

Death and Desires

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In “The Makropulos Case,” Bernard Williams argued for the importance of what he called “categorical desires” in understanding the evil of death and the unattractiveness of immortality (Williams 1993). According to Williams, categorical desires play three roles. First, there is a *psychological* role. When someone chooses to live rather than die, her choice must be explained by some categorical desire she has. Second, there is a *normative* role. Categorical desires, unlike other desires, provide reasons to continue living. Third, there is an *axiological* role. When someone dies, her death can be bad for her only if she had some categorical desire that was frustrated by her death; since it is possible to lack categorical desires, “death is not necessarily an evil” (Williams 1993: 74).¹ According to Williams, a being that lived long enough would, at some point, lose the ability to form categorical desires; at that point, she would not choose to live, nor would she have reason to live, nor would her death be bad for her.

Subsequently, others have made additional claims about categorical desires. One striking claim is that it is impossible for fetuses, infants, and most animals to have categorical desires.² When combined with Williams’s claims about the badness of death, this claim entails that it is not bad for a fetus, infant, or animal to die. This in turn seems to have implications for the wrongness of killing such beings (assuming the wrongness of killing is connected to the badness of death – a controversial assumption).

¹ On the normative and axiological roles, see also Belshaw 2009: 116.

² Belshaw 2009: 117, McMahan 2002: 183, Cigman 1981: 58-9.

Unfortunately it is not clear what Williams means by “categorical desire.” Furthermore, it is not clear, either in Williams’s original paper or in the extant secondary literature, which of these roles, if any, is meant to be *definitional* or constitutive of what it is to be a categorical desire, and accordingly it is not clear whether it is a substantive thesis that some mental state fills any (or all) of these roles. For example, John Fischer says that categorical desires “implicitly answer the question of whether one wishes to remain alive” (1993: 16).³ Is Fischer taking the (alleged) psychological role of categorical desires as being constitutive of them? When Jeff McMahan first mentions categorical desires, he characterizes them as “those that give one a reason to continue to live in order to ensure their satisfaction” (2002: 182). McMahan appears to stress what we are calling the normative role of categorical desires, and given that this is how the technical term is first introduced, it is tempting to read McMahan as implicitly defining categorical desires as those that satisfy the normative role.⁴ Mikel Burley claims that categorical desires are “those of our desires which are capable of being frustrated by death” (2009: 79). This characterization of categorical desires appeals to neither their psychological role nor their normative role but rather to the conditions under which they are capable of being frustrated. This is a better way to define categorical desire. If we define categorical desires by appeal to the psychological, normative or axiological role such desires allegedly play, then apparently interesting claims go trivial (given certain assumptions about desires and reasons to be set forth below). For example, the claim that one has reason to live only if one has categorical desires reduces to the claim that one has reason to live only if one has a desire that gives one a reason to

³ Also see Wisniewski 2005: 28; it is unclear whether Wisniewski defines categorical desires as those that propel one into the future, or as those that are not conditional on being alive; perhaps he takes these to amount to the same thing.

⁴ Also see Belshaw 2009: 116 – though again, we cannot tell whether Belshaw means to *define* categorical desires as those that provide reasons to stay alive.

live. This would make for a bad interpretation of Williams. We therefore plan, at least at the outset, to treat as substantive the claims that categorical desires play a psychological, normative, or axiological role. This is also important because it is even less clear that any particular sort of desire could fill all three roles, or that categorical desires cannot be had by fetuses, babies, or animals.

There is an obvious way to reject the importance of categorical desire to the badness of death: simply deny that desire plays a fundamental role in what our reasons are, or what is good for us. For example, if hedonism were true, then death would be bad for someone no matter what she desired, as long as death deprived her of more pleasure than pain; eternal life would be a good thing, even without any categorical desires, if the future always delivered more pleasure than pain. For the sake of this paper, we will set these worries aside and provisionally accept both a desire-based theory of reasons for action and a desire-based theory of well-being.

