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Philosophy of Death

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'... what we desire when we desire something or some state of being is not really that thing or state: what we desire is the power to get that state or thing.'

Roots of Desire

This quote reminded me of a youtube video I recently watched. In an interview Lance Armstrong, after coming back from cancer and winning another Tour de France, was asked: if we set our mind on something, with determination, can we achieve anything? Lance said no.

Buddhism rests on the assumption that human beings have desires. I think we can all agree, as humans, not only do we have desires but we are constantly desiring an object or state of being. Throughout the day our desires meander from chocolate ice cream to sex, before wishing your roommate would do his dishes. With this quote, Ziporyn explains the Buddhist understanding of desire, enlightening us to the fact that all desires are really the same desire.

Desire is not typically viewed as something you would want to sit with for a long period of time. Don't believe me? Don't check your phone the next time it buzzes in your pocket. Desires are hard to sit with because we form attachments. We form attachments to alternate forms of reality. The imagined form of reality full of chocolate ice cream, sex, and clean roommates is the antithesis to some aspect of our current state that is bothering us or leading us to craving. Thus, we believe it to be better than our current state, so we desire this state, we long for it, we care about it. To open his essay, Ziporyn suggests, that because of attachment the unenlightened person develops for an alternate state, they view desire as something that exists to be terminated.

This leads to two groups of desire based on how we seek to bring an end to a desire. The first type of desire is the one we wish to fulfill or satisfy, unraveling the desire by giving in to the desire. The other type of ending to a desire is suppressing or forgetting the desire. I will attempt to fulfill my desire to do well in philosophy and try to ignore the pimple on my chin. However, separating these desires into two groups subverts our understanding of the true nature of desire. This is where Ziporyns quote provides insight, ‘... what we desire when we desire something or some state of being is not really that thing or state: what we desire is the power to get that state or thing’. Yes, some desires we aim to satiate and some we try to forget but either way what we are truly desiring is not this state or that item, but the ability to manipulate our current reality in order to achieve the desired reality. It is control that we really want.

The knee-jerk reaction to this idea is to argue we have control, if I want ice cream I’ll go out and get some. But this quote has little to do with ice cream and other such immediately satiated desires. The belief that I am in control of what happens to me is referred to in Buddhism as the *self*. To think one is solely in control means that any version of reality can be obtained. The self is a mental state subscribing to linear cause and effect. Each cause has a traceable and defined effect. However, it is a mistake to believe the desire to get an A in a class can be resolved by a simple map of cause and effect that leads to the desired outcome. Life, it turns out, is not nearly binary enough for any one cause to have a corollary singular effect. To get an A in a class depends on the teacher, the timing of the exams, your study habits, the sleep you get the night before, and endlessly more factors.

To desire is to indulge the self. To believe we have the power to exert will over our existence and mold it into another form. This is why we don’t actually desire the item or condition, what we really want is the ability to manipulate a world that is largely out of our

control to arrive at a reality that we have been yearning for. When we believe we are in control is when we develop attachments.

In a similar way to how physics looks to unite gravity, electromagnetism, the weak force, and the strong force under a unified theory, Ziporyn derives all forms of desire from a shared base desire. The commonality being the desire for control over one's existence. Ziporyn believes the desire for control arrives because of a flawed understanding of how capable we are in manipulating the social and physical world surrounding us, whether to gain something or not be bothered by something. Then we suffer because of the attachments we form to imagined states of being. For this reason, Ziporyn would have appreciated Armstrong's response. Responding by reflecting that there were others in the hospital that wanted to live more than he did, that fought harder, but didn't make it. While I romanticize the idea of my dreams coming true with enough hard work, Ziporyn and Armstrong remind me to let go of my desire for control over my reality, and I think I'll suffer less because of it.