

Wanting and Affect: Foundational Problems

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I

1. Galen Strawson's charming story of the Weather Watchers aims primarily, and I think successfully, at dismantling the conception of wanting as a disposition to act, particularly as it is found in the texts of conceptual functionalism. We are in agreement that this cannot be the core of the concept of wanting.

2. Strawson goes on to make the positive claim that wanting is "more intimately", "internally" or "constitutively" related to hedonic experience (1994, 282). He also claims that "the fundamental and only essential element in desire is just: wanting (or liking) something", a claim he characterises as a "tautology" (1994, 266).

3. As far as I can see, Strawson does not argue for this claim, except in so far as it gains a certain plausibility from the kinds of examples he uses against the functionalist conception. As he quite rightly points out, we want a great deal of things over which we believe that we have no influence. Spectator sports and the ways of the weather undoubtedly provide paradigm cases here. One could add the fact that we also want certain things to happen without our having any influence on the occurrence. If a mother wants her child to apologise without being prompted by her, then the specification of the non-interference by the bearer of the want is part of its content.

4. Examples of these kinds help to make Strawson's negative point. They may also appear to offer prima facie support for the claim that there is a more intimate connection between wanting and hedonic experience. In each of these cases, if what is wanted occurs, the person will tend to experience some sort of positive emotion, essential to which is a level of hedonic gain.

5. But why should these experiences be constitutive of wanting any more than dispositions to action? I fail to see a difference in the status of hedonic and motivational dispositions. Both are typically associated with wanting in beings such

as ourselves. A warning that Strawson – quite correctly – repeatedly levels at conceptual functionalism is not to generalise from "our own case". But this seems to be precisely what he is doing himself. If we can coherently imagine beings that want things without being motivated by their wants, simply because they are not motivational beings, why should not the same be possible for beings that lack the capacity for hedonic experience? Strawson tells us that he has a "sense" (1994, 282) that such beings should not be seen as desiring, but does not tell us why.

6. I would like to invite him to do so in Konstanz. In the meantime here's an alternative suggestion: to want something is to be the bearer of an attitude that is expressed in an utterance such as "Let it be the case that p ", a proposal first advanced by Anthony Kenny (1963, 218). If we take this as the core of what it is to want, further typical symptoms of the attitude can be grouped around it. It is typical of humans that they are motivated to (try to) realise what they want, i.e. something in us moves us to do so. It is also characteristic of humans to experience pleasure when the contents of their wants are realised, whether through them or through some other agency. And characteristic cases of wanting exhibit both symptoms – as well as some others, to which I shall return towards the end of these remarks. But there seem to be perfectly good examples of wanting without one or the other. I shall mention examples of these as I proceed.

II

1. In what sense, then, might it appear plausible that hedonic experience or affect is particularly "constitutive of" or "internal to" wanting? As far as I can see, there are five significant ways in which affect and wanting are related. Four of them have been elevated by some more or less distinguished philosopher to a constitutive status. In what follows, I shall briefly characterise each relation in turn before saying why it cannot plausibly be assigned such a status.

(A) Present Discomfort

2. According to the first conception, wanting that p is equivalent to experiencing discomfort at $\neg p$. This is basically the conception advanced by Locke in the *Essay*,

Book II, chapter xxi (§§29ff.). Thus understood, wanting p is a matter of feeling discomfort or "unease" at p -lessness. One can capture the idea by saying that, where beliefs "aim at truth", so wants "aim at relief".

3. If this has a certain plausibility for what Locke (§34) calls "the uneasiness of hunger and thirst", it is hardly generalisable. It makes acting on our wants always a matter of conforming to what Nowell-Smith (1957, 98) memorably dubbed the "itch-scratch pattern".¹ But if someone gets up on the first morning of her holiday and ponders what to do on that day, she doesn't do so by checking herself for signs of discomfort. The mental process gone through is likely to involve the positive imagining of possible goals for the day. And as people on holiday are generally after some kind of hedonic gain, such an imaginative process will often be accompanied by the attempt to gauge the extent to which activities of a certain kind are prospectively pleasurable. Such cases point to a second possible way of understanding pleasure or pain as constitutive of wanting.

