

# Pessimism for rationalists

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## Abstract

There is a long tradition, in philosophy, of blaming passions for our unhappiness. If only we were more rational, it is claimed, we would lead happier lives. I argue that such an optimism is misguided and that paradoxically, people with desires, like us, cannot both be happy and rational.

There is a long tradition, in philosophy, of blaming passions for our unhappiness. If only we were more rational, it is claimed, we would lead happier lives. In a way this might seem trivial. On any plausible view, happiness is a constituent of welfare and it is, at least normally, rational to secure one's welfare. Rational people should then normally track their contentment better and be less prone to diversionary temptations, they should accordingly manage to be happier. I believe that such an optimism is misguided. I will argue that even when it is perfectly rational to secure our own happiness, creatures with desires, like us, cannot both be happy and rational. We can call this claim "pessimism for rationalists", or, for short, "rational pessimism".

The argument for rational pessimism can be considered as a variation on a classical pessimistic argument. This argument can be traced back to Schopenhauer and claims that desiring souls like us cannot be happy (section 1). Although it is plausible, this argument is not conclusive (section 2). It is not conclusive, actually, unless it is assumed that we are rational. We can thus construe the argument for rational pessimism as a way to "rescue" this classical pessimistic argument (section 3).

The claim of rational pessimism, has, as I said, an air of paradox. This impression, I argue, should not be taken too seriously. It relies both on some conceptual and some empirical assumptions which are unwarranted (section 4). In particular, I argue that a major recent development in psychology known as "dual process psychology" allows us to make sense of the

contention that happiness is importantly disconnected from rationality and that we are bound to overlook that fact.

## 1 Schopenhauerian pessimism

We desire something, in the wide sense of the term, when we want it and are disposed to make it happen (I desire in this sense to do the washing up because I have to do it, even though I wholeheartedly wish someone else could do it instead of me). Unfulfilled desires claimed Schopenhauer, cause suffering. “The basis of all willing is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it is therefore destined to pain (Schopenhauer, 1966, I-312).” True, some unfulfilled desires do not result in sensory pain, the desire for glory, say, unlike the desire for food of those who starve, is not usually associated with any particular sensation. Yet those desires make their subject dissatisfied and this dissatisfaction cuts into happiness. In the same way, it might be claimed that some unfulfilled, desire which are trivial or very weak might not have a significant impact on our happiness. In any case, unfulfilled desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness, and if they are ‘important’ they will significantly cut into our happiness.

One might hope that those sufferings and this dissatisfaction will be compensated by the fulfillment of some desires. Such a fulfillment, however, never meets the joys it had promised: as soon as a desire is fulfilled, it vanishes and lets us bored with the object of our formers longings. During four years, you will turn all your energy to complete a dissertation thesis, realizing only too late that accomplishing this goal does not, or not substantially, make you happier. We have all experienced some of those disappointing responses to success. “Attainment, writes Schopenhauer, quickly begets satiety. The goal was only apparent; possession takes away its charms (Schopenhauer, 1966, I-314)”. As a result, he concludes “life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents (Schopenhauer, 1966, I-312)”.

Schopenhauer’s argument can be rendered as follows.

- (1s) Unfulfilled desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness: our unfulfilled desires eat into our happiness and if they are important, our lives will not be happy.
- (2s) Desires cannot survive their fulfillment: we cannot desire a state of affair that already obtains.

(3s) Therefore, desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness: our desires eat into our happiness, and if they are important our lives will not be happy<sup>1</sup>.

The pessimism defended here is ‘psychological’ in that it bears on happiness rather than on well-being. In my terminology while “well-being” is a value term, which characterize how good our lives are for us, “happiness” is a psychological term which refers to a state of mind (this distinction is further elaborated by Haybron (2008, ch. 2)). It is a state of mind, for sure, that is highly valued and that is probably a constituent of well-being. It is however notionally distinct from the latter. The pessimism defended here is also conditional on the claim that we have what we have called “important desires”.

It is plausible that Schopenhauer argued for a form of unconditional pessimism as well. He claimed that the fulfillment of all our desires would normally engender a form of general boredom. This general boredom can be seen as a *sui-generis* state which is inconsistent with happiness. Alternatively it can be construed as involving an important second-order desire: the desire for having new (first order) desires (cf. Young (2005, 210-3) and Fernández (2006)). This important second-order desire would, by (1s-3s), be inconsistent with happiness.

Even though it is appealing, Schopenhauer’s argument is highly problematic. It is first of all imprecise. We would need to specify exactly what the “importance” of our desires consists in. Second, and more importantly, it is ultimately unconvincing. Some of us believe that they are happy sometimes, and this argument will not persuade them that they are misguided. Something must be wrong with (1s-3s).

## 2 The Case Against Schopenhaurian Pessimism

### 2.1 Liking without desiring

One might object, first, that even if unfulfilled desires cause dissatisfaction, and even if this dissatisfaction cannot be compensated by the fulfillment of some desires, it might be compensated by other sources of happiness.