Williams does not clearly state what he takes to be the relations between desires, reasons and well-being. According to Williams, “to want something... is to that extent to have reason for resisting what precludes having that thing” (1993: 76). This claim is much too weak to support Williams’s conclusions about the badness of death and eternal life. We provisionally accept the following stronger claims: one has a reason to bring about P only if one desires that P; one has more reason to bring about what one desires more; what is intrinsically good for someone is the satisfaction of her desires; what is intrinsically bad for someone is the frustration of her desires; the satisfaction (frustration) of stronger desires is intrinsically better (worse) than the satisfaction of weaker desires.⁵ We do not believe these assumptions, but without them, it is

⁵ Luper-Foy says that it is only the thwarting of “fulfilling” desires, or desires whose fulfillment would bring a sense of satisfaction, that is bad for someone (1993: 271-2). This distinction does not play a role in our arguments.

hard to see how any of Williams's claims about reasons and value could be plausible or true. We will have reason to clarify these assumptions below.

1. Categorical desires as unconditional desires

What is a categorical desire? Here is what Williams has to say:

Many of the things I want, I want only on the assumption that I am going to be alive; and some people, for instance some of the old, desperately want certain things when nevertheless they would much rather that they and their wants were dead... A man might consider what lay before him, and decide whether he did or did not want to undergo it. If he does decide to undergo it, then some desire propels him on into the future, and *that* desire at least is not one that operates conditionally on his being alive, since it itself resolves the question of whether he is going to be alive. He has an unconditional, or (as I shall say) a categorical desire. (1993: 77)

Williams says that a categorical desire is “not one that operates conditionally on his being alive.” He also says that it is “unconditional.” But a desire can fail to be conditional on being alive while still being conditional on something else, and so fail to be unconditional. (One might want something on the condition that someone else is alive, for example.) Thus it would be a bad idea to identify the class of categorical desires with the class of unconditional desires. It

(Recall that we are provisionally adopting a desire-satisfactionist view of well-being, rather than a view in which pleasant feelings, such as feelings of “felt satisfaction”, are the primary contributors to well-being.)

would be better to say that S's desire that P at t is categorical iff S's desire that P at t is not conditional on S's being alive at t.⁶ But what exactly does this mean?

If we are to identify categorical desires with desires that are not conditional on being alive, it behooves us to think about the notion of conditional desire. It would be natural to think that a conditional desire is a desire whose object is a conditional proposition. And in fact this is just what Steven Luper-Foy says. According to Luper-Foy, to say that S desires that P at t conditional on being alive at t is to say that S desires that the subjunctive conditional *if S were alive at t, then P at t* is true (Luper-Foy 1993: 276).

But this cannot be right.⁷ Suppose S desires that P at t, and that his desire is conditional on his being alive at t. Suppose S dies before t; but suppose that at the closest possible world at which S is alive at t, P at t. Then the subjunctive conditional *if S were alive at t, then P at t* is true.⁸ So S's conditional desire that P at t is *satisfied*, even though S is dead, and P never actually obtains. That cannot be right. It cannot be so easy to satisfy a conditional desire. If it were this easy to satisfy one's desires that are conditional on one's being alive, suicide might often be a more attractive option than it should be. If John now wants dessert after dinner on the condition that he is not too full, his conditional desire for dessert is not satisfied if he stuffs himself silly before dessert time. Nor is his desire for dessert frustrated. Rather, we say that the desire is "cancelled." It is neither satisfied nor frustrated. ("All bets are off" with respect to that desire, in Williams's words (1993: 77).)

⁶ Belshaw (2009: 116) distinguishes desires that are conditional on being alive from categorical desires, which he says are desires that give us a reason to continue living. This suggests that Belshaw might identify categorical desires, ones that give us reason to continue living, with desires that are not conditional on being alive.

⁷ See Kleinschmidt (manuscript), Edgington 1995: 288, and McDaniel and Bradley 2008 for more on why conditional desire is not desire with a conditional object.

⁸ We assume an account of subjunctive conditionals like that found in Lewis 1973 and Stalnaker 1984, but nothing turns on this assumption.

On our view of conditional desire, conditional desire relates a person to two propositions: an object and a condition.⁹ A conditional desire is satisfied iff both its object and its condition are true. It is frustrated iff its condition is true but its object is false. It is cancelled iff its condition is false. Given our assumptions about desire and value, a satisfied desire is intrinsically good for the desirer, a frustrated desire is intrinsically bad, and a cancelled desire is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Since a single desire may be conditional on many things, the condition of a desire will sometimes be a large conjunction. Sometimes one of those conjuncts is that the desirer is alive at some time in the future. In such cases, the desire is conditional on being alive.

