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Desire and Satisfaction

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Desire satisfaction has not received detailed philosophical examination. Yet intuitive judgments about the satisfaction of desires have been used as data points guiding theories of desire, desire content and the semantics of ‘desire’. This paper examines desire satisfaction and the standard propositional view of desire. First, I argue that there are several distinct concepts of satisfaction. Second, I argue that separating them defuses a difficulty for the standard view in accommodating desires that Derek Parfit described as ‘implicitly conditional on their own persistence’, a problem posed by Shieva Kleinschmidt, Kris McDaniel and Ben Bradley. The solution undercuts a key motivation for rejecting the standard view in favour of more radical accounts proposed in the literature.

Keywords: desire, conditional desire, satisfaction, propositional attitude, propositional content.

This paper examines the notion of desire satisfaction in the context of what has been called the ‘received wisdom’ about desire (McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 268) or ‘standard philosophic[al] practice’ (Schueler, 1995, p. 197):

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The Standard View

(P): Desire is a relation between a subject S and a proposition p .

(S): S 's desire that p is satisfied iff p is true; otherwise frustrated.

Some have argued that the standard view faces a fatal problem accommodating a class of desires that Derek Parfit called ‘implicitly conditional on their own persistence’ (Parfit, 1984, p. 151), or *CP-desires* for short. I provide a new explanation of where the problem lies by clarifying some distinctions related to desire and satisfaction. Whilst I am no friend to the standard view, I argue that this explanation dissolves the problem CP-desires pose.

§1 introduces CP-desires and explains the problem they pose. §2 clarifies the notion of desire satisfaction employed by the standard view, and motivates and explains the importance of two *psychologised* concepts of satisfaction to provide a novel diagnosis of the problem. §3 argues that this exercise in conceptual hygiene provides a neat and conservative explanation of CP-desires, undercutting a key motivation for a more complex and revisionary theory of desire proposed by Kris McDaniel and Ben Bradley. The availability of this simple solution evidences the fact that these psychologised notions of satisfaction have not been adequately appreciated in the philosophical literature.

1 CP-Desires

Two types of desires are cited as paradigmatic CP-desires in almost every discussion of them: (i) appetitive desires e.g. to eat or to drink (Schiffer, 1976; Gordon, 1986; Kleinschmidt, *ms.*), (ii) transient desires such as a desire to go out for a beer (McDaniel and Bradley, 2008) or to go swimming at moon rise (Parfit, 1984). Here I focus without loss of generality on the desire to eat.

1.1 The Problem

How on the standard view might we construe the desire of someone, say Tom, with the desire to eat? A natural first attempt is that it involves a desire with the propositional content *that he eat*.¹ Shieva Kleinschmidt, Kris McDaniel and Ben Bradley and others point out that this simple analysis seems to make wrong predictions in counterfactuals where Tom *loses* his desire to eat.²

Suppose Tom loses his desire to eat but ends up eating anyway (e.g. so as not to offend his host). McDaniel and Bradley (2008, reconstructed from 271) argue as follows:

P1. Tom's desire to eat is satisfied iff Tom eats. [By Standard View]

P2. Tom ends up eating. [By stipulation]

C. So, Tom's desire to eat is satisfied. [By P1, P2]

P3. But '[s]urely it is just wrong to say that his [Tom's] previous desire has been satisfied'. [Datum; McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 271]

Contradiction.

Now suppose Tom loses his desire and goes to bed:

P1'. Tom's desire to eat is satisfied iff Tom eats, otherwise frustrated. [By Standard View]

¹There is one issue that will only distract from matters. Propositions have truth-values that do not change over time. The typical way to do this would be to incorporate a temporal component to determine a proposition that is *absolutely* true or false. But it is far from clear how to assign an absolutely true or false proposition to Tom's desire to eat. After all, there is no time t , such that Tom wants to eat at t . And obviously, nor is it true that Tom wants that there is a time t such that he eats at t . This poses some *prima facie* problem for the standard view. A possible solution that is consistent with this constraint is to construe the relevant desire as having token-reflexive contents (e.g. a desire to eat so long as one still has *this* desire), see Higginbotham (1995) and Schiffer (1976). Thanks to Mike Martin for discussion on this point.

