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Dimensions of Desire Strength

Dimensiones de la fuerza del deseo*

*FEDERICO BURDMAN***

Abstract: The question I address in this paper is what is it exactly for desires to possess a certain strength. And my aim is twofold. First, I argue for a *pluralistic* account of desire strength. On this view, there are several dimensions along which desires possess greater or lesser strength, and none of them is intrinsically privileged. My second aim is to highlight some time-based properties of desires, *recurrence* and *persistence*. Both desires' degree of persistence across time and their rate of episodic recurrence are, I argue, further dimensions of desire strength.
Keywords: desire, desire strength, motivation, recurrence, persistence.

Resumen: La pregunta que abordo en este artículo es qué es exactamente que un deseo posea una cierta fuerza. Y mi objetivo es doble. Primero, argumento a favor de una visión *pluralista* de la fuerza del deseo. Desde esta perspectiva, existen varias dimensiones en las que los deseos poseen mayor o menor fuerza, y ninguna de ellas es intrínsecamente privilegiada. Mi segundo objetivo es resaltar algunas propiedades de los deseos basadas en el tiempo, la *recurrencia* y la *persistencia*. Sostengo que tanto el grado de persistencia de los deseos a lo largo del tiempo como su tasa de recurrencia episódica son también dimensiones de la fuerza del deseo.
Palabras clave: deseo, fuerza del deseo, motivación, recurrencia, persistencia.

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** Federico Burdman, Departamento de Filosofía, Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, Universidad Alberto Hurtado (Santiago, Chile). fgburdman@uba.ar. Research areas: addiction, motivation, self-control, their relation to moral responsibility, and related issues at the intersection between the Philosophy of Mind, the Philosophy of Action, and the Philosophy of Psychiatry. Relevant publications: "A Pluralistic Account of Degrees of Control in Addiction", *Philosophical Studies*, 179 (1), pp. 179-221, 2022.

1. Introduction

A fundamental feature of desires is that some of them are stronger and some of them are weaker. It is true of me right now both that I want to go to the next Juana Molina concert and that I want to have a soup for lunch, but one remarkable difference between these two states is that the former desire is much stronger than the latter. And we ordinarily accept facts about the strength of desires as playing relevant roles in the explanation of action. (—Why did Martha drive for three hours to meet Maia if she knew she would only be able to spend a short while with her? —Well, because she wanted to see her very badly). Further, the concept of desire strength is implicated in some putative folk-psychological generalizations, such as the 'law of desire' —the claim that whenever someone desires two incompatible things, she will, other things being equal, pursue the stronger desire (if she were to act at all)[1]. In sum, it does not seem contentious to assume that there is a property, or a set of properties, that desires possess to different degrees, such that some of them are stronger and some of them are weaker.

The question I address in this paper is what is it exactly for desires to possess a certain strength. And my aim is twofold. First, I look into some of the main available theories of desire strength —the phenomenological, the valuational, and the motivational accounts—, and I argue that none of them is able to produce, by itself, a comprehensive picture of desire strength. As an alternative, I put forward a *pluralistic* account. On this view, there are several dimensions along which desires possess greater or lesser strength, and none of them is intrinsically privileged. Assessments of desire strength often vary as we focus on one or another of these dimensions, and it is only on pragmatic grounds that one of them may be deemed more appropriate in particular cases. My second aim is to highlight some time-based properties of desires which have often been neglected by traditional theories, namely the rate of *recurrence* of particular episodes of occurrently wanting something and standing desires' long-term *persistence*. Both desires' degree of persistence across time and their episodic recurrence rate are, I argue, further dimensions of desire strength.

The plan for the paper is this: I discuss phenomenological, valuational, and motivational accounts of desire strength in sections 2, 3, and 4. Then I look into persistence and recurrence as dimensions of desire strength in section 5. Lastly, in section 6 I conclude with a statement of the pluralistic view and I discuss some of its main features[2].

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1 This is somewhat roughly put, but I will not get into the details of a proper formulation here. Different versions of this claim are discussed by (Davidson, 1980; Kennett & Smith, 1996; Mele, 2003, 2014). Of course, the 'law of desire' is not without its critics. However, all parties to the debate explicitly or implicitly rely on assessments of desire strength.

