**DESIRE, LOVE AND HAPPINESS**

Classical Greek and medieval philosophy conceive of the will as *a rational appetite for the good*. According to this classical tradition, the will ineluctably seeks the good, is not free to do otherwise and the possession of the good is happiness, the last end of all of human striving. Aristotle, the source of this definition, claims that everyone agrees that happiness is our last end, but that there is no agreement about what happiness consists in.[[1]](#footnote-1) He then goes on to specify his own account of what the human *telos* is (self-realization), of the human ideal (the fullest possible development of the rational capacities that are distinctive to our nature) and of happiness (contemplation of the best and highest things we can apprehend by means of our intellect.)

I shall approach the matter in stages, presenting the outline of a complete analysis of these things that must be pursued in detail elsewhere. First, I shall attempt to distinguish appetite and desire and explain what it means to call the will an *appetite* for the good rather than a faculty of desire or that processes desires. Secondly, I will attempt to clarify the relation between appetite and desire. Thirdly, I will consider the theory that pleasure is the good, that pleasure consists in desire-satisfaction and that happiness is simply a matter of maximizing one’s satisfactions. Fourthly, having sketched the general

reasons why this theory will not do, I will attempt to clarify the relation between desire, the good and happiness. Fifthly, I shall discuss the Augustinian notion of love in relation to happiness.

**Appetite, Desire and Love**

In modern philosophy and psychology, the notion of appetite as a distinct reality within the human psychological make-up is largely absent rather than neglected and tends to be assimilated to desire. In classical and medieval philosophy, the opposite was largely the case: desire was seen to be a function of appetition. However, these are distinct, though related realities and we need to appreciate this fact. In addition, we need to dispel a number of myths with regard to each. I can only scratch the surface here, but I hope to do enough to suggest the need for such an analysis. We will begin with appetite.

**Appetite** The paradigm cases of appetite are those physiologically based, naturally occurring urges that arise spontaneously, i.e. unbidden and independently of our will: hunger, thirst and sexual arousal. We share these appetites with non-rational animals hence can classify them as *non-rational appetites*. We experience these appetites in everyday conscious life by means of various sorts of discomfort (sometimes akin to physical pain) that motivate us to act in some manner to relieve them. However, it is typical of appetite that the sensations or feelings by means of which we are made aware of and motivated to act by them carry with them neither knowledge of their causes (this is typical of sensations generally) nor of their objects, i.e. of what will relieve the discomfort associated with arousal. In the case of the non-rational appetites, of course, nature has seen to it that both non-rational and rational creatures are instinctually aware of these objects; even the human infant knows how to suckle in order to get nourishment. The gratification of an appetite is accompanied by *sensuous pleasure*, i.e. felt sensations of pleasure that are physiologically based and occur independently of the will.

A significant fact about such sensations, first pointed out by Plato but not often enough appreciated, is that where appetite is concerned, the pleasure of gratification is simultaneous with the pain of deprivation and diminishes along with it.[[2]](#footnote-2) The physical pleasure associated with eating, drinking to relieve thirst and sexual activity is most intense when the discomfort associated with arousal is most keenly felt and diminishes in intensity as the appetite is lessened through gratification. It is generally not pleasant to continue to eat, drink or have sex after one has gratified the relevant appetite; indeed, in some cases it is physically painful to do so. At the same time, the objects of those acts have value for us only to the extent that arousal of those appetites is recurrent and anticipated as such.

Although the basic non-rational appetites are natural, this is not true for all appetites. Quite the contrary, there are acquired appetites, such as those associated with alcoholism, cigarette smoking and drug-addiction that are not natural but which possess all the features that natural appetites do. These include: a recurrent, spontaneously arising urge apprehended in consciousness as a discomfort that typically grows more intense the longer gratification is delayed (within limits), no direct reference either to the cause or the object that will relieve that discomfort, pleasure upon gratification that is proportional to the discomfort that that gratification relieves and which diminishes over time as the urgency of the appetite subsides.

In non-human animals, the natural appetites are (with rare exceptions) generally *well-regulated* in relation to the biological ends they obviously evolved to subserve: in the case of hunger and thirst to preserve the life of the individual and in the case of sexual arousal the preservation of the species through its propagation. Animals outside of captivity generally experience hunger, thirst and sexual arousal only in circumstances in which the proper physiological states are present and instinctually seek the objects that will gratify the appetite. Other than that, they neither think about nor concern themselves with either those appetites or their objects and appear to have no memory of the physical pleasure associated with their gratification. It is quite the opposite in the case of human beings in whom the appetites are both capable of being and which to a large extent have become separated from their natural biological ends, a consequence of the greater complexity of human psychology and the wider palette of experiences of which they are capable. We will here be able only to go into a small part of this issue, that involving the connection between appetite and desire. First, however, we must distinguish desire from appetite.

