

"What are Theories of Desire Theories of?"

Abstract:

In this paper I try to undermine complacency with a predominant conception of desire, for the sake of refocusing attention on a philosophical problem. The predominant conception holds that to have a desire is to occupy an evaluative outlook, a perspective from which the agent 'sees' the world in practically salient terms. I argue that it is not clear what this theory is a theory of, because the concept of desire at its center is deeply ambiguous. Understood as a theory of desire in what I call the "placeholder" sense, the evaluative outlook theory is at bottom a theory of action explanation. So construed, its claim is relatively uncontroversial, and falls far short of being a full theory of action explanation. Understood as a theory of desire in what I call the "substantive" sense, it does not even go so far as to acknowledge the central problem such a theory has to answer. That problem is how we can be passive (in a particular sense) with respect to our own motivation.