2 Before moving on, allow me to signal a few assumptions I will be making along the way. First, I will assume that desires are causally efficacious states, thus assuming for present purposes a broadly causalist theory of action. I think, however, that the main elements of my view can be endorsed by a non-causal theorist as well. Second, I remain neutral here concerning how exactly to characterize the objects of desires —throughout the paper I will refer indistinctly to desires for an object or a substance, to desires to perform certain actions, or for a state of affairs to obtain. Third, I will often make a reference to desires being stronger or weaker than other desires, and this might give the impression that my topic concerns comparative, or otherwise relational, properties of these attitudes. Of course, there is always a comparative dimension to any claim that a particular desire is strong or weak, insofar as it involves placing that desire at some particular point along the spectrum of desire

2. The phenomenological account

A phenomenological view of desire strength claims that the strength of a desire is given by the intensity of affect that goes with occurrently experiencing that desire. There reasons to favor such an approach. At least some of our desires are consciously experienced, and the phenomenal character of these experiences is often one of its most prominent features. Consider, for instance, appetitive desires, including sexual desires and food- and drink-related desires, among others. These are arguably prototypical of the lay concept of desire, and their phenomenal character —say, a sense of urgency and of readiness for action— is among the first things that come to mind when we think about desires that are particularly strong. And a phenomenological approach seems an appealing option when it comes to other embodied psychological states, such as sensations of pain and pleasure, to which desire seems to bear a connection. Further, phenomenal qualities are gradable properties, so they might seem *prima facie* good candidates for an account of desire strength.

Despite these advantages, there are also several reasons why phenomenal character cannot be the whole story when it comes to desire strength. Some of them relate to why phenomenological accounts are not very popular as theories of desire in the first place. For instance, a phenomenological account is badly poised to accommodate the possibility of unconscious desires, since these are by definition not directly experienced in any way. If you happen to think that there are such things as unconscious desires, that is a reason not to favor a phenomenological theory of desire strength.

In addition, it is unclear exactly how even some of our conscious desires may be accounted for in phenomenological terms. When I cross the street, it seems that the correct explanation of why I do so would include a reference to the fact that I want to cross the street —maybe because I want to buy groceries at the market in the opposing sidewalk. And that desire is arguably something that occurs in my consciousness. But how does it feel to want to cross the street? A phenomenological account is committed to the claim that there is at least a dimly felt quality to wanting this —which would make of it a relatively weak desire. In fact, it is not clear that it feels like anything at all (cf. Smith, 1987, p. 46).

Other problems relate specifically to the phenomenological account's proposed way of dealing with desire strength. First, there seem to be intuitive counterexamples to the claim that the stronger desire is the one that is more intensely felt. Consider, for instance, the predicament of a psychiatrist who feels sexually attracted to one of her patients but who, at the same time, thinks that acting on that desire would be wrong and could potentially hurt her career prospects (cf., Mele, 1998, p. 26). It is easy to picture the case in a way in which

strength. But though there are many interesting questions concerning judgements of relative strength of desires, I will not discuss them here. The question I look into in this paper is a prior one, and it concerns the very concept of desire strength. When we speak of some desire as strong or weak we are referring to some property, or set of properties, that desires possess to different degrees. In this paper, I ask what those properties are. That question can, I think, be addressed without engaging directly with the issues involved in relative strength comparisons. Finally, my claims are meant to apply only to *intrinsic desires* —namely, those which concern things we want for their own sake, and not as means for the satisfaction of other desires—, as instrumental desires raise different issues that are beyond the scope of this paper. For a useful discussion of instrumental desires, see Smith (2004).

her desire to do the right thing and to enjoy a successful career are the stronger ones. But it is also easy to picture how the current desire to engage sexually with her patient might be the one possessing the stronger phenomenal quality. It seems that felt intensity is, at best, an unreliable guide to desire strength.

Consider now a different case. To see my daughter again is probably one of the things that I want more strongly than any other. And I can picture to some extent how that desire would feel if, for some reason, I were to become convinced that seeing her again was in jeopardy. It seems fair to assume that, under such circumstances, that desire would indeed be intensely felt —I would feel agitated, I would hardly be able to focus in anything else, I would feel desperate. And yet, feeling very confident now that there is a relatively simple series of steps that would lead me to see her again, that very strong desire of mine seems to sit in the background for some time as I focus on writing this paper. It seems, then, that what makes such a big difference in phenomenal character is some further fact related to my beliefs, and not how strongly I want to see my daughter again *per se*, which is arguably a constant factor in all scenarios[3].

A similar point can be made concerning the effects of expectations about how soon a desire will be satisfied. For instance, reported craving levels among smokers are higher when subjects are led to believe that an opportunity to smoke a cigarette will be available shortly (Juliano & Brandon, 1998). The belief that an opportunity to satisfy this desire will come in the near future seems to make it phenomenologically more salient, or more pressing. But this change in phenomenal salience seems to be tracking something else, and not a change in desire strength itself.