²Gordon (1986) points out a similar issue, but does not pursue an objection to the standard view in quite the same way.

P2'. Tom ends up not eating. [By stipulation]

C'. So, Tom's desire to eat is frustrated. [By P1, P2]

P3'. But '[s]urely it is just wrong to say that his [Tom's] previous desire has been frustrated'. [Datum; McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 271].³

Contradiction.

So in both counterfactuals, the simple propositional analysis of the standard view cannot be reconciled without contradicting some compelling intuitions about the satisfaction conditions of such desires.

1.2 Existing Discussion

Clearly something has gone wrong here; where do we diagnose the fault?

One diagnosis is that we have incorrectly characterised the content of Tom's desire. Schiffer (1976, p. 200), Persson (2005, p. 154) and others argue that the content involves a certain conditional proposition. Kleinschmidt, McDaniel and Bradley and others go to great lengths to supply counterexamples to many of these accounts which I will not rehearse here.⁴

Another diagnosis arrived at by McDaniel and Bradley is that the standard view fails to recognise a third way for desires to be, namely *neither satisfied nor frustrated* ('cancelled', McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 279). If this is right, then the standard view faces a deep irremediable problem since it entails that every desire is either satisfied or frustrated on the assumption that every proposition is either true or false.⁵ McDaniel and Bradley's fix involves complicating, not the content, but the desire *relation* by proposing that all desires have *two* contents: one stating the *object* of the desire and another giving the *condition* which must obtain in order for the desire to be satisfied or frustrated; otherwise it is cancelled. On their view, CP-desires

³For now, I assume that McDaniel and Bradley's use of 'frustrated' simply means 'not satisfied'/'unsatisfied' rather than something more specific; more discussion to follow in §3.

⁴See Kleinschmidt (*ms.* Pp. 5–10), McDaniel and Bradley (2008, pp. 270–4).

⁵Following McDaniel and Bradley, I disregard solutions that proceed by arguing that propositions might lack truth-values, e.g. Edgington (1986).

are desires where the condition makes reference to one's still having the relevant desire.⁶

This paper proposes an alternative diagnosis by clarifying what I think is a crucial element of the problem, namely the notion of satisfaction and its relationship with the persistence conditions of desire. Until we attain a better understanding of the paradigmatic CP-desires, an important issue that I will set aside until §3 is that of the *contrast* to CP-desires.

2 Satisfaction

The notion of desire satisfaction is often relied on upon as data points guiding theorising about the nature and content of desire, but rarely is the concept an independent object of investigation.⁷ In this section, I begin the task of clarifying distinct notions of satisfaction. This will be used to address the problem of §1. I begin by considering two distinct readings of possessive noun phrases like 'Tom's desire'.

2.1 Objectual and Attitudinal Readings

Consider:

1. Tom's desire that Bowie's *Heroes* be played at Alice's funeral is satisfied.

Focus here on the noun phrase 'Tom's desire' which many have pointed admit of two readings.⁸ Read *objectually*, 'Tom's desire that Bowie's *Heroes*

⁶This, as McDaniel and Bradley recognise, is incomplete since the desire on which the CP-desire is conditional will itself be conditional. McDaniel and Bradley go on to provide a yet more complex analysis (see McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 277). The fact that McDaniel and Bradley's account ultimately requires such a complicated content makes my dissolution of the problem more attractive.

⁷A noteworthy exception is Wollheim (1999).

⁸There is some disagreement about why these distinct readings are available. Whilst Alvarez (2009, p. 212) takes this to be due to an ambiguity in 'desire', Braun (2015, p. 153) suggests that 'desire' unambiguously denotes 'a general, non-specific term whose extension includes two metaphysically different types of items (desired propositions and [corresponding] desiring-events)' (Braun, 2015, p. 153).

be played at Alice’s funeral’ denotes a *proposition*, namely that *Heroes* be played at Alice’s funeral. Certain sentences like ‘Tom’s desire that p is unattainable’ force such a reading, where the adjectival phrase modifies the object of Tom’s desire (that p), not his desiring it (Alvarez, 2009, p. 212). Read *attitudinally* however, ‘Tom’s desire’ denotes Tom’s psychological attitude of desire. Certain adverbial qualifications of desire phrases, as in ‘Tom’s desire that p is intense’, make sense only if we construe ‘intense’ as modifying Tom’s state of mind, not the object of his desire (Alvarez, 2009, p. 212).

