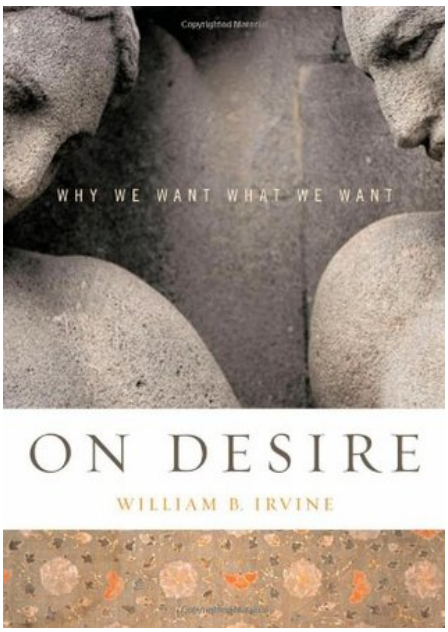

On Desire: Why We Want What We Want

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A married person falls deeply in love with someone else. A man of average income feels he cannot be truly happy unless he owns an expensive luxury car. A dieter has an irresistible craving for ice cream. Desires often come to us unbidden and unwanted, and they can have a dramatic impact, sometimes changing the course of our lives.
In On Desire, William B. Irvine takes us on a wide-ranging tour of our impulses, wants, and needs, showing us where these feelings come from and how we can try to rein them in. Spicing his account with engaging observations by writers like Seneca, Tolstoy, and Freud, Irvine considers the teachings of Buddhists, Hindus, the Amish, Shakers, and Catholic saints, as well as those of ancient Greek and Roman and modern European philosophers. Irvine also looks at what modern science can tell us about desire--what happens in the brain when we desire something and how animals evolved particular desires--and he advances a new theory about how desire itself evolved. Irvine also suggests that at the same time that we gained the ability to desire, we were "programmed" to find some things more desirable than others. Irvine concludes that the best way to attain lasting happiness is not to change the world around us or our place in it, but to change ourselves. If we can convince ourselves to want what we already have, we can dramatically enhance our happiness.
Brimming with wisdom and practical advice, On Desire offers a thoughtful approach to controlling unwanted passions and attaining a more meaningful life.

On Desire: Why We Want What We Want Details

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From Reader Review On Desire: Why We Want What We Want for online ebook

Elina says

very interesting read. It is a keeper in the library for times when i want to rethink my life. it could be summarized a bit but on the other side if it was denser maybe it would be too much.

Karl Nordenstorm says

If you are the kind of person who reads books like this one, then you probably already knew much of what it has to say. In brief the book covers stoicism, zen-Buddhism, cynicism, epicureanism and various Christian sects. However this makes a fine reading experience - vivid language, enlightening anecdotes, intriguing little reflections spread throughout - it simply is pleasant to hear the literary voice of William B. Irvine.

The following double-quote (Irvine quotes somebody named Fran Lebowitz) is illustrative of the material in the book.

“People who get married because they’re in love make a ridiculous mistake. It makes much more sense to marry your best friend. You like your best friend more than anyone you’re ever going to be in love with. You don’t choose your best friend because they have a cute nose, but that’s all you’re doing when you get married; you’re saying, ‘I will spend the rest of my life with you because of your lower lip.’”

An obvious idea, but formulated with force. At least to me reading formulations like the one above makes the ideas really sink in. Another example from the book is the following question, which is quite obvious intellectually, but which at least helps me to embrace an idea at a gut level. I paraphrase:

"If you were the last person on earth (and introverted enough not to go crazy), what things would you loot? Would you bother to get diamonds? To eat lobster? To drive a fancy car? To get a comfortable bed?"

That thought experiment really brings to life which things we desire for their intrinsic good, and which we want to impress others.

Stacy says

Heard this author on NPR, talking about another book, A Guide to the Good Life: The Art of Stoic Joy. I read this since the other isn't out in paperback and isn't in the library. I liked this one a lot. Made me think - though I feel like I should have known more of this.

Stephen says

Why do we want what we want? William Irvine’s On Desire examines the nature of desire, exploring first

how profoundly it affects our lives, then surveying psychological inquiries into its basis before at last turning to consider how religions, philosophies, and odd ducks have attempted to grapple with it. Irvine is author previously of A Guide to the Good Life, a manual on the practice of Stoicism, and the two works have a common subject and a likely audience. On Desire is one part science and another philosophy, thorough but concise.

