The Trainwreck Named Desire

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
September 26, 2010

Dr. Irvine writes, "we don't for example, choose to fall in love.[1]" Or with whom. Scarlett O'Hara is fixated on Ashley Wilkes, though he is marrying Melanie. Emma Bovary is smitten by Leon Depuis though she is married to Charles. Lady Chatterly falls for the gamekeeper Oliver Mellos. Romeo gets swept of his feet by Juliet even though she is a member of the family which is mortal enemies of his own. Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy find themselves drawn inevitably towards each other despite their mutual contempt. What does Princess Leia see in Han Solo? What did Paris see in Helen that made him start the Trojan War over her? Why did the aristocratic wasp Stella DuBois fall for the working-class Pole Stanley Kowalski?

Desire, in literature as in life, is not just a streetcar, it is sometimes a trainwreck. We read stories and watch movies about people risking everything for love, loving the wrong people. Even if we have never acted on desires like this, it rings true that some people would.

I want this morning to reflect a bit on desire, where it comes from and how it impacts our freedom and our wills. Though romantic and sexual desire is the centerpiece, I am going to be talking about all kinds of desire, from what socks we wear to what we want our of life. I want to look at it from religious and from evolutionary perspectives.

Our Declaration of Independence says that certain rights are given by God and inalienable, and enumerates life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For most Americans, the last two items in this list are intertwined: we have liberty so that we can pursue happiness. Freedom, for most of us, is freedom to pursue our desires, to strive to get what we want. By the time I'm finished speaking this morning, I hope to outline a different definition of freedom: freedom from desire itself.

I am aided in my reflections by this fine book by William Irvine, whom I heard speak on Star Island this summer. Dr. Irvine is a philosophy professor who specializes in the Stoics, but this book is called, simply, *On Desire*.

Let us start by making some distinctions. Let's say you are a philosophy professor and a student comes to you and says he wants to take your class. You ask why. He says so he can graduate. You ask why he wants to graduate. He says so he can go to law school. You ask why he wants to go to law school. He says so he can make lots of money. You ask why he wants to make lots of money. He says so he can buy an Arrest-Me Red Dodge Viper RT/10 with a 415 horsepower engine that will go from 0 to 60 in 5.0 seconds[2].

This is what Irvine calls a chain of desires. The desire to enroll in the class, to graduate, to go to law school, were all directed toward getting this car. The ultimate goal is what Irvine calls the terminal desire. The goals along the way are what he calls instrumental desires.

Chains of desire can be very long, but they always end in a terminal desire. You may question whether we have actually reached the end of the chain in the example I just gave. Why does this student want this car? If the answer is, because it would give him pleasure to drive it, we have reached the end – the pleasure in driving it is what the whole chain was about. If, on the other hand, the student says that he wants it because it would impress other people and help him to pick up women, then the car is an instrumental desire and the ultimate desire is to choose a good mate or to attain social status.

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[1]Description of *On Desire*, by William B. Irvine (New York: Oxford University Press 2006) at www.williambirvine.com.

[2]*On Desire*, p. 60.

The terminal desire can be hedonic or non-hedonic, that is it can give pleasure or not. If I decide to click my tongue just because, that is an example of a non-hedonic desire. Most terminal desires are hedonic – we pursue the chain of desires because it will lead to some kind of pleasure in the end.

Dr. Irvine notes that we have this notion of ourselves as rational creatures, with reason and intellect firmly in control rationally choosing the course fo our lives. But when we actually look at the role of intellect vs. emotion, we find that almost all of our hedonic terminal desires are generated by emotion. The role of the intellect is to construct the chain that will help us achieve what the emotion has already settled on. Intellect is the servant of the emotions, emotion is always in the driver's seat.

Animals can desire, and animals can take action to satisfy those desires. What animals cannot do is construct elaborate chains of intermediate desires and then rationalize them.

Here's an example that Dr. Irvine used at his talk on Star Island. Let's say we get a desire for granite countertops in our kitchen. One person gets granite countertops, throws a dinner party, people come into her kitchen and ooh and ahh and suddenly the granite countertop company has dozens of orders. Why? What happened? Suddenly we are seized with a desire for granite countertops while the day before they were the furthest thing from our minds.