2.2 Satisfaction, Truth and Content

Having outlined object-attitude readings, I use it to clarify two possible ways of reading claims like (1).

Read objectively, (1) amounts to the claim that a *proposition*– the content of Tom’s desire– is ‘satisfied’. It is unclear how exactly to interpret this claim, but if there is a true objectual reading of (1), it is by interpreting the predicate ‘is satisfied’ as ‘is true’. On the most natural objectual reading then, (1) is true just in case Bowie’s *Heroes* is played at Alice’s funeral.

Read attitudinally, (1) claims that Tom’s *desire* is ‘satisfied’. But what could ‘satisfied’ mean here? Defenders of the standard view must have in mind the property a satisfied desire shares with a true belief; namely the property of having a *true propositional content*. Notice that this is a logically stronger claim than (S) and can constitute an informative explanation of *why* (S) holds.

We can neatly show how these two distinct concepts of satisfaction pair with the two readings by disambiguating with subscripts:

‘ S ’s desire that p is satisfied’

Objectual Reading: $is\ satisfied_O \approx$ is true.

Attitudinal Reading: $is\ satisfied_{A1} \approx$ has a true content.

In most cases, the question of whether Tom’s desire is is satisfied_{A1} is ‘transparent’ to the question of whether Tom’s desire is is satisfied_O. But

it is important to emphasise that strictly speaking, what we have here are *two* distinct concepts of satisfaction, one applying to propositional contents, and the other to psychological states.

In the following section, I argue that *satisfaction*_{A1} (\approx has a true content) is not the *only* concept of satisfaction for states of desire. To show this, I begin by outlining an important intuition about desires concerning their persistence conditions and argue that there is a concept of satisfaction yet distinct from *satisfaction*_{A1}.

2.3 Satisfaction as Normal Termination

A natural picture of many desires is of a psychological state that persists though time. We seem to speak of some desires as ‘coming and going’, as ‘besetting’ or ‘assailing’ us before being ‘quelled’, ‘extinguishing’, or ‘dissipating’. This intuition of onset and termination applies to the range of desires canvassed in §1 and operates as a presupposition about desires of the kind appealed to in the arguments considered, e.g. to go swimming, but most clearly with appetitive desires. Paradigmatic such cases include desires to eat, drink or engage in sexual activity.⁹

What is it for a desire to have onset and termination conditions? For present purposes the following suffices: the onset of an appetitive desire to ϕ , e.g. to eat is the point at which a certain activity ϕ , like eating, constitutes a *proximate behaviour-influencing goal* for the subject.¹⁰ The termination of an appetitive desire to ϕ occurs when the activity *ceases* to become a proximate behaviour-influencing goal.

The idea to be developed now is that there is an important concept of desire satisfaction connected to the termination of a desire. To get a fix on this idea, consider how an appetitive desire to eat or drink is satisfied through

⁹Clearly not all desires to eat or drink are appetitive, one can want to eat in order to please one’s host for instance. Appetitive desires are plausibly states with a certain kind of etiology, tied to biological need (Stampe, 1987).

¹⁰To say that ϕ -ing is a proximate goal for S need not imply S is now ϕ -ing or doing something in order to ϕ , only that the goal of ϕ is active in influencing what an agent is now (planning on) doing.

eating or drinking whereupon the state is ‘extinguished’.¹¹ Clearly however, *mere* termination is insufficient for satisfaction in the sense to be developed. It seems false to say one’s desire to eat is *satisfied* when one terminates one’s appetitive desire by ingesting a desire-erasing pill (Gordon, 1986; Lycan, 2012). What is needed is an account of satisfaction as *normal* termination. Since my aim is simply to motivate the idea that there is a distinct concept of satisfaction from $satisfaction_{A1}$ (\approx has a true content) for *some* desires, I will focus on appetitive desires where the notion of satisfaction as normal termination is especially plausible.

The kind of normality relevant to our judgements of satisfaction is highly dependent on the nature of the desires in question. For instance, judgements about the normal way for an appetitive desire to terminate will be sensitive to common beliefs about the *biological functions* of appetite-producing and appetite-suppressing mechanisms. The relevant notion of normality will thus be biological or teleological rather than statistical.