(B) Expected Pleasure

4. "The prospect of pain or pleasure" is, at least on one plausible reading, constitutive of the Humean passions (THN II, iii, 3). According to the conception suggested by such a reading, for a person to want that p is for her to *believe* that, should p occur, it would bring her some form of hedonic gain.

5. The traditional response to this claim is that we want things we won't be around to experience, such as our own fame or the well being of our children after our deaths. This response still seems to me to be perfectly appropriate.

6. A second response is, I think, of primary importance for an understanding of why no hedonic conception of wanting can be right. This consists in pointing out the obvious fact that *instrumental* wants are also wants. We often want things for the sake of other things. In fact, *most* of the things we want are wanted for the sake of

¹ Nowell-Smith inaccurately attributes an itch-scratch conception of desire and its satisfaction to Hobbes.

other things.² Even where pleasure is the ultimate goal, the motivational transfer that takes place from end to means is obviously not accompanied by the same transfer of hedonic expectations: wanting q in order to bring about p simply does not entail expecting pleasure from q , just because p is expected to be pleasurable. Jock, for instance, may well expect more pleasure, or less discomfort, from a life which is physically healthy and believe that unpleasant things like jogging before breakfast and cold showers are means to achieve this aim. If he therefore indulges in these practices regularly, he may even come to find them pleasant and thus to expect to find them pleasant. That transformation is, however, obviously no conceptual consequence of his cognitive judgement, but is rather a possible contingent result of his regularly performing the actions that are the means to his end. And, of course, that hedonic change may not set in at all, in spite of the fact that Jock manages repeatedly to muster the motivation to do what has to be done.

(C) *Imaginative Pleasure*

7. An alternative to seeing wanting as a primarily epistemic exercise is to see it as conceptually bound up with imagination, as Moritz Schlick (1930, II.4; VIII.4) did. According to a conception along these lines, a person wants p if they gain pleasure from imagining p . Schlick argued that we can be motivated to bring about an event it is pleasant to imagine in spite of believing that the event itself will be unpleasant – for instance, dying a heroic death. For this reason, he claims, the imaginative-hedonic conception of wanting³ is more plausible than any position that ties wanting to expected hedonic gain.

8. However, in spite of the fact that enjoying imagining some experience will often lead someone to want to really experience it, there is no necessity that wanting to do or experience something involve imagining enjoying that thing. Even when the reason we want that p is that we expect pleasure from it, we can want that p without imagining it. Someone might want to go to a concert because she it has been recommended to her by a friend, who has told her he is sure she will enjoy it. But, as

² Quite often, of course, what is ultimately being aimed at is pleasure. But even if pleasure were to be the ultimate *object* of all our wants, that wouldn't make a relation to pleasure *constitutive* of what it is to want.

³ Actually, Schlick saw this as an explanation of *motivation*, rather than of wanting.

she knows nothing more than this about what she can expect from the concert, she is unlikely to engage in imagining the experience.

9. Conversely, deriving pleasure from imagining a proposition is by no means sufficient for wanting it to really happen. It strikes me as a mark of the peculiar human life form that we can gain pleasure from the imaginative experience of things whose real occurrence would horrify us.

10. It is instructive here to compare imaginative and perceptual pleasure. There are things we enjoy perceiving without them necessarily stirring any kind of desire in us. For instance, we are apparently biologically wired so that the sight of the bodily proportions of young children or animals causes a surge of warm feeling in us. But surely that doesn't entail us wanting anything in particular. If you find the sight of some baby cute, there is no implication that you either want such a baby or even want to continue looking at it. In this respect, perceptual and imaginative pleasure are, as far as I can see, of a piece.

(D) Counterfactual Pleasure

11. There is a final twist that can be given to the problem of unifying hedonic experience and wanting. This is to go counterfactual. Two such possibilities are worth mentioning:

According to the first (D1), to want p is to be disposed in such a way that, if you were to acquire a belief that p is the case, you would experience hedonic gain.

According to the second (D2), to want p is to be disposed in such a way that, if you were to imagine p being the case, you would experience hedonic gain (Fehige 2001, 50).

12. Something like D1 *seems* to be a position Strawson finds plausible. "A reliable tendency to react with pleasure or displeasure...", he writes, "may surely be held to be sufficient ..." (1994, 383). That we are the bearers of some such tendency is, he claims, something we may just come to discover about ourselves.

