy a pleasure or possess a good.

Not all writers, however, contrast the generosity of love with the acquisitiveness of desire. Locke, for example, finds self-interest and self-seeking in both. The meaning of love, he observes, is known to anyone who reflects "upon the thought he has of the delight which any present or absent thing is apt to produce in him . . . For when a man declares in autumn when he is eating them, or in spring when there are none, that he loves grapes, it is no more but that the taste of grapes delights him." The meaning of desire is, in Locke's opinion, closely related. It consists in "the uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of anything whose present enjoyment carries the

idea of delight with it." We desire, in short, the things we love but do not possess.

The distinction between love and desire, the question whether they are distinct in animals as well as in men, and their relation to one another when they are distinct, are matters more fully discussed in the chapter on LOVE. It is enough to observe here that when writers use the two words interchangeably, they use both words to signify wanting and seeking.

In the case of animals and men, the thing wanted is an object of conscious desire only if it is something known. In addition to being known as an object of science is known, it must also be deemed good or pleasant—in other words, worth having. For Locke, desire, as we have seen, is no more than "an uneasiness of the mind for want of some absent good," which is measured in terms of pleasure and pain. "What has an aptness to produce pleasure in us is that we call *good*, and what is apt to produce pain in us we call *evil*." That which we consciously desire, that which we judge to be desirable, would thus be something we regard as good for us, while the "bad" or "evil" would be that which we seek to avoid as somehow injurious rather than beneficial to us.

There is no question that desire and aversion are psychologically connected with estimations of good and evil or pleasure and pain. This is the case no matter how we answer the moralist's question, Do we desire something because it is good, or do we call it "good" simply because we desire it? The ethical significance of the question, and of the opposite answers to it, is discussed in the chapter on GOOD AND EVIL.

THE METAPHYSICAL conception of natural desire provides terms for the psychological analysis of conscious desire and its object. Viewed as belonging to the very nature of a thing, appetite, according to Aristotle, consists in the tendency toward "something we do not have" and "which we need." Both factors are essential—the privation and the capacity, or potentiality, for having what is lacked. Privation in the strict sense is always correlative to potentiality.

The writers who use these terms would not speak of the sunflower being deprived of wisdom, even as they would not call a stone blind. Blindness is the deprivation of sight in things which have by nature a capacity to see. So when it is said that man by nature desires to know, or that certain animals, instinctively gregarious, naturally tend to associate with one another in herds or societies, the potentiality of knowledge or social life is indicated; and precisely because of these potentialities, ignorance and solitariness are considered privations.

We observe here two different conditions of appetite or desire. As the opposite of privation is possession—or of lacking, having—so the opposite states of appetite are the drive toward the unpossessed and satisfaction in possession. We do not strive for that which we have, unless it be to retain our possession of it against loss; and we do not feel satisfied until we get that which we have been seeking.

“If a man being strong desired to be strong,” says Socrates in the *Symposium*, “or being swift desired to be swift, or being healthy desired to be healthy, he might be thought to desire something which he already has or is.” This would be a misconception which we must avoid. To anyone who says “I desire to have simply what I have,” Socrates thinks we should reply: “You, my friend, having wealth and health and strength, want to have the continuance of them . . . When you say, ‘I desire that which I have and nothing else,’ is not your meaning that you want to have in the future what you now have?” This “is equivalent to saying that a man desires something which is for him non-existent, and which he has not got”; from which Socrates draws the conclusion that everyone “desires that which he has not already, which is future and not present . . . and of which he is in want.”

The object of desire—natural or conscious—thus seems to be an altered condition in the desirer, the result of union with the object desired. Man’s natural desire to know impels him to learn. Every act of learning which satisfies this natural desire consists in a changed condition of his mind, a change

which both Plato and Aristotle describe as a motion from ignorance to knowledge.

When we consciously desire food, it is not the edible thing as such we seek, but rather the eating of it. Only the eating of it will quiet our desire, with that change in our condition we call “nourishment.” That the edible thing is only incidentally the object of our desire may be seen in the fact that no way in which we can possess food, *other than eating it*, satisfies hunger.

THE DISTINCTION between natural and conscious desire is complicated by other closely related distinctions which psychologists have made. Freud, for example, distinguishes between conscious and unconscious desire; Darwin separates instinctive from learned desires; and James observes how a conscious desire may become habitual and operate almost automatically, without our awareness of either its object or its action.

Part of the complication is verbal and can be removed by referring to natural desires as *non-conscious* rather than *un-conscious*. The word “conscious” literally means *with knowledge*. Creatures which lack the faculty of knowing cannot desire consciously. It does not follow, however, that sentient or conscious beings cannot have natural appetites. Man’s natural desire to know is a case in point. That natural human tendency is not excluded by the fact that many men also consciously seek knowledge, knowing what knowledge is and considering it something worth having.