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<sup>1</sup>This argument differs slightly from what Janaway (1999, 327) considers as the main Schopenhaurian argument for pessimism — an argument he calls the argument from “the argument from the ubiquity of suffering within the structure of willing”. Although I believe that the argument (1s-3s) that I have presented captures the philosophical core of Schopenhauer’s main argument, I do not want to make a scholarly claim in calling it Schopenhaurian.

There are some joys and pleasures after all, that do not seem to depend on preliminary desires. As noticed by Plato (Philebus 51A-52C), we can enjoy a music, a smell or a sight by surprise, without wanting them before or even while we perceive them. We enjoy them because, whether we *want* them or not, we *like* them (cf. section 4.3 for more on that distinction).

It is not however obvious that those desire-free joys and pleasures are both frequent and intense. The Schopenhaurian pessimist could fairly answer that given the pervasiveness of our important desires, and given the amount of suffering they jointly yield, those desire-free gratifications will not normally make up for our dissatisfaction.

## 2.2 Being happy with one's current desires

There is in any case a bigger worry for the Schopenhaurian pessimist. Let us say that one is *happy with* a given desire when this desire does not cut into his happiness. Against premises (1s) and (2s), it seems possible to be happy with one's current desires and even with one's current *important* desires.

### 2.2.1 Desiring what has happened or what is actually happening

If we are happy with important desires, it is either because some of those desires survive their fulfillment (against (2s)) or because we can be happy with important unfulfilled desires (against (1s)). I believe, and I shall argue later, that only this second disjunct is actually true: desiring what has already happened or is actually happening is not what makes us happy. It is not totally implausible, however, that we could, in some situations, be happy because our desires survive their fulfillment. This might be a way, in particular to interpret the pleasure we derive from certain *activities*. My desire to ride a bike, to eat a burger or to drink a beer, it might be argued, are still present when I drink that beer, eat that burger or ride my bike, and this, it might be added, is precisely what makes those activities pleasant.

### 2.2.2 Being happy with one's unfulfilled desires

As we shall see, there are others, and arguably, better conceptions of pleasant activities and I am not sure we have any telling reason to accept that, against (2s), some of our desires really survive their fulfillment. There is however a convincing reason to reject (1s). It seems perfectly possible indeed to have important unfulfilled desires and to be perfectly happy, and even actually satisfied, with that.

**Erotic attitudes.** This even seems to be quite a frequent phenomenon. There are, first of all, some desires which contribute to please us *before* they are fulfilled. Those are desires we are prone to play with, readily delaying their fulfillment. We actually seem to take pleasure in the mere idea of their possible fulfillment. Erotic desires are typically like that. Future lovers can willingly prolong their flirting period, enjoying the obstacles that separate their desire to love and be loved from its foresighted satisfaction. Strippers please their spectators by hiding, as long as they should, what the audience desires to see...

Such a phenomenon, however, is not the privilege of erotic desires in the strict sense. I desire to spend my next holidays in Thailand and I actually take pleasure contemplating the idea that I might really spend my vacations there. What characterizes such a pleasant attitude towards unfulfilled desires is that it bears on desires that we can hope to fulfill. When I say that we *can* hope to fulfill those desires I do not mean that we must believe the satisfaction of those desires is probable or easy. I can enjoy certain fantasies of fantastic desires whose satisfaction I deem totally unlikely. The point however is that the satisfaction of those fantasies does not matter much. I *can accordingly afford* to contemplate the possibility of their satisfaction, and even dimly hope that it might take place, without taking the risk of a severe and harmful desillusion<sup>2</sup>.

Kierkegaard was very sensitive to this rewarding nature of mere contemplation of possibilities and he even suggested that it was the only possible source of gratification for people in the “esthetic stage”. Under his pen, the pseudonymous A, who has been “forsaken by the jinn of joy” complains:

My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating! (Kierkegaard, 1987, 41)

We will say that I have an *erotic attitude* towards a given desire whenever it is a desire I can hope that I will fulfill and I am happy with it even though it is unfulfilled. It should be reminded, however, that such an attitude is not restricted to *erotic* desires in the strict sense.

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<sup>2</sup>I thank ... for pressing me on that point.

**Mourning attitudes.** We cannot only be happy with those unfulfilled desires we can hope to will fulfill. We can also be happy with unfulfilled desires we cannot at all desire to fulfill. It is a common observation that important and irremediable losses can have little impact on one's happiness. People losing their dearest relatives can rapidly adapt to their new situation. Even in the early phases of mourning, and despite their obvious sadness, some subjects report feeling, "in the depths of their soul," happy. Perhaps less anecdotally, victims of disabling injuries or chronic illnesses tend to quickly return close to their former happiness "set-point". This general phenomenon of "hedonic treadmill" has been extensively studied in the last twenty years and has been confirmed by different measures. It was shown, first that (i) after a sudden and short-lived decrease judgments of global life satisfaction of the victims of irremediable losses reliably return very close to what they used to be. It was shown, also that (ii) their moods and affects follow the same temporal pattern (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006, 14-8). Those two observations are surprising. Some have indeed questioned the claim that they indicate a form of stability or of adaptation of the subject's level of happiness.

