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Objective Ethics and the Dynamics of Desire

In the West today, objectivity in ethics is hard to come by. In other places and times, the will of God, time-honored tradition, recognized moral paragons, or the dictates of pure reason have seemed to provide a solid basis for agreement on moral claims, but today one might wonder if it is a mistake to even seek for objectivity. Bernard Williams, for one, has argued that we should be content with something more modest: a kind of reflective confidence. For others, desire has become the only guide for action.

In discussions of ethics relying on the aforementioned authorities, desire and pleasure are often cast as the villains who tempt and mislead us away from the right and the good. There are reasons why desire should not always be trusted. For Aristotle, however, desire is far from a mere villain, and pleasure more than a mere temptation. In fact, Aristotle claims it is hard to say whether we should aim ultimately at the good or at pleasure. Similarly, while Socrates generally emphasizes the unreliability of desire as a guide, because it is so subject to change, even his analysis offers elements of a more optimistic view. As other authorities have fallen out of favor, it is worthwhile taking a careful look at how far desire might serve as a basis of objectivity in ethics, either in its own right, or as corroborating other authorities.

In this paper I draw on Plato (particularly the *Gorgias*) and Aristotle (particularly *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Anima*) to construct a partial account of the dynamics of desire. This account explains how desire is so often unreliable, but also shows why Aristotle saw pleasure as a credible candidate for the ultimate end, under the right circumstances. For Aristotle and Plato, in a healthy soul desire and the good align. In such a soul the dynamics of desire take on a distinctive character, signalling this alignment with the good. As it happens, this dynamic also displays the features Bernard Williams describes in his call for reflective confidence.