Let us consider, then, a different sort of phenomenological account. Maybe it is not the phenomenal intensity of experiencing the desire what gives us a measure of its strength, but the strength of the (potential) affective response to its satisfaction, or to coming to believe that it will not be satisfied (Humberstone, 1990). This suggestion stems from the basic insight of hedonistic theories of desire (Strawson, 1994): we tend to feel pleasure at getting the things we want, and we tend to feel some sort of displeasure or sadness when we realize that we will not get something we want. Vicarious versions of those feelings may arise even by simply considering the prospect of getting or failing to get what we want (Kavanagh et al., 2005). In some cases, in fact, the experience of such feelings allows us to realize what our desires were all along, even if we were not entirely conscious of them. For instance, experiencing great joy at getting a promotion might make you realize how much you really wanted to get it, even though you had been telling yourself that you did not care much one way or another. So there are at least some cases in which an assessment of desire strength can be built upon the intensity of those felt qualities.

However, the hedonistic account of desire strength seems vulnerable to some of the same difficulties that have been raised in the past against the hedonistic approach to desire more generally. One of them is that the pleasure obtained at desire satisfaction is also susceptible to expectancy effects, similar to those discussed above, and so it is also, at best, an unreliable guide to desire strength. Further, it seems possible for someone to undergo a condition that interferes with their capacity to feel pleasure and displeasure, without thereby rendering

3 This case is loosely based on (Schroeder, 2004, p. 144).

that person incapable of having stronger and weaker desires. It seems reasonable to assume that a friend who is experiencing a transient depressive state does not cease to want you to do good at your work, even though they may be unable to experience true joy at learning about your promotion.

In sum, there is some support for a phenomenological account of desire strength. Sometimes we do feel strongly about the things we want the most, and desires that count as intuitively weak are things we rarely feel strongly about. Further, there are cases where the intensity of pleasure or displeasure we get from some desire's (non-)satisfaction is revealing of how strongly we wanted something. And yet a theory of desire strength that focused solely on phenomenology would leave important phenomena unaccounted for. There is a dimension of desire strength that is captured by a phenomenological account, but it will not do as a complete picture.

3. The valuational account

Each of the major theories of desire suggests a particular picture of desire strength. I turn now to consider accounts of desire strength inspired by the idea that desires embody a sort of valuation of the thing desired. I will look into two rather different ways in which such a claim might be developed to provide an account of desire strength, depending on whether the relevant valuation is taken to be explicit or implicit. Explicit valuations are invoked by 'guise of the good' accounts of desire. As a theory involving implicit valuations I will discuss the reward theory of desire.

Typical 'guise of the good' theories of desire claim that, whatever else may be true of these states, they are partly constituted by an evaluative belief (or an evaluative judgement) to the effect that the thing desired is good (e.g., Gregory, 2021). Weaker versions of the claim have also been defended, and seeing the object of desire under the guise of the good might be equated with having a disposition to judge that the thing desired is good, or with having a propensity to make such a judgement, upon reflection, if queried about it (see Asarnow, 2016, for discussion). Regardless of how we think of the details here, this general picture suggests a particular approach to desire strength, according to which the strength of a desire is related to the agent's degree of commitment to, or endorsement of, the relevant belief or judgement. While the epistemology of credence or degrees of belief is no simple matter (Moon, 2017), if one takes desires to constitutively involve evaluative beliefs, that may suggest that desire strength is related to the strength of those beliefs.

Of course, that view will seem particularly promising to philosophers already convinced by guise of the good theories of desire, and probably not very appealing to those who think that such an account is wrongheaded as a theory of desire in the first place. The main arguments against guise of the good accounts are well-known, and I will not rehearse them extensively here. The guiding thought behind many of them is that it is possible for an agent's desires and evaluative beliefs to be in conflict or, at least, to be dissociated in a number of ways. It seems correct, for instance, to attribute desires to small infants and non-human animals, though it would probably be controversial to attribute beliefs or judgments to them in a standard sense (cf. Velleman, 1992, p. 7).

Another classic argument against guise of the good accounts stems from the observation that it is possible for people to desire something while straightforwardly believing it to be bad, as might be the case when people, for whatever reason, do not want for themselves the things they believe to be good. Think, for instance, of a depressive person who believes himself to be totally unworthy of having anything good come his way, and who consequently strongly desires that bad things accrue to him (Stocker, 1979). These cases seem even harder to accommodate for a guise of the good account of desire strength, since they involve a total disconnection between wanting something and believing it to be good.

