

# The Connection Between Desire and Action

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we are focusing on the relationship between human desire and human action. In the first part of the paper that we will be focusing on the definition of desire and break down it into different parts. Then we will be focusing on how desire would affect the way human act and on making decisions. In the end, it will discussing by have a better understanding of the connection between desire and action that can help us to solve the social issues, such as racism.

**Keywords:** Desire; Unchangeable desire, Changeable desire, Racism.

## 1. Introduction

This paper will discuss the nature of desire and the relationship between desire and action. The general meaning of desire is that we view it as a movement beyond the human need, and it can seek all possible satisfaction in reality. That is what we call desire. In other words, desire could be a cause for human action. For example, when a person is hungry, then that person would find the food to eat. In other words, "hunger" made the person have a natural desire to want to eat, and then it caused his action to "find the food to eat." Therefore, we need to desire to take action because nothing can cause nothing, which means everything we do needs a cause, and desire is that cause for action. However, that does not mean we will always do what our desire tells us to do. For instance, there is a math test tomorrow, now at 1 am at midnight, you want to go to sleep, but you still do not feel confident about the test tomorrow. Then what are you going to do? You have two desires, one desire is telling you to go to sleep, and the other one is telling you that you want to get a pass the math test for tomorrow. There is no wrong or correct answer between these two desires for your following action. If you choose the first one, you might not pass the math test, and if you choose the second one, you need to continue to study and give up sleep. Therefore, you can choose between these two different desires, which tells us desire could motivate us to act on something, but we still have the authority to choose which desire we should respond to.

## 2. Main Body

### 2.1 Definition of Desire

General definition of desire from The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy: desire is a typical model of human motivation, in other words, desire is that we view it as a movement beyond the human need, and it can seek all possible satisfaction in reality.

### 2.2 How people making decision on their action

For people to make an action, there are three elements we need to meet: desire, value, and belief. By value that, it meant the measurement that we have to measure or determine what is right and wrong. Furthermore, different people from different cultures will have a different values on the same thing. For example, two different people grow up in two different cultures (culture can affect the growth of one's value); we can call them A and B. A grows up in a culture that tells him eating pigs is not the right to do, and B grows up in a culture that tells him eating pigs is the right thing to do. Then A and B would have a different value on the behavior of eating pig. Therefore, when A and B are in the situation where they need to eat pigs to save their lives, both would desire to eat pigs due to the same reason—to survive. However, due to different values, they will take different actions.

Furthermore, belief is the last step before we make the decision for our action. By belief that I meant what "you" think is accurate, and the word "true" here can have different meanings to different

individuals. Overall, we will only do things that match our beliefs. In other words, we will only do things that we think are right for us. Now, A and B are in that life or death situation, and there is a pig in front of them. If they eat it that they will survive. If they do not eat it, they will die. For B, he will have the desire to eat that pig. It matches his value, and he believes eating a pig is the right thing to do, then he will act. However, for A that, he will also have the desire to eat the pig, but it does not match his value, then whether he is going to eat it or not will be determined by his belief.

We cannot control what desire can appeal to our minds, such as the desire to play, the desire to steal, or the desire to kill. The Desire itself does not represent bad or good. In other words, we shall not judge a person's character due to their Desire. The intention is not always the cause of the existence of our Desire, but it is often the cause of our action. This means that if our intention matches our Desire, we will act on our Desire. The "bad" Desire would be acting on if and only if we have a bad intention that matches the "bad" Desire. These desires can lead to a harmful consequence if we decide to execute them, and most of us will not execute these desires because we know they are bad. However, that cannot stop us from having these evil desires sometimes in life. Secondly We will have different desires in different circumstances due to different factors. For example, the desire to kill could appeal to our minds due to a violent movie. The desire to steal something can be caused by not having enough money to buy something that we need it. Desire can motivate us to do something, but it cannot make us do something. This means that the desire to kill can motivate us to kill someone, but it cannot force or make us do it if we do not want to do it. We would not do anything that we do not desire to do, but we will not act on any of the desires when we do not intend to do so. To be more specific, many people think we would easily do things that can satisfy our desire. That is how it works. Desire does not represent our intention, and we have desires, not just one desire, and everything we do is not always the answer to desire. In other words, what makes us do things is not desire but our values, belief, our intention. For example, during a math test, if you feel hungry, then you will have the desire to eat, then the desire will motivate you to eat, but it cannot make you go out and eat during your math test.