It might be wondered first whether the observed stability of both measures is not an artifact of scale recalibration (a change in the standards used to assess one's happiness). It has been shown, however, that after they have adapted, the victims of irremediable losses, injuries or diseases, do not rate various other aversive differently from other people (Lacey et al., 2008). Some general doubts have also been raised concerning the adequacy of either (i) or (ii) when it comes to measuring happiness. There might be individual subjects whose judgments of life satisfaction or whose positive reported affects do not correlate with happiness. Such divergences between happiness and its measures are less likely, however, when both measures (i) and (ii) are matching. They should also be less, if at all, significant when we are dealing with large samples<sup>3</sup> (in which case errors made in different directions will cancel each other out). Accordingly general skepticism about the current measures of happiness should not cast doubts on the reality of hedonic adaptation, nor on the fact that the term "hedonic" here can be taken to refer to the level of happiness.

It is tempting to explain such a happiness, or, as it is called "hedonic", adaptation as a form of *conative adaptation*. The subjects would main-

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<sup>3</sup>This point is made forcefully by Haybron (2008, ch. 10) who concludes that despite their shortcomings (he is one of their most severe critique) those measures based on self-reports "still matter" for the study of happiness.

tain their levels of happiness by giving up those desires whose fulfillment is thwarted by their losses. People disabled by a car accident would for example return to their original happiness level by renouncing the desire to walk or dance again... There is decisive evidence that this explanation is wrong. People maintain very strong desires to regain their healthy state *even when they have hedonically adapted* to their chronic illness or their disability. For example, even though dialysis patients are almost as prone to positive moods as controls and report being as satisfied with their life as the latter,

[They] state that they would give up almost half their remaining years to once again live with normal kidney function (Torrance, 1976). Similarly, Smith et al. (2006) measured the well-being of people with colostomies against those without and failed to find any significant difference in self-reported mood. Yet people with colostomies report, on average, that they would give up almost 15 percent of their remaining lifespan to regain normal bowel function (Ubel and Loewenstein, 2008, 203).

Those are very strong preferences. They reflect desires we would expect to eat deep into one's happiness. We can call *mourning* this attitude which allows us to remain happy with some unfulfilled desires we cannot hope to fulfill.

Mourning and erotic attitudes bear on different kinds of desires. Unlike erotic attitudes, mourning attitudes bear on desires one can readily hope to fulfill. A decisive condition for hedonic adaptation is indeed the quasi-certainty that the condition is permanent and the absence of hope for relief. This connection between certainty and hedonic adaptation has long been clinically observed. Decisive empirical evidence comes from a recent study by Smith et al. (2009), which shows that patients who receive colostomies only adapt if the colostomy is *not* potentially reversible.

### 3 Pessimism for rationalists

The existence of mourning and erotic attitudes towards unfulfilled desires shows that unfulfilled desires do not always tend to be inconsistent with happiness and that one can be happy despite some important unfulfilled desires. It shows that the first premise of the Schopenhauerian argument for pessimism is wrong and that this argument fails. It is an interesting fact about our psychology, an interesting fact to which we shall come back, that this argument is appealing despite its many shortcomings. For now,

I would like to show that it can actually be rescued provided that it is slightly modified. The modification involves construing both premises and the conclusion as conditional on our rationality. The amended argument would not conclude that whoever has desires, or rather important desires, should be unhappy, but rather that he or she should be unhappy provided that he or she is rational.

Let me introduce some terminology. We will say that a subject, in a given context, has most reason to do something if he has stronger reasons to do that thing than do anything else. In that case, this action is what he really should do, and his reasons for doing that are decisive. We might want to say that a given subject's action is rational when it is the action he has most reasons to do, and that it is irrational if it is an action he has most reason not to do. Call this the *objective* sense of 'reasons' and of 'rational'. It happens however that we sometimes want to say that a subject has decisive reasons to accomplish a given action, and that this action is rational, even though it is an action he really shouldn't accomplish. Suppose that I am facing a wire dilemma. In order to disarm an atomic bomb I have to cut the blue and the red wires in the right order. I mistakenly believe that I must cut the blue wire first. This is what I do, the bomb blows. Objectively, I had most reason not to cut the blue wire first so what I did was not rational in the objective sense. There is a sense, however, in which this action was rational: if my beliefs about the wires and the bomb had been true, I would have had most reason to accomplish this action. When my action is rational in this conditional sense, we will say that it is *subjectively* rational and that I had decisive subjective reasons to accomplish it. We will say, moreover and in either senses, that an action is irrational if I have decisive reasons not to accomplish it. The distinction between objective and subjective reasons, it should be noted, is a distinction between two kinds of normative, as opposed to explanatory or motivational, reasons. Because it is more fundamental, in what follows, I will focus on the objective sense of 'rational'. It should also be noted that the sense of rational and irrational under consideration are quite demanding. I might for example equally good reasons to eat a pie and to eat a fruit for dessert, choosing the fruit in that case, would be neither rational nor irrational. One might say that the sense of rational and irrational under consideration correspond to full rationality and full irrationality.

Desires can, like actions, be called rational or irrational: a desire of a subject for a given state of affairs is rational if it is rational for the subject to cause this state of affairs. We can assume, for simplicity, that by desires we mean desires that are not overridden by stronger desires, something often called preferences as well. If this is so, a rational subject is a subject who

has no irrational desires and who accordingly never acts irrationally.