These objections can easily be dealt with, if only we think of the relevant evaluative element in desires as implicit rather than explicit. Consequently, an implicit version of the valuational claim might seem a more promising way of rendering the insight behind this approach. For a start, it allows for the possibility of desire/belief splits, conflicts, and dissociations, since implicit and explicit evaluations by the same agent may differ from one another. For instance, an implicit valuation approach has the resources to account for Stocker-like cases of 'desiring the bad', simply by noting that the sense in which the agent sees the desired outcome as valuable is not the same as the sense in which she judges it to be bad.

Consider the picture of implicit valuation put forward by the reward theory of desire (Arpaly & Schroeder, 2013; Schroeder, 2004; Schroeder & Arpaly, 2014). On this theory, the relevant implicit valuation is given by the way the organism construes a certain target or state of affairs as a reward or a punishment. And reward and punishment themselves are understood in terms of the role of 'reward signals' —produced in specific areas of the brain's reward system— in driving contingency-based learning. The resulting view is that something is treated by an agent as a reward in case a representation of it contributes to the production of reinforcement signals within the organism —thus enabling certain forms of reinforcement learning—, and conversely for punishment. To desire something (intrinsically) is, in essence, to construe it as a reward in this specific sense related to the theory of reinforcement learning. This understanding of desire is easily expanded into a theory of desire strength, as the relevant notions of reward and punishment are themselves scalar concepts. A strong desire is pictured, then, as one which constitutes a state of affairs as a substantial reward (or punishment), and a weak desire is one which constitutes a state of affairs as a minimal reward (or punishment) (Arpaly & Schroeder, 2013, p. 136; Schroeder, 2004, p. 138).

One possible worry about this account is that it takes a strongly revisionist stance on the ordinary concept of desire[4]. For a start, it seems that the view most amenable to the theory is that —contrary to ordinary opinion— no desire is ever consciously experienced (Hulse

4 It is Schroeder and Arpaly's view that the account they put forward is not such a strong departure from folk-psychological wisdom. On the version of the theory I am discussing in this section, the implicit valuation approach involves a claim to capturing the essence of desire strength. Actual pronouncements of the theory are somewhat more nuanced than this. For instance, Schroeder (2004) defends a theory of desire where there are three 'faces' to these attitudes (the phenomenological, the motivational, and the one connected to reward and punishment), but then argues that it is only this latter face which is involved in the necessary properties of desires. The same position is later defended by Arpaly & Schroeder (2013). I take it that the theory looks more revisionistic when it pictures the essence of desire as connected to reinforcement learning, and somewhat less revisionistic when it presents desire as having more 'faces'.

et al., 2004). Common-sense should no doubt be open for revision, but a suggestion that no desire is ever conscious has a good deal of apparent evidence against it.

Moreover, even if one fully endorses the subpersonal story built into the theory, that would still leave room for argument about the extent to which that story matches the personal-level folk-psychological phenomena of desire. In fact, there is some plausibility to giving the basic machinery behind the theory an eliminativist reading (cf. Haas, 2021). The idea that valuational states play a crucial role in enabling reinforcement learning seems perfectly consistent with the claim that there are no such things as desires in the standard folk-psychological sense. Both strong revisionism and eliminativism about desire are defensible but costly theoretical options. The view I put forward in later sections is, by contrast, only mildly revisionist.

For present purposes, however, my main quarrel with the reward theory concerns the suggestion that it captures the necessary, essential features of desire strength. There is some plausibility to the thought that, when we speak of some desire as strong or weak, one thing we might be referring to is its ability to shape our learning, such that it functions as a strong reinforcer if we desire the thing strongly, and only as a weak reinforcer if we desire it weakly. But while this is a plausible relevant dimension of desire strength, it is not the only one.

4. The motivational account

Arguably the most popular theory of desire, the motivational account pictures desires' motivational dimension as the essential element of the desiderative attitude (Smith, 1987). There is something appealing about this, as desires appear to be, if anything, the kind of state that *moves* us to try to achieve various things. The canonical symptom of wanting something arguably is —paraphrasing Anscombe (1967, p. 47)— trying to get it. If desiring, then, is often thought to be fundamentally a matter of being motivated to do various things, it stands to reason that a main contender for a theory of desire strength will be a theory of motivational strength.

