JUSTIFYING DESIRES

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Abstract: According to an influential conception of reasons for action, the presence of a desire or some other conative state in the agent is a necessary condition for the agent’s having a reason for action. This is sometimes known as internalism. This article presents a case for the considerably stronger thesis, which we may call hyper-internalism, that the presence of a desire is a sufficient condition for the agent’s having a (prima facie) reason for action.

Keywords: desire, ethical justification, epistemic justification, general conservatism, ethical internalism.

1. Introduction

According to an influential conception of reasons for action, the presence of a desire or some other conative state in the agent is a necessary condition for the agent’s having a reason for action. A desireless creature would have no reasons for acting one way rather than another. This, or something very like it, is sometimes known as (ethical) internalism.¹ The opposite view, (ethical) externalism, is that desires are unnecessary for having reasons for action.² Elsewhere, I have argued in some detail in favor of internalism (Kriegel 1999).³ Here I want to consider the much stronger thesis that the presence of a desire is a sufficient condition for the agent’s having a reason for action—at least a prima facie reason for action. This thesis, which we may call hyper-internalism, is one that virtually no internalists have been willing

¹ The label “internalism” is of course used for a variety of different views. See Darwall (1992) for a useful taxonomy. The kind of internalism at issue here is what Darwall calls “existence internalism.”
² A particularly strong version of this is the view that desires cannot possibly be part of a reason for action, and that a reason for action must always be a purely cognitive state, such as the belief, or realization, that such-and-such state of affairs would be good or valuable. But externalism, as construed here, is the much weaker claim that desires are simply not a necessary condition for reasons.
³ I have also argued for a different kind of internalism—what Darwall (1992) calls “judgment internalism”—according to which moral judgments are, or involve constitutively, conative states (Kriegel 2012).

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to defend. For that matter, my own degree of belief in it is limited. My purpose here is thus mostly exploratory, in the sense that I wish to consider what the strongest case for hyper-internalism might look like. It is only once we have this kind of case before us that we can make a considered assessment of the plausibility of hyper-internalism.

My overarching goal is to articulate an outlook on what makes a desire ethically justified that, on the one hand, is stable, coherent, and reasonably plausible, and on the other hand, entails that every desire provides the desirer with a prima facie reason for action. To that end, I start with an exposition of a view on the epistemic justification of beliefs that is widely considered stable, coherent, and reasonably plausible (Section 2). I then articulate the analogous view on the ethical justification of desires, arguing that the attractions of the former carry over to the latter (Section 3) and that the analogous view entails hyper-internalism rather straightforwardly.

2. General Conservatism in Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge. Almost every account of the nature of knowledge adopts the notion that the property of being knowledge is an attribute, in the first instance, of beliefs. The question then becomes what conditions a belief must meet in order to constitute knowledge. This is of course an area of great disagreement. Nonetheless, one recurrent, near-universal assumption is that there is a certain distinctly epistemic notion of justification, or justifiedness, such that one of the conditions for a belief being knowledge is that it exhibit this kind of epistemic justification. The question then becomes what it is about a belief that makes it epistemically justified.

In debating this issue, it is important to make a distinction between two kinds of justification. There is, on the one hand, prima facie, defeasible justification, and on the other hand, ultima facie, all-things-considered justification. Plausibly, the latter entails the former, but not the converse. So the notion of ultima facie justification is the stronger one. It is also plausible, however, that prima facie, defeasible justification is the only kind of justification needed for a belief to be knowledge. Thus in what follows whenever I speak of justification, I have in mind prima facie justification unless I indicate otherwise. The issue is therefore better construed as the following question: What is it about a belief that makes it prima facie (epistemically) justified?

In the epistemology of the past century, two main approaches to this question have stood out: foundationalism and coherentism. They differ

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4 Williams (1989) avows sympathy for something like hyper-internalism—in passing—but does not embark on the project of arguing in its favor.

