Wanting What's Not Best*

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Abstract

In this paper, we propose a novel account of desire reports, i.e. sentences of the form ⌜S wants p⌝. Our theory is partly motivated by Phillips-Brown's (2021) observation that subjects can desire things even if those things aren't best by the subject's lights. That is, being best isn't necessary for being desired. We compare our proposal to existing theories, and show that it provides a neat account of the central phenomenon.

1 Introduction

In this paper, we propose a novel account of desire reports, i.e. sentences of the form ⌜S wants p⌝. Our theory is partly motivated by some striking observations presented by Phillips-Brown (2021). In particular, Phillips-Brown observes that subjects can desire things even if those things aren't best by the subject's lights. That is, being best isn't necessary for being desired. To illustrate, Phillips-Brown discusses scenarios such as the following:

> *Tickets*: You will be given a single ticket from a hat. Most of the tickets are worthless. Two tickets, though, have cash value, the blue ticket (worth $100) and the red ticket (worth $50).

(1) a. I want to get the red ticket.
    b. I want to get the blue ticket.

Both (1a) and (1b) are acceptable here. In particular, (1a) sounds true, even though getting the red ticket clearly isn't the best outcome.[1]

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[1]Here is another way to bring out that what's best isn't necessary for being desired. Suppose your favorite type of pasta is spaghetti bolognese, with lasagna a close second. You're late for dinner, so your friend orders for you. As you sit down, the waiter brings you a plate of lasagna. If your friend points to the food and asks 'Did you want that?', you can perfectly well say 'Yes'. But lasagna isn't best by your lights.

Phillips-Brown argues that some prominent analyses of desire do not allow (1a) to be true in context. More generally, these accounts do not allow subjects to want what isn't best. Phillips-Brown then develops a decision-theoretic semantics for desire reports—what we call *thresholdism*—that does.[2] In what follows, we raise some concerns for thresholdism, and propose an account of our own.

We maintain that desire reports have two important aspects. First, they are *alternative-sensitive*. This means that the objects relevant for the evaluation of a desire report is a set of propositions, called *alternatives*; and whether S wants p doesn't just depend on the content of p alone, but also on which alternatives are relevant in context. Second, we maintain that desire reports *existentially quantify* over alternatives in the following sense: ⌜S wants p⌝ is true just in case there is *some* p-entailing alternative that is "good" by the subject's lights.[3] This explains why, for instance, (1a) is true: the alternative on which you get the red ticket is still a good outcome, even though getting the blue ticket is better. Not only does this account allow subjects to want what isn't best, but, as we will show, it also improves on thresholdism in several respects.

Our discussion is structured as follows. In §2 we outline Phillips-Brown's criticism of dominant approaches to desire, and present thresholdism. Then in §3 we argue that thresholdism predicts that some unacceptable conjunctions involving desire reports should be true; and show that it invalidates an intuitively plausible principle in the logic of desire. In §4 we develop our positive proposal, and explain how it satisfies our desiderata. Finally, §5 concludes.

2 Thresholdism

In this section, we outline Phillips-Brown's criticism of existing analyses of desire (§2.1), and then present thresholdism (§2.2).

[2]We will follow Phillips-Brown in assuming that 'want' in its most fundamental use expresses a propositional attitude. Some have questioned this assumption (Montague, 2007; Grzankowski, 2016). We expect that our main ideas could be readily adapted to a non-propositional approach.

[3]We let 'S' range over the names of agents and let 'S' range over the corresponding agents denoted by 'S'. Similarly, we let 'p' range over the logical forms of proposition-denoting strings and let 'p' range over the corresponding propositions denoted by 'p'.

2.1 Wanting and what's best

Existing analyses of desire typically connect the desirability of a thing to that thing being best among the relevant alternatives.[4] As mentioned, Phillips-Brown poses a problem for such analyses by arguing that being best isn't necessary for being desired. To make Phillips-Brown's criticism clear, it will be helpful to have an account of desire on the table. To this end, we briefly present a popular ordering-based semantics for desire reports.