We may then define categorical desire in the following way:

CD1. *S* categorically desires that *P* at *t* iff *S* desires that *P* at *t* on the condition that *Q*, where *Q* does not entail that *S* is alive at *t*.

A categorical desire can be satisfied or frustrated even if the desirer dies before *t*. A non-categorical desire that *P* at *t* would be cancelled if the desirer were to die before *t*.

CD1 is the most straightforward way to make sense of the notion that categorical desires are unconditional. But does the resulting notion of categorical desire satisfy the psychological, normative and axiological roles that categorical desire is alleged to fill?

By “the psychological role” of categorical desires, we mean the causal profile of such desires, or how an agent’s categorical desires interact causally with her other mental states and

⁹ We defend this view in McDaniel and Bradley 2008.

her outward behaviors. Williams seems to think that an agent who lacked categorical desires would thereby lack the psychological capacity to intentionally continue living.

We are skeptical about there being anything interesting to say about categorical desires and their potency to propel agents into the future, at least not at this level of generality. We explicitly mention this aspect of Williams's discussion because we are somewhat unsure whether Williams would be happy with calling *every* desire that is not conditional on being alive a categorical desire, since it is hard to believe that many of these desires could be causally relevant to the production of an agent's behavior which is aimed towards sustaining her life. Consider, for example, the desire one might have that the life of a stranger that one met on a train goes well for her. One might have this desire while believing that one will never again see the stranger, and moreover have no opportunity to affect the stranger's welfare. Nonetheless, an agent might have a desire of this sort without it being conditional on her (the agent) continuing to live.¹⁰ It is hard to see how a desire of this sort could causally motivate the agent to continue to live. Similarly for desires concerning matters wholly past or wholly non-contingent. Finally, there are desires that are conditional on being not alive. For example, one might desire, on the condition that one dies tomorrow, that one's spouse receives her possessions. It is hard to see how desires that are conditional on one's not being alive could help one actually stay alive. Should they be called *categorical* in Williams's sense even though it is plausible that they are causally impotent in sustaining an agent's life?

It seems better to think of categorical desires as forming a proper subset of those desires not conditional on being alive. If so, then CD1 does not fully capture Williams's intention, and further restricting clauses need to be added to CD1 in order to do this. It would be interesting to

¹⁰ See Luper-Foy's distinction between independent and dependent goals (1993: 275).

learn that the presence or absence of these clauses would make a difference in what follows. We imagine that some philosophers might want to add the clause that the objects of categorical desires are always “objectively significant” or “meaningful goals,” and by stressing this aspect of their conception of categorical desires, they might thereby make it somewhat more plausible that the presence of such desires is necessary for a good life and the frustrating of such desires a factor that makes the end of a life bad.¹¹ We also imagine that some philosophers might believe that the object of a categorical desire requires a lot of cognitive sophistication to entertain. Perhaps a necessary condition on having categorical desires on this conception is having beliefs about the future or a concept of a self as a self.¹² On a conception according to which the possession of categorical desires requires exceptional intellectual achievement, some non-human animals (as well as some human animals) will fail to have categorical desires. None of these views about categorical desires follows from any of the definitions of categorical desire that we discuss here.

We will set these complications aside in our further evaluation of CD1.

2. Categorical desire and death

In the second sentence of the following passage, Williams appears to be formulating (for the sake of refuting) an argument against the badness of death:

¹¹ Susan Wolf, John Fischer and Mikel Burley describe categorical desires as, at least typically, being about objectively valuable things, and not merely about, e.g., conditions for survival. (Burley 2009: 79, Fischer 2009: 89, Wolf 1997: 211)

¹² One philosopher who requires this sort of cognitive sophistication is Ruth Cigman (1981: 58-9). Fischer also claims that only persons can have categorical desires (1993: 17).