In the case of human desires to eat, judgements of normal termination will be sensitive to beliefs of varying sophistication about the kinds of processes that occur in the complex process known as *satiating*. A desire to eat for instance terminates normally when it terminates through the consumption of food via the operation of the mechanisms underlying satiation. The study of satiation has revealed a syndrome of components: satiety (the feeling of fullness), cognitive, attentional and sensory components. (cf. Benelam, 2009; Kringelbach, 2015). Here the cluster of components constitute criteria for folk judgements about whether a desire terminates normally.

Some philosophers have been sensitive to the existence of such a concept of satisfaction. It falls under what William Lycan calls satisfaction ‘in the ordinary sense’ (Lycan, 2012, p. 203) in contrast with ‘semantic satisfaction’ ($satisfaction_{A1}$). To accommodate this intuition, we should add a third concept of satisfaction to our stock:

‘*S*’s desire that *p* is satisfied’

¹¹What I say here neatly applies to sexual desire; for a complementary discussion, see Shaffer (1978).

Objectual Reading: $is\ satisfied_O \approx$ is true.

Attitudinal Reading:

$is\ satisfied_{A1} \approx$ has a true content.

$is\ satisfied_{A2} \approx$ terminates normally.

What differences are there between the two attitudinal notions of satisfaction? It is plausible that a desire is $satisfied_{A1}$ if it is $satisfied_{A2}$. This would be true if the normal termination condition for a desire is one which entails that desire's having a true content.¹² The converse is where the two notions come apart: there are some desires that can be $satisfied_{A1}$ but not $satisfied_{A2}$. The clearest example is the possibility of an *insatiable* desire. An insatiable desire to eat for example is one that cannot be quelled despite the fact that it is true that one is (now) eating. So although such desires can have true contents and so $satisfied_{A1}$, they cannot be terminated in the normal way, that is, $satisfied_{A2}$.¹³

¹²This claim is plausible on some of the most prominent accounts of the kind of normality at issue here, e.g. Millikan (1984). This is because it is plausible that a desire's having a true content, even if many of our desires do not end up fulfilled, is what explains the proliferation of traits responsible for our conative capacities. It is a condition that holds for the proper function of a desire to be fulfilled in accordance with a 'Normal' explanation (Millikan, 1986, pp. 50–4, 63–7).

¹³An anonymous reviewer has suggested that appetitive desires to eat also involve a desire to feel full, so as to deny the possibility that an insatiable desire to eat involves a single desire that is $satisfied_{A1}$ but not $satisfied_{A2}$. We must be careful to distinguish the object of a desire from what (partially) constitutes its satisfaction. In the present case, it is far from clear that appetitive desires to eat involve a desire to feel full. First, it is important to be careful not to assume that if x terminates one's desire, x is what that desire was for; as a *reductio*, Wittgenstein, criticising Russell (1921, p. 32) who seemingly assumed this, wrote 'if I wanted to eat an apple, and someone punched me in the stomach, taking away my appetite, then it was this punch that I originally wanted.' (Wittgenstein, 1975, p. 64). Second, sometimes we can quell our desire to eat without eating until one feels full (e.g. when one has a snack in the knowledge that dinner will be later than usual). If this counts as genuinely satisfying the desire (for now, until it resurfaces later), then it makes less plausible the idea that appetitive desires to eat always involves a desire to feel full.

3 CP-Desires Examined

This section aims to do two things. The primary aim will be to dissolve the seeming problem posed by CP-desires. I do this by showing how clarity with respect to which concept of satisfaction we are deploying in intuitive judgements about the (non-) satisfaction of CP-desires suffice to resolve any apparent contradiction. The secondary aim will be to explain the source of any merely apparent contradiction as due to an equivocation over what are three distinct concepts of satisfaction.

3.1 The Problem Revisited

Recall the case discussed in §1: Tom, we are told, has a desire to eat which he loses. In the first counterfactual, Tom ends up eating anyway. The first problematic piece of reasoning:

P1. Tom's desire to eat is satisfied iff Tom eats. [By Standard View]

P2. Tom ends up eating. [By stipulation]

C. So, Tom's desire to eat is satisfied. [By P1, P2]

P3. But '[s]urely it is just wrong to say that his previous desire has been satisfied [when he ends up eating]'. [Datum; McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 271]

Contradiction.