Ordering-based accounts of desire involve two main elements: (i) a domain of worlds, or *modal base* $\mathcal{B}$[5], and (ii) a subjective ordering $>_{S,w}$ over the worlds in $\mathcal{B}$.[6] The idea is that $w' >_{S,w} w''$ when w' is more desirable to S (in w) than w''.[7] $>_{S,w}$ is taken to be a strict partial order. The desirability of a proposition is measured by considering the top-ranked worlds in $\mathcal{B}$, as ordered by $>_{S,w}$ (von Fintel, 1999; Crnič, 2011; Rubinstein, 2012). To make this a bit more precise, let us introduce a function BEST that takes a subject S, modal base $\mathcal{B}$, and subjective ordering $>_{S,w}$ and yields the set of top-ranked worlds in $\mathcal{B}$, as ordered by $>_{S,w}$. Then the ordering-based account can be expressed as follows:

> **Ordering-based semantics for *want***
> ⌜S wants p⌝ is true relative to $\langle w, \mathcal{B}\rangle$ iff BEST $\subseteq p$.

So, for instance, 'I want to order lasagna' is true just in case all of the best worlds, by my lights, are ordering-lasagna-worlds.

Now recall (1a) and (1b) in the *Tickets* scenario:

(1) a. I want to get the red ticket.
b. I want to get the blue ticket.

Intuitively, both reports are true in context. However, the problem is that for any (non-empty) modal base $\mathcal{B}$: if (1b) is true relative to $\mathcal{B}$ on the ordering-based semantics, then (1a) will be false relative to $\mathcal{B}$. For instance,

[4] The notion of "being best among the relevant alternatives" can be spelled out in various ways. We consider one common approach below. See fn.11 for another.

[5] The term "modal base" is often used ambiguously in the literature: sometimes it is used to mean the set of propositions that are intersected to determine the modal domain (or the function from worlds to such sets), while other times it is used to mean the modal domain itself. We use it in the second way here.

[6] $\mathcal{B}$ is often identified with the set of worlds compatible with what the subject believes (Heim, 1992; von Fintel, 1999). As we discuss in §4.1, there is reason to think that this identification is problematic, so we opt for a less committal statement of the view here.

[7] We will often drop the world subscript on preference orderings when no confusion arises.

suppose $\mathcal{B} = \{w_{\mathrm{R}}, w_{\mathrm{B}}, w_{\mathrm{N}}\}$, where w_{R} is a world where I get the red ticket, w_{B} is a world where I get the blue ticket, and w_{N} is a world where I get neither the red nor blue ticket. My preference ordering over these worlds looks as follows: $w_{\mathrm{B}} >_{\mathrm{Me}} w_{\mathrm{R}} >_{\mathrm{Me}} w_{\mathrm{N}}$. Thus, $\textsc{best} = \{w_{\mathrm{B}}\}$. But then although (1b) will be true, (1a) will be false.

As far as we can see, the only possible response here is to appeal to a shift in the modal base.[8] The idea would be that (1b) is true because, e.g., the report is evaluated relative to $\mathcal{B}$ from above. And (1a) is true because the best worlds in the modal base relative to which this report is evaluated are red-ticket worlds, e.g. the modal base could be $\mathcal{B}' = \{w_{\mathrm{R}}, w_{\mathrm{N}}\}$. Although Phillips-Brown doesn't discuss this reply, we see at least two reasons to be unsatisfied with it. For one thing, conjunctions such as (2) seem perfectly felicitous, and don't induce the kind of "double take" effects that usually come with context shifts.

(2) I want to get the red ticket and I want to get the blue ticket.

Moreover, if someone asked the question in (3a), it would be acceptable to answer as in (3b):

(3) a. How many tickets are ones you want to be drawn?
b. Two.