Many of the things I want, I want only on the assumption that I am going to be alive; and some people, for instance some of the old, desperately want certain things when nevertheless they would much rather that they and their wants were dead. It might be suggested that not just these cases, but really all wants, are conditional on being alive; a situation in which one has ceased to exist is not to be compared with others with respect to desire-satisfaction—rather, if one dies, all bets are off. (1993: 77)

Filling in a few blanks, here is how we reconstruct the argument:

1. Death is bad for S only if death frustrates one of S's desires.¹³
2. A desire can be frustrated by death only if it is a categorical desire. (Suppose S desires that P at t, but S's desire that P at t is conditional on S's being alive at t. And suppose S dies before t. Then S's desire is not thwarted.)
3. There are no categorical desires.
4. Therefore, death is never bad for the one who dies.

Williams's response to this argument is to argue that there are some categorical desires, so premise 3 is false. We agree that premise 3 is false and can think of nobody who has defended it. However, Williams accepts premises 1 and 2, which lead us to think he must accept the following argument:

1. Death is bad for S only if death frustrates one of S's desires.

¹³ See also Luper-Foy 1993: 271.

2. A desire can be frustrated by death only if it is a categorical desire.
3. Therefore, death is bad for S only if death frustrates S's categorical desires.

Luper-Foy also seems to find this sort of argument convincing: "since none of their fulfilling desires can be thwarted by death, Epicureans never regard death as a misfortune" (1993: 276).

However, given the account of categorical desire we are working with, the above argument is unsound. Suppose S desires that P conditional on S's being alive. Now compare some ways things might go. If S dies, S's desire is cancelled. No matter whether P obtains or not, S's desire cannot be satisfied or frustrated; all bets are off with respect to P. But if S lives, and P obtains, this is good for S. Suppose that S dies, but that if S had not died, P would have obtained. Then it would seem that, in at least one respect, S's death is bad for S, because S's death prevents something good from happening to S. To be sure, nothing intrinsically bad happens to S as a result of S's death; no desire of S's is frustrated, and the cancellation of a desire is neither intrinsically bad nor intrinsically good for the desirer. But that is insufficient to show that S's death is not bad for S.

Thus we reject premise 1 of this argument, on the grounds that death can be bad for someone by virtue of cancelling (rather than thwarting) her conditional desires, and thereby depriving her of some goodness. Although the cancellation of a desire is never intrinsically bad, when a desire is cancelled that would otherwise have been satisfied, the desirer's life is thereby made less good than it otherwise would have been. And so the cancellation of the desire is bad for the desirer. We hypothesize that the view that conditional desires are desires with conditional propositions as their objects is partly to blame for the seeming attractiveness of this argument. This false view of conditional desire does not allow for the possibility of a desire being

cancelled, thereby rendering invisible the possibility that death could be bad by cancelling rather than frustrating a desire.

If S has a non-categorical desire that P, that desire *might* be insufficient to give S reason to live, *if* S also has (like “some of the old”) a desire to die. The desire to die may outweigh the non-categorical desire that P. In such a case one would have most reason to die, that is, the reasons to die would collectively outweigh the reasons to live. But then there is nothing really special about categorical desires. Having such desires is not necessary for death to be bad. For one thing, one can have a non-categorical desire that P without also having a desire to die. For another thing, the desire to die can outweigh even a categorical desire that P. The only reason categorical desires are different is that they are frustrated, rather than cancelled, when you die. So, given our assumptions about desire and value, when death prevents the satisfaction of a categorical desire (thereby frustrating it) there is some intrinsic badness that is not present when death prevents the satisfaction of a non-categorical desire (thereby merely cancelling it).

Furthermore, given CD1, an eternal life could be composed solely of non-categorical desires and still be a good life, contrary to what Williams argues. “Since I am propelled into longer life by categorical desires, what is promised must hold out some hopes for those desires” (1993: 83). Williams’s mistake is in thinking that only categorical desires, understood in accordance with CD1, can motivate one to continue living, give one reason to live, and make one’s life better than no life at all.¹⁴ Why would he think this? Perhaps the unstated principle supporting Williams’s reasoning is that if S desires that P on the condition that Q, then S should