Producing a theory of motivational strength is hardly an easier task than producing a theory of desire strength itself. For instance, it might seem tempting to think that motivational strength can be read right off behavior, given the assumption that motivation is causally efficacious in the production of action. But motivational strength cannot be simply inferred from behavioral outcomes, as it is possible for a desire to possess certain motivational strength and still never be acted upon —say, because the desire in question lost in competition against an incompatible contemporary desire endowed with greater motivational strength. And it also seems right to say that a desire can possess great motivational strength even if some other factor permanently prevents it from being translated into action —if lightning struck a man rendering him permanently incapable of attempting to act, there would still be a fact of the matter about which of his desires was motivationally stronger at the time (cf. Mele, 1998, p. 26).

On the other hand, any plausible theory of motivational strength will still be guided by the thought that motivation is fundamentally connected to the production of action. For present purposes, I am going to assume that something resembling Al Mele's (1998, 2003) way

of capturing this guiding thought is appropriate. The suggestion is, roughly, that the strength of a motivational state (or its physical realizer) is given by the way it causally contributes to the production of an attempt that is appropriate to the content of that state. Motivational strength, under that reading, is a sort of causal power responsible for the agent's propensity, or inclination, to act in certain ways. The basic idea behind the motivational account of desire strength may then be stated thus: strong desires are endowed with greater causal power, which results in a greater propensity to act in desire-congruent ways (and probably also in an increase of desire's efficacy in sustaining and guiding actions, see Shepherd (2017)). Weak desires, on the contrary, are endowed with a lesser amount of causal power, and this is reflected in a lower overall propensity to act in the relevant ways.

These and other aspects of the complex concept of motivation would need to go into a properly developed theory of motivational strength. And motivational strength is surely a prominent dimension along which to assess degrees of desire strength. In the present context, however, the important point to make is that even a properly developed account of motivational strength would fall short of a complete theory of desire strength.

For a start, even if one acknowledges motivation to be a paradigmatic feature of desires, it is far from clear that all desires necessarily involve motivation to produce certain actions. It seems conceivable that creatures constitutively incapable of acting (like Galen Strawson's (1994) 'weather watchers') may still have a preference for certain outcomes and thus, in a way, a desire for certain states of affairs to obtain. In less fantastic scenarios, it also seems conceivable to desire certain things to obtain even if one believes that there is no possibility of doing anything to promote the obtainment of the relevant state of affairs, like a mathematician who wants certain mathematical proposition to be true (Schroeder, 2004, p. 16), or the way many of us desire world peace without doing much really to promote it. Further, sometimes we desire not to get things we do not have, but to keep things we have (Humberstone, 1990, p. 108). Keeping things the way they are certainly involves action in many cases, but in other cases we may simply have a desire that things stay the same in a way that does not move us to any particular action.

An available move for a motivational theorist is to restrict the scope of the account to action-desires, or desires that (essentially) constitute motivation to act in certain ways (Mele, 1995). The price of that move is, of course, to produce a less general theory, but the resulting account has a *prima facie* more credible claim if we restrict the discussion to action-desires. And it is arguably the case that (intrinsic) desires typically have motivational properties, so the resulting theory might be general enough to merit serious consideration, even if some sub-set of desires fell outside its scope.

As I said, it is part of my view that motivational strength is an important dimension of desire strength. But it does not tell us the whole story about desire strength, even if we consider only action-desires. First, as discussed above, both the phenomenological and (some versions of) the valuational account have strong claims to capturing relevant dimensions of desire strength which are not reducible to motivational phenomena. That, in itself, is a challenge for the claim that motivational strength is the essence of desire strength. Second, and more importantly, as stated the motivational account would not be a complete theory *even if* motivation was the essential feature of desires. The problem, briefly put, is that the account

as stated focuses exclusively on occurrent desires[5]. In other words, even if the motivational account gave us the full story about occurrent desires —which, I suggest, it does not—, it would still need to be complemented by a further story about standing desires.

Allow me to introduce this important distinction. *Occurrent desires* are the ones that are experienced by agents at particular times. Sometimes they involve an affective dimension, and they play a role in canonical explanations of intentional action, as they often constitute motivation to engage in behaviors conducive to their satisfaction. It is possible for occurrent desires to arise on a one-off basis, but there are often regularities concerning the sorts of things that an agent occurrently desires across time. We may speak of *dispositional or standing desires* as the lasting complex dispositions which include, among other things, a disposition to experience occurrent desires with a particular content[6].