We are not merely what we think deliberately; anyone can realize their mind has a life of its own with a simple experiment: simply shut your eyes and attempt to count slowly to ten. The count will not even reach five before thoughts start floating up and competing for attention. Where do these distractions come from? After a brief introductory section in which Irvine comments on how profoundly our life can be changed by desires beyond our control -- falling in love, for instance -- the second part of the book offers that desires are ultimately the result of our instincts, a kind of biological incentive system that's had a cobbled-together evolutionary history.

That our minds are driven by evolutionary forces is natural, but not ideal; following every desire is not the road to happiness. Indeed, even if the desires didn't lead to our immediate destruction (like the urge to pet a sleeping lion), heeding every impulse leaves a person constantly in need of stimulation. That in mind, it is no accident that virtually every religion, and most moral philosophies, have addressed the matter of desire, and in the third section of the work Irvine examines Abrahamic, Greek, and Buddhist approaches. While the Abrahamic religions typically couch mastery of desire so that people can attain heaven and everlasting bliss, the Greek schools (Stoicism and Epicureanism) and Buddhism have a more this-worldy approach: desire is countered to achieve tranquility or to maximize enjoyment. After surveying the advice given to students by such luminaries as Augustine, Seneca, and Henry David Thoreau, Baxter notes that despite the variety of contradictions, there are some common lessons that can be distilled.

The foundational observation is that desires should not be trusted. If we practice mindfulness, we will immediately realize their impermanence; like a child blowing bubbles, one desire will be a phantasm among dozens, constantly moving, eventually fading. Desires compete with one another, and so thick are they that our intellect is crowded out; it plays 'second fiddle'. The most potent desires are the ones we have the least control over, but no desire is really insatiable. Even though they cannot be fulfilled, they can be resisted; our biological incentive system may try to punish us, but it's not the end the world. Ultimately, the only way to truly fight desires is to change ourselves to learn to appreciate -- through philosophy, religion, etc -- what we have, to use techniques both ancient and modern to strengthen our minds against the distractions of the moment. Irvine covers a lot of varied practices within the text for those who develop an interest.

On Desire is a superb work, quite attractive to anyone with an interest in mindfulness. My own Stoic leanings predispose me to enjoy it, of course, but I think it laudable also for demonstrating how our evolutionary history has consequences in our present life; although we'd like to think that natural history is history, a closed book, in truth we are driven by the same instincts today that wrote that book. The thoughtfulness of a work such as this gives us the ability to avoid much of the suffering that nature's book is replete with.

Related:
Irvine's own The Good Life: the Ancient Art of Stoic Joy, any book in Stoicism

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Emily Krueger says

Although very detailed, the tone and various implications of the author were problematic.

Bob Nichols says

Discussions about intelligence and cognition frequently omit the role of desire. Irvine's book brings desire to the forefront and describes how it works with cognition. Irvine does a good job of separating terminal (desire for own sake) from instrumental (desired for the sake of something else) desires. Terminal desires are set by evolution (food, sex, rest, protection) because they have survival value and they have a built in biological ("hedonic") incentive system. Satisfying desire feels good; not satisfying feels bad. The second half of the book discusses various religious and philosophical theories about how to master "unwanted" desire. What is wanted or unwanted desire is highly variable, but it's generally understood that some of our desires get in the way of individual and social well-being and social order.

So far, so good. Irvine selectively quotes Schopenhauer but fails to convey the comprehensive way Schopenhauer's theory of the Will looks at desire. Schopenhauer's theory provides the philosophical and, implicitly, the biological, framework for Irvine's subject. The Will is primal energy related to survival and reproduction. This energy pulses through our being and demands to be satisfied. When the objects of the Will are obtained, the satisfaction is temporary before the Will, as life force within, pushes us out into the world again to seek new objects (food, sexual partners), which include the various instrumental actions (related, for example, to pride, rank) related to these fundamental terminal desires. While Irvine asserts that desires are insatiable, Schopenhauer's theory enlightens us as to why this is so. Also, while Irvine casts desire into the traditional "seek what feels good, avoid what feels bad" mode, Schopenhauer reframes the "seek pleasure, avoid pain" debate by saying that the Will, as action, is always prompted by pain (dissatisfaction). This is what moves us into the world (seeking) and moves us to defend ourselves against threats. When the Will is successful, there is satisfaction ("good"). When it is not successful, the Will is unsatisfied ("bad"), prompting a new round of action.