¹⁴ Stephen Rosenbaum, defending Epicurus, claims that someone with only conditional (non-categorical) desires can have a worthwhile life (Rosenbaum 1993: 302). But Rosenbaum’s argument is based on rejecting desire satisfactionism in favor of hedonism. We do not wish to debate the relative merits of hedonism and desire satisfactionism here. One need not reject desire satisfactionism to believe that a life without categorical desires can be intrinsically good.

be indifferent between a scenario in which both P and Q obtain and a scenario in which Q does not obtain. So if S desires that P on the condition that S is alive, then S should be indifferent between a scenario in which P occurs while S lives and a scenario in which S is not alive. Such a principle might explain why Williams says the following: “a Utilitarian person... certainly has good reason to prevent a situation that involves the nonsatisfaction of his desires. Thus, *granted categorical desires*, death has disutility for an agent” (Williams 1993: 79-80, our emphasis).

Perhaps such a principle can also be attributed to Luper-Foy, given his remark that, since conditional desires “apply only on the assumption that we are alive, they cannot provide grounds for being alive” (1993: 279). But this is a false presupposition. Given our assumptions about desires and goodness, it is better to have a desire satisfied than not; so if you desire that P on the condition that Q, P&Q is better for you than not-Q. Non-categorical desires can give reasons to live. So Williams is right to say that there is reason to prevent the nonsatisfaction of desires; he is wrong to think that death results in the nonsatisfaction of only categorical desires.

Nonsatisfaction sometimes involves frustration, but sometimes involves cancellation.

Here is another way in which a mistaken view about conditional desire might lead one to think that only categorical desires provide reasons to live. Suppose one thinks, as Luper-Foy does, that a conditional desire is a desire whose object is a conditional proposition. Now consider a desire that is conditional on being alive; suppose Jeremy desires to eat food tomorrow on the condition that he is still alive tomorrow. Given Luper-Foy’s account of conditional desires, Jeremy desires that the following subjunctive conditional be true: if Jeremy were to be alive tomorrow, Jeremy would eat food tomorrow. Suppose there is plenty of food around. Then the subjunctive conditional that is the alleged object of Jeremy’s desire is true whether or not Jeremy survives. So this desire gives Jeremy no reason to continue to live. After all, it’s not

as if Jeremy needs to be around to ensure that the desire is satisfied; his actual death is more than compatible with the closest worlds in which he lives being worlds in which he is satiated.

Presumably similar stories could be told about other accounts of conditional desire according to which conditional desires are desires that some conditional be true. But as we've noted, these accounts of conditional desires are false. Conditional desires are not desires with conditional propositions as their objects. Jeremy cannot satisfy his conditional desire for food by dying. A desire for food conditional on being alive is not satisfied on our account when the desirer dies, but is rather cancelled.

One might object that in fact it is not better to have a conditional desire satisfied than cancelled. In many cases, we are indifferent between these options. For example, if my nose itches, I may have a desire to scratch my nose conditional on its continuing to itch. But it seems no better for me to scratch my nose than for it to stop itching on its own. There are many cases like this: one desires to have an umbrella on the condition that it is raining, etc.¹⁵ Do such desires undermine our argument against CD1?

No, they do not. These are all examples of extrinsic desires. On our way of understanding extrinsic desires, an extrinsic desire is a sort of conditional desire (though not all conditional desires are extrinsic). The desire that P is extrinsic just in case it is conditional on P raising the probability of some Q distinct from P. One who endorses a desire-based theory of value typically claims that it is only intrinsic desires, not extrinsic desires, that are relevant to value (Brandt 1979: 111). And in the cases of the itch and the umbrella, what is desired intrinsically (to stop itching, or to be dry) obtains whether the conditional, extrinsic desire is satisfied or cancelled. If the itch goes away by itself, or if it is not raining, then scratching or

¹⁵ Thanks to Shieva Kleinschmidt and David Faraci for suggesting these cases.

having an umbrella fails to raise the probability of not itching or being dry. We cannot think of an example of an intrinsic desire such that it would not matter (supposing the truth of a desire-based axiology) whether the desire was satisfied or cancelled.