For there to be genuine inconsistency, the interpretation of 'satisfied' in (C) and (P3) must remain constant. I argue that this argument fails to derive a contradiction on each possible disambiguation of 'satisfied'.

Suppose we read (C) and (P3) *objectually*. In this case, 'is satisfied' is disambiguated in both premises as *is satisfied_O* (\approx is true). But then it is clear that (C) is *true* given the stipulation that the proposition that Tom eats is true. The problem however is that (P3), by that very fact, comes out *false*. This is because (P3) asserts that it is 'just wrong' to say that the

proposition that Tom eats is true relative to a case in which it is stipulated that Tom *does* eat.

Suppose we read (C) and (P3) *attitudinally*. There are two possible concepts of satisfaction applicable. Since appetitive desires are paradigmatic cases where the intuition of onset and termination applies, we disambiguate ‘is satisfied’ as *is satisfied*_{A2} (\approx terminates normally). This explains why (P3) is *true*: it is impossible for a desire to terminate normally (be satisfied_{A2}) after it has *already* terminated as stipulated in the description of the case. (Analogously: it is impossible for a song to end at a point after it has already ended.) The problem however is that (C) then comes out clearly *false*. This is because it is false to say that Tom’s desire terminated normally at a time after it has been stipulated to have already terminated.

To sum then, the first piece of reasoning no longer generates any contradiction when we eliminate the possible source of equivocation.

3.2 Detour: Satisfaction_{A1}

I have not considered the possible disambiguation of ‘satisfied’ on the attitudinal reading of (C) and (P3) as *satisfied*_{A1} (\approx has a true content). Before I demonstrate that the second piece of reasoning fails to generate a contradiction, I want to show for completeness that no contradiction results in a case where the notion of satisfied_{A1} is in play.

To show this, recall Tom’s desire that Bowie be played at Alice’s funeral. Suppose now that Tom loses this desire because he learns that Alice actually hated Bowie. Suppose that by accident Bowie’s *Heroes* is played. Is (1) true or false?

1. Tom’s desire that Bowie’s *Heroes* be played at Alice’s funeral is satisfied.

Objectually read, the proposition expressed by (1) is true since it amounts to the claim that the proposition that Bowie be played at the funeral is true, which is obviously true relative to a case in which it is stipulated that *Heroes* is played. But then it is entirely unclear, as above, how (1), objectually read,

could be claimed to be ‘just wrong’. We do not seem to yield the contradiction that McDaniel and Bradley need to motivate their account.

Attitudinally read, (1) is true if Tom’s desire has a true proposition as its content. Here, we do not yield the contradiction that McDaniel and Bradley need to motivate their account for it is plausible to think that relative to contexts of assessment in which *it is stipulated that the subject no longer has the desire*, an attitudinal reading is simply *unavailable* for that very reason and so we are forced to read (1) objectually. If this is right, then my previous reasoning about the objectual reading applies.^{14,15}

For completeness, take the counterfactual in which Tom loses the desire for the aforementioned reasons but in which Bowie is *not* played. On the objectual reading, the sentence ‘Tom’s desire is unsatisfied/frustrated’ is true since that Bowie was not played is part of the stipulated case. The same reasoning as above applies concerning the possibility an attitudinal reading, which given its unavailability will force an objectual reading in which case the reasoning with respect to the objectual reading will apply. Once again, we do not yield the kind of contradiction that McDaniel and Bradley need to motivate their account.

3.3 Back to the Problem

Let us now return to the previous case where Tom loses his desire to eat and goes to bed, where we were presented with the following piece of reasoning:

¹⁴In conversation, some have expressed hesitation about how to evaluate (1) on the basis that it is unclear that it makes sense to think of past desires as having content. Roughly, the concern seems to be that on certain causal theories of content, to bear content requires that there exist a mental state which can stand in various (counterfactual) causal relations to the environment. To be clear, this issue does not affect my argument. For *if* past desires cannot have content then (1) is *false* relative to the case described since a past desire cannot have propositional content and so *a fortiori* cannot have a *true* proposition as its content. In the variant in which Bowie is not played, it would be *false* to say that Tom’s past desire has a false proposition as its content. Thanks to Ulrike Heuer for discussion.