**Desire, Satisfaction and Pleasure** As I shall here be using it, “desire” is a technical term that refers to something distinct from though often confused with appetite both in ordinary language and in philosophical psychology. As I analyze it, desire is always an intentional state hence one only a rational being can enjoy. Because desire is intentional, hence focused on its object and impossible without it, every desire carries with it knowledge both of its cause (in experience) and its specific object; in this it differs from appetite. Desire is apprehended in consciousness as a felt tendency to acquire and possess the object upon which desire is focused prompting us to adopt the means necessary to acquire it. Desire arises upon the apprehension of the object rather than spontaneously as a mysterious sort of discomfort that assaults us willy-nilly, hence not because of merely physiological changes occurring in the brain, though it may presuppose such changes. The objects of desire can include things, events and states-of-affairs but unlike appetites, which are either “on” or “off”, these objects can admit contrary desires in different respects. So, I may desire a heart operation under one aspect (e.g., as necessary to save my life) while not desiring it under others (as e.g., expensive, inconvenient and risky). Further, desires occur within a cognitive context provided for by beliefs, reasoning and the expectations founded on these, which thus affects both the occurrence of desires and the strength with which they are felt.

We experience desire is in consciousness as a felt inclination toward its object, which varies in strength due to a number of factors. When we attain the object of desire, we say that our desire is satisfied; when we fail to attain it, we say that our desire is frustrated. There is a long tradition in philosophy (more prominent in modern philosophy than in the classical tradition) that identifies happiness with pleasure and pleasure with desire-satisfaction, treating satisfaction and frustration as feeling-states that result from attaining the object of desire or failing to do so, of either getting (or failing to get) what we want.[[3]](#footnote-3) The degree of satisfaction or frustration thought of in this way is generally taken to be proportional to the strength of the desire/inclination that was focused on the object, such that the stronger the desire, the greater the pleasure that accompanies its satisfaction or the pain accompanying its frustration. To take this view is to regard the phenomenon of desire as consisting in nothing but inclination, a view according to which desire can exist only in the absence of its object and ceases to exist once the object is attained and the desire satisfied or frustrated through one’s failure to attain it.

In line with this way of thinking, many philosophers have thought that happiness is nothing more than *aggregate desire-satisfaction* consisting in a positive balance of pleasure (=desire-satisfaction) over pain (=desire-frustration). On this view, what desire most urgently portends is its own satisfaction and the pleasure associated with the successful attainment of its object. Thus, on this view the satisfaction of any desire, regardless of its object, is as good as any other or if preferable to others, is so only to the extent that it represents the greater inclination hence is productive of the greater pleasure.

Such a view, regardless of how popular it may be, is surely wrong. The characteristic pleasure associated with the attainment of an object of desire can occur spontaneously, even when not associated with a desire hence without being the product of “desire-satisfaction.” For example, I may be walking down the street minding my own business when suddenly I am assaulted by the sound of bagpipe music, something I have never heard before but which I nevertheless find so enthralling that I find myself following the sound in order to discover its source. By the same token, this characteristic pleasure can even be experienced contrary to my desires, as when I am dragged, kicking and screaming to the opera and yet find myself transfixed by the experience and thereupon eager to repeat it. Indeed, in these cases, it is precisely because these experiences are pleasurable that I come to desire their objects in the first place.

Furthermore, there is no automatic connection between getting what one wants and feeling pleasure; nor is there any strict proportion between the strength of one’s desire and the amount of pleasure one feels upon satisfying it. Nothing is more common than for us to desire something and yet to discover upon attaining it that it is not as pleasurable as we thought it was, or as experientially valuable as we thought it was. Indeed, we often find the opposite to be the case. For example, based on recommendations from others and reviews I have read, I may greatly desire to see a particular film, but discover to my chagrin that it was not as good as I thought it would be, or even that it was terrible and a waste of time to view. In this case, I ardently desired the object and attained it, yet despite getting what I wanted did not want what I got when I finally got it. In many cases, this results from the fact that I had false beliefs about the object or unclear motives such that I wanted the object only as a means to an end that I did not realize I possess. For example, a little boy may find his joy at receiving the new three-speed bike he had ardently desired for his birthday utterly destroyed by his discovery that his best friend got a ten-speed for his. In many cases, however, it is a simple fact of experience that something that we thought would make us happy (in this sense) does not, for any reason that we are even easily able to articulate and may never even discover; we only know that we either are not happy or not as happy as we expected.