But relative to the candidate modal bases, only one ticket will be best.[9,10]

[8] As Phillips-Brown points out, trying to explain how both reports can be true by appealing to a shift in the preference ordering over worlds is problematic, since the only thing I value here is money.

[9] Phillips-Brown also denies that being best is *sufficient* for being wanted. His argument against this claim ultimately comes down to cases such as the following:

> *Depressive*: Suppose that you are deeply, deeply depressed. There is nothing at all in the whole world that you want. Life is misery. Even so, you do prefer some things to others. Something is best, but nothing is wanted.

The idea is that if you are such a depressive, then even if you prefer some options to others, ⌜You want p⌝ is false for any p. If it is coherent to suppose that such an individual exists, then this poses a problem for the ordering-based account, no matter which worlds appear in the modal base.

We find cases such as *Depressive* fairly tendentious (after all, it's fairly strange to say something like 'I prefer getting spaghetti most of all, but I don't want to get spaghetti'). More generally, our sense is that the case against the sufficiency of being best for being desired is weaker than the case against the necessity of being best for being desired. Consequently, we focus on the latter here, and remain neutral about the status of sufficiency (but see fn.24 for how a rejection of sufficiency could be captured on our positive proposal).

[10] It is worth noting that the analogue of (1a) with 'hope'—'I hope to get the red ticket'—sounds much worse in the *Tickets* scenario. Similarly with 'wish': 'I wish I had gotten the red ticket' is infelicitous if you find out that you were given, for example, the

2.2 Threshold semantics

In response to scenarios such as *Tickets*, Phillips-Brown develops a novel decision-theoretic account of desire, which we will call *thresholdism*.[11] On this semantics, ⌜S wants p⌝ is true just in case the *expected value* of p, for S, exceeds a contextually determined threshold value t. The expected value of p for S is the utility of p for S weighted by S's subjective probabilities (Jeffrey, 1965). To make this account more precise, let $\mathrm{C}_{w,S}$ represent S's credences over the live possibilities in w. Also, let $\mathrm{v}_{w,S}$ be an evaluation function, i.e. a function from W to the real numbers. Intuitively, $\mathrm{v}_{w,S}(w')$ measures how much utility S would get if w' was the actual world. Then thresholdism can be represented as follows:[12]

Threshold semantics for *want*

⌜S wants p⌝ is true relative to $\langle w, t\rangle$ iff $EV_{w,S}(p) > t$

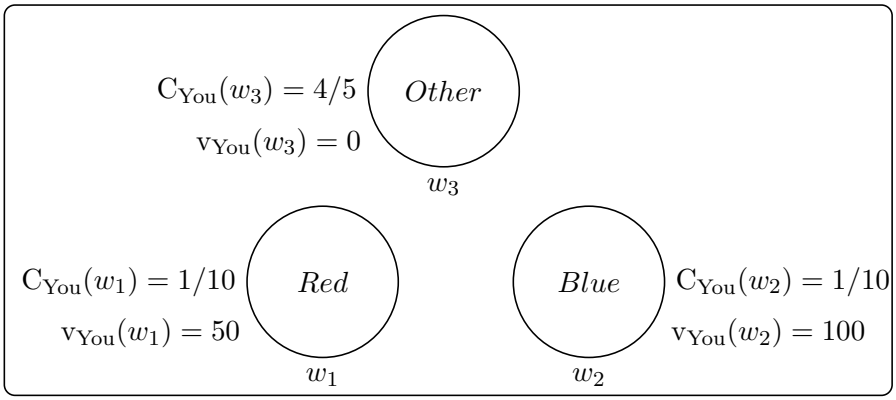
$$\text{iff } \sum_{w' \in W} \mathrm{v}_{w,S}(w') \cdot \mathrm{C}_{w,S}(w'|p) > t$$

This account explains the fact that being best isn't necessary for being wanted by maintaining that the threshold value is set sufficiently low in context. For instance, in the *Tickets scenario*, let us suppose that there are a total of ten tickets in the hat. Then your credences/utilities are as follows:

green ticket. Moreover, the only appropriate answer to the questions 'How many tickets are ones you hope will be drawn?' and 'How many tickets are ones you wish had been drawn?' in these scenarios is 'One'. More generally, in contrast to wanting, one cannot hope or wish for what isn't best. See (Blumberg & Hawthorne, forthcoming) for a detailed discussion of these features of hoping, among others, and (Blumberg, 2018) for an analysis of wish reports.

