

[This is a draft I completed while at Rutgers. Please do not cite without permission.]

## **Conditional Desires**

### Abstract:

There's an intuitive distinction between two types of desires: conditional (desires for things such that we want to get them only as long as we'll still want them when we get them) and unconditional (desires for things that we want to get regardless of how we'll feel about them later). Derek Parfit has suggested that we interpret conditional desires as desires involving certain conditionals – that is, that we interpret them as being implicitly conditional upon their own persistence. While this account seems intuitive, I argue that it is incorrect. In this paper, I examine several ways of cashing out conditional desires in terms of conditionals (both material and subjunctive), and show problems with each. Then I set those problems aside and present a trilemma against this way of interpreting conditional desires, based on problems independent of those already mentioned. Finally, I conclude by noting that the problems I raise apply to a wide variety of accounts, not just those involving conditionals, which leaves us with an interesting puzzle: we have an intuitive, easily graspable distinction, and a difficulty in accounting for it.

## Conditional Desires

There is an intuitive distinction between two types of desire: Conditional desires (desires like thirst, infatuation, a craving for ice cream and the desire to sneeze), and unconditional desires (like the desire to do the right thing, the desire to do the dishes and the desire to study for the GRE).<sup>1</sup> With unconditional desires, we want the desideratum regardless of what attitude toward it we may have later. But with conditional desires, we only want to get the desideratum as long as we still want it when we get it. It's easy to understand this exhaustive division well enough to pick out desires of one or the other type. But giving an account of what this division is in virtue of is a much more difficult task.

In this paper, I evaluate the initially plausible claim that we should understand conditional desires in terms of *conditionals*. The paper proceeds as follows: in §1 I elaborate on the intuitive distinction between these two types of desire, and mention some initial characterisations of them. In §2 I raise some problems for several attempts to cash out the form of conditional desires using conditionals. In §3 I present a trilemma against interpreting conditional desires as involving conditionals, based on problems entirely separate from those discussed in §2. Finally, I briefly discuss the scope of my conclusions. Though my primary aim is to show that conditional desires should not be cashed out with conditionals, the problems I raise will apply to a wide variety of ways of attempting to draw the distinction between conditional and unconditional desires. Thus we have an interesting puzzle on our hands: there's an intuitive distinction between those two types of desire, and it's not clear how to account for it.

### 1. What Are Conditional Desires?

Before looking at conditional desires, I'll mention a few characterisations of all desires. The general account of desires is that, like beliefs, they are intentional mental states that have propositional content.<sup>2</sup> That is, they are mental states consisting of (at

---

<sup>1</sup> This distinction has been drawn by many philosophers (though some give different names to the two kinds of desires), including (but not limited to) Thomas Nagel in *The Possibility of Altruism*, Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons*, Mark Platts in *Moral Realities* and Stephen Schiffer in "A Paradox of Desire".

<sup>2</sup> Among other sources, this account can be found in Kim 1998.

least) an attitude toward a proposition.<sup>3</sup> And they are fulfilled if and only if that proposition is true.<sup>4</sup>

Now consider this example of a conditional desire<sup>5</sup>: I experience a craving for cinnamon ice cream, but end up eating something else before I can get it, and so cease desiring it. Suppose I then receive some anyway. Eating some of it will not cause me harm (at least, not in virtue of the desire that's now merely past) – after all, though I have lost the desire for it, I have not developed an aversion to it. And with an easy action I can do something I'd been wanting to only shortly before. Nevertheless, it's clear that my past desire doesn't give me reason to act. I desired to eat ice cream, but only if I still desired it when I got it. What can we tell about conditional desires from this example?

As Derek Parfit says, it seems conditional desires are “implicitly conditional on their own persistence”.<sup>6</sup> That is, a subject desires to obtain the desideratum only if, at the time that they obtain it, they still have the relevant desire. It's not the case that I desire to later have the ice cream *no matter what* my mental states would be at that time; rather,

---

<sup>3</sup> As Smith (p. 107) points out, we can see this reflected in the way in which we often ascribe desires to subjects, by using statements of the form ‘S desires that p’, where ‘p’ expresses a proposition. This, of course, is not to discount that desires also have a phenomenological aspect, as Hume seemed to believe.