Undoubtedly, there is a characteristic sort of mild psychological pleasure or pain that accompanies the mere satisfaction or frustration of any desire; however, to identify the whole of the pleasure that obtains (or fails to obtain) in such cases, let alone the lion’s share of it, with mere desire satisfaction is surely wrong.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the same reason, neither can happiness consist merely in pleasure understood as aggregate desire-satisfaction, since as we have seen this is a vanishingly small element in the overall phenomenon of happiness. Desire as inclination, considered solely *as such*, has very little to do either with constituting things as desirable or with explaining the pleasure that results from attaining those things. Therefore, we cannot plausibly think of desire as consisting solely in inclination or portending primarily its own satisfaction. To the contrary, if we are to understand desire, even desire as inclination, we have to understand it not in terms of the satisfaction that extinguishes it, but instead as a manifestation of something else that continues to exist and finds its completion in the object desired. We need, then, to make a fresh start – or rather, return to an older analysis of desire.

According to this view, what desire is focused on is not its own satisfaction, but instead on its object and portends the acquisition, attainment, or possession of that object. By acquisition, attainment or possession here we do not mean mere ownership or even an exclusive relation to that object. One of Berkeley’s finest essays defends the thesis that the true possessor of a work of art is the person whose inclination and taste allows him or her genuinely to appreciate it, something that requires neither legal ownership nor exclusivity of relation. On this view, then, possession of the object of desire is no mere matter of ownership, but instead the active *use* or *enjoyment* of that object through being related to it in an appropriate way. Desire, then, seeks the object as a source of enjoyment or enrichment, which may take many forms. Some things are desired as means to some further end, hence as useful, whereas others are desired (as we say) for their own sakes and thus as intrinsically enjoyable. Among these latter things are those for which the activity of mere contemplation is sufficient for their enjoyment.

To apprehend something as useful or enjoyable for its own sake is to see it as *beneficial* to us, as “better-making.” We will see something as beneficial to us if we see it as contributing to a better, fuller, and more complete and satisfying life. Whatever we apprehend in this way we acknowledge to be good and thus desirable. Similarly, whatever is desired is apprehended by the one who desires it as good or under the aspect of good to the extent that it is seen as desirable. However, we are very quickly led to draw a distinction between what merely *appears* to be good or beneficial and what *actually* is so. The distinction between these two is a matter of perspective. Almost anything can be seen to be good from some point of view and thus as desirable from that perspective. The mere appearance of goodness is produced when the object is apprehended from some limited point of view or perspective, which may include erroneous beliefs or even a deliberate narrowing of vision that excludes/ignores considerations that would make the object appear less good. The appearance of goodness that most closely approximates the object’s actual goodness is that which reflects all of the perspectives and information relevant to the evaluation of that object. Actual goodness, then, is goodness on the whole, which takes into account every perspective on that good as well as its relation to all the other goods to which it is related. Thus, when speaking of the desirable we can distinguish two distinct senses in which this term can be used. First, there is a purely descriptive sense of “desirable”, according to which something is desirable if it is in fact desired by someone at some time as a consequence of its merely appearing to be good. Second, there is also a normative sense of “desirable” according to which something is desirable only if it not merely appears but also is actually good as judged from the most adequate perspective from which that potential object of desire can be viewed, a perspective to which in everyday life we can only asymptotically approach. Without making any effort to specify this further, in what follows I shall use “good” to refer to that which is actually beneficial or genuinely desirable.

**Desire and Happiness** In my view, following a long tradition, we are “hard-wired” for happiness and seek it ineluctably by means of the will. However, since the will is an appetite, it fails to carry with it any knowledge of its object; its complementary object has to be discovered through a combination of experience and reflection. The place where this experience occurs and to which reflection must inevitably be turned must be with regard to the good as intimated by desire. The search for happiness is the search for the genuine good, to the extent that this can be characterized and attained. Happiness, then, is to possess and enjoy that good, whatever it may happen to be. For the same reason, happiness will only be possible if there is such an object and if it is attainable by us. Only in that case will the appetite for happiness be capable of being gratified. So, then, the search for happiness is the search for the good and the good in turn is what answers to, completes and gratifies the appetite for happiness. To be happy, then, is to possess and enjoy the good. Similarly, to desire happiness is to desire the good and to be motivated to seek and acquire the good as an object of enjoyment. Given that happiness – and thus the good – is the supreme object of desire, we can borrow a phrase from Tillich and call the desire for happiness *ultimate concern* and the good the object of that ultimate desire.