Dr. Irvine suggests that we look to our evolutionary history for the answer. We have hardwired desires for social status. Over the course of evolutionary history, those individuals who cared about social status were more successful at getting mates and in passing on their genes. So we have an instinct for social status. When we see the reaction of the other twelve dinner guests to our hostess's new granite countertops, we realize that we, too, can have all of this social approval with the mere expenditure of a few thousand dollars and disruption of our lives for three months.

Desires give rise to the question of who's in control. Dr. Irvine says,

> "We are daily presented with evidence of a divided will. ... We find ourselves wanting to do things – such as get drunk, have sex, express anger – that at a higher, more rational level we don't want to do. On New Year's Eve, we might resolve to give up alcohol, a resolution that is broken before the first week of January is over. That our resolutions are broken so quickly suggests that we are not in control – that elemental forces within us give rise to desires that, at a conscious level, we desire not to have but are nevertheless powerless to resist. Indeed, the mere fact that we make resolutions shows that we are not in control of our desires. In making them we are, in effect, announcing to the various sources of desire within our brains that we, not they, are in charge. If we were truly in charge, though, we wouldn't need to announce that fact.[3]"

Now let's shift gears and look at a couple of religious perspectives. Many if not most religions recognize that many of our desires are something over which we have little control and often are contrary to God's plan or our own good. In Christianity, St. Paul speaks of the war between the spirit and the flesh; in Romans 7, he discusses the relation of God's law to his fleshly desires:

> 14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery
> under sin. 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want,
> but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the
> law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within
> me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can
> will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the
> evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I
> that do it, but sin that dwells within me."

[3]On Desire p. 98.

Here is an attempt to explain why we find ourselves doing what we have said we would not do. St. Paul's explanation, which has become embedded in orthodox Christian doctrine, is that it is sin. It is not me acting, it is my sin. From a modern psychological viewpoint, though, the explanation is that most of our desires have their origin in the unconscious, beyond the perception or control of our consciousness.

In most religions, there is some tradition of asceticism. The practice of asceticism is based on consciously renouncing most ordinary desires. There is an ancient tradition of asceticism in India, for if you take the doctrine of karma seriously, one way to minimize bad karma is to do as little in this life as possible. The story of how Prince Siddhartha, the man who became the Buddha, embarked on his spiritual quest is often told. Siddhartha was raised in a palace and his father, the king, made sure that he was completely insulated from any exposure to suffering or death. But one day he was outside the palace and saw thee men, one was very old, one was very sick, and one was dead. At that instant, Siddhartha realized how protected he had been and, leaving his wife and young child, went out into the world to find out about human life, which is to say, human suffering. For many years he lived as an ascetic, wearing only a minimum of clothes and eating only a bare minimum of food. But after a few years he realized that his renunciation was bringing him no closer to the answer. So he renounced asceticism and pursued what he called the middle way.

And after he became enlightened he realized that at the root of suffering was desire. Clinging and craving are what cause unhappiness – this is the second Noble Truth. A Buddhist Monk explains:

> "So what is this happiness? For most of us, the perfect happiness would mean getting everything we wanted, being in control of everything, playing Caesar, making the whole world dance a jig according to our every whim. ... it does not work that way. Take a look at the people in history who have actually held this type of power. They were not happy people. Most assuredly they were not at peace with themselves. Why? Because they were driven to control the world totally and absolutely and they could not. They wanted to control all men, and yet there remained men who refused to be controlled. They could not control the stars, They still got sick. They still had to die.[4]"

In other words, to paraphrase Mick Jagger, "you can't get everything you want." It is impossible. The monk continues,

> "Luckily there is another option. You can learn to control your mind, to step outside of this endless cycle of desire and aversion. You can learn not to want what you want, to recognize desires but not be controlled by them."

There are echoes of the Buddhist approach in Jesus. The real ascetic in the Jesus story is John the Baptist, who wears animal skins, lives in the outdoors and eats only nuts and berries. His lifestyle might have been consonant with the Essenes, the Jewish sect which gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus at one point compares himself to John and says [Matthew 11:18] that while John is not eating or drinking, the Son of Man comes eating and drinking and gets called a glutton and a drunkard. That is, Jesus saw himself as practicing a middle way.

On the other hand, when he instructed his disciples in how to approach people in the towns around Lake Capernaum, he sounded very ascetic: don't take any purse or food or even a cloak or sandals. Knock on the door and if they let you in and offer your something to eat, you can eat [Matthew 10:5-14].