If we are right about these claims, then we should also be suspicious about Williams's claim that only categorical desires have the power to motivate one to stay alive. In general we (rationally) prefer to have our intrinsic desires satisfied rather than not satisfied – we prefer to get what we intrinsically want rather than to have our desire frustrated or cancelled. Conditional desires can motivate one to ensure that their conditions are satisfied, since that is necessary for the desires themselves to be satisfied. Or so it seems to us, though we don't want to rely too heavily on our armchair psychologizing.

So CD1 does not satisfy the normative or axiological roles, and possibly not the psychological role either. What of the claim that fetuses, infants and animals lack categorical desires? Given CD1, there seems to be no reason to accept this claim. Why would one think that horses desire food only conditionally on their being alive? If anything, it seems to require a more sophisticated mental apparatus to have a non-categorical desire than to have a categorical desire. Moreover, horses do have desires, and it is apparent that they often act so as to continue living. If categorical desires are necessary to motivate persistence-oriented action, then horses, like any non-suicidal animals that have desires at all, must have some categorical desires.

3. Categorical desires as preferences

It would be rash to conclude that Williams is deeply misguided. Let us proceed in a different way. Instead of first trying to define categorical desire, and then seeing what happens

to Williams's claims about the badness of death, let us start with his claims about the badness of death and work backwards to an account of categorical desire. On this strategy, it is a condition on an account of categorical desire that it yield the normative and axiological results Williams wants: one who has no categorical desires has no reason to live, and death is not bad for such a person.

Williams's thought might be better fleshed out by appeal to preferences rather than desires. Consider Dumpy, who does not particularly want to live, but does not necessarily want to die either. What Dumpy wants is that if he were to survive, he would get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Continued survival without a sandwich would be worse than death from Dumpy's perspective. Dumpy is just the sort of person Williams wishes to say lacks categorical desires. Now let us move to talk of preferences. There are three futures to consider here.

F1: Dumpy dies before t .

F2: Dumpy is alive at t and enjoying a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

F3: Dumpy is alive at t and without sandwich.

Given the story about Dumpy's desires, it would seem that he is indifferent between F1 and F2, but prefers F2 to F3, and also prefers F1 to F3.

Now we must translate this talk of preferences back into desire-talk. It is not clear that desire and preference are interdefinable. However, elsewhere we have suggested a way to define preference in terms of conditional desire, for those who believe in a tight connection between the two:

PD. S prefers P to Q iff S desires that P on the condition that $(P \text{ EOR } Q)$.

EOR. $P \text{ EOR } Q$ iff $(P \ \& \ \text{not-}Q)$ or $(Q \ \& \ \text{not-}P)$. (McDaniel and Bradley 2008: 296)

Given these definitions, here are Dumpy's desires: Dumpy desires $F2$ on the condition that $(F2 \text{ EOR } F3)$ but does not desire $F2$ on the condition that $(F2 \text{ EOR } F1)$; Dumpy desires $F1$ on the condition that $(F1 \text{ EOR } F3)$ but does not desire $F1$ on the condition that $(F1 \text{ EOR } F2)$. As before, if Dumpy dies, one of his desires is cancelled – but another one is automatically satisfied. Dumpy has no more reason to bring about $F1$ than $F2$. Someone like Dumpy, a person with no categorical desires, is a person for whom no outcome in which the person is alive is preferred to an outcome in which he is dead, i.e. there is no P such that he desires that P on the condition that $(P \text{ EOR he is dead})$.

If all this is correct, then here is another way of defining categorical and non-categorical desire:

CD2. S categorically desires that P at t iff S desires that P at t on the condition that $(P$ at t EOR S is dead at $t)$.

If someone lacks all such desires, then, given our assumptions about desire, reason and value, the person would have no reason to continue living, and death would not be bad for her.

So CD2 seems to give us a notion of categorical desire that can apparently fill the normative and axiological roles. But as we will argue in Section 5, this is an illusion. Furthermore, CD2 faces two additional problems. First, there is an interpretive objection. It seems very unlikely that CD2 could be what Williams had in mind when thinking about

categorical desires. His claims about the relevance of categorical desires seem deep and interesting, but if CD2 were correct, his claims would amount to nothing more than claims such as “people are not motivated to continue living when they most prefer to die.” We take it nobody who thinks there is something interesting about Williams’s paper could be interpreting him in this way.