The instinctive desires of animals are not generally thought to operate apart from the perception of the object toward which the animal is emotionally impelled. The instinctive desire works consciously, both on the side of perception and on the side of the emotionally felt impulse. If, because it is innate rather than learned, or acquired through experience, we call the instinctive desire “natural,” it is well to remember that we are not here using the word to signify lack of consciousness. Yet both instinctive and acquired desires may operate unconsciously.

What Freud means by a repressed desire

illustrates this point. The repressed desire, whether instinctual in origin or the result of some acquired fixation of the libido on object or ego, would be a conscious tendency *if it were not repressed*. Freud compares the process of repression to the efforts of a man to get from one room to another past the guard of a door-keeper. "The excitations in the unconscious . . . to begin with, remain unconscious. When they have pressed forward to the threshold and been turned back by the door-keeper, they are 'incapable of becoming conscious'; we call them then repressed . . . Being repressed, when applied to any single impulse, means being unable to pass out of the unconscious system because of the door-keeper's refusal of admittance into the preconscious."

The repressed desire is made to operate unconsciously by being repressed, which does not prevent it from influencing our conduct or thought, but only from intruding its driving force and its goal upon our attention. In contrast, the desire which works habitually and therefore to some extent unconsciously, is not repressed, but merely one which no longer demands our full attention.

DESIRE AND EMOTION are often identified in our description of the behavior of animals and men. Sometimes, however, desire along with aversion is treated as just one of the emotions, and sometimes all the emotions are treated as manifestations of just one type of conscious appetite, namely, animal as opposed to rational desire.

The appetitive or driving aspect of emotions is indicated by James in his analysis of instinctive behavior. The functioning of an instinct may be viewed, according to James, as a train of psychological events of "general reflex type . . . called forth by determinate sensory stimuli in contact with the animal's body, or at a distance in his environment," arousing "emotional excitements which go with them." The emotional part of the instinctive behavior is at once an impulse to perform certain acts and the feeling which accompanies the acts performed. The sheep, instinctively recognizing the wolf as dangerous, fears and flees. It

runs away because it is afraid and feels fear in the act of flight. When, in his theory of the emotions, James goes so far as to say that the feeling of fear results from running away, he does not mean to deny that the emotion of fear involves the impulse to flee.

In its aspect as impulse—or tendency to act—an emotion is a desire, consciously aroused by sense perceptions and accompanied by conscious feelings. This conception of emotion has been variously expressed in the tradition of the great books. Aquinas, for example, calls all the emotions or passions "movements of the sensitive appetite." But he also uses the words "desire" and "aversion" along with "love" and "hate," "anger" and "fear" to name specific emotions.

Hobbes recognizes the appetitive tendency which is common to all the emotions when he finds at their root what he calls "endeavour"—"these small beginnings of motion within the body of man, before they appear in walking, speaking, striking, and other visible actions . . . This endeavour," he goes on to say, "when it is toward something which causes it, is called appetite, or desire." Spinoza makes the same point in somewhat different terms. "Desire," he writes, "is the essence itself or nature of a person in so far as this nature is conceived from its given constitution as determined towards any action . . . As his nature is constituted in this or that way, so must his desire vary and the nature of one desire differ from another, just as the affects from which each desire arises differ. There are as many kinds of desire, therefore, as there are kinds of joy, sorrow, love, etc., and in consequence . . . as there are kinds of objects by which we are affected."

Those psychologists who find in man two distinct faculties of knowledge—the senses and the reason or intellect—also find in him two distinct faculties of appetite or desire. The distinction is perhaps most sharply made by Aristotle and Aquinas, who claim that "there must be one appetite tending towards the universal good, which belongs to reason, and another with a tendency towards the particular good, which appetite belongs to sense."

The traditional name for the intellectual appetite, or the faculty of rational desire, is "will." In Spinoza's vocabulary, the effort of desire, "when it is related to the mind alone, is called *will*, but when it is related at the same time both to the mind and the body, is called *appetite*."

Psychologists who attribute these diverse modes of desire, as they attribute sensation and thought, to a single faculty called "mind" or "understanding," nevertheless deal with the whole range of appetitive phenomena, including both the animal passions and acts of will. James, for example, treats the instinctive acts associated with the emotions as "automatic and reflex" movements, and separates them from "voluntary movements which, being desired and intended beforehand, are done with full prevision of what they are to be." In so doing, he draws a line between emotional impulses and acts of will, even though he does not distinguish two appetitive faculties.

With or without the distinction in faculties, almost all observers of human experience and conduct seem to agree upon a distinction in types of conscious desire, at least insofar as they recognize the ever-present conflict between the passions and the will. These matters are more fully considered in the chapters on EMOTION and WILL.