The phenomenological and the motivational accounts, in the versions considered here, are meant primarily as theories of occurrent desire strength. Picture, for instance, someone pregnant who does not usually like strawberries, but who one day suddenly experiences a strong craving for them. That desire may be, then and there, both phenomenologically and motivationally strong in the way pictured by these accounts, even if it is not the expression of any lasting disposition of her to experience desires for strawberries.

But if we shift focus to more extended periods of time, there emerges a further way in which desires may be strong or weak, which is framed in terms of the concept of standing desires. Consider the case of a student who wants to graduate from school. A person continues to have such a desire when she goes to sleep, and also at other times when she is not presently experiencing any feelings relating to it, or is not presently inclined to do things conducive to its satisfaction. The intuition that the agent continues to desire the relevant things at those times is plausibly grounded in the thought that the agent continues all along to be *disposed* to experience desires with the relevant content. As I will argue, how strongly a person is disposed to experience those desires constitutes a further relevant measure of their strength that is not captured by the motivational account as stated.

5. Persistence and recurrence

There are at least two ways of picturing the strength of psychological dispositions that are relevant to the theory of desire strength. One concerns how frequently (or, to put it differently, how easily) is the disposition manifested —its *recurrence rate*—, and the other one concerns how *persistent* the disposition is in the long-term.

Let us focus on persistence first. Standing desires are long-lasting dispositions. And the fact that agents often continue to be disposed to experience similar desires during significant stretches of time is one of the things that makes the pursuit of long-term goals possible. Then, one dimension along which standing desires may be compared concerns how lasting they are. Think, for instance, of someone who wants at some point to pursue a particular career. If her desire were not particularly strong, one might expect it to be easily diverted, leading to a

5 This is also a possible complaint against the phenomenological account, as I note in the main text below. The reward theory seems better poised to give an account of standing desires.

6 For discussion of the distinction between occurrent and standing desires, see Mele (2003, p. 30 and ff.).

change of heart about her career prospects. On the other hand, there is a recognizable sense of desire strength in which we would see the fact that she continues to desire the same things during long stretches of time as evidence of her having a strong desire indeed.

Still, there is more to persisting than merely lasting through time. Consider, for instance, professional athletes, who spend several hours training every day, are constrained by strict schedules and regimented eating guidelines, and are constantly dealing with competition-related stress and various sources of pressure to perform well. What is remarkable about professional athletes is that they often continue to be strongly disposed to have the desire to compete and triumph, even though they experience so many things that seem to have a potential to undermine those desires. In spite of that, their disposition to experience the relevant desires often continues to be strong. There is, to put it differently, an element of *stubbornness,* or of not being easily derailed, in a desire that is strong. By contrast, desires that are weaker are more easily undermined.

To picture a different kind of case, consider the desires —often called *cravings*— experienced by addicted people, which are arguably prototypical of remarkably strong desires. These desires are, among other things, extraordinarily persistent. The disposition to experience them is typically very long-lasting —on which grounds many claim that addiction is a chronic condition (e.g., McLellan et al., 2000)—, and they are also particularly resistant to being undermined by desire-contrary considerations (Burdman, 2024). Some addicted people put up with different sorts of harsh difficulties that they see as causally connected with a pattern of problematic drug use, and yet this fails to undermine their continuing disposition to experience drug-related desires. That plausibly speaks to a relevant measure of how remarkably strong these desires are.

Now, consider a second time-related property that standing desires possess to different degrees. Standing desires are, as discussed before, lasting dispositions to experience desires with a particular content. So, another important feature of them concerns how frequently the relevant disposition is manifested —which is often a reflection of how susceptible the agent is to different sorts of triggering-cues. This concerns desires' episodic *recurrence rate*, which is higher in some desires than in others. Recurrence is, I submit, yet another dimension along which to assess desire strength.

Desires are attention-grabbing (Scanlon, 1998). When we want something very much, we often find ourselves thinking time and again about the thing we want, fantasizing about it, rehearsing plans about how to acquire it, or imaginatively tasting the joy of getting it (Kavanagh et al., 2005). Many of these episodes are triggered by different sorts of associated cues, which may or may not be perceptual in nature. For instance, particular craving episodes may be induced by an enticing smell, or by seeing the wanted target, but also by specific physiological deficit (as in ordinary cases of hunger, or in withdrawal from drug use), or by explicit cognitively-induced imagery of the wanted target. So how susceptible the agent is to the relevant sorts of cues (or how strongly learnt are the associative connections doing the triggering) is an important factor driving recurrence rates. In any case, exactly what are the factors responsible for the fact that some desires have greater or lower recurrence rates is not a question I will attempt to answer here. My present claim is, more modestly, that desires that recur more frequently are plausibly pictured as stronger along a relevant dimension of desire strength.