<sup>4</sup> This point may be disagreed upon, for a couple of reasons. One may be that on this account, vacuous truth results in desire fulfilment (such as with conditionals with a false antecedents). The second reason may be provided by this argument:

(1) Desires can be fulfilled to a variety of degrees (other than 1 and 0).

(2) Truth does not come in degrees other than 1 and 0.

(3) Therefore, fulfilment of desires cannot depend simply on the truth or falsity of their content.

I don't find vacuous fulfilment worrisome, and I think that though the second worry raises an interesting problem, it can be adequately addressed (One can reject 1 by claiming that in the cases which tempt us to accept it, there are actually several desires, only some of which are satisfied. One could also respond with a charge of invalidity, by claiming that intentional mental states can have more than one proposition as their content. If this is the case, a desire can be partly fulfilled in virtue of only some of the propositions it takes as its content being true.). Nevertheless, I will leave the issue, and mention simply that if one thinks it is not the case that desires are fulfilled iff their propositional content is true, then some of the worries I raise in §2 will be unsuccessful. However, the proponent of this view will still need to deal with the worries in §3.

<sup>5</sup> Desires like the one I describe are taken to be paradigm examples of conditional desires. Stephen Schiffer says, “bodily appetites are of course examples *par excellence* of [these] desires” (p. 202).

<sup>6</sup> Parfit, p. 151. An elegant description of conditional desires is given by G. F. Schueler, who is describing Mark Platts' views: “the idea is that what is desirable to the agent about the object of such a desire is completely exhausted by the fact that he wants it” (p. 40). (The desires Platts is describing are referred to as ‘reason-providing’ desires. But these are just conditional desires under a different name: this can be seen when we realise that if a conditional desire were had in virtue of anything else, it would be conditional on that other reason. Take my desire for ice cream: one might claim that, while a conditional desire, I have the desire for other reasons, such as my desire for something cold and also sweet, and my belief that ice cream meets these standards. But if this is the case, then the desire isn't really contingent on *its own* persistence, but rather on the persistence of the belief and other desire. So, insofar as we consider it as had in virtue of that other reason, it is not a conditional desire.)

the desirability of the ice cream depends on the persistence of my desire to have it. So without the relevant desire, it makes no sense for me to eat the ice cream. In fact, it seems impossible to fulfil my desire for ice cream once I no longer have the desire for it.

Reflecting on conditional desires, we may feel compelled to make certain claims about them: First, (at least some) conditional desires can become past – I can cease craving ice cream, stop feeling thirsty, etc. Second, they do not seem fulfillable once merely past – I cannot fulfil my craving for ice cream, or quench my thirst, when I no longer have the relevant desires. Further, if one thinks that desires provide reason for action, they may claim (as Mark Platts and Stephen Schiffer do) that conditional desires provide reason for acting while they're had, and do not provide reason for acting once merely past.<sup>7</sup> Though I agree with those final characterisations, only the first two characterisations will be assumed for the purposes of this paper.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, unconditional desires are not implicitly conditional on their own persistence. We desire to attain the desideratum, regardless of how our desires may later change.<sup>9</sup> And we can act in such a way as to fulfil these desires even after they are past. To follow Platts' characterisations, things that are desired unconditionally are desirable for reasons existing independently from the desire for the desiderata. So, for instance, I may desire to study for the GRE. I desire that I do this, regardless of whether later on I become disgruntled and cease desiring to study. My desire to study is not what provides the reason for me to do so, and it is a desire that can be fulfilled once merely past.

## 2. Using Conditionals to Understand Conditional Desires

---

<sup>7</sup> This condition reflects Stephen Schiffer's characterisations of these desires, which, like Platts, he calls 'reason-providing', or 'r-p' desires. He does not state that these are conditional desires, but they have the same relevant features. Characterizing these desires, he says (quoted in Schueler, p. 82): "When it is an r-p-desire to  $\phi$  that one acts on, the reason for which one  $\phi$ 's and, typically, the only reason one has to  $\phi$ , is provided entirely by one's desire to  $\phi$  and . . . one's reason for  $\phi$ ing is just that desire" (Schiffer, p. 198).