5 Not everybody proceeds this way—see Williamson 2000. Nonetheless, this is a standard assumption that I will adopt here.
on whether to grant special epistemic status to a subset of the subject’s beliefs.

Foundationalism does grant special status to a subset of the subject’s beliefs. According to foundationalism, a given belief is prima facie (epistemically) justified just in case it is either a foundational belief or suitably based on foundational beliefs. The foundational beliefs are beliefs which are either self-justifying or not in need of justification. Thus in this picture foundational beliefs form a subset of the subject’s beliefs that enjoy a special status. There are two types of belief traditionally designated as potentially foundational: “rationalists” have identified beliefs in certain a priori and/or necessary propositions as foundational; “empiricists” have preferred perceptual and/or introspective beliefs (beliefs regarding the subject’s concurrent perceptual experiences).

Coherentists deny that any beliefs are foundational. According to coherentism, no beliefs enjoy special status. None is self-justifying, let alone exempt from the need to be justified. Rather, beliefs justify each other by hanging together in a belief system that coheres in the right way. Thus a given belief is justified just in case it suitably coheres with other beliefs. Different coherentists offer different views on what it is for a belief to “suitably cohere” with others.

Despite the opposition between them, there is one assumption that both traditional foundationalism and coherentism share, an assumption that has only recently been called into question. The assumption is that beliefs are by default lacking in justification—that they need to somehow qualify in order to become justified. On this assumption, normally beliefs stand in need of being justified. They do not just come justified—their justification does not come for free. Instead, they have to pass some test, and only then can they qualify as justified. The traditional views differ on what the test is: foundationalism requires that a belief either be or be based upon foundational beliefs, and coherentism requires that it suitably cohere with other beliefs. But some test must be passed in order for a given belief to qualify as justified.

This assumption has recently been called into question. According to Harman (1986), all beliefs are prima facie justified by default. The subject is (prima facie) justified in believing as she does as long as there is no special reason to stop believing as she does. Beliefs do not generally need to pass some test in order to be justified. Thus beliefs do not stand in need of being justified; they are only expected, more minimally, not to lose their justification. Rather than require beliefs to acquire justification in some way, this approach requires them to conserve their pre-given justification. On this approach, then, beliefs do not need to pass any test in order to qualify as justified, they just need to avoid being disqualified from the realm of the justified. In this sense, beliefs come justified—they do not have to become justified.

6 See, more recently, Harman 2003.
This statement of the view, which Harman calls *general conservatism*, is loose and metaphorical—it employs centrally a temporal or causal metaphor. Literally, the view is not about the *temporal* or *causal* precedence of justification over nonjustification. It is rather about *conceptual* precedence. The basic idea is that a belief B is prima facie justified simply in virtue of being a belief. For foundationalists and coherentists, by contrast, B is prima facie justified in virtue of being a belief of kind K, with the disagreement being on the character of K. Thus general conservatism is best formulated as the following thesis:

\[(GC) \text{ For any mental state } S, S \text{ is prima facie epistemically justified if } S \text{ is a belief.}\]

This is to be contrasted with the following foundationalist and coherentists theses:

\[(F) \text{ For any mental state } S, S \text{ is prima facie epistemically justified if (and only if) either (a) } S \text{ is a foundational belief or (b) } S \text{ is suitably based on foundational beliefs.}\]

\[(C) \text{ For any mental state } S, S \text{ is prima facie epistemically justified if (and only if) } S \text{ is a belief that suitably coheres with other beliefs.}\]

Talk of the belief being justified by default, not having to pass a test, and so on is thus merely expressive and designed to communicate the *spirit* of general conservatism. The *letter* of general conservatism is provided by (GC).