Here too, addictive desires, as prototypically strong desires, provide an interesting test-case for this claim. Addictive desires are not always phenomenally strong[7]. And it is an open question whether they are best described as motivationally strong, given that exercising self-control is typically possible for addicted agents in the face of each individual drug-related inclination[8]. But a key feature of these desires is that their recurrence rate is remarkably high, and it is this aspect of addictive desires that poses one of the greatest challenges for addicted agents attempting to refrain from drug use (Burdman, 2023; Sripada, 2018, 2022). The available evidence suggests that a crucial dimension of these desires' strength is connected not with any property of the individual episodes themselves, but with the fact that these are recurring at such remarkable rates. As a reflection of that, some of the scales used in addiction research for measuring craving strength include an assessment of cravings' recurrence, along with reports of craving intensity and other indicators of occurrent desire strength (Flannery et al., 1999; Statham et al., 2011).

It might be objected that addiction is an unrepresentative case. Indeed, in some cases, exceedingly high recurrence rates approximate an obsession (Anton, 2000; Modell et al., 1992), which might seem to make addiction an inadequate reference point for a general theory of desire strength. But recurrence rates as a dimension of desire strength is at the heart of how we ordinarily think about all sorts of desires. Say that Renata, a teenage guitar player, wants very much to own an electric guitar. She finds herself thinking about it several times a day, rehearsing the reasons to buy a particular model rather than another one, anticipating people's reactions to seeing her with it, and making plans to get the money she needs to buy it. Once the thought comes to her mind, it is not that easy for her to put it away and regain focus in other activities (McInerney 2004). All these are symptoms of an intuitively strong desire, irrespective of how strong or weak we picture this desire to be in other dimensions.

In certain cases, desires that have a high recurrence rate will also be motivationally strong once they occur. But these two dimensions may come apart as well. It is possible, for instance, for desires totally disconnected from action to possess a high recurrence rate. Imagine someone who wants very much the current war to stop, but who firmly believes that no action on their part has any chance of significantly altering the course of events, and who consequently does not feel any inclination to perform particular actions in an attempt at desire satisfaction. That desire may be motivationally inefficacious, but still be strong in other dimensions. For instance, the strength of that desire may be reflected in the recurrence rate of particular experiences related to that desire. Maybe desire-related thoughts keep entering one's consciousness at different times, maybe news and media content related to the war are particularly prone to capturing one's attention, and so on. There would still

7 There are a number of complex methodological issues surrounding how desire or craving strength is measured in addiction research. Most studies rely on self-report, typically structured by validated craving questionnaires, but these often leave it to subjects to interpret what exactly is being referred to when they are asked to rate a particular craving episode as strong or weak. For discussion of the difficulties of measuring craving or desire strength, see (Tiffany & Wray, 2012). Nevertheless, it seems natural to assume that what many people have in mind when delivering these ratings is the felt intensity of these experiences. It is telling, then, that empirical studies that measure craving strength in addiction rarely come up with estimates on the higher end of the spectrum available in rating scales. The point is discussed by Sripada (2022).

8 I discuss evidence for this claim in (Burdman, 2022).

be an intuitive ground to picturing that desire as strong, even if there was no discernible motivational side to it.

6. A pluralistic view of desire strength

Let us sum up the discussion thus far. Phenomenological, valuational, and motivational accounts all have a plausible claim to capturing relevant aspects of desire strength. There are cases where, when we think of some particular desire as strong or weak, what we have in mind is either its phenomenal character, or its capacity to shape learning, or its motivational impact. But these are not the only things we have in mind when we picture desires as strong or weak. Indeed, I have argued that the dimensions of persistence and recurrence are apparent once we focus on the relevant properties of standing desires.

The view of desire strength that emerges from the previous discussion is, then, a species of *pluralism*. There is no privileged property of desires that we consistently point to when we think of them as strong or weak. Instead, there is a set of dimensions along which desire strength might be assessed. These include phenomenological, valuational, and motivational dimensions, along persistence and recurrence, and possibly others besides these. On the pluralistic view, none of them has a privileged status in itself, pragmatic considerations apart[9]. That is consistent with the claim that some particular sub-group of dimensions can be more relevant than others, on pragmatic grounds, for assessing desire strength at some particular occasion.