Consider the second premise first: “we cannot desire a state of affair that already obtains.” It might be argued, as we saw, that we can. It remains true, however, that it would be blankly irrational (in the objective sense) to do so. If I desire to win the Nobel Prize, it would be irrational for me to keep this desire after I was actually awarded the prize. Keeping the desire for X implies being disposed to make X happen if one can, but it would be plainly stupid to be so disposed if X has already happened. Quite generally and whatever reasons we had for desiring a given event, the fact that it has already happened gives us a decisive reason *not* to desire it anymore. It might be said that in some cases, it is rational to desire something that has already happened. If I forgot that I was awarded the Nobel Prize, it might be claimed that it would not be irrational for me to still desire the prize. The sense of irrationality involved here is, however, not the objective but the subjective sense. The fact that I was awarded the Nobel Prize always gives me a decisive reason not to desire it but it will not give me a ‘subjective reason’ not to want it unless I am aware of that fact. We have here defended the following version of premise (2s):

- (2r) Desires cannot rationally survive their fulfillment: we cannot rationally desire a state of affair that already obtains.

A similarly modified version of the first premise can also be defended. We can be happy, we saw, with important unfulfilled desires because those desires do not always eat into our happiness. This, however seems to involve a form of irrationality. Whoever is happy with an important unfulfilled desire, I will argue, must be irrational. This is due to an important fact about human motivation, which connects it to happiness: we are more prone to fulfill a desire if we are unhappy with its being unfulfilled. In other words,

**Connection principle.** We do not do our best to fulfill those unfulfilled desires we are not unhappy with.

It is not always irrational not to do one’s best to fulfill a given desire. If one of my desire is irrational, it will not be irrational not to do my best to fulfill this desire. If, for example, I desire to spend a year in agony, it might be argued that my dearest desire is irrational (Parfit, 2011, ch. 11) and that it would not be irrational not to do my best to fulfill it. It might also not be irrational not to do one’s best to fulfill a desire that merely fails to be rational. If I want to give my blue painting to my daughter or to my wife, but I am indifferent between the two options, it won’t be irrational not to

do one's best to fulfill one of those desires rather than the other (it won't be rational either).

Suppose however that I have a desire that is not indifferent to me, something we might call a *strict* preference. If I am moreover rational, this desire will not be irrational. In such a case at least, it would be irrational not to do my best to fulfill my preference. We can accordingly conclude from the *Connection Principle* that if someone rational has a strict unfulfilled preference, he should not be happy, or at least not fully happy. We can actually simplify this conclusion if we notice that someone rational who has unfulfilled desires should have some strict preference. Someone rational who has unfulfilled desires should indeed strictly prefer to satisfy some of his unfulfilled desires rather than none (preferring to satisfy none of his unfulfilled desires would be self-defeating, and thus irrational: if I satisfied none of my unfulfilled desires I would *ipso facto* satisfy this (formerly) unfulfilled desire to satisfy none of my desires). So someone rational who has unfulfilled desires should not be happy.

We can also classify desires according to how much they matter. A strict preference matters to his subject a minimum in the sense that he is not indifferent to it. Let us say that a desire matters more than another one to a subject if, had he to choose between the satisfaction of those two desires and were he rational, he would choose to fulfill the first one. The more a desire matters to a subject, the stronger reasons he has to satisfy it, and, if he is rational, the more its being unfulfilled should cut into his happiness. At a certain level of importance, say if the desire 'matters a lot' to the subject, that desire should make the him, not only 'not happy' or 'not fully happy', but even, frankly unhappy.

We can now conclude:

- (1r) For someone rational, unfulfilled desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness: if someone rational has unfulfilled desires he will not be happy, if he has some unfulfilled desires which matter a lot to him, he will be frankly unhappy.

One might want to question our defense of this premise on empirical grounds. Our *Connection Principle* claims that happiness has a motivational role and that people are more prone to fulfill a desire when they are unhappy with its being unfulfilled. This link between motivation and happiness is supposed to be an empirical fact about our psychology, but is it?

**Mourning and irrationality.** We saw that people who adapt hedonically to an aversive condition usually maintain a very strong preference not be in

that condition. Doesn't this show that motivation is actually orthogonal to happiness? That one we can be just as motivated by unfulfilled desires he or she is happy with and by those he or she is unhappy with? The answer is "no". The objection confuses the *strength* of a desire, as measured by the number of years the subject *claims* to be ready to give up in order to fulfill that desire (this "time trade-off" is indeed a standard measure of the strength of desires (Torrance, 1976)), with its *motivational force*, which is the propensity of the subject to try and fulfill this desire if he or she can. There are many cases in which the strength of our desires departs from their motivational force. The heavy smoker who gets literally sick of smocking will sometimes express an extremely strong preference for quitting smoking. Yet he might not be disposed to act in ways that differ substantially from those of people who express a strong preference for smoking. We should not accordingly infer from the fact that a subject expresses a strong preference for a condition, that he is strongly motivated to be in that condition. We should not, in particular, suppose that subjects of hedonic adaptation are strongly motivated to escape their aversive condition just because they express a strong preference to do so<sup>4</sup>.