[11] Decision-theoretic accounts of desire are also endorsed by (van Rooij, 1999; Lassiter, 2011; Jerzak, 2019). Existing decision-theoretic analyses also typically maintain that being best among the relevant alternatives is necessary (and sufficient) for being desired. For instance, on Levinson's account, ⌜S wants p⌝ is true just in case p has higher expected value than $\neg p$. The relevant alternatives here are the propositions p and $\neg p$, and the "best" proposition is that which has highest expected value. It is worth noting that Levinson's proposal predicts that (1a) ('I want to get the red ticket') is true in the *Tickets* scenario (so this example does not support thresholdism over Levinson's account). However, his account also predicts that there should be no scenarios where although some outcomes are preferred to others, every outcome is good and therefore wanted. But such cases seem to obtain, e.g. if every dish on the menu looks good, I can truly assert 'I want everything on the menu'. Moreover, the problems that we raise for thresholdism in §3 also arise for Levinson's theory. Finally, if one was convinced that being best isn't sufficient for being desired, then Levinson's account would be problematic, e.g. it cannot capture cases such as *Depressive* of fn.9.

[12] Technically, on the variant of thresholdism developed by Phillips-Brown the threshold is fixed by a contextually determined function from world-agent pairs to real numbers (15-18), rather than directly by context. But this machinery is only needed to handle embedded desire reports, which we do not consider here. Presenting things as we have done simplifies the discussion.



Then $EV_{\text{You}}(\textit{Red}) = 50$, and $EV_{\text{You}}(\textit{Blue}) = 100$. Even though $EV_{\text{You}}(\textit{Blue}) > EV_{\text{You}}(\textit{Red})$, so long as the threshold t is below 50, both (1a) ('I want to get the red ticket') and (1b) ('I want to get the blue ticket') are predicted to be true.

Overall, thresholdism is able to capture the central examples in a fairly elegant fashion. However, we think that there are some problems with this account, which we turn to next.

3 Two concerns

We raise two issues for Phillips-Brown's threshold semantics. First, it predicts that some unacceptable conjunctions involving desire reports should be true (§3.1). Second, it invalidates an intuitively plausible principle in the logic of desire (§3.2).

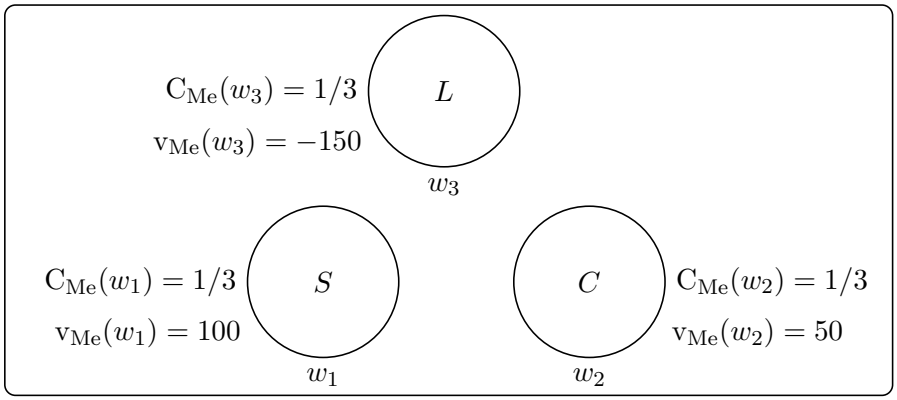
3.1 Abominable Conjunctions

On the threshold semantics, desire reports fail to be closed under logical consequence, i.e. Monotonicity is not valid on this account:

Monotonicity If $p \models q$, then *S wants* $p \models$ *S wants* q

To illustrate, consider the following example:

> *Dinner*: I'm meeting my friend for dinner. There are three items on the menu: spaghetti bolognese, chicken, and lasagna. I'm going to be late, so my friend—who has no idea about my preferences—is going to order for me. Given my past experience, I like the spaghetti most, I find the chicken to be good, and I hate the lasagna. More specifically, my credences/utilities are as follows:



Then $EV_{\text{Me}}(\textit{Spaghetti}) = 100$, and $EV_{\text{Me}}(\textit{Pasta}) = EV_{\text{Me}}(\textit{Spaghetti or lasagna}) = -25$. Thus, so long as the threshold t is above -25, (4a) is predicted to be true, and (4b) is predicted to be false. But of course *I get spaghetti* entails *I get pasta*.

(4) a. I want spaghetti.
b. I want pasta.

Now, von Fintel (1999, 120) raises a challenge for approaches to desire that reject monotonicity.[13] The central observation is that conjunctions such as (5) are unacceptable (as indicated by the '#' preceding the example):

(5) # I want spaghetti, but I don't want pasta.

It is difficult to access an acceptable interpretation of (5); the conjunction sounds incoherent, almost as if the speaker is contradicting themselves.[14] This is surprising if (4a) is true and (4b) is false—why can't one felicitously conjoin them as in (5)? It's unclear.[15]

[13]This argument is also endorsed by Crnič (2011) and Pasternak (2019).

[14]Some might be tempted to respond by appealing to the so-called "neg-raising" properties of 'want' i.e. the phenomenon whereby negated want reports are interpreted with negation taking narrow scope with respect to 'want' (Collins & Postal, 2014). However, it is generally assumed that the negation 'it's not that' resists neg-raising, and yet (6) is just as unacceptable as (5):

(6) # I want spaghetti, but it's not that I want pasta.

Moreover, 'I want to not get pasta' is predicted to be *true* on thresholdism so long as the threshold is below 50. So, neg-raising doesn't provide us with a good explanation for the badness of (5).

[15]We explore the various data points around monotonicity and abominable conjunctions in more detail in (Blumberg & Hawthorne, 2021). Also see (Blumberg, forthcoming) for related discussion.

3.2 Weakening

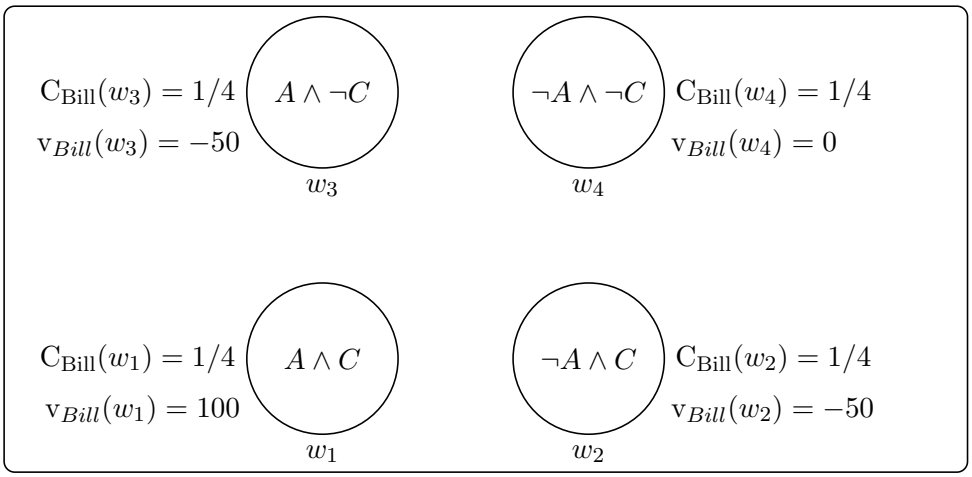
Our second concern with thresholdism involves the rule we'll call *Weakening*, after an analogous principle in deontic logic discussed by Cariani (2016):