General conservatism has commonalities with both traditional foundationalism and coherentism.\(^8\) With foundationalism, it shares the claim that there is such a thing as foundational beliefs, in the sense of beliefs that need not derive their justification from *other* beliefs. The difference is that according to general conservatism all beliefs are foundational (at least in this sense, the sense that they do not derive their justification from other beliefs), whereas according to traditional foundationalism not all beliefs are foundational. With coherentism, the view shares the claim that there is no distinction to be made between beliefs that have a special epistemic status and beliefs that do not. All beliefs have the same prima facie status. The difference is that according to general conservatism this is the prima

\(^7\) Note that this is only a one-way conditional. One might push for a formulation of (GC) as a biconditional—For any mental state S, S is prima facie epistemically justified if S is a belief—but for the purposes of the analogy pursued in the next section only the one-way conditional will matter.

\(^8\) I refer here to “*traditional* foundationalism” because there is a sense in which general conservatism is itself a form of foundationalism. At least this is how Harman himself treats it (Harman 2003).
facie status of being justified, whereas according to traditional coherentism it is the prima facie status of lacking justification.

Why should we accept general conservatism? Harman motivates his general conservatism mainly by arguing that it overcomes the challenge of skepticism in a way traditional foundationalism and coherentism have consistently failed to do. If one starts out with the assumption that beliefs by default lack justification, then as the recent (and not-so-recent) history of epistemology attests, one will be hard pressed to show how belief in the existence of, say, the external world, or other minds, or the past, can acquire justification and become justified. By contrast, if one assumes that beliefs are by default justified, then one only needs to show how it is that belief in the existence of the external world, or other minds, or the past, retains its justification and does not become unjustified. The challenge here is much easier to meet: we only have to claim that the normal subject does not have any special epistemic reasons to stop believing that there is an external world (or other minds, or a past).

To a first (and rough) approximation, then, the argument for general conservatism might be put as follows: (1) if (F) or (C) is true, then we do not know that there is an external world; (2) we do know that there is an external world; therefore, (3) neither (F) nor (C) is true. Alternatively, one might argue as follows: (1) we know that there is an external world only if (GC) is true; (2) we know that there is an external world; therefore, (3) (GC) is true. Call this the argument from skepticism.

The argument from skepticism is one motivation for adopting general conservatism. Another potential motivation might be the following. On the face of it, one could wonder what is supposed to make the assumption that beliefs are by default lacking in justification preferable over the assumption that they are by default justified. The fact that it has been presupposed throughout the history of epistemology does not make it any more philosophically or logically compelling. After all, the intuition is that when, say, it seems to one that there is an external world, in the sense that one finds oneself believing that there is an external world, this gives one reason enough to believe that there is an external world. Why would one’s belief have to pass some test in order to ensure that one is not at fault for holding it? Intuitively, unless one has done something to disqualify one’s beliefs—unless one has been epistemically irresponsible in some way—one cannot be at fault for holding one’s beliefs. It is almost as though there is something perversely distrustful and unforgiving about an epistemology that requires the subject to “prove himself” before he can be found justified in believing as he does. In epistemology, as in life, one

9 Rather, it seems to be a mere historical contingency, having to do with the way Descartes and other rationalists have set the agenda for modern epistemology. Intuitively, the assumption that beliefs have to pass some test if they are to qualify as justified appears unduly harsh.
ought to be innocent until found guilty. Traditional epistemology suffers from a syndrome of holding subjects guilty until found innocent.

3. A Metaethical Analog

The suggestion I would like to make at this point is that the same syndrome appears to rear its head in twentieth-century metaethics. The desires and actions of moral agents are often held to be guilty until found innocent. They are required to qualify for justification rather than allowed to be justified pending disqualification. Let us therefore attempt to articulate a conception of desire justification that parallels Harman’s conception of belief justification. On the view I would like to defend, desires are innocent until found guilty—in order to be justified, they do not have to qualify but rather have to avoid being disqualified.

It is important to note that the kind of justification at stake here is in all likelihood different—it is a kind of ethical or moral justification rather than epistemic justification. It may be possible to develop an argument to the effect that one of these two types of justification is analyzable in terms of the other, or that their underlying nature is the same, or whatever. But there is no obvious, antecedent, a priori reason to treat them as the same, and thus we may proceed on the assumption that there is at least a conceptual distinction between epistemic and ethical justification. Our concern in the present section is with the ethical justification of desires.