And in one famous passage, Jesus seems to trash all the work we do to bring about the satisfaction of our desires. This is from the Sermon on the Mount:

[Matthew 6] 25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the

[4]Mindfulness in Plain English, by Venerable Gunaratana

body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Now this message is not quite the Buddha's message. The Buddha says step outside your desires, learn not to want what you want, recognize your desires without being controlled by them. This lilies of the field passage says don't worry about satisfying your desires because God will satisfy them if you are faithful. But both would counsel us to get off the merry-go-round of spending all our energy trying to satisfy our desires.

But let us now return to an evolutionary perspective. As evolution has shaped our bodies, it has shaped our psyches. And the merry-go-round of chasing our desires has made us who we are.

What evolution has given us is a set of incentives, which Professor Irvine calls the Biological Incentive System, or BIS (rhymes with "his").

> "We are forced ... to live under a system of incentives. That system ... is wired into us. Because of it some things, such as having sex, feel good to us and other things, such as getting burned, feel bad. We retain the ability to resist our BIS: we can, for example, act contrary to our incentives and deliberately burn ourselves or refrain from having sex. Such resistance comes at a price[5]."

OK we have this BIS, this set of incentives, which we inherit from our ancestors. Does this lead to happiness? Not at all says Professor Irvine.

> "Our BIS was imposed on us without our consent. This might be tolerable if the force responsible for the imposition were benevolent and had our interests in mind when devising the BIS's schedule of incentives. It would be tolerable, in particular, if this force did all it could to ensure that we had happy, meaningful lives. But this is not the case. The force in question – namely, the process of natural selection – cares little about whether we are happy and cares even less about whether we feel that our lives are meaningful. What it cares about is that we survive and reproduce. As long as our feelings of unhappiness and futility do not lessen our chances of surviving and reproducing – as long as, despite these feelings, we take the steps necessary to stay alive and have sex – the process of natural selection is indifferent to them."

Wait, it gets worse. In the next paragraph, Prof. Irvine goes on to say that natural selection is not only indifferent to our happiness, but the incentive is actually to make us unhappy.

> "Indeed, thanks to our evolutionary past, we are wired to feel dissatisfied with our circumstances, whatever they may be. An early human who was happy with what he had – who spent his days on the savannas of Africa thinking about how good life is – was far less likely to survive and reproduce than his neighbor who spent every waking moment trying to improve his situation. We, the evolutionary descendants of these humans, have inherited this predisposition towards dissatisfaction. We have a BIS that, regardless of what we have, will

[5]On Desire, p .175

make us itch for more.[6]"

So we are really programmed to be driven by desires which are never satisfied. Most of us in this room are beyond our child-bearing years. In evolutionary terms, whatever happens in the years after children are born and raised has little impact downstream. It is in these years, then that we can examined the instincts which have brought us here.

And as inconvenient as this packet of desires are, it might be better than the alternative. We don't have to wonder what it would be like to be completely free of desire, for that is the condition of people who are profoundly depressed. It s not a condition we would wish on ourselves or anyone else.

Desire can be a train wreck, for sure. The middle way between being a slave to desire and being profoundly depressed is to try to tease out the roots of our desire. From this perspective, we can see that happiness does not result from its pursuit and that true freedom does not consist in driving, driving, driving to satisfy our every desire, but in not being driven by them. The merry-go-round may have brought us here, but we really can step off any time we want. It is when we can step outside our desires that we shall be truly free.
Amen.

Reading

Blurb for *On Desire* at http://williambirvine.com/

We like to think we are in control of our desires, and we are in control of some of them, like what color socks we wear or what cereal we eat for breakfast. But our most important, life-affecting desires tend to be beyond our control. We don't, for example, choose to fall in love. In On Desire, I take a look at what science, philosophy, and religion have discovered about human desire--about what we want and why we want it.

Many of our desires, it turns out, are a consequence of our evolutionary past. We want what we want not because getting it will give us a happy, meaningful life, but because our ancestors who wanted the thing in question were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who didn't. Indeed, if we want to have a happy, meaningful life, it is important for us, rather than attempting to satisfy whatever desires pop into our heads, to master desire to the extent possible. After discussing the science of desire, On Desire describes much of the advice that has been given, across cultures and across the millennia, on how this can be done.

[6]Pp 175-6.