**Erotic attitudes and irrationality.** What about those who adopt an erotic attitudes towards some of their unfulfilled desires? Is there any empirical evidence that they can still be rational? To the contrary, as we saw, adopting an erotic attitude towards a desire involves "playing" with it, readily delaying its fulfillment. Such a delay might often be harmless, but it is risky and it might very well end up preventing altogether the fulfillment it was toying with. It is, accordingly, irrational. Lovers who willingly prolong the flirting period with their elected one might well realize too late that they should have declared their feelings earlier, and that their flirting partner finally chose someone else, someone quicker. They might correctly think it was stupid not to show their love earlier. For sure the delays they imposed

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<sup>4</sup>It is true that that cases in which the strength and the motivational force of a desire are not aligned are cases of weakness of the will and that such cases involve a form of irrationality. It might objected that we should not, by default, attribute such irrationalities to someone and that we should accordingly consider that subjects of hedonic adaptation are also strongly motivated to escape their condition. Even if a default charity injunction of that kind were accepted, however, it would not imply that we should consider that motivational force and preference strength are aligned in the case of hedonic adaptation. Being a 'default injunction', the injunction of charity should not be enforced if we have independent reasons to believe in the subject's irrationality. I believe that taken together, the intuitive plausibility of the *Connection Principle* and the known pervasiveness of weakness of the will precisely constitute such a reason.

on themselves were a source of erotic, dreamlike, pleasure. But we shall see that even if they thus contributed indirectly to their happiness, that does not suffice to make their imposition rational (see section 4.1) .

We can now conclude from (1r) and (2r) that:

- (3r) For someone rational, desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness:  
if someone rational has some desires he will not be happy, if he has some desires which matter a lot to him, he will be frankly unhappy.

Most of us have desires, and many of them matter a lot to us. Take simply that: I desire to eat before the end of the day, to sleep well tonight, to get rid of this chronic back pain... I also desire that everything be fine for my daughter at school, I desire that she will live a good adult life later, I desire that no one starves, etc. Or again: I desire not to die, or at least not before the next century ends, I desire to see my dead father once again... All such desires are stabs wounds to the happiness of a rational subject. If we were rational, and even if we could enjoy some desire-free satisfactions, thanks to the things we like, we would be unhappy.

## 4 Three ways to miss the point

I believe that the argument for “rational pessimism” is sound and valid. Given that most of us have many desires that matter a lot, it entails that we will not be happy unless we are irrational. This conclusion has an air of paradox which I would like to spend some time clearing.

### 4.1 Supposing that rationality can be inherited

We always have strong reasons to maximize our welfare and, for that, to secure our happiness. Let us, assume, for the sake of the argument that those reasons are decisive. It follows that it is rational to secure our happiness. Now if in order to be happy we must sometimes act irrationally or have some irrational desires, it is rational for us to cause ourselves to act irrationally or to have some irrational desires, and more broadly to dispose ourselves to act irrationally. But, it might be objected, if it is rational to cause ourselves to have some desires or to accomplish some actions those desires and those actions must not be irrational. Call this claim the *Inheritability of Rationality*. It entails that happiness cannot but require desires and actions which are not irrational. It entails, in short, that rationality will always promote happiness and never eat into it. This principle, however, is false. It has been elegantly refuted by Derek Parfit.

In order to refute the *Inheratibility of Rationality*, Parfit (1984, 2011) puts forward the following case,

*Schelling's Case.* A robber threatens that, unless I unlock my safe and give him all my money, he will start to kill my children. It would be irrational for me to ignore this robber's threat. But even if I gave in to his threat, there is a risk that he will kill us all, to reduce his chance of being caught. I claimed that, in this case, it would be rational for me to take a drug that would make me very irrational. The robber would then see that it was pointless to threaten me; and since he could not commit his crime, and I would not be capable of calling the police, he would also be less likely to kill either me or my children (Parfit (2011, I-437), cf. also Parfit (1984, 12-13,37-40), Parfit (2011, I-420-447))

Even though it would be rational for me to take the drug, this would dispose me to act irrationally. Under the influence of the drug, I could act in damaging and self-defeating ways, cutting my hands to be more clever, wounding my children because I love them, etc. We can also imagine that this drug would cause me to do all those things by causing me to desire doing all those things. Those desires and the acts they motivate would clearly be irrational. If you believe that they could still be rational because they would have good effects, showing the robber that I am irrational, you can add a feature to the case and suppose that it is enough, to convince the robber that I am insane, that he sees me take the drug (Parfit, 2011, I-437). This case neatly shows, I believe, that it can be rational to cause oneself to have some irrational desires and to act irrationally.

One should not be too puzzled by such "rational irrationalities". They arise, very simply, whenever irrationality is rewarded. If a whimsical tyrant won't save my life unless I become irrational, it should be rational, other things being equal, to cause myself to become irrational. The argument for "rational pessimism" can thus be summed up by saying that the nature of desires and motivation (and in particular the connection of the later with (un)happiness) rewards irrationalities.