Secondly, we doubt that categorical desire as understood in CD2 fulfills the psychological role. It is implausible to suppose that in any case where someone is propelled forward into life, what is really motivating that person is such a preference. Suppose Jerry has a categorical desire to play tennis. His thoughts might be preoccupied with tennis. He might never think about how much better it is to play tennis than be dead. He is motivated by tennis, not by any comparison between tennis and death. To be sure, he might have such a preference; his behavior indicates that he does, even if he never consciously considers how much better it is to play tennis than to be dead. But that is no reason to insist that the preference is what is *motivating* his behavior. We are inclined to think, rather, that what motivates him is just his strong desire to play tennis.

Can fetuses, babies and animals have categorical desires if they are understood as in CD2? It is not entirely clear. Certainly these beings act as if they prefer some things to death. But perhaps they really lack such preferences, because they cannot grasp their own mortality. Just as we doubt that people are typically motivated to do things by preferences to do those things rather than die, we also doubt that animals are motivated by such preferences. We do not feel compelled to settle this question, since it seems so clear that CD2 does not capture Williams’s notion of categorical desire.

4. Categorical desires as strong desires

So we offer another way of thinking about categorical desire. Rather than by appealing to conditional desires or preference, we can define categorical desire simply by appealing to strength of desire. To have a categorical desire, on this way of thinking, is to have a desire that is stronger than the desire to die. This is not quite sufficient, for one might have a desire that is stronger than the desire to die but that does not propel one into the future. For example, one might desire that one's ancestors did not own slaves; no matter how strong this desire is, it could not motivate one to continue living. To ensure that the psychological role is filled, let us add that a categorical desire that P at t is a desire whose satisfaction is incompatible with the desirer's being dead at t .

CD3. S categorically desires that P at t iff (i) S desires that P at t to a degree greater than the degree to which S desires to be dead at t , and (ii) P at t EOR S is dead at t .

Any other desire counts as non-categorical. CD3 correctly classifies Dumpy as someone with no categorical desires, since his desire for a PB&J sandwich is not stronger than his desire to die. Perhaps this way of thinking about categorical desire makes sense of Williams's claims about the badness of death. Categorical desire so understood seems necessary to explain why one would choose to live; someone who lacked such a desire would have no desire stronger than the desire to die. Death would not be bad for such a person, but good or indifferent; it would satisfy a desire of his than which none is stronger.

However, eternal life could still be good for such a person. She might have many desires that do not propel her into the future, but are satisfied – such as the desire about one’s ancestors not being slave-owners. Granted, living longer won’t help her satisfy those desires. But we can see a way that eternal life could be valuable, at least given our assumptions about desire and value. Given that it is good to have one’s desires satisfied, one might try to satisfy the desires one already has; but one might instead form new desires that will be satisfied from the moment they exist. An eternal life could be filled with strongly held, satisfied desires concerning the past. Williams might not think that it is intrinsically good to satisfy such desires. He might place restrictions on what sorts of desires it is intrinsically good to satisfy. So this is perhaps not an insurmountable problem for CD3.

What is strange about CD3 is that it does not utilize the notion of conditional desire. The work is done by the notion of strength of desire. Since Williams explicitly defines categorical desire as “unconditional,” this makes CD3 seem problematic as an interpretation of Williams. Furthermore, just as in the case of CD2, we wonder whether Williams’s claims would seem interesting if he were thinking of categorical desire as in CD3; could he really have just meant that people don’t want to continue living when their strongest desire is not to live? Probably not. But perhaps it is the best we can do, since it seems that accounts of categorical desire that appeal to unconditionality do not give us a notion of categorical desire that fills the roles it is supposed to fill.

Given CD3, it again appears entirely possible for animals and babies to have categorical desires. As long as an animal lacks a desire to die, and has just one other desire, that desire will be categorical.