In reality, before making a decision or an action, we will have more than one desire. When we choose which desire we want to execute, it has a strong influence due to our background knowledge and satisfaction level. By background (Value) knowledge, it meant that it would help us become more rational when choosing what kind of desire we should follow and what kind of desire we should not. For example, after watching a Spiderman movie, and in movie, we saw how Peter Parker became a Spiderman (one little spider bitted him). Some people might want to be as cool as Spiderman and might have the desire to try to let a spider bite him to see if that works. However, when a person has a good amount of background knowledge about the world, that person would not actually execute that desire of being bit by a poison spider because that person knows it will not turn him like a Spiderman but might turn him into a deadman. However, if a person does not have enough background knowledge of the world, especially the little kids, they might believe that process of becoming a Spiderman is real, and they might execute the desire. Therefore, how much we know about the world, and how much we know about what is wrong or right have a strong influence on our decision making. The satisfaction level meant people would often choose the desire that can provide them with more satisfaction. For example, at 1 am at midnight, the example above has two desires in mind: one is to go to sleep, and the other is to keep studying. In this particular situation, if we can get more satisfaction by sleeping, we will most likely execute the action of sleep.

Desire can motivate us to do bad or good things, but we shall never view desire as the measurement in moral stands, we cannot judge person due to their desire, just like we cannot judge a person's character due to their skin color. We do not have control over the existence of desire in our minds, but we can choose which responses we want to respond to. In other words, we cannot judge a person's character based on their desire, and I think desire itself does not have a truth value. To have the desire to steal something from someone in a particular situation does not make that person a stealer. We shall not view that person as a stealer until he is the stealer. As I have mentioned above, we all had those desires before, sometime in our life. Such as when someone made you feel so angry that you

might have the desire to want to kill that man. It is normal to have a desire like that in an extreme circumstance, but that does not make you as a murderer until you execute it. Therefore, to stop people from doing bad things, we should never try to remove the evil desire because we cannot fully remove the desire from a person. However, what we can do is to find the cause of the "evil" desire.

We cannot judge a person's character only by their action and desire. As I have mentioned above, the desire is natural and would occur to our mind, but it will not make or force us to do things. What is holding us back is our values and our belief. Therefore, when we want to reduce the discrimination rate that the majority has against the minority, we should help them form the correct values and beliefs. For example, if we are teaching a kid that stealing is a wrong behavior to practice, we should help him understand that he should not steal things from other people because that is the wrong behavior. Therefore, if a person has true values and true beliefs, it would be impossible for them to do things that would harm others.

### **2.3 Changeable desire and Unchangeable desire**

There are two types of desire, one is unchangeable desire, and the other one is changeable desire. By unchangeable desire, I meant the desire to know the world's truth, the desire to love, and the desire to get satisfaction. In other words, this unchangeable desire is born with us, and it will not change due to outside factors. For example, the reason why we want to learn things about the world that regardless of what situation we are in, we will always have the desire to learn. It can help us survive on the earth and gain satisfaction from our thirst for knowledge. By changeable desire, I meant the desire could be changed. Such as the desire of how to be happy, the desire of how to love others or be loved by others, and many. We will always have the desire to be happy as long as we are alive, but it can be done in various ways, and each person has their unique way of being happy. For example, A loves to play basketball, so to make A happy, A can just play basketball whenever he desires to be happy, but there are two things we must acknowledge. Playing basketball could make A happy, which means this behavior or sports could bring happiness to everyone. Also, it does not mean playing basketball is the only behavior that can make A happy. It is changeable when he is in a different context, so A likes to play basketball. That does not mean he does mean A does not like watching basketball, and it does mean basketball is the only thing that can make A happy. Outside factors could determine changeable desire; for example, if a white boy is born into a family with a racist mindset, there is a high possibility that the boy will have a racist mindset just like his family. For example, our desire will motivate us to do things that we can gain satisfaction, which means the desire will not motivate us to do things that can decrease our satisfaction, in general, we will be less likely to do things that can make us unhappy.