A pluralistic view is also consistent with the possibility that there be causal links between the degree of strength that desires have along different dimensions. I leave that door open, as it depends on an assessment of the relevant empirical evidence. The claim of the pluralistic view is only that these dimensions are conceptually distinct, and that point holds irrespective of the extent of constant conjunction between them uncovered by empirical studies. The pluralistic view is certainly consistent with there being complex causal relations between the different dimensions of desire strength.

As for the claim that these dimensions are conceptually distinct, I have argued for it mainly by presenting several possible dissociations between them. I discussed cases where phenomenologically strong desires are not motivationally strong, where motivationally strong desires are not recurrent, where highly recurrent desires are not motivationally strong, and where remarkably persistent desires are not phenomenologically strong in particular instances. I have not gone through the whole matrix of possible dissociations, but I take it that the cases I discussed, if found convincing, are enough to make my point.

The resulting picture is, as I suggested in passing, mildly revisionist. There is some revisionism involved in allowing for an open set of dimensions to the concept of desire strength, and in allowing for assessments of desire strength to vary as we focus on one or another of these dimensions. To put it differently, it is an implication of the pluralistic view that the

9 The Dictionary of Psychology of the American Psychological Association offers a definition of the strength of an attitude that is reminiscent of the sort of pluralistic view I put forward here: "Attitude strength: the extent to which an attitude persists over time, resists change, influences information processing, and guides behavior..." (APA, 2015, p. 89). Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this reference to my attention.

ordinary concept of desire strength is equivocal to a certain extent. Upon reflection, desire strength is revealed as being a complex multidimensional affair, and this arguably clashes to some extent with a default assumption that desire strength is, fundamentally, one thing[10]. Still, the account is only mildly revisionist, insofar as the dimensions highlighted in this discussion are all of them recognizable features of the folk-psychological concept of desire.

A possible complaint against the pluralistic view is that it fails to give us a clear concept of desire strength, as it allows for an indeterminate number of dimensions of desire strength that might be at issue in different contexts. But the objection fails to give proper consideration to the possibility that desires be, in fact, multidimensional creatures. Though the present discussion concerns theories of desire strength, and not theories of desire more generally, a similarly inspired pluralistic theory of desire is not at all an implausible view. It is hard to escape from the observation that desires typically have a phenomenological, a valuational, and a motivational aspect, and possibly others beside these, even if we can conceive of cases where one or another of these aspects seems to be lacking. Moreover, when we consider standing desires as lasting dispositions, persistence and recurrence stand out as plausible further dimensions of desires. So the objection would need to be backed up with a strong argument to the effect that a similarly inspired pluralistic view of desire is to be rejected.

The idea that desires encompass all these different dimensions might seem more natural if we consider an analogy with the emotions. Theories of emotion have, of course, often focused on some particular property of them as their essential nature, but in recent times it has become more popular to think of emotions as comprising a set of different properties which are all, in a way, characteristic of emotional episodes and dispositions (e.g., Moors, 2009; Pérez & Gomila, 2021; Robinson, 2005; Scherer, 2005, among others) . Moreover, a plausible list of emotional dimensions overlaps to a significant extent with the dimensions of desire discussed here. Emotions are often associated with feelings of various kinds, they seem to embody a sort of valuation of relevant states of affairs, and they no doubt often motivate us to do various things. And emotions also have an episodic and a dispositional nature, and so persistence and recurrence are also plausibly among their relevant properties. Emotions, desires, and other visceral states share many common features. If emotions are multidimensional, then it is not implausible that desires turn out to be so as well.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for two main claims. One is the pluralistic view of desire strength, or the claim that there are several different dimensions along which desires may be strong or weak. Most notably, desire strength has phenomenological, valuational, and motivational dimensions, and yet none of them holds a privileged position as the essence of desire strength. Assessments of desire strength may differ as we focus on one or another of these dimensions, and it is only on pragmatic grounds that we may settle on some particular sub-group of dimensions as the one that is at issue in some particular context.

10 I know of no relevant experimental studies on the ordinary concept of desire strength that could be cited to support this statement, so this particular speculation on ordinary intuitions might turn out to be wrong.

Second, I have argued that persistence and recurrence are further dimensions of desire strength, and that they are not reducible to any of the dimensions discussed by traditional theories of desire. Persistence and recurrence stand out as crucial properties of desires once we focus on standing desires, as this opens up the door for a consideration of some of their time-based properties. Once we think of desires as lasting psychological dispositions that are manifested at particular times, it becomes increasingly plausible to think of their recurrence rate and their degree of persistence across time and circumstances as further dimensions of desire strength.

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