In rational beings, appetites can often be both the source of desires as well as their objects. Thus, when I am hungry I desire food, because of my belief that food is the appropriate object of that appetite, when thirsty, drink and so on. In a like manner, we not only have an appetite for happiness, but an occurrent desire for it and thus motivation to inquire into the question of what the good is and, having grasped what it is, to pursue it. Happiness, then, is also an object of desire and so the possibility of happiness requires that there be a good or set of goods that answers to and extinguishes that general desire for happiness. However, given that the good (or goods) constituting the object of happiness is not obvious to us; we must inquire into its nature before it can be actively sought by us.

**Desire, Love and Fulfillment** Just as one finds little reference to appetite in contemporary philosophical psychology, so too one finds almost no reference to love. In the contemporary milieu, the term itself brings to mind an emotion sometimes called “romantic love”, one that is rooted in sexual desire and is constituted primarily by certain strong feelings prompted by the play of beta-endorphins in the brain. In spite of this, the emotion of romantic love is something that only a rational being can experience and is a genuine form of love, though not the only form of love or even the best kind of love possible. A more general characterization is possible and it is this we will consider here.

I have already argued that desire portends, not its own satisfaction but the attainment of the object desired and its enjoyment. Desire as such, then, is not its own object nor is desire-satisfaction the be-all and end-all of human motivation. Rather, desire is for the sake of enjoyment and these two states lie on a continuum as an initial state in relation to its fulfillment. Desire and enjoyment – here thought of as the fulfillment of desire in the possession and enjoyment of its object – are mutually exclusive states in the sense that one cannot be in a state of desire and enjoyment with regard to the same object in the same respect. To the extent that one attains and enjoys the object, desire is excluded and ceases to be. To the extent that one is still in a state of desire with regard to its object even after having begun to possess and enjoy it, to that extent one fails to possess it securely and one’s enjoyment is not complete. Despite being mutually exclusive in this way, however, desire and enjoyment are related to one another in some respects as youth and adulthood in that one naturally precedes the other and culminates in it, though not automatically as in the aging process. The child is the father of the man and desire is both necessary for and completed by the fulfillment that supersedes it.

The continuous character of the relation between desire and fulfillment is captured by the notion of *love*. From this perspective, desire is *love yet to be requited*, whereas fulfillment is *love requited*, something capable in principle of continuing to exist even after all desire has been superseded as a state of enjoyment in possession of the desired object. Desire motivates, then, because it presents the good, the object of love, as something not yet possessed or enjoyed but as something still to be pursued. Yet the act of pursuit is not undertaken for its own sake, but instead for the sake of possession of the beloved object, something capable of existing even after the pursuit has successfully concluded, as desire does not.

In Augustine of Hippo, the term *love* is used in this wide-ranging and generic sense to refer, as we do in colloquial speech, to any object of desire.[[5]](#footnote-5) So understood, it makes literal sense for one to say that one loves ice cream, or chocolate, or the Democratic party, or one’s spouse, or God. Further, according to Augustine, what one loves determines what kind of person one will be: *amor meus, pondus meum* – my love is my weight. Of course, these diverse objects of potential or actual love are not all of equal merit as objects of love and need to be ordered in a hierarchy according to a rational principle; however, we will not undertake this analysis here. Instead, let us summarize our results to this point.

The will is a rational appetite for the good, the nature of which it does not inform us such that the good must be sought by means of the intellect reflecting on experience. In the case of rational beings, this appetite gives rise to a desire for happiness, i.e. for the possession and enjoyment of the good, whatever this may be, conceived of as the object of ultimate concern. Desire and enjoyment are continuous with each other, each of them being a different form of love, the first of which, desire, portends its own completion in enjoyment; this enjoyment is, in turn, is happiness. Happiness, then, consists in the possession of the beloved object, the good.

Happiness comes in degrees associated with the significance of the objects that produce it. The quest for human happiness is not the quest for merely everyday joys but instead for complete human fulfillment through the enjoyment of an object that answers to the deepest longings of the human heart. The question of what such an object might be is a topic for another time.

1. See Aristotle, *EN* 1095a17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the *Gorgias*, around 495-498. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is particularly the case with Utilitarians like Bentham and Mill, who despite their different accounts of the nature of pleasure seem to agree that it is a kind of sensation that results from satisfying a desire or gratifying an appetite. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Again, we are misled here by the tendency to identify desire with appetite. In human beings,, the fact that appetite has become detached from its biological function means that the pleasure of gratification as such can become an object of desire, leading even to the artificial stimulation of the appetite in order to produce the state of arousal necessary for the experience of that pleasure. In this way, appetite is further distorted by turning it away from its natural object and thus its natural function in the economy of biological life. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See his *Confessions*, XIII, 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)