### **2.4 Apply this theory on solving social issue**

First, we must acknowledge that we are all born equal, and we shall not judge a person's character by color. This means when we think about racism or the willingness to discriminate against others, that is not the type of unchangeable desire we are born with. For example, when we see little kids play on the playground today. We always see kids play together regardless of whether they have the same color or not. By using this example, I will not state a view that racism is a changeable desire that was developed after birth due to the social and family environment. As I have mentioned above, desire is not something we can control, but at the same time, desire cannot force us to make any decision. We will only do things that we think are true. Therefore, people who have a racist mindset will falsely believe that all black or other minorities suppose to be cremated are true and that they are dangerous. This kind of belief would make them feel uncomfortable around black people, so they want to get away from black people or attack black people. However, we cannot say the leading cause was the desire because this changeable desire is caused by outside factors, such as family, school, friends, and the social culture. It is because, after having this desire, and it matches with their justified belief, then it turned into action.

### 3. Conclusion

It is impossible to eliminate all the outside factors that might cause people to have a racist mindset. Therefore, we should focus on the things that can change. There is a book called *Sum of the US* written by Heather McGhee, and in this book, she has mainly focused on how to solve the conflict between black people and white people by using a rational way of thinking. In her book, she provides a case, in 1942, in Montgomery, West Virginia, a pool was built for American citizens. However, black residents were not involved in using the pool. However, as black people gathered to fight for their civil rights, the pool eventually changed its policy to welcome all people (McGhee 57). Unfortunately, this new policy offended white people because they did not want to share their benefits with black people; later, white mobs attacked black people in the pool. Moreover, this violent behavior forced the pool to be closed after six years (60). In the book, McGhee thinks we can solve this discrimination issue by letting the white people realize how violent behavior could make them lose their benefits. For example, if the white mob did not attack the black people swimming in the pool, the pool would not have been closed by the government. Therefore, that attack did not only make the black lose the privilege of using the public pool but also themselves. However, by doing this, I would consider that is the other way to add outside factors into the environment that try to change people's desires. The problem is that people often have different definitions or understanding of their benefits. McGhee's solution cannot help them to change their belief. As I have mentioned, desire cannot force people to do things, so we should focus on people's beliefs and how they justify them. If people have the true justified belief that they know judging people due to their color is false, then no matter what desire might occur in their head that they will never execute the racist behavior. According to a famous Philosopher, Yangming Wang, he believes "every person knows from birth the difference between good and evil," which means we can seek what is not good or evil. He also claims people would only do certain things when they know it. For example, if we know sleeping 8 hours each day is good for us, then we would sleep 8 hours each day. However, if we do not sleep 8 hours a day, that would only prove that we do not know sleep 8 hours each day is good for us from our whole hearts. By applying his theory, that we can notice all people have the ability to know what is good or bad, and we have the ability to practice what is good. Therefore, when it come to the point of solving racism issue that we should always think about the root (cause) of racism. The desire of wanting to attack black people or not like black was due to the outside factors, especially the culture. Furthermore, we will have changeable and unchangeable desires as intelligent individuals. We can choose which desire we want to execute if we educate people and help them have enough background knowledge. Then they will have the ability to make the right decision on which desire they should choose. Regardless a desire is unchangeable or changeable, and we are the one who is making the decision. We cannot control when and how desire appeals to our mind, but we can change the cause for changeable desire, such as issues like racism. In order to understand the difference between unchangeable and changeable desire and have a better understanding of what desire is, that desire is an uncontrollable motivation that will help us solve those injustice issues in society. According to the desire thesis, Socrates claims that virtue and wisdom can make people do things in action because he thinks everyone desires the good. Therefore, the key to sloving these social issues is not always about one's desire. If and only if we can teach people to understand what is good and bad, they will do what is good. In other words, if people understand that racism is bad, they will not practice racism anymore. That should be the way for us to do and the goal we aim to achieve by understanding the connection between desire, value, belief, and action.

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