¹⁵One problem to be guarded against which I have found discussing such cases is that assessors asked to evaluate (1) at a context in which the desire is stipulated to have ceased simply *set aside* the fact that the desire has become past, evaluating (1) *as if* Tom still had the desire.

P1'. Tom's desire to eat is satisfied iff Tom eats, otherwise frustrated. [By Standard View]

P2'. Tom ends up not eating. [By stipulation]

C'. So, Tom's desire to eat is frustrated. [By P1, P2]

P3'. But '[s]urely it is just wrong to say that his [Tom's] previous desire has been frustrated'. [Datum; McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, p. 271]

Contradiction.

What I have assumed so far is that a frustrated desire is simply a desire that is not satisfied. Suppose we persist with this assumption. When (C') is read objectually then, it expresses the proposition that it is false that Tom eats, an obvious truth relative to the case as stipulated. The problem however is that (P3'), by that very fact, comes out false given how the case is described.

The argument suffers a similar fate when receiving an attitudinal reading. If we disambiguate 'is frustrated' as *is not satisfied*_{A2} (\approx does not terminate normally), then (C') expresses the proposition that Tom's desire failed to terminate in the normal way. This is true given the case as described: the desire dissipates before being terminated through eating. The problem is that (P3'), by that very fact, comes out false.

Let us now revisit the assumption that a frustrated desire is simply a desire that is not satisfied. A final gambit would be to claim that the set of 'frustrated' desires is a more narrow kind of unsatisfied desire. McDaniel and Bradley do not say what kind. The only options I can think of are variants on the idea that a desire is frustrated when the subject comes to feel frustrated attempting to satisfy a now past desire, gives up attempting to, and so on.¹⁶ The problem with this however is that it renders the problem posed by CP-desire for the standard view entirely superficial since the fix is obvious: reformulate (S) using 'not satisfied' or 'unsatisfied' rather than 'frustrated'.

¹⁶For discussion, see Lecture 1 of Wollheim (1999).

Moreover the gambit renders McDaniel and Bradley’s solution otiose. Though it would be true that some desires are neither satisfied nor frustrated (in the stipulated sense), this amounts to the relatively innocuous observation that it is possible for one’s desire to cause one frustration having failed to terminate in the normal way or before it had a true content. These are facts about desire that do not require the solution that McDaniel and Bradley propose.

I will end this section with two clarificatory points.

The first considers the implications of my argument for McDaniel and Bradley (2008). To be clear, the point I am pressing is that the kinds of desires appealed to do not necessitate McDaniel and Bradley’s account. This is because either the arguments that aim to establish this are unsound, or in the case of the final gambit, the desires appealed to pose no deep problem to the standard view, and so do not require McDaniel and Bradley’s account.¹⁷ I wish to further emphasise that there might be some *abductive* reason to accept McDaniel and Bradley’s account. They argue that their account can be employed to solve other puzzles of desire (McDaniel and Bradley, 2008, pp. 279–92). I have not claimed that the standard view has equal or greater abductive superiority to McDaniel and Bradley’s account. Nevertheless, the work done here will be key for someone sympathetic to making such a case since the problem posed by CP-desires seems to indicate a deep structural defect with the standard view. As far as I am aware, there are no responses to this problem in the literature. The fact that sensitivity to the psychologised notions of desire satisfaction can easily dissolve the problem constitutes good reason for paying them greater attention when theorising about desire.

The second point concerns the role of the objectual reading in my arguments. In particular, one might balk at whether there is a sense of ‘satisfied’ apt for the objectual reading (satisfaction_O). It is important to note that as far as my primary aim is concerned, it does not actually matter whether

¹⁷I have not aimed to establish the negative universal claim that *no such desire could exist*. I have after all described a simple way in which desires can be neither satisfied nor frustrated; the point just is that no reason has been given to establish desire of the kind that necessitates the account in McDaniel and Bradley (2008). The onus is on those who claim such desire exist to describe the relevant case.

there really is a sense of ‘satisfied’ apt for the objectual reading provided I have adequately shown that no problematic contradiction arises for the concepts of satisfaction relied on in attitudinal readings. But *if* there is an objectual reading, I have shown that no problematic contradiction arises. To be clear, the role that the notion of satisfaction_O plays in my argument is by figuring in an *explanation* of the seeming puzzle generated by CP-desires, my secondary aim. Notice though that for the explanation to be successful, it only needs to be plausible that *assessors* may interpret ‘satisfied’ as satisfied_O when the objectual reading is raised to salience. *This* psychological claim is plausible even if one has misgivings about whether the concept of satisfaction_O is widely used.

