

33rd Annual Meeting of the European Society for Philosophy and Psychology (ESPP)

Abstract : **On Strength of Desires**

Primary discipline: **Philosophy**

Intended submission : **Paper**

Wordcount: **977 words**

The notion of *strength of desires* is used in naive psychology, which explains behavior through beliefs and desires that generate intentions that cause actions. It is also used in the philosophy of mind, which studies beliefs, desires, emotions, and other types of mental states and processes. Finally, it plays an important role in moral philosophy, in central debates in each of its subfields. *Normative ethics*, which mainly thinks about the good life, often discusses a *hierarchy and discipline of desires*, bringing their strength into play, as is clearly shown in the discussion on akrasia or weakness of will. In *ethics applied to psychiatry*, the question is raised of whether some desires are *irresistible* or not, in particular compulsive desires involved in pathologies such as obsessive-compulsive disorders or addiction. This issue is related to the debate on *moral responsibility*, in *meta-ethics*, because the irresistible strength of some desires could be a psychological factor providing excuses for perpetrated wrongs.

However, the notion of *strength of desires* is obscure. At first glance, it appears to be a quantification of desires, but various intuitions come into play when determining what this quantification applies to, drawing on as many possible theories of desires. It may apply to *phenomenological intensity*, to a *causal power with regard to actions*, to *an influence on mental states* (beliefs, other desires, emotions...), or to *an order among the preferences revealed by an individual's choices*. These approaches refer respectively to the theory of desires as *dispositions toward pleasant states of consciousness* (Strawson, 1994), to the theory of desires as *behavioral dispositions* (Smith, 1987, 1994), to *the attentional theory of desires* (Scanlon 1998), and to the theory of desires as *guiding reward-based learning processes* (Schroeder, 2004). This philosophical debate sometimes suffers from insufficient empirical input from psychiatry, psychology and neuroscience, even though these fields offer a wealth of recent relevant data. For example, numerous studies focus on cravings, namely desires that are unusually strong and now included in the clinical criteria for addiction (Addolorato et al., 2005; Bergeria et al., 2021; Flanagan, 2020; Redish & Johnson, 2007; Robinson & Berridge, 1993; Vafaie & Kober, 2022). Such studies lend themselves well to an empirically informed philosophical discussion on the strength of addictive desires (Lavalée, 2020b, 2020a; Pickard, 2024).

What, then, is *strength of desires*? Our reflection will proceed in two stages. First, we will examine philosophical theories of desires and argue that *the attentional theory* is most consistent with empirical data. Second, we will show that this theory provides a conception of *strength of desires as a power to influence attention*, which is also consistent with various data.

In the first part, we will first refute the theory of desires as *dispositions toward pleasant states of consciousness*, drawing on Robinson and Berridge's dissociation of the circuits of *wanting* and *liking* in their *incentive sensitization theory* of addiction (Robinson & Berridge, 1993, 2025). Secondly, we will reject the theory of desires as *behavioral dispositions* by drawing on the distinction made in psychology and neuroscience between four systems of action: *reflexes*, *Pavlovian conditioning*, *habitual behavior*, and *goal-directed action*, with only the latter system involving desires (e.g. Rangel et al., 2008). This fourfold division shows that many dispositions to act are not desires, and we will further

argue that some desires, mainly impossible or unrealistic ones, do not dispose one to act. Thirdly, we will dismiss the theory of desire as *guiding reward-based learning processes* by emphasizing that these processes can be part of *Pavlovian conditioning* and *habitual behavior*. These latter may not involve any representation of the value of the object that serves as a reward, nor of the object itself or of obtaining it as the result of some actions, as proved in outcome devaluation procedures, whereas this representation is supposed to correspond to desire in this theory. Finally, after proceeding in this way by elimination, we will argue positively in favor of *the attentional theory of desires* by maintaining that it is consistent with the inclusion of desires in the *goal-directed action system*. In this system, a desire corresponds to a motivational state that causes actions together with the representation of their ends and means by beliefs or other cognitive states. With the function of causing actions that are guided by cognitive states, this motivational state is capable of engendering a number of mental states by directing attention to certain stimuli.

In the second part, we will build our definition of *strength of desires* based on *the attentional theory of desires* in three stages. First, we will distinguish the strength of a desire from its phenomenological intensity, from its causal power with regard to actions, and from the priority of resulting preferences over other of the individual's preferences. Taking *strength* as *the active power* of something, we will argue that *strength of desires* lies in their *power to influence attention*, drawing on the attentional theory of desires and responding to certain objections. Second, we will discuss the main competing theory, namely the theory of *causal power with regard to actions*, that is the orthodox philosophical theory about strength of desires (Schroeder, 2020). In particular, we will argue that a desire can be strong and yet devoid of causal power with regard to actions because it is deprived of it by a mental state other than a desire, such as a belief, or by mechanisms of repression, or because the psychological or physical conditions required to carry out relevant actions are not met. We will rely on analyses by Nordenfelt in the philosophy of action applied to irrationality and mental disorders (Nordenfelt, 2007). Thirdly, we will argue that diverse phenomena to which psychiatry, psychology and neuroscience refer as *strength of desires*, such as *irresistibility of cravings*, are better accounted for by the notion of a *power to influence attention* than by the notion of a *causal power with regard to actions*.

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