## 4.2 Misunderstanding pleasant activities

From Aristotle to Csíkszentmihályi, many philosophers and psychologists, have emphasized the importance of pleasant *activities* in promoting happiness. Because of their temporal extension, such activities might seem to provide a counterexample to either (1r) or (2r). Suppose for example that

*My bike ride.* I desire to have a two hour bicycle ride in the countryside. Acting on that desire, I go and have a bicycle ride. After having flitted about the country for an hour, I am still really pleased by the ride. At that point, my desire to have the ride is not gone.

- (i) Some might claim that this desire is fulfilled, for I am having a ride, but that it is not an irrational desire yet, for the ride is not over. They might claim that my bike ride falsifies (2r).
- (ii) Others might claim that this desire is not, or not totally, fulfilled already. However, they might add, its being unfulfilled does not eat into my happiness —the ride is, on the contrary, quite pleasing to me— and I need not be disposed to act in ways that are less than fully rational for that —I will not, for example, be less prone to pursue my ride because I am pleased before it is finished. They might conclude, then, that my bike ride falsifies (1r).

On either views, my bike ride seems to thwart the argument for rational pessimism.

Both of these views are however misguided. Against (i), my desire to have a two hour ride is not, or not fully satisfied after one hour of ride. What is true is that because I desire to have a two hour bike ride, I continually form instrumental desires to pursue the ride until that desire for a two hour ride is itself fulfilled. After an hour of ride, my past instrumental desires to continue the ride are fulfilled, not my present desire to do so. (ii) also relies on a misunderstanding of pleasant activities. For it does not follow from the fact that I am happy with my ride while my desire for a ride is unfulfilled that I am happy with *its being unfulfilled*. The fact that my desire for a ride is not fulfilled yet will normally cause dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction will be small, for riding a bike is a leisure activity, an activity that does not normally matter much, and the desire for it will accordingly not normally be very important. It will also be compensated by the pleasure I take in riding my bike. It will nevertheless eat into my happiness in that, all things being equal, I would be happier if I did not have this unfulfilled desire.

### 4.3 Confusing liking and desiring

Now, it might be wondered, how can I take pleasure in having my bike ride while my desire for a ride is not fulfilled and while, supposing that I am fully rational, this eats into my happiness? How more broadly, could we be

fully rational and take pleasure in anything? If (1r) and (2r) are right, a fully rational person cannot derive any pleasure from the satisfaction of his desires.

Such a puzzlement comes from a confusion between likings and desires. I normally take pleasure in riding my bike, not because doing so I am fulfilling a desire, but only because I *like* riding my bike. Likings and desires differ fundamentally. Likings, unlike desire cannot be fulfilled. Likings cannot be rational or irrational either, they are *arational*. Accordingly, whereas I can rationally be blamed for some of my desires. I cannot be likewise blamed for my likings<sup>5</sup>.

Notice that even though likings are arational, it might be rational, and I take it that it actually is rational, to cause oneself to like some things rather than others, and to like some things rather than none (patients suffering from depersonalization are sometimes described as emotionally numb and as not liking anything anymore (Sierra, 2009, 32-33)). If it is better to like one thing than not, it is not the liking in itself that is rational—likings are arational— but the action of causing oneself to acquire this liking and the desire to accomplish that action. (Compare with: it might be rational to cause oneself to weigh one hundred pounds, but weighing one hundred pound is neither rational nor irrational.)

Finally, liking some state of affairs, even though it is arational, gives us some reasons to provoke this state of affair<sup>6</sup>. If I desire a given state of affairs because I like it, its occurrence will normally contribute to my happiness. It should be noted however, that we can and we often do desire things we do not particularly like. When a mosquito bites me, I desire to scratch my mosquito bite. It is not something I like, and I do not take pleasure doing it. More importantly, addictions, and compulsive behaviors more broadly, often seem to involve such liking-free desires. That would explain why satisfying compulsive desires often does not bring any joy at all.

This distinction between likings and desires is not new. One may detect it in Plato's claim that one could not be pleased by a life spent desiring to scratch one's itches, and satisfying this desire (Plato, 1979, 68-9 (494A-

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<sup>5</sup>Some Humeans are suspicious of the idea that desires can be irrational in any substantial sense but they should also acknowledge the difference between likings and desires. A mathematician who tries to square the circle desires to square the circle. This is logically impossible and even Humeans should grant that this desire is irrational. The corresponding liking is not however irrational. The mathematician would like to square the circle in the sense that it would please him to, and he cannot be blamed for that.

<sup>6</sup>Those reasons, however, are not always decisive, which explains that one can like a state of affair that one should not make happen.

495A)). Interestingly, this distinction was recently given a biological basis. In a series of papers, Berridge and Robinson (2003) have argued that “liking” and “wanting” depend on neurophysiological systems whose distinctness might explain addictions, compulsive behaviors and many of the difficulties we encounter in the pursuit of happiness<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4.4 Supposing that we are rational

It is said that Diogenes refuted Zeno’s paradoxical arguments by having a little walk. One might likewise answer our argument with smile. He might, that is, show how happy we are. I do not deny, however, that we often *are* happy. What I deny is that we are rational when we are happy. More specifically, I deny that when we are happy we are able to respond appropriately to reasons and that we are disposed to do our best to fulfill our (non irrational) desires.