Weakening *S wants p, S wants q* $\models$ *S wants p or q*

As far as we can tell, Weakening is an entirely uncontroversial principle in the logic of desire. The pattern it exhibits is eminently plausible, and we know of no purported counterexamples in the literature. However, thresholdism renders it invalid. To see this, let us focus on the following scenario:

> *Party Time*: Bill has been invited to a party, and he knows that Ann and Carol have been invited too. When Ann and Carol are together they're funny, charming and tell great stories. But if one attends without the other, the person attending always ends up being a real bore, and inevitably makes the party worse for everyone else.

Let us suppose that Bill's credences/utilities look as follows:[16]



A routine calculation confirms that $EV_{\mathrm{Bill}}(\textit{Ann attends}) = EV_{\mathrm{Bill}}(\textit{Carol attends}) = 25$, but $EV_{\mathrm{Bill}}(\textit{Ann or Carol attend}) = 0$. Thus, so long as the threshold is set between 0 and 25, thresholdism predicts that (7a) and (7b) should be true, but (7c) should be false.

[16] This countermodel to Weakening is inspired by a similar countermodel provided by Cariani (2016) against certain decision-theoretic analyses of deontic modals.

(7) a. Bill wants Ann to attend.
b. Bill wants Carol to attend.
c. Bill wants Ann or Carol to attend.

But as far as we can tell, there are simply no contexts where one could appropriately assert something like 'Bill wants Ann to attend, and he wants Carol to attend, but it's not that he wants Ann or Carol to attend'. Such speeches seem incoherent.

What could be said in response? As far as we can see, the only possible reply is to maintain that although Weakening isn't strictly valid, the most natural contexts ensure that (7a) and (7b) pattern with (7c). More specifically, it would have to be maintained that in these contexts, the threshold value t is fixed so that if (7a) and (7b) are true, then (7c) is true as well. However, a fair amount of work would need to be done in order to run this argument successfully. For one thing, the meta-semantic question of how exactly the threshold gets fixed in context would need to be addressed; and then the requisite property of contexts would need to be isolated and independently motivated. These tasks seem non-trivial. At the very least, we have sufficient motivation to develop a different style of approach that allows us to capture Weakening more straightforwardly.

To sum up our discussion thus far: what we require is an analysis on which (i) being best isn't necessary for being desired, (ii) abominable conjunctions are not predicted to be acceptable, and (iii) Weakening is valid. We try to develop such a proposal in the next section.

4 Alternative-sensitive semantics

We present our positive approach in several stages. First, we provide a basic entry that captures some of the central features of our account (§4.1). Then we propose a constraint that governs the relationship between the prejacent of want reports and the set of possibilities relevant for the evaluation of these ascriptions (§4.2). Finally, we discuss some concerns involving disjunctions in the scope of desire reports (§4.3), and reports which feature internal negation (§4.4).

4.1 The basic proposal

Like the ordering-based analysis presented in §2.1, we also propose that desire reports are evaluated relative to a domain of objects. However, one of the key features of our account is that we take this to be a domain of *propositions* rather than *worlds*. There are several ways of developing this

idea, but we will implement it in a fairly simple way so as not to distract from our central arguments.