THE ROLE OF DESIRE in human life—especially emotional desire—is so intimately connected with problems of good and evil, virtue, duty, and happiness, that until quite recently the subject was discussed mainly in books on ethics, politics, rhetoric, or in works of imagination rather than psychology. Untempered desire leading to downfall is a theme repeated throughout the whole range of imaginative literature, from Homer to the present. Even attempts to repress desire are seen by some authors as paths to destruction, as Mann demonstrates with a quote from Plato in *Death in Venice*: "Detachment . . . and preoccupation with form lead to intoxication and desire, they may lead the noblest among us to frightful emotional excesses . . . So they too, they too, lead to the bottomless pit." Plato, Mann, and Joyce are among those writers who suggest

that artists are more prone to such emotional excesses than other people.

Freud takes a similar view of the artist, who "is urged on by instinctual needs which are too clamorous; he longs to attain to honour, power, riches, fame, and the love of women . . . So, like any other with an unsatisfied longing, he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest . . . on to the creation of his wishes in the life of phantasy." For Freud, artists are only extreme cases of every "hungry soul," for "the intermediate world of phantasy is sanctioned by general human consent."

Freud tries to separate psychological description and explanation from moral principles or conclusions, but even he cannot avoid treating the effects of morality upon the dynamics of desire and the life of the passions. Many of the fundamental terms of psychoanalysis—conflict, repression, rationalization, sublimation, to name only some—carry the connotation of moral issues, even though they imply a purely psychological resolution of them.

Contrary to a popular misconception, Freud expressly declares that "it is out of the question that part of the analytic treatment should consist of advice to 'live freely.'" The conflict "between libidinal desires and sexual repression," he explains, is "not resolved by helping one side to win a victory over the other." Although Freud thinks that "what the world calls its code of morals demands more sacrifices than it is worth," he also declares that "we must beware of overestimating the importance of abstinence in effecting neurosis."

What Freud calls emotional infantilism resembles to some degree what a moralist like Aristotle calls self-indulgence or incontinence. To give vent to all the promptings of desire, without regard to the demands of society or reality is to revert to infancy—a state characterized, according to Freud, by "the irreconcilability of its wishes with reality." Because children "live at the beck and call of appetite, and it is in them that the desire for what is pleasant is strongest," Aristotle thinks it fitting that we should speak of self-indulgence when it occurs in an adult as a "childish fault."

Aristotle and Freud seem to be looking at

the same facts of human nature and seeing them in the same light. What Freud describes as the conflict between the "pleasure-principle" and the "reality-principle," Aristotle—and with him Spinoza—treats as a conflict between the passions and the reason, and Kant conceives in terms of the opposition between desire and duty. What Freud says of the reality-principle—that it "demands and enforces the postponement of satisfaction, the renunciation of manifold possibilities, and the temporary endurance of pain"—parallels traditional statements concerning the role of reason or of duty in the moral life. Where the moralists speak of the necessity for regulating or moderating emotional desires, Freud refers to the need of "domesticating" them, as one would train a beast to serve the ends of human life.

The implication, in Aristotle and Spinoza as well as in Freud, does not seem to be that man's animal appetites are in themselves bad, but that, if they are undisciplined or uncontrolled, they cause disorder in the individual life and in society. Some moralists, however, take an opposite view. For them desire is intrinsically evil, a factor of discontent, and fraught with pain.

"What we do not have," Lucretius writes, "seems better than everything else in all the world/But should we get it, we want something else." As often as a man gains something new, he discovers afresh that he is not better

off. Either our desires are unsatisfied, and then we suffer the agony of frustration; or they are satiated and so are we—desperate with ennui. Hence, freedom from all desires, not just their moderation, seems to be recommended for peace of mind; as centuries later Schopenhauer recommended the negation of the will to live in order to avoid frustration or boredom.

Marcus Aurelius and the Stoics, and later Kant, similarly urge us "not to yield to the persuasions of the body . . . and never to be over-powered either by the motion of the senses or of the appetites." But whereas the Stoics would restrain desire "because it is animal" and in order to avoid pain, Kant argues that the renunciation of desire should be undertaken "not merely in accordance with duty . . . but from duty, which must be the true end of all moral cultivation."

The opposition between these two views of desire in the moral life represents one of the major issues in ethical theory, further discussed in the chapters on DUTY and VIRTUE AND VICE. The doctrine of natural appetite is crucially relevant to the issue. If the naturalist in ethics is right, he is so by virtue of the truth that natural tendencies are everywhere the measure of good and evil. If, however, there is no truth in the doctrine of natural desire, then the impulses which spring from man's animal passions can claim no authority in the court of reason.