13. According to either D1 or D2, the *primary* form of access to one's wants would be via self-observation. Now, it is certainly correct that a theory of wanting has to make it clear how there *can* be such a thing as coming to find out what you want, that is, it should leave conceptual room for non-conscious variants of the attitude. However, it ought to make equally clear why it is that we *characteristically* know what it is we want *non-inferentially*. The fact that we generally know what we want cannot plausibly be a purely contingent matter. But such a contingent epistemic relation is the consequence of any counterfactual conception.

14. A second consequence of counterfactual conceptions concerns their capacity to make sense of wanting's typical motivational effects. Were a conception of this kind to be correct, then wants would not only have no conceptually central relation to action causation. They could not be the bearers of motivation *at all*. We would not do things because we wanted to do them, but because we *believed* that we wanted to do them. I may be disposed to enjoy eating all sorts of food I have never heard of, but be in no way motivated to eat them. The relevant motivation is only likely to ensue as a result of my acquiring the belief that, if I were to eat them, a pleasurable experience would ensue. According to counterfactualists, it thus ceases to be true that we generally act because we want so to act.

15. A possible response to both of these objections is simply to deny their premises, both of which ground in everyday understandings of what it is to want something. The counterfactual affectivist could simply claim both that we indeed only become acquainted with our wants as a result of introspective self-observation and that our wants are not what motivate our actions. Against such a strategy there are no arguments in the strict sense of the word, except to say that it leads to a reconstruction of something other than the everyday concept of wanting.

16. Strawson's talk of a "reliable tendency" to affective experience may be meant to alleviate at least the first problem, as "reliability" can be taken to presuppose repeated experience and corresponding inductively formed beliefs. If this is correct, does this leave us with B rather than D1? Or with the conjunction of B and D1? Or perhaps with their disjunction? I can't see that either of these latter two compound options will solve the problems that afflict their components individually.

(E) "*Pain of Exclusion*"

17. There is a final significant relationship between wanting and hedonic experience. This is that wanting that p and believing that $\neg p$ often leads to what one might call *second-order discomfort* at the non-realisation of p (cf. Duncker 1940/41, 417). Obviously, this relationship between wanting and displeasure is no candidate for a definition of wanting. However, it does describe a significant way in which wanting and hedonic experience are bound up with one another. The significance of this pattern of interaction between the two is shown by the fact that we have a whole series of terms to refer to it, such as "to crave", "to hunger" or "thirst for" and "to be dying for".

18. Admittedly, it is not always easy to work out whether the discomfort is of type A or of type E. The test is whether the discomfort could be eradicated by eradicating the want itself. If relief can be gained as much by destroying the want as by satisfying it, then the discomfort in question is going to be a form of the pain of exclusion.

III

1. In his *Pleasure and Desire* (1969, 122ff.), J.C.B. Gosling argues we would have difficulty seeing ourselves sharing a life form with creatures whose wanting is completely cut off from hedonic relations.⁴ This remark has, it seems to me, exactly the same status as analogous remarks about creatures whose wanting is completely motivation-free. We should not, as Strawson says, generalise from "our own case". But we should do so in neither the one nor in the other direction. We are the bearers of instrumental, institutional and moral wants on the one hand, and wants concerning propositions whose realisation lies outside the sphere of our influence on the other. One set may lack hedonic, the other set motivational qualifications. But in all these cases, to want is to be the bearer of a mental posture expressible by a "Let it be the case ..." utterance. Wanting is the setting, or having set, of subjective standards, a movement of the mind that has certain typical effects.

⁴ "[P]eople who to any considerable extent fail to want_p [i.e. want "with pleasure connotations"] are peculiar at least in the sense of being unlike most human beings" (1969, 123).

2. According to the conceptual functionalist programme (Lewis 1966, 19ff.), clarifying the concept of wanting would involve detailing all the causes and effects characteristically, although not necessarily, associated with the phenomenon. In this light, Armstrong's neo-behaviourist concentration on action causation (1968, 139ff.; 154ff.) is, even by functionalist lights, inadequate. Wanting is typically involved in a whole set of causal relationships. Here are some of the characteristic effects of wanting p :

- (i) *Primary motivational* effects: action to bring about p
- (ii) *Secondary motivational* effects:
 - (bi) epistemic action: to find out whether p ;
 - (bii) expressive action: to talk about p .
- (iii) *Perceptual* effects: "salience"
 - of information that might confirm or disconfirm p ;
 - of information that might be useful for bringing about p ;
 - of information that is merely associated with p .
- (iv) *Imaginative* effects: involuntary or deliberate fantasising about p .
- (v) *Hedonic* effects: of the five types I have been discussing.