<sup>8</sup> 'Reason' is used throughout this paper in the sense of justification, not motivation.

<sup>9</sup> Parfit's example of an unconditional desire involves meeting someone on a train, hearing about her life, and becoming extremely sympathetic. He desires that her life go well for her in the future, even though he knows he will soon forget about her. He desires that her life go well regardless of whether in the future he still desires for that to be the case. (1984: 151)

Parfit has stated that due to the very *form* of conditional desires, they cannot provide reasons for present action once they are merely past, because they are impossible to fulfil once past.<sup>10</sup> But what is the form of a conditional desire?

One interpretation of conditional desires is that they are desires we have only when certain conditions obtain. That is:

- Account 1:  $x$  is a conditional desire iff  $x$  is a desire and the existence of  $x$  depends (is conditional) on something.

An example is my desire to have cinnamon ice cream, a desire I have (let's suppose) only when I have not just become full. However, it seems that on this interpretation all desires are conditional, because every desire depends for its existence on *something*. For instance, each desire exists only if there is mentality, only if the desire is caused, etc. There is another problem with this conception of conditional desires: if desires are conditional *only* in virtue of their existence-dependence on other things, then once merely past they can provide reasons for present actions and/or can be fulfilled just as unconditional desires can. For example, if my desire for ice cream at  $t$  is conditional merely in virtue of its existence depending on certain conditions obtaining, then my coming to lack the desire prior to  $t$  will not make it the case that I cannot fulfil my merely past desire for ice cream at  $t$ . Thus, this conception of conditional desires both fails to create any division between desires, and does not give us conditional desires that can be characterised as seems intuitive.

An account that's better on the first score has been suggested by some statements by Mark Platts, who says that whenever someone has a conditional desire: "On contemplating a possible world in which he does not have the desire concerned, the agent should see no desirability of this kind in the realization therein of what is his actual object of desire".<sup>11</sup> This, one might think, suggests the following account:

- Account 2: A subject,  $s$ , conditionally desires that  $x$  iff  $s$  desires that  $x$ , and  $s$  is at least disposed to think that the situation in which  $s$  gets  $x$  but lacks the desire for  $x$  is not desirable.

---

<sup>10</sup> Parfit, p. 152. However, Parfit now thinks that *no* desires ever provide reason for action. But, as I mentioned earlier, the stand one takes on this view is not crucial to my thesis.

<sup>11</sup> *Moral Realities*, p. 73, quoted in Schueler, p. 40.

So I conditionally desire to have ice cream just in case I desire to have ice cream, and if I were to reflect on the situation in which I get it but lack the desire for it, I'd find such a situation undesirable.

It's worth pointing out before evaluating the account, this isn't one that relies on conditionals. So this isn't an account that serves as a way of cashing out the intuitions that conditional desires are desires conditional upon their own persistence. Still, will it work?

I think it doesn't. Like the first account, on this account conditional desires can be fulfilled once merely past. Consider the case in which I desire ice cream yet also have the accompanying mental state that the scenario where I get ice cream without desiring it is undesirable. Later, my desire for ice cream becomes merely past, and I receive some. Though I find it undesirable, the scenario still makes the content of the desire true, and thus fulfils it. So this account fails to accord with how we want to characterise conditional desires.

This brings up a common problem for accounts 1 and 2. To get the fulfilment conditions right when it comes to merely past conditional desires, at least some of the differences between conditional and unconditional desires must be differences between the form of *the content* of those desires, since fulfilment of desires consists in the content of those desires being true.

Toward this end, and perhaps also more intuitively, one could say that conditional desires are desires that *certain conditionals be true*. Because conditional desires are taken to be somehow conditional on the persistence of a relevant desire, if we interpret this characteristic as had in virtue of the propositional content of conditional desires, we know the content must have at least these elements: reference to the attainment of the desideratum, reference to the persistence of a desire, and a logical connective. But what order should these parts be in? I will take a cue from Parfit, who states conditional desires in this form: I desire that (I get  $x$  only if I still desire to get  $x$ ). In other words:

- Account 3: subject  $s$  conditionally desires that  $x$  iff  $s$  desires that *if  $x$ , then  $y$*  (where  $y$  is that  $s$  still desires that  $x$ ).