One might try to make a subtler objection. Most of us have many strong desires, many desires we would apparently give a lot to satisfy. The argument for rational pessimism entails that quite generally, and independently of our level of rationality, the satisfaction of those desires is not decisive for our happiness. We might be just as happy if we satisfied and if we did not satisfy those desires. For sure, fulfilling a given desire might often contribute to our happiness:

- (i) the fulfillment might be in itself pleasing, if one is aware of it and if (irrationally) it does not extinguish the desire.
- (ii) it might also bring about something we *like* and thus contribute indirectly to our happiness.
- (iii) it might also, finally, help extinguish the desire it fulfills and the dissatisfaction that desire used to cause.

But we could often be made as happy without satisfying those desires, merely by changing our attitudes towards them, by adopting, for example, a mourning or an erotic attitude towards them. Worse, no matter the level of satisfaction we can get from the satisfaction of some of our desires, if the argument for (1r) is right and if we indeed have some unfulfilled desires that matter a lot to us we could not be happy unless we adopt such attitudes towards those

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<sup>7</sup>See Parfit (2011, 54-56) for a further elaboration on the distinction between likings and desires and for an important caution against the philosophical mistakes their confusion is responsible for.

unfulfilled desires. Even if the satisfaction of our desires might sometimes contribute to our happiness then, it would remain that the latter is largely independent from the former.

Let us take stakes. The argument for rational pessimism and the fact that we often are happy seem to have two strange consequences. They entail that

- (a) we are often irrational, and in particular, as entailed by the defense of (1s), that we often have irrational desires or fail to do our best to satisfy some of our strict preferences
- (b) and that our happiness is largely independent of the satisfaction of our desires.

Those two claims are *not* intuitively plausible. First, when we try to predict what we would do in a given situation, we normally assess the various reasons for actions we would have in such a situation, and we imagine that we would respond appropriately to those reasons, doing what we believe, we would have most reason to do. Typically, if we imagine that we would have decisive reasons to do something we imagine that we would desire to do that thing and do our best to fulfill this desire. We thus picture ourselves, at least implicitly, as rational subjects who respond appropriately to reasons.

Second, when we try to imagine how happy we would be in a given situation—and we often do try to imagine such things in order to deliberate—we tend to use desire fulfillment as a raw estimate of happiness. Some researchers even go further and posit a strong theoretical connection between happiness and desire satisfaction. I am thinking in particular of some of those who define *welfare* in terms of desire-satisfaction (for example Nozick (1974) and Sumner (1999)). If strictly speaking, their view is consistent with happiness (as opposed to welfare) being largely independent of desire satisfaction, many would be reluctant to accept such an independence claim. Given their definition of welfare, this claim would indeed imply that welfare is equally independent from happiness. This, however, seems to be a wrong conclusion. Happiness seems at least necessary for welfare. Conversely, it seems that a very great deal of happy lives—those happy lives which are not subject to something like an experience-machine illusion, those in which happiness is, in Sumner (1999) terms, ‘authentic’—are good lives for the ones who live them.

I believe that (a) and (b) should however be accepted. Recent scientific developments have not only provided

- some reliable evidence that (a) and (b) are true,

- and that we implicitly deny (a) and (b) when we deliberate and when we predict our future actions,
- but also an elegant theory of error, which explains our reluctance to accept (a) and (b).

#### 4.4.1 The science of happiness and dual process psychology

I have already mentioned the studies about hedonic adaptation which confirm (b). Surprisingly, those studies also show that we systematically fail to appreciate how much we can adapt. There is a growing literature on affective forecasting, which has established that we make systematic errors when we try to predict the hedonic impact of some events (Wilson and Gilbert, 2003). One important source of error stems from our failure to take the hedonic treadmill into account (Gilbert et al., 1998). For example, healthy people systematically predict that their happiness would substantially decrease if they had colostomies or if they were on dialysis. This ignorance of hedonic adaptation seems to constitute a genuine cognitive *illusion*. Thus even the patients who have adapted to their aversive condition judge that they would be substantially happier if they were healthy (Ubel and Loewenstein, 2008, S203). It was even shown that patients who finally get a renal transplant not only fail to be as happy as they thought they would be in such a case, but also misremembered their pre-transplant quality of life to be lower than it actually was (Ubel and Loewenstein (2008, S203), see also Smith et al. (2006))! Interestingly, in each of those cases, whereas the subjects' happiness is disconnected from the fulfillment of their dearest desires, their evaluation of their happiness in past or counterfactual circumstances remains correlated with the evaluation of such desires' fulfillment.

It is probably easier to show that we often have irrational desires or that we often fail to do our best to satisfy some of our strict preferences (a). After all, isn't it what happens in most cases of impulsivity and *akrasia*? Some will deny that such cases really involve either irrational desires or strict preferences we do not act upon. It would take us too far to argue against those much debated claims (see Yaffe (2001) for an overview of the debate in the case of addictive behaviors). It is not the place either to provide a detailed argument for a theory of error explaining why (a) and (b) are not intuitively plausible. What I will do, instead, is present a very broad theoretical framework which allows us to make sense of all those claims and to situate them within a broader perspective.