Irvine also states the essential role the intellect plays in formulating chains of desire (Ends-means relationships), or the instrumental actions used to satisfy terminal desires. In Schopenhauer's theory, the latter provides the End of action. These are invariant and provide the reason (motivation) for action. We are not, Schopenhauer argues, free to change those Ends, but our intellect is free to chose how to put together these Ends-means relationships. Irvine at one point says that we can act by sheer will power (non-hedonic terminal desire) which bumps into Kant's moral theory (we do the right thing because it is the right thing). From the perspective of Schopenhauer's theory, this intellectual motivation is problematic and suspect, and is perhaps why so-called pure reasoned morality is pervaded with unacknowledged self-biased perspectives.

Irvine discusses how reason can be used to master ("superimpose its plan") on unwanted desires, and thereby reinforces the common belief that we can be the masters of our desires. Schopenhauer's theory struggled with this as well and, while Schopenhauer was not particularly successful, he had a strong appreciation for the power of the Will and its pervasive immunity to control by reason. Irvine's book is excellent in emphasizing that an intellectual commitment needs to be based in emotion to have an effective hold on our behaviorv. The weaker part of Irvine's book is that it gives too much credit to reason to control unwanted desire. For those whose Will (energy level) for self-survival and well-being and reproduction (sex drive) is particularly strong, self-control via reason is likely to be a far too optimistic view.

David says

When I took this book from the shelf at BN and flipped through the opening pages, I saw a page with a single quote from La Rochefoucauld: "Little is needed to make a wise man happy, but nothing can content a fool. That is why nearly all men are miserable." And with that, I bought the book.

The text itself is easy to read. Though clearly writing as a philosopher, Irvine neither preaches nor obfuscates. The three sections, "The Secret Life of Desire," "The Science of Desire," and "Dealing with Desire" are mostly exercises in introspection, pop science, and a sort of philosophical anthropology. It was fun to read, but I don't know if I will re-read it. What I will do, though, is re-read the bibliography and the chapter quotes for more reading ideas. In particular, I think I may seek out a copy of La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*.

Linda says

I feel a bit nerdy typing this up at 1:00 a.m. on a Saturday night so I can return this book tomorrow on my way to babysitting. They're 8 days overdue at the library.

My favorite philosophy professor reviewed this book and half way through the book I noticed his quip on the back of the book

"William B. Irvine has written a disarmingly seductive and easily readable treatise on the origins, nature, vicissitudes, and 'crises' of desire. He simply and clearly discusses biologically incentive systems, the rich psychological research on the peculiarities of our motivation, and the wisdom of various religious and spiritual traditions. It is a well-informed, wise, informed interdisciplinary book that is highly recommended for the general reader." - Solomn
I've copied that only because Solomon died early this year and it's just one more thing to hold on to besides his books and my class notes.

Initially,I was very excited to read this book. I was browsing the philosophy section in the library idly when I came upon this book. Was going through some conflicting desires at the time (they're still unresolved actually) and I thought hmm perhaps this book will enlighten me. Initially after the introduction and the first two chapters, my excitement waned. I was dedicated and read through the end. Towards the end, I got bored and was skimming through the last few chapters. I did jot down a few excerpts. It is a great book if you want a crash course on all the different philosophical teachings... Crash course on Stoics, Skeptics, Eccentrics. Irvine also did a lot of philosophical name dropping which I'd admit I like in my books only to keep me fresh.. Hume, Schophenhauer, Aristotle, etc etc. Many got mentions. Irvine touched on the evolutionary proposes of desires, different types of desires, religious advice on how to deal with desire and, philosophical advice on how to deal with desire.

So first few chapters peaked my interest. Distinguished the differences between the bandwagon effect (conforming) and the snob effect (not conforming for the sake of not conforming).

Excerpts follows.

"Familiarity breeds envy. A person is more likely to feel envious of his coworkers, neighbors, or relatives than a multibillionaire he has never met." -48

"Other people's heads are a wretched place to be the home of a man's true happiness." - Schopenhauer 36

"We go far less trouble about making ourselves happy than about appearing to be so." - La Rochefoucauld 39

"Intellectually, we know what we need to do with our lives, and we set goals accordingly - to swim ten miles each week, to write a page a day, to learn to play the bango, to terminate a relationship that is causing us grief. But unless our emotions cooperate, unless they commit to the goals our intellect sets, it is unlikely that we will accomplish these goals: our heart won't be in it, and a mind operating without the support of a heart is singularly impotent."

"The intellect's best strategy for dealing with the emotions is to use emotions to fight emotions."

"Adaptation: we tend to get used to what we have and therefore like it less with the passage of time. We grow indifferent to the spouse, home, or car that was once our pride and joy, and because we are no longer satisfied with what we have,w e form new desires in the belief that satisfying them - unlike when we satisfied our previous desires - will lead to lasting happiness."