Our concern is, moreover, with prima facie ethical justification rather than ultima facie, all-things-considered ethical justification. For we are attempting to construct a parallel with general conservatism in epistemology, and the latter pertains only to prima facie justification.

Talk of desire justification may strike some as unnatural and forced. There is a sense in which desires are, in themselves, neither justified nor unjustified—they are brute psychological events or states. For this reason, it may be better to speak not of ‘desires’ status as justified but rather of their status as justification-conferring. A desire to \( \Phi \) is neither justified nor unjustified, but, depending on its nature, it might confer justification on the act of \( \Phi \)-ing or fail to confer such justification. On this way of thinking, ultimately what is justified or unjustified is actions, not desires. But desires may be said to be justified in a derivative, or perhaps extended, sense when they are effective desires to act in what is a justified way. More precisely: an agent’s desire to \( \Phi \) is justified (in this derivative or extended sense) just when \( \Phi \)-ing is justified (in an unextended and nonderivative sense), and justified because of the agent’s desire to \( \Phi \).

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10 One may have prima facie justification for helping an old lady to cross a busy intersection even if one does not have ultima facie justification for doing so because, say, she is on her way to murder someone.

11 We are assuming here that actions are indeed justified in an unproblematic way. One routinely speaks of actions as being morally justified, or more generally normatively justified.
Even more cautiously, we may speak of actions as being not justified but reasonable, where an agent’s action is reasonable when the agent has a reason for it—a justificatory or normative reason for it. To the extent that a desire can constitute such a reason for action, it has the status of being reasonableness-conferring, in that it confers reasonableness on the action for which it is (or constitutes) a reason. If the desire to \( \Phi \) constitutes a reason for \( \Phi \)-ing, then the act of \( \Phi \)-ing is reasonable and the desire to \( \Phi \) is reasonableness-conferring. In what follows, I will speak of a desire that constitutes a reason for action, and thus confers reasonableness, as a justified desire. This is to be understood as a stipulative and technical usage of the term “justified,” one that is supposed to designate nothing more and nothing less than the status of being reasonableness-conferring.

Also, it should be emphasized that my interest is not so much in desire itself, understood as a particular kind of psychological attitude. Rather, it is in conative states generally, including intending, deciding, wanting, wishing, planning, and so forth. What all these types of mental state have in common is a substantive question, but several features seem central. First, all such states appear to ensue from a single faculty, which we may call “the will.” Second, they all appear to be inherently motivational, in that one cannot be correctly attributed with such states unless one has an appropriate motivational impetus to act (which impetus may or may not actually issue in action). Third, such states arguably share a phenomenology of presenting their intentional objects or contents as good (or as good-for-me), as opposed to presenting them as true (or as obtaining). Relatedly, though more theoretically, their intentional contents appear to have a so-called world-to-mind (or “telic”) direction of fit. In any case, such states are what Davidson (1963) calls pro attitudes: psychological attitudes of being “pro” or favoring, a certain state of affairs (and/or the action deemed suitable to bringing it about). My interest here is strictly

12 I make reference here to the common distinction between two senses of “reason for action.” There is the purely explanatory sense, in which a reason statement is made in order to explain the agent’s action; and there is the normative sense, in which a reason statement is made in order to justify the agent’s action. In this article, however, I am only interested in normative reasons. So whenever I speak of reasons for action, I should be understood to mean normative reasons.

13 I adopt this shorthand for ease and clarity of exposition. After articulating the view of desire justification in this particular sense, I will spell out the view more explicitly in terms of reasons for actions, reasonableness of action, and so forth.

14 Whereas cognitive states have a mind-to-world direction of fit, in that the mind has to bring itself to fit the way the world is, conative states have a world-to-mind direction of fit, in that their point is to bring the world to fit the way the mind is. This distinction is originally due to Anscombe 1957, and is presented very clearly in Searle 1983. Michael Smith (1994) is best known for employing this distinction in the metaethical context.