The framework I am thinking of is often called 'dual process psychology'.

It gathers various approaches in social psychology, cognitive psychology, neuroscience and economics whose fundamental assumption is that human behavior results from the interaction of multiple, often conflicting, processes rather than from a unitary mechanism Loewenstein et al. (2008); Evans (2008). One can in particular distinguish some processes which are phylogenetically ancient and automatic from more recent, controlled, processes. On what is probably the most relevant version of the framework, automatic processes are pictured as essentially ‘hot’ or affective while controlled processes are ‘cold’ or ‘deliberative’<sup>8</sup>. Both kinds of processes contribute to the explanation of our actions and of our judgments (see, e.g. Loewenstein, 1996). This distinction within deep neuropsychological processes corresponds, at the personal level, to the distinction between two factors in the explanation of our actions: the affective or ‘visceral’ appraisals on the one hand, and the ‘rational’ evaluations on the other hand (the opposition between the ‘visceral’ and the ‘rational’ is from Loewenstein (1996), in what follows, I will try to avoid using the word ‘rational’ to refer to the cold system and will prefer the less ambiguous ‘deliberative’). Regular desires and beliefs, for example, involve the cold system, while likings and drives involve the hot system.

Now the important fact is that both kinds of processes are somehow blind to each other. Hot, visceral appraisals are little sensitive to the deliverings of cold controlled evaluations, which might explain the irrationality of some of our impulsive actions. Under the influence of visceral factors, a subject will for example ignore the outcome of his deliberations, and act against the rational preferences to which they had led him.

Conversely, and this is probably one of the most important results in the field, our cold evaluations are little sensitive to the deliverings of our hot appraisal. It has indeed been shown that we systematically underestimate the impact of visceral factors in our decisions and in the explanations and the predictions of our hedonic condition and our behavior. Loewenstein (1996, 277-8) for example reports that when asked to make a non binding choice, expectant women tend to state a desire to eschew anesthesia but reverse their decision when they start to experience pain. “The reversal of preference, he notes, was observed not only for women giving birth for the first time, but also those who had previously experienced the pain of childbirth; experience

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<sup>8</sup>This version of ‘dual process psychology’ can be considered as an updated version of the classical ‘reason-passions psychology’ or even of Freud’s distinction between the primary and the secondary processes. Interestingly, some philosophers have also recently, and I believe independently, revived similar distinctions in order to analyse motivation (Watson (1975) and Schapiro (2009) are examples).

does not seem to go very far in terms of enhancing one’s appreciation for future pain.” Such “cold-hot empathy gaps” have since then been found in a variety of situations, in intrapersonal and interpersonal settings, regarding past, present as well as imagined affects (Loewenstein, 2005; Van Boven and Loewenstein, 2005; Wilson and Gilbert, 2003).

This mutual blindness between the two kinds of processes is important because it implies that they belong to two partly independent psychological *systems*, two systems which arguably have different ways of learning, different dynamics and different functions (Phelps, 2005). More to the point, it explains why, as claimed by (c), we are largely blind to many of our irrationalities and to phenomena such as hedonic adaptation, in which the link between happiness and desire satisfaction is severed. We seem blind to those phenomena

- because they involve hot, visceral factors rather than cold controlled ones,
- and because it is the cold system which ‘holds the microphone’ and which accordingly seems representative of who we are.

The cold system ignores the impact of the hot system, and when we reflect on our rationality and on our happiness in various circumstances, it is his conclusions we are listening to. To take a comparison that Haidt (2006, ch. 4) borrows from Buddha, the cold system is akin to a weak trainer on the back of a wild elephant, a weak trainer with little influence on the choices of the elephant but who deludes himself into thinking that he is the one who is in control<sup>9</sup>.

We already saw that the influence of visceral factors could, in the proposed version of the dual system framework explain many of our irrational behaviors (a). It could also explain hedonic adaptation (b) which appears to be a form of affective regulation that is not, or not much cognitively mediated. It was for example shown that some important mechanisms involved in hedonic adaptation can be triggered automatically by some events of which the subject has no cognitive access (Gilbert (2006, ch. 9), Lieberman et al. (2001)). It should not come as a surprise then, that we picture ourselves as globally rational and that we imagine that our happiness correlates with some of our desire’s satisfaction. Hedonic adaptation might even be more pervasive than the classical studies suggest: along with the tragic losses it

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<sup>9</sup>With Gilbert (2006), Haidt (2006) constitutes one of the best introductions both to the psychology of happiness and to the version of the dual processes approaches that I have presented here.

relieves, it might help us the “rational weight” of our simple, everyday, desires.

## 5 What makes us happy

Even though it is usually rational to seek happiness, desiring creatures like us cannot be happy if they are rational. Even worse, given the importance of our desires, we are likely to be unhappy when we are rational. What makes us happy, then, is what we might call rational irrationalities and rational “arationalities”: conditions in which it is rational to cause ourselves to be, even though it is not rational to be in them. We are happy because there are things we like, even though likings are arational. We are happy, also and overall, because we can adopt mourning or erotic attitudes towards our unfulfilled desires, even though such attitudes prevent us from being rational.

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