This account of conditional desires has the positive feature that it captures something that seems to be unique about conditional desires: they are not fulfilled if, at the time that the desideratum is attained, the relevant desire is not had. So a conditional desire for ice cream could not be fulfilled in the situation where I get ice cream yet no longer desire to

have it. However, these desires can be fulfilled by the subject's merely desiring the desideratum! This state of affairs would be enough to render the consequent of the conditional true and thus the conditional desire would be fulfilled. Further, it is fulfilled by the subject's merely lacking the desideratum – unacceptable because (i) this isn't the type of situation we think generally leads to desire fulfilment, and (ii) it has the result that conditional desires can be fulfilled once merely past.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps we should attempt putting the parts of the propositional content in reverse order, and say:

- Account 4:  $s$  conditionally desires that  $x$  iff  $s$  desires that *if  $y$ , then  $x$* .

So I conditionally desire ice cream iff I desire that if I desire ice cream then I have ice cream. This account has the virtue that, according to it, conditional desires are not fulfilled by merely desiring the desideratum. However, on this account the desire is fulfilled merely by the subject losing the relevant desire! This is not a way for desires to be fulfilled (except, perhaps, for a few strange cases). For instance, suppose the subject loses the desire yet obtains the desideratum. While we may be hesitant to say that this scenario should be avoided, it is certainly a characteristic of conditional desires that situations of this type are not enough to satisfy them!<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> There is another reason to reject this account as well, though it's a bit more contentious: if one thinks that, generally, propositions that are logically equivalent are identical, then conditionally desiring that *if  $x$ , then  $y$*  is a way of desiring that  $\sim(x \text{ and } \sim y)$ . But this means that someone with a conditional desire for  $x$  also has a desire (that same one!) for the avoidance of the scenario where they get  $x$  yet lack the desire for it. This seems too strong: intuitively, having the desideratum without the desire for it isn't sufficient to fulfil the desire, but it often isn't *bad* when this occurs (at least, not bad in virtue of our indifference toward the desideratum). Also, this would mean that conditional desires are fulfillable once past, by avoiding acquiring the desideratum.

This is contentious, however, because it is hard to distinguish when logically equivalent propositions are identical. As Hud Hudson pointed out in conversation, it's obviously not true in all cases; for example, the propositions  $2+2=5$  and  $2+2=5$  and *Metaphysics is fantastic* are not identical. It's worth pointing out, though, that the reasoning in the objection to account 3 works for someone who believes desire is closed under entailment. Still, I don't endorse that thesis, and think account 3 is false for the other reasons given.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Edgington (2001) says: "Conditional desires appear to be like conditional beliefs: to desire that  $B$  is to prefer  $B$  to  $\sim B$ ; to desire that  $B$  if  $A$  is to prefer  $A \& B$  to  $A \& \sim B$  . . . I have entered a competition and have a very small chance of winning. I express the desire that if I win the prize ( $W$ ), you tell Fred straight away ( $T$ ). I prefer  $W \& T$  to  $W \& \sim T$ . I do not necessarily prefer  $(W \supset T)$  to  $\sim(W \supset T)$ , i.e.  $(\sim W \text{ or } W \& T)$  to  $W \& \sim T$ . For I also want to win the prize, and much the most likely way for  $(\sim W \text{ or } W \& T)$  to be true is that I don't win the prize. Nor is my conditional desire satisfied if I don't win but in the nearest possible world in which I win, you tell Fred straight away." (I should note, she uses 'conditional desire' in a different sense than Parfit does. For her, it refers simply to a desire with propositional content that takes the form of a conditional.)

We could avoid this implication, and also the negative implications of Account 3, by characterizing conditional desires with a disjunction of two conjunctions:

- Account 5:  $s$  conditionally desires that  $x$  iff  $s$  desires that  $(x \text{ and } y) \vee (\sim x \text{ and } \sim y)$ .