"Why ignore modern philosophy? Because most modern philosophers are horrified by the thought of giving people advice on how to live better lives."

Rick says

Can we convince ourselves to "want what we already have"? (p. 6) Can we master our desires? I really liked this book. It helps to understand how we may be biologically created to want things. Our problem is trying to control those wants so that they don't control us. (There is a nice section about Thoreau in the chapter on eccentrics. Appropriate.)

Maya Rock says

Terrific packaging. While there were moments here and there, ultimately I did not fall in love with this. The chapter titles were great. Throwing the word "desire" into anything makes it compelling--The Evolution of Desire, The Psychology of Desire etc. I really felt I had more of an understanding about desire from Buddhist reading stuff than this.

Anyway I liked this Zen story on page 191: "There is a story about a Zen student who goes to a temple and asks how long it will take him to gain enlightenment if he joins the community . 'Ten years,' says the Zen master. 'Well, how about if I realyl work and double my effort' "Twenty years,' comes the reply."

This moment typifies some of the problems I had with the text P. 237 "Sometimes teenagers go out of their way to become pregnant. They have seen parenthood transform others, and seek a similar transformation of themselves. What they don't realize is that this transformation, when it tkaes place, happens because a

woman is willing to sacrifice for her child. The sacrifices in question are possible because the woman has gained a degree of mastery over her desires; what she wants for herself simply isn't that important anymore. And because she has been transformed, her sacrifices won't really seem like sacrifices. When a young a woman gets pregnant, but refuses to sacrifice for her child, the transofmration cannot take place. Rather tahn finding motherhood to be an incredibly rewarding and enriching experience, she probably finds it to be endlessly annoying."
Whoa, Nelly.

Vikas says

Irvine does a good job with this book and it can be an introductory book on understanding and managing desire - to defeat something you need to understand it well.

Origin of Desire:
He starts with our evolutionary past - our evolutionary ancestors who had desires were more likely to survive and reproduce than the ones who didn't. Two kinds of desires:

- Terminal Desire: An end in itself.
- Instrumental desire: it is part of a chain desires. We normally need to go through a lot of instrumental desires for a terminal desire.

Understanding desires: They will normally come when we have a terminal desire. In this situation it's worthwhile to contemplate - do we really want that ? Do you really want to impress your neighbours with the flash car whom you despise for their love of material. What will you end up becoming.

Solution : He doesn't want to prescribe a "magic bullet" as it'll vary with the person. Someone who's religious may pray whereas an atheist will find it pointless. Someone may meditate whereas a "Stoic" on the other hand will try to find reason for desire to get to the root of it. People can chose whatever works for them.

Normal everyday people are as or even more happier than billionaires though the latter may look happy!

Overall a good book. Happy to give 5 stars.

Falina says

This was better than I expected, maybe because of the practical self-help side of it that I didn't expect -- not only does Irvine discuss desire, he talks about different methods of dealing with desire, too. I think that I'll read it again and continue to find value in it.

Esteban del Mal says

A bit pedestrian if you come to the topic with any background. Fun diagrams like "The Chain of Desire" and "The Taxonomy of Desire" are a lame attempt at street cred. Presents a naive understanding of Buddhism.

We are ever at odds with our Biological Incentive System (BIS), but must we reduce eons of evolution to an acronym worthy of an online management school primary text?

Emmanuel Honesty says

Enlightening

Geoff Bartakovics says

Seriously good summary of various philosophers' takes on "why we want what we want." No Oprah-esque at all, though it does end with a somewhat zen view on recognizing the irrational/emotive parts of our desires so that we can influence...if not control...those desires.

Like "stumbling on happiness," this is one of those books that lucidly describes/categorizes human experiences that you recognize. For example:

"The relationship between the intellect and the emotions is therefore asymmetrical. Although the emotions have veto power over the intellect, in most cases the intellect has only the power of persuasion in its dealings with the emotions, and it can persuade them only if it can invoke a stronger emotion than the one it wants to suppress. Conversely, the intellect can form a desire, but if the emotions don't commit, the resulting desire will be feeble. And if the emotions object, the resulting desire will be stillborn..... The emotions, in their dealings with the intellect, don't use reason to gain its cooperation. instead they wear it down with -what else?--emotional entreaties. They beg, whine, and bully. They wont take no for an answer. They wont give the intellect a moment's peace. In most cases, the best the intellect can hope for is to withstand these entreaties for a spell. Then it succumbs."

A perfect description of the processes in my head when I want to buy something that I shouldn't.

Highly recommended book.