3.4 Desires *not* conditional on their own persistence?

In §1, I explained that CP-desires are supposed to contrast with desires that are *not* conditional on their own persistence. This section re-examines the alleged contrast.

As with CP-desires, the contrast class is characterised by giving examples of paradigmatic cases. Parfit gives three examples. First, a desire that someone’s life goes well (Parfit, 1984, p. 151). Second are ‘unconditional desires of the dead’ (Parfit, 1984, p. 151) such as a desire that one’s estate be given to charity. Third, a child’s desire to become a poet (Parfit, 1984, p. 157).

What exactly is the contrast supposed to be? One rough idea is that a CP-desire that *p* is a desire for a state of affairs *p* that is wanted only in so far as you still have the desire in question. Clearly this won’t do since on this understanding, it seems that *every* desire is a CP-desire since the property of *being desired only if desired* is true of all *desiderata*. Take the desire that one’s estate be given to charity. If one did not in fact desire this, then obviously the state of affairs in which that one’s estate is given to charity would not be, in fact, something one desired.¹⁸

¹⁸Of course there can be desires with explicitly conditional contents which are not, in this sense, ‘trivially’ conditional on their own persistence. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for emphasising this.

Is there another non-trivial way to understand the idea? A plausible interpretation is one that focusses, not on the *content* of desire or the desire relation, but on the connection between desires and our reasons for action. The idea is that a CP-desire that p is a desire that no longer constitutes a *reason* to bring about that p once *past*, whereas non-CP desires provides a reason *even when past*.¹⁹

This distinction emerges when comparing two of Parfit's examples: a transient desire to go for a swim at moonlight or certain desires with a posthumous content. Take the desire to go for a swim at moonlight. If such desires constitute pro tanto reasons for action, then it is plausible that they do so only at times when they exist. If one no longer finds the prospect appealing (cf. Chang, 2004), then the fact that one had such a desire would constitute no reason for one, or indeed anyone, to ensure that one went swimming at moonlight.²⁰ In contrast, Alice's posthumous desire that Bowie be played at her funeral provides *some* reason, other things being equal, for her executor to bring this about even when Alice's no longer has any mental states.

Why exactly some desires retain their status as reasons once past is an important question which I do not aim to address here. For present purposes, I want to emphasize that it is not at all clear why accounting for this difference requires solutions that require us to think of such desires as having complex propositional contents, or more radically, to reject the standard view of desire.

¹⁹This interpretation is plausibly Parfit's. One piece of evidence is that it coheres well with how Parfit introduced the distinction: '[i]f a desire is conditional on its own persistence, it can obviously be ignored once past [whereas] in the case of other desires [e.g. a desire that someone's life goes well] there is no such general reason for this to be so.' (Parfit, 1984, p. 151) The interpretation coheres given that a consideration which is no longer a reason, e.g. that one previously wanted to eat or go for a swim, can 'obviously be ignored'.

²⁰For a related discussion of this feature with respect to the Humean account of reasons, see Maslen (2002, p. 43)'s response to Nagel (1970, Ch.6)'s discussion of transient desires and the rationality of prudent conduct.

4 Conclusion

This paper has examined desire satisfaction, a notion often relied on but rarely discussed. Attaining a better understanding of this concept is important not simply for its own sake but because failure to clarify it leads to problems such as the one posed in McDaniel and Bradley (2008) which is leveraged to motivate a revisionary account of desire. Whilst I am no friend of the standard view, I think the problem rests on a mistake. I have argued that the source of the problem arises through equivocating several distinct notions of satisfaction. Careful disambiguation leaves it unclear where the problem lies, obviating the need for more complex interventions found in the literature.

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