Going back to the ice cream example, on this account I conditionally desire to have ice cream iff I desire that either (I both get ice cream and still desire ice cream when I get it), or (I don't get ice cream but lack the desire for it). However, this account has the result that losing the desire while lacking the desideratum is enough to fulfil the desire. Once again, we're faced with an unacceptable result: losing the desire for ice cream while lacking ice cream is not a way to fulfil a desire for ice cream, regardless of whether the desire is present or merely past.<sup>14</sup>

The failure of the above accounts might push us to give up on material conditionals altogether. But will subjunctive conditionals help? Consider:

- Account 6: A subject,  $s$ , conditionally desires that  $x$  iff  $s$  desires that if it were that  $x$  then it would be that  $y$ .

So I conditionally desire to have ice cream iff I desire that if I were to get ice cream then I would still desire it. But on this account, the conditional desire would be fulfilled simply by my having the disposition to want what I got. That is, the subjunctive conditional above is made true when, e.g., I desire to have ice cream, I don't get ice cream, and in the nearest worlds where I get it I want it. But clearly, just having that handy disposition isn't enough to fulfil the desire! What of:

- Account 7: A subject,  $s$ , conditionally desires that  $x$  iff  $s$  desires that if it were that  $y$  then it would be that  $x$ .

So I conditionally desire to have ice cream iff I desire that if I were to desire ice cream then I would get ice cream. But this account fails as well: it allows conditional desires to be fulfilled simply by the subject being such that if they *were* to desire something, they would get what they wanted. So, for instance, suppose I cease wanting ice cream, but then come to be in a town in which, any time someone wants ice cream, it's immediately brought to them. My desire for ice cream, on that account, would be fulfilled. But that's

---

<sup>14</sup> And, once again, things are worse for the person who believes desire is closed under entailment: the content of the desire that  $(x \text{ and } y) \vee (\sim x \text{ and } \sim y)$  is equivalent to  $x \equiv y$ , which entails a desire that *if  $x$  then  $y$* . But this takes us back to the second problem mentioned for account 3.



*not* a way for that to occur – I both don't want ice cream, and don't have it! We could try a subjunctive biconditional:

- Account 8: A subject, *s*, conditionally desires that *x* iff *s* desires that both if it were that *x* then it would be that *y*, and if it were that *y* then it would be that *x*.

That is, I conditionally desire to have ice cream iff I desire that it's the case that both: if I were to get ice cream then I would still desire it, and if I were to still desire it then I would get it. But nifty as it sounds, this too gives counterintuitive results: on this account, the conditional desire (e.g.) for ice cream is satisfied by my being such that I don't desire ice cream any longer, I don't get any ice cream, I would get it if I wanted it, and would want it if I got it. So pretend that I begin a walk wanting ice cream, then cease having that desire. Also during the walk, I develop a disposition to want whatever I get. Finally, I arrive in the town I mentioned above, where anyone who desires to have ice cream gets it. In this case, according to the account above, my desire for ice cream is fulfilled. But that's not a way to fulfil my desire for ice cream!

Perhaps these results incline us to give up on conditionals. We could instead say that a conditional desire is the desire for the truth of the conjunction *x and y*, rather than for the truth of any conditionals involving *x* and *y*.

- Account 9: subject *s* conditionally desires that *x* iff *s* desires that *x and y*.

So I conditionally desire to have ice cream iff I desire that: I both have ice cream and still have the relevant desire for ice cream. This would avoid the implausible implications just mentioned. And how well the account does seems to depend on whether desires provide reason for action. If they do, Account 9 has the following implausible result: it implies that the subject has a reason to attain *y*, which is the desire for *x*. This is a bad implication because it would mean that my conditional desire to have ice cream gives me reason to cause myself to continue desiring it (and likewise for thirst – my thirst for water would give me reason to not only attain water, but also to cause myself to continue thirsting for it). But this is clearly wrong.