15 As Smit (2003) and others have pointed out, the set of conative states should more accurately be understood to include also “con attitudes,” attitudes that inherently motivate the agent against a certain state of affairs. Just a feeling of approval counts as a conative state, so should a feeling of disapproval: both are inherently motivational states.
speaking in the justification not of desires but of pro attitudes more generally. I will continue to conduct the discussion in terms of desires, but the reader should feel free to substitute any other pro attitude for desire. The question that concerns me, then, is this: What makes desires (and other pro attitudes) prima facie ethically justified, in the sense of being prima facie reasonableness-conferring? Traditional approaches to this question can be profitably divided in a way parallel to traditional epistemologies. This way of dividing the traditional approaches—of carving the traditional debate on desire justification—may not be the most historically prominent, but in the present context it will be useful in bringing out vividly the parallel between the epistemological “syndrome” pointed out above and its metaethical counterpart. What we may call practical foundationalism is the view that desires are justified when they are well founded, that is, when they either are, or are somehow based upon (perhaps derive from), foundational desires. Foundational desires are desires that are either self-justifying or exempt from the need to be justified. Here too there are two main versions of this view, rationalism and sentimentalism, depending on what the foundational desires are taken to be. Rationalism identifies as foundational desires for what is good a priori or necessarily. Sentimentalism identifies foundational desires with suitably emotionally formed desires—desires issuing, say, from an empathetic sentiment.

What we may call practical coherentism is the sort of view we get when no desires are allowed to be foundational. Here what makes a desire justified is that it coheres well with other desires, where desire coherence is a matter of co-satisfiability and/or suitable prioritization (that is, a matter of ensuring that the desires either can be satisfied simultaneously or, when they do not, are arranged so that the satisfaction of some takes priority over that of others). The result is a system of desires that justify each other by cohering in the right way.

Arguably, but not uncontroversially, the paradigmatic version of rationalist foundationalism is Kantian ethics. It maintains that foundational desires are desires that conform to the categorical imperative, that is, desires the agent could want everybody to harbor (first formulation), or desires that treat others as ends and not means (second formulation). It is possible to deny that Kantian ethics is indeed foundationalist in this sense, but I will not discuss the matter further here.

According to sentimentalists, there are certain moral sentiments that are foundationally justified, and other desires are justified only when derived from these moral sentiments. This antirationalist version of foundationalism parallels the empiricist foundationalism discussed above: the foundations are identified in the instinctual and more “passive” parts of the agent’s mental life, rather than in the more rational or “active” parts.

Again, arguably but controversially the view of morality (or more generally, normativity) as a “system of hypothetical imperatives” (Foot 1972) is an instance of such coherentism: desires’ contents conform with conditional imperatives that do not conflict. Showing that this is indeed an instance of such coherentism, however, would take us too far afield.
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Both these approaches to desire justification—practical foundationalism and practical coherentism—presuppose that desires normally stand in need of being justified. Desires do not just come justified, they have to become justified. They become justified when they pass a certain test. Only then do they “qualify” as justified. The approaches just sketched differ on what the relevant test is. But they all agree that some test must be passed in order for a given desire to qualify as justified.

The opposing outlook would suggest that all desires are by default justified. The agent is justified in desiring as she does so long as there is no special reason to stop desiring as she does. She is justified in desiring what she does so long as there is no reason to stop desiring what she does. Desires do not generally need to pass some test in order to be justified. Thus desires do not stand in need of being justified, they are only expected not to lose their “default justification.” Rather than require desires to acquire justification in some way, this opposing outlook requires them merely to conserve their pre-given justification. On this view, desires only have to avoid being disqualified from the realm of the justified; they do not need to qualify in order to belong in it. In this sense, desires come justified—they do not have to become justified.