5. Actualism

When categorical desire is defined as in CD3, categorical desire is necessary for death to be bad – or is it? Here we must revisit our assumptions about desire, well-being and reasons. According to Williams, “the reasons a man would have for avoiding death are, on the present account, grounded in desires—categorical desires—*that he has*; he, on the basis of these, has reason to regard possible death as a misfortune to be avoided” (1993: 79, our emphasis). Williams seems to be endorsing an actualist account of desire satisfactionism. According to actualism, it is only one’s actual desires that matter when determining how well things go in some counterfactual situation. Recall the case of Dumpy. Suppose Dumpy actually dies without ever forming a categorical desire. Suppose that had he not died when he did, a few months later he would have adopted a stray monkey. He would have formed a categorical desire to take care of the monkey, and it would have been satisfied to a high degree. Since Williams thinks it is not bad to die unless you have a categorical desire, he must also think it was not bad for Dumpy to die when he did. And since he also seems to think that death is bad when it deprives the victim of the goods of life (1993: 76), he must think that Dumpy’s death did not deprive him of anything good. His actual desires would have been no better satisfied; only an additional purely counterfactual desire would have been satisfied, and those don’t count.¹⁶

Possibilism is the view that when evaluating how well things go for someone in some counterfactual situation, we look at what desires the person would have had in that situation. According to a possibilist, Dumpy’s death was bad for him. Had he not died, he would have had

¹⁶ See Belshaw 2009: 115-117, where he argues that an actual desire to live is necessary for one’s death to be bad.

a categorical desire satisfied; the fact that he never *actually* had that desire (because he died first) is irrelevant.

Possibilism is a far more attractive view than actualism. It just seems wrong to say that Dumpy's life would have gone no better had he lived. Consider also the following example. As a teenager, Wilma must decide whether to go to art school or become a philosopher. Whichever way she chooses, her desires will over time conform themselves to her decision, and will be largely satisfied on the whole. She chooses philosophy. Years later she remarks: "Boy, I'm glad I became a philosopher – my life would have been terrible if I had gone to art school! Philosophy is for winners; painting is for losers!" Surely Wilma is wrong. She is projecting her actual desires onto her counterfactual life, and imagining how unfulfilled she would be if she were not reading journal articles and teaching classes about Quine. But those wouldn't have been her desires. She would have wanted to draw pictures of unicorns, and been just as well off doing so. The actualist agrees with Wilma. So much the worse for actualism.¹⁷

If we reject actualism, then the connection between categorical desire and the badness of death is weakened, even given CD3. A frustrated actual categorical desire is not necessary for death to be bad. The most interesting thing we can say is that someone's death is bad for her only if it results in a life with less desire satisfaction than the life she would otherwise have had, and this can be the case only if she at some point has or would have had a desire that is stronger than the desire to die that would have been satisfied if she had not died when she did. This is not

¹⁷ For similar criticism, see Grover 1987: 724. Perhaps the thought is not that we should deny that it would be better to have a life with additional desires that are satisfied. Perhaps the thought is, rather, that it is not bad, not a misfortune, to be deprived of goodness in that way. As far as we know this view has not been explicitly defended; it involves rejecting the deprivation account of the badness of death, which seems to be nearly universally accepted among those who believe death is sometimes bad for the one who dies. So we will not discuss this view here.

a particularly interesting claim; in fact, it follows straightaway from possibilism plus our original assumptions about the connection between desire and value. Nonetheless, it is a claim worth making explicit, especially if assumptions as to its truth or falsity have not always been made explicit in the extant literature on Williams's original argument.

6. Conclusion

We have examined several ways of explicating the notion of a categorical desire. When categorical desire is defined as a sort of unconditional desire or as a sort of preference, it fills none of the roles that Williams thought it was supposed to fill. When defined as a desire stronger than the desire to die, it does not fill the axiological or normative roles unless an implausible actualism is presupposed. On none of these conceptions is it the case that categorical desires cannot be had by animals or babies (on some conceptions this is less obvious). Thus we are forced to conclude that the evil of death cannot be explained simply in terms of the presence or absence of categorical desires, nor are categorical desires obviously helpful to those who wish to argue for the permissibility of abortion, infanticide or carnivorousness. It is a mistake to take categorical desires to be particularly relevant to understanding the evil of death or the wrongness of killing.¹⁸

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¹⁸ A version of this paper was presented at Bowling Green State University; thanks to those present, especially Christian Coons and David Faraci, for their helpful comments. Also thanks to André Gallois and Shieva Kleinschmidt for discussion.

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