For someone who doesn't believe desires provide reason for action, Account 9 is better off: it simply implies that conditional desires are not fulfilled unless both the desire and the desideratum are had. And this is surely what we want to say about

conditional desires. (Of course, someone who accepts this account will still have to address the worries raised in §3.)<sup>15</sup>

So, to conclude this section: I examined several accounts of conditional desires which cash out the form of those desires in terms of conditionals. I found each account to be inadequate. The final account, which avoids unacceptable implications only in conjunction with the substantive further claim that desires don't provide reason for action, is not an account that uses conditionals. Perhaps there are accounts involving conditionals which I have overlooked, but we can at least conclude that the most straightforward ways of using conditionals in interpreting these desires will not work.

### 3. A Trilemma Against Using Conditionals

Thus far, I have presented issues having to do only with the form of conditional desires. However there are other problems as well: following the intuition that led us to use conditionals in the first place, there must be reference to desire within the content of the desire itself. I mentioned earlier that the propositional content of a conditional desire must refer to the desideratum and the persistence of the desire. And throughout the paper I have made mysterious references to the having and persistence of the "relevant" desire. But what exactly is being referred to here?

We have three options for what the desire referred to within the content of the conditional desire might be. The "relevant desire" might (i) refer to an unconditional desire, (ii) refer a conditional desire but not the desire in question, or (iii) be self-referential, referring to the entire conditional desire.

Interpreting it as an unconditional desire is highly problematic. The most obvious candidate for the desideratum of this unconditional desire is the desideratum commonly attributed to the conditional desire. For instance, when describing my conditional desire for ice cream, I say I want ice cream only if at the time that I get it I still want ice cream. The desideratum of the persisting desire mentioned is ice cream. And certainly, that seems to be the only relevant candidate. However, if we posit an unconditional desire for

---

<sup>15</sup> This may give one reason to prefer the view that desires don't provide reason for action over the view that they do, in virtue of the latter producing implausible results when combined with Account 9. But this is only compelling if one believes that Account 9 is more plausible than any alternatives. One might reject that claim for a variety of reasons: perhaps they've come across a more plausible account; or perhaps they haven't, but see no reason to prefer Account 9 to any others that may be out there; or maybe they believe that no account of the distinction between conditional and unconditional desires can be given.

ice cream, the unconditional desire must either come into existence at the time that I get ice cream (which, even if true in some strange case, clearly wouldn't be true in all relevant cases), or the unconditional desire is had before I get ice cream. If it is had before I get the ice cream, then in addition to having a conditional desire to have ice cream, I have an unconditional desire for it as well. Now it seems that the conditional desire is superfluous. It may characterize a real aspect of my mental life, accounting for my distaste for the situation in which I get what I desired while lacking the desire, but it will not help us account for why past desires for things like ice cream don't provide reason for present action and/or are not fulfillable once merely past. Also, do we really want to posit unconditional desires for things like ice cream? It would entail that when I want ice cream, I want to have it even if I no longer want it at the time that I get it. Having the additional conditional desire that I get the ice cream only if I desire it doesn't help.<sup>16</sup> This account, in forcing us to posit such unconditional desires, misses part of why we posited conditional desires in the first place: to avoid the implausible positing of unconditional desires for these things.

Going with option (ii), saying that the persisting desire referred to in the content of the conditional desire is itself a distinct conditional desire, isn't much of an improvement. It commits us to an infinite regress of conditional desires (unless the chain of conditional desires circles back on itself, which is similar enough to option (iii) that I will deal with it below), leaving us with an infinity of mental states. Perhaps this in itself is not unacceptable, especially if we posit dispositional desires. However, it seems extremely counterintuitive that I fulfil an infinity of desires when I eat ice cream that I want. An infinity of conditional desires would have to persist in order for it to be good for me to get the ice cream I want, but how could so many distinct desires be relevant to my wanting the ice cream? And what distinct conditional desires would be relevant to my wanting the ice cream, anyway?