This view, which we may call practical general conservatism, or general conservatism about desires, has certain commonalities with both traditional foundationalism and coherentism about desires. With foundationalism, it shares the claim that there is such a thing as foundational desires, desires that need not derive their justification from other desires (or any other source). The difference is that according to general conservatism all desires are foundational in this sense, whereas according to traditional foundationalism only some desires are. With coherentism, general conservatism shares the claim that there is no distinction to be made between desires that have a special justificatory status and desires that do not. Rather, all desires have the same prima facie status. The difference is that according to general conservatism this is the prima facie status of being justified, whereas according to traditional coherentism it is the prima facie status of lacking justification.

What we have here, then, are two opposing outlooks on desire justification. According to what may be called the qualification model, a desire has to acquire a certain property in order to qualify as justified. According to the disqualification model, a desire must acquire a certain property in order to be disqualified as unjustified. On the former model, a desire remains unjustified, or at least nonjustified, until it acquires the relevant justification-bestowing property. On the latter model, the desire remains justified as long as it does not acquire the justification-vacating property.

As in the epistemological case, the temporal or causal language is to be understood as merely metaphorical. The literal point is simply that according to practical general conservatism, a desire is prima facie ethically justified, in the sense of being prima facie reasonableness-conferring,
simply in virtue of being a desire—or more generally, in virtue of being a conative state or a pro attitude. The contrasting view, found in practical foundationalism and coherentism, is that a desire is prima facie ethically justified just in case it is a desire of some special kind K, with the foundationalism/coherentism debate being over what K is. Thus we may offer the following formal statement of practical general conservatism:

\[(PGC) \text{ For any mental state } S, S \text{ is prima facie ethically justified if } S \text{ is a desire (or another conative state).}\]

This is to be contrasted with the following practical foundationalist and coherentist theses:

\[(PF) \text{ For any mental state } S, S \text{ is prima facie ethically justified if (and only if) either (a) } S \text{ is a foundational desire or (b) } S \text{ is suitably based on foundational desires.}\]

\[(PC) \text{ For any mental state } S, S \text{ is prima facie ethically justified if (and only if) } S \text{ is a desire that suitably coheres with other desires.}\]

(PGC) is intended to capture the letter of practical general conservatism, just as (GC) captures that of general conservatism in epistemology. Note well: given the understanding of desires’ justifiedness in terms of their conferring reasonableness on actions (the actions they are desires to perform), a more explicit statement of (PGC) is possible, whereby a desire \( \phi \) confers reasonableness on \( \phi \)-ing simply in virtue of being a desire to \( \phi \).

An immediate consequence of practical general conservatism is that the having of a desire to \( \phi \) is sufficient to provide the desirer with a normative reason for action—at least a prima facie reason. This is what I called hyper-internalism in Section 1. To get hyper-internalism from (PGC), we only need something like the following bridge principle: If a subject’s desire to \( \phi \) is prima facie (ethically) justified, then the subject has a prima facie (normative) reason to \( \phi \). We can then argue as follows: (1) For any mental state \( S \), \( S \) is prima facie ethically justified if \( S \) is a desire; (2) if a subject’s desire to \( \phi \) is prima facie (ethically) justified, then the subject has a prima facie (normative) reason to \( \phi \); therefore, (3) if a subject has a desire to \( \phi \), then that subject has a prima facie reason to \( \phi \). On

\[19\] For someone who sympathizes with this one-way conditional, the biconditional may be tempting: For any mental state \( S \), \( S \) is prima facie ethically justified iff \( S \) is a desire (or other conative state). However, the proponent of practical general conservatism need not deny that nonconative states could also constitute justificatory reasons for actions. I am indebted to a Metaphilosophy referee for making me see that the biconditional need not be plausible.

\[20\] A somewhat unlovely statement of the thesis would be this: For any mental state \( S \), \( S \) is prima facie ethically reasonableness-conferring iff \( S \) is a desire (or other conative state).
some interpretations, the bridge principle in premise 2 is tautological; on others, it is substantive but obviously true. Either way, through it hyper-internalism follows straightforwardly from practical general conservatism.