Now there is little doubt that (i) and (v) are the principle symptoms of wanting. They seem to occur more frequently and they are at least experientially more prominent than (ii), (iii) and (iv). Nevertheless, we all recognise these other phenomena as symptoms of wanting in our everyday interactions.

3. My point is that we can, in thought, strip the core of wanting of *all* these effects –following Strawson's strategy with the Weather Watchers. There is no conceptual reason why one shouldn't take the thought experiment a step further. This could lead us to what one might call the *Disaffected Weather Watchers*. The figures from the Strawsonian narrative would have been stricken by the withering away of a further capacity – to have positive and negative hedonic experience. But they could still carry on in their strange and, *for us*, seemingly pointless practice of standard setting for the weather, internally noting when what the weather does meets those standards and when it doesn't. Whether those standards are met or not would simply no longer have any hedonic consequences.

4. Perhaps we wouldn't call the attitudinal core that remains "wanting" in our everyday sense of the word. When we talk of "wanting" on an everyday basis, we often mean an attitude that is also hedonically qualified in one way or another. This is, however, not always the case, as the blanket use of the question "What do you want?" makes clear. If you (rudely) put this question to the cleaners when they knock at your office door and you get the answer "To empty your rubbish bin", they would not thereby be giving you cause to imagine that they are really looking forward to the sensual pleasure of emptying out the bin's contents or that they have been suffering at the thought of the unemptied bin in your office. They are just acting according to the standard of bin-emptying that their boss has informed them of and which they have accepted in taking on the job.

5. Note that there *is* one type of mental capacity that we cannot conceive as withering away in the Weather Watchers if they are to remain wanters. This is the capacity to *believe*. A mental posture according to which some proposition *is to be* the case can only exist in an entity that has a conception of things *being* the case, that is, a conception of what it means for contents of their mental attitudes to conform to the way things are. Wanting, in contrast to being hedonically disposed, is thus dependent on believing, although the converse is arguably not the case.

6. There is actually one sense in which there is a closer connection between wanting and motivation than there is between wanting and hedonics. This is that motivation to *a* is at least a *sufficient* condition for wanting to *a*, whereas this is simply not true of a disposition to feel pleasure or decreased displeasure. We may be disposed to feel pleasure on having experiences that are only possible on Alpha Centauri. However, as we have no concept of these experiences, we cannot be said to want them. Being motivated to do something, however, entails – at least this is the normal understanding of "motivation" – wanting to do it.

7. It is worth mentioning a linguistic symptom of the symmetry that by-and-large exists between hedonic and motivational symptoms of wanting: the two symptoms are given particular prominence by two ways of using the expression *to really want*. We sometimes deny that someone "really wanted" some proposition if they

experience no pleasure on its instantiation, just as we sometimes deny that someone "really wants" to perform some action if they are not prepared to adopt the means they take to be necessary for its performance.

8. In both of these cases, the literal implication of the use of the adjective "really" is that anything else would only be pseudo-wanting. But the epithet is surely not to be taken literally. Unwillingness to adopt unwanted means to some end merely indicates that the agent isn't sufficiently motivated in the context, not that he has no desire for the end. And people can be disappointed on attaining what they wanted and, as a result, cease to want things of that kind in the future. But their action to bring about the relevant state of affairs in the first place is an indication of their prior desire to bring it about. Moreover, people can irrationally continue to want things they know are going to bring them ill – wanting that can be accompanied by the symptoms i – iv, as well as by hedonic effects C and E.

9. Paradigmatic cases of wanting will include both motivational and hedonic components. One could with justification claim that they will involve *all five* relations to hedonic experience that I have discussed. In *that* sense, affect is perhaps "more intimately" related to wanting than any other symptom. But that would be a matter of merely *quantitative* "intimacy" and no "internal" or "constitutive" relation.

Literature

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