Lastly, we might claim that conditional desires are self-referential (either in virtue of immediately referring to themselves, or by beginning a chain of conditional desires that eventually refer to them). This would have the benefit of referring to relevant desires without positing unconditional desires. It also seems to be reflected in how we talk about

---

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the unconditional desire for ice cream seems to be in conflict with the conditional desire for it. However, cashing out this conflict is difficult until we have an acceptable way to cash out conditional desires.

conditional desires, when we say that they're desires for something, conditional on *their own* persistence. However, this option is mysterious. How can we conceive of the conditional desires when they simply refer to their own persistence? What does it take, exactly, for such a desire to persist? My desire to have ice cream becomes: the desire that (I have ice cream at  $t$  given that at  $t$  I still have this desire). What work is the conditional doing here? How is this functionally different from an unconditional desire? Though this way of cashing out conditional desires might be promising, but the mysteriousness of the option is a mark against it; it is far from perspicuous and needs to be elucidated. And there's another worry about it, which also applies to option (ii):

Setting aside the issues above, we still must ask ourselves, when are conditional desires past? Intuitively, the desire to eat ice cream is a conditional desire which can become past. But according to all three of the accounts above, the conditional desire persists even after, e.g., I have chocolate cake and no longer want any food. Even while I'm full, I want it to be the case that I get ice cream only if I want ice cream (and I want it to be the case that if I were to get ice cream then I would want ice cream, and so on for the other accounts stated in §2). The first option, according to which we interpret 'desire' within the content of conditional desires as referring to unconditional desires, can offer at least some response to this problem. We can make sense of *some* desire ceasing to be had, even some desire for ice cream, and this makes it easier to accept that the conditional desire persists. But if we say that desires for things like ice cream are *only* conditional, we do not get the result that some desire ceases to be had once I stop wanting ice cream. This is unacceptable. And, because the interpretation which had us positing unconditional desires is also unacceptable, we are left without an account of conditional desires.

Thus, in attempting to explain what occurs when we desire things like ice cream, and we cannot succeed by appealing to what we originally may have thought: namely, desires with conditional content, or desires conditional on their own persistence. I have shown that the most straightforward ways of using conditionals in the form of conditional desires do not work, and that reference to the persistence of a "relevant desire" within the content of a conditional desire is problematic. Alternative accounts of conditional desires

have been suggested (e.g., interpreting conditional desires as desires for means<sup>17</sup>), but regardless of what one thinks of such alternatives, it is clear that appeals to conditionals won't be enough to explain conditional desires.

Also, any alternative account must be held to the same standards we've held the conditional accounts to: for instance, any account of conditional desires must produce the result that though conditional desires cannot be fulfilled once merely past, at least some of them can become merely past. It must also either not involve reference to the persistence of a "relevant desire" within the content of the conditional desire, or include some response to the trilemma from §3. Finally, the account must give intuitive results for when these desires are fulfilled. These requirements make me believe that once again – as seems to often be the case in Philosophy – explaining what underlies an intuitive, easily graspable concept is shaping up to be more difficult than anticipated.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> That is, we can recognise the distinction between desires for ends and desires for means: I have a desire for an end when I desire something for itself, in virtue of its intrinsic features. I desire something as a means when I desire it insofar as it can bring about something else that I desire as an end. On this account, desires we take to be conditional, such as the desire for ice cream, are desires for means. With this we can make sense of why we lose these desires: when I become full, eating the ice cream will no longer achieve the end of producing pleasure for me. Therefore, I cease to desire it as a means. Since fulfilment of desires for means is only valuable insofar as it leads to fulfilment of desires for ends, it makes no sense for me to consume ice cream once I cease desiring it. Also, on this account losing the relevant desire will not result in desire fulfilment (unless this itself is a means to the desired end), yet we do not have reason, in virtue of this desire, to avoid acquiring the means once it is no longer desired. Nevertheless, there are problems for this account that would need to be worked out. This, however, is a topic for another paper.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Hud Hudson, Dan Korman, Derek Parfit and Larry Temkin for helpful comments.

### Works Cited

- Edgington, D. 2001. Conditionals. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2001 Edition, ed. E. N. Zalta.
- Kim, Jaegwon. 1998. *Philosophy of Mind*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1970. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Platts, Mark. 1991. *Moral Realities*. London: Routledge.
- Schiffer, Stephen. 1976. "A Paradox of Desire." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13: 195–203.
- Schueler, G. F. 1995. *Desire: Its Role in Practical Reason and the Explanation of Action*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Smith, Michael. 1994. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.