The observation I would like to make at this point is simply this. The idea that a desire may constitute, in and of itself, a normative reason for action is almost nowhere to be found in moral psychology and metaethics (Stampe 1987 being a notable exception). More generally, although discussions of the role of desires in practical reasoning/deliberation and action guidance may bear in certain roundabout ways on the issue of which model ought to be preferred, practical general conservatism (as well as the disqualification model that goes with it) has not been explicitly stated and formulated, let alone explicitly argued against. Yet the view appears coherent and stable.

Moreover, the view seems just as attractive in metaethics as general conservatism is in epistemology. I noted in Section 2 that the great advantage of general conservatism is its dissolution of the problem of skepticism—its ability to account for our beliefs about the existence of the external world being justified. Analogously, arguably the traditional adherence to the qualification model has led to an intractable problem of moral skepticism. What makes any action (or corresponding desire to perform that action) justified? How could we ground the notion that it is better to feed hungry cats than to torture them for fun and profit? These are questions surrounding the “sources of normativity”—what could make a course of action not only take place but also be justified, that is, not only occur but also have a normative status. Such questions present tremendous, perhaps insurmountable, challenges to ethical theory—but only insofar as we stick with the qualification model. If instead we start out with the assumption that any desire justifies the action for which it is a desire, at least prima facie, such skepticism about the sources of normativity dissipates instantly. Thus the theoretical payoff of practical general conservatism is tremendous. It offers us a straightforward account of the sources of normativity, an account that is moreover purely naturalistic and avoids the complications and difficulties attending accounts in the mould of the qualification model.

If this is right, we can formulate an argument for (PGC) that would parallel the argument from skepticism for (GC). As parallel to the belief

21 Indeed, I am not aware of so much as an explicit acknowledgment of practical general conservatism as an option. In a way, the primary purpose of the present article has been precisely to articulate practical general conservatism (and the disqualification model) as a prima facie coherent position.

22 Relatedly, another fundamental problem is the one captured by the question “Why should I be moral?” Under the disqualification model, the desire to be moral, which everybody but the wicked and amoralist shares, is justified unless there is a special reason to think it is not, and is so simply because it is a desire. So the problem dissolves again.
that there is an external world, let us take the desire to not commit genocide. The argument then looks like this: (1) if (PF) or (PC) is true, then we are not ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide; (2) we are in fact ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide; therefore, (3) neither (PF) nor (PC) is true. Alternatively, we might argue as follows: (1) we are ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide only if (PGC) is true; (2) we are in fact ethically justified in desiring to not commit genocide; therefore, (3) (PGC) is true. The general reasoning would be this: (1) we are ethically justified in wanting to act morally only if (PGC) is true; (2) we are in fact ethically justified in wanting to act morally; therefore, (3) (PGC) is true. Call this the argument from moral skepticism.

The argument from moral skepticism is the chief motivation for practical general conservatism. As with general conservatism in epistemology, however, there are ways in which practical general conservatism is, upon reflection, quite intuitive. Just as the fact that one finds oneself believing that there is a table before one, or some such trivial fact, constitutes prima facie epistemic justification for believing that there is a table before one, so the fact that one feels like scratching one’s ear gives one a prima facie ethical justification for scratching one’s ear. The action of scratching one’s ear is made reasonable simply by the fact of the agent’s desire at the time, arbitrary and insignificant though it may be, in the same way the agent’s holding on to his belief in the table’s existence is reasonable given that the belief already exists. These reasonableness-conferring psychological states may well later be outweighed by other considerations. But so long as they are not, their very existence makes sure that their subject is being reasonable in believing or acting as he does. Here too the intuition is that, unless there is something to disqualify one’s desire in some way (e.g., its being formed in an unreliable or irresponsible way), one cannot be at fault for believing or acting as one does.

To be sure, practical general conservatism faces some clear objections. Perhaps the most pressing is presented by wicked or evil desires. Jean Kambanda’s desire to incite the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda did not give him a reason to do so, it might be plausibly argued, and was not a justified (or justifying) desire. But practical general conservatism entails that it did and was, and is thereby reduced to absurdity.

The first response to this objection is to insist on the distinction between prima facie and ultima facie justification. Arguably, pretheoretic intuitions about Kambanda’s desire and their justification seem to concern a generic notion justification, one that does not discriminate between prima facie and ultima facie justification. We may therefore do justice to them by accepting that Kambanda’s desire did not provide Kambanda with ultima facie justification, and thus did not constitute a conclusive, all-things-considered reason for inciting genocidal activity, while insisting that the desire did provide him with prima facie justification. Such prima
facie reasons can readily be outweighed. Indeed, they can be overwhelmingly outweighed, to the point that their comparative weight becomes negligible.

This initial response to the objection may seem inappropriate, however, inasmuch as we would like to think that Kambanda’s desire did not give him any (justificatory) reason, not even a slight one. There are two possible responses to this pressing of the objection. One response is to claim that our intuitions are not sufficiently fine-tuned to tell apart not having a reason at all and having a negligible reason. That is, if we really appreciate what it means for someone to have a negligible reason to do something—a reason infinitely outweighed by contrary reasons, say—we realize that we have no intuitive sense of whether it is this kind of reason that Kambanda’s desire provided him with or no reason at all. A second response is to hold that prima facie reasons are such as to be susceptible not only to being outweighed and overridden but also to being altogether vacated and annulled. Compare the notion of defeasible evidence in epistemology; as Pollock (1986) pointed out, one’s defeasible evidence for something is susceptible to two different kinds of defeater, which Pollock called “overriding” and “undermining,” respectively. The former defeat the evidence by presenting heftier counter-evidence; the latter do so by removing an apparent evidential connection. Still, both overridden and undermined defeasible evidence is defeasible, prima facie evidence. By the same token, we may insist, both outweighed and vacated prima facie ethical justification is genuine prima facie justification. Kambanda’s desire to incite genocidal activity may thus have provided him with a prima facie, though vacatable and indeed vacated, justification.

It may be objected that if prima facie reasons are vacatable, as opposed to merely overridable, then they are very meager reasons indeed, making practical general conservatism much less interesting than it had originally seemed. But the important point about prima facie reasons is that, however meager, they are normative. Thus the fact that every desire constitutes, in and of itself, a prima facie reason for performing the action it is a desire for means that normativity comes for free with the natural having of desires. It is still the case that practical general conservatism dissolves any deep mystery about the sources of normativity.

This response may raise the ire of some objectors, who may insist that desires cannot possibly have any normative force in and of themselves, and by default, since in themselves they are brute, dated psychological occurrences. Their occurrence is a brute fact and cannot carry any evaluative or normative significance by itself. To assert this, however, is nothing more than to assert the falsity of practical general conservatism. In the present context, it effectively amounts to begging the question. More deeply, I am of course well aware that practical general conservatism is not immediately compelling in a way one might wish. But the discussion above
is an invitation to try on for size this way of thinking, one that may well
involve, if you will, an achievement of the philosophical imagination.

4. Conclusion

To be sure, other objections and difficulties may attend practical general
conservatism. I am very much open to the possibility that ultimately the
liabilities associated with practical general conservatism would make it
untenable or at least undesirable. As I indicated in Section 1, my own
degree of belief in it is limited. Nonetheless, I find that it forms a coher-
ent and stable position, one that upon reflection is not unduly unintuitive
and may neutralize one of the perennial problems of metaethics, the
specter of moral skepticism. An interesting consequence of practical
general conservatism is hyper-internalism: the thesis that the having
of a desire to \( \varphi \) is sufficient to provide the desirer with a normative
reason for \( \varphi \)-ing.

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