We will say that $\mathcal{A}$ is a set of *alternatives* if it is a set of pairwise incompatible propositions. So, if $A, B \in \mathcal{A}$, then $A \cap B = \emptyset$. To illustrate, let ANN, MARY, PETE, and SUE represent the propositions that Ann wins the race, Mary wins the race, Pete wins the race, and Sue wins the race, respectively. Then $\mathcal{A}_1 = \{\text{ANN}, \text{MARY}, \text{PETE}, \text{SUE}\}$ is a set of alternatives. We propose that the set of objects that is relevant for the evaluation of a desire ascription ⌜S wants p⌝ is a set of contextually supplied alternatives.[17]

Given a set of alternatives $\mathcal{A}$ and a world w, $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(\cdot)$ is what we will call a *good-selecting function* from individuals to subsets of $\mathcal{A}$. Intuitively, $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(S)$ represents the set of "good" alternatives in $\mathcal{A}$ for S at w.[18] Correspondingly, the complement of $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(S)$ with respect to $\mathcal{A}$ $(\mathcal{A} - \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(S))$ represents the set of alternatives that are "not good" for S.[19] For instance, if Ann and Mary are Bill's friends, and Pete and Sue are Bill's enemies, then $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}_1}(\text{Bill}) = \{\text{ANN}, \text{MARY}\}$.[20] We propose that desire reports are evaluated relative to a contextually determined good-selecting function.

Our first-pass account can be expressed as follows:

> **Account 1**
> ⌜S wants p⌝ is true relative to $\langle w, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{G}\rangle$ iff for some $q \in \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(S)$:
> $q \subseteq p$

In short, ⌜S wants p⌝ is true just in case some good alternative entails p. It is worth pointing out that an analogous account that existentially quantified over individual *worlds* would be a non-starter. For instance, consider a variant of the entry considered in §2.1 on which ⌜S wants p⌝ is true just in case there is some top-ranked p-world in BEST. This would predict that subjects want anything that is merely compatible with their desires, e.g. that 'I want ten people in Germany to wear yellow tomorrow' should be true. But this is clearly problematic. By contrast, since Account 1 quantifies over propositions, rather than worlds, this issue doesn't arise.

[17] One might want to allow the set of alternatives to vary from world to world. One could capture this by maintaining that interpretation proceeds relative to a function from worlds to sets of alternatives, rather than just a set of alternatives. But we'll ignore this complication in what follows.

[18] If you were a "doxastic cognitivist" in the sense of (Dietz, 2020) you might think that the goodness of an alternative has to do with the agent believing the alternative has some special property, and then somehow try to explain desire in terms of beliefs of this kind. We wish to be agnostic about cognitivism here.

[19] The alternatives in $\mathcal{A} - \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(S)$ needn't be bad for S, they just aren't good.

[20] We will often drop the world subscript on the good-selecting function when no confusion arises.

To get a feel for how Account 1 works, consider the following example adapted from Levinson (2003):

> *Insurance*: Sue is deciding whether to take out house insurance. She estimates that the chances of her house burning down are $\frac{1}{1000}$. But the results would be calamitous: she'd lose her home which is valued at $\$1,000,000$. Comprehensive home insurance would cost her \$100. Sue has a meeting with her insurance broker this afternoon, so she needs to decide what she wants to do.

(8) Sue wants to buy insurance.

If Sue is like most of us, (8) is true: even though she thinks it's likely that her house won't burn down, there is a small possibility that it does, and the badness of this possibility outweighs the cost of buying insurance.

Examples such as (8) are often taken to pose a problem for accounts that ground the semantic value of desire reports in preference orderings over worlds, e.g. the ordering-based analysis considered in §2.1. Given such an ordering over worlds, the problem is that in order to make (8) come out true, it must be claimed that Sue's most preferred worlds are ones where she buys insurance. But intuitively this isn't the case; it's quite clear that Sue most prefers worlds where she spends no money on insurance (and there's no fire).[21] However, alternatives are relatively coarse-grained entities. So, even if there are some *worlds* in an alternative B that are bad by S's lights, S can still consider B to be good overall. For instance, let us suppose that the relevant set of alternatives in the *Insurance* scenario is

[21] As far as we're aware, this argument was first put forward by Levinson (2003). It has been endorsed by Lassiter (2011) and Jerzak (2019).

It might be argued that the ordering-based analysis does actually predict that (8) should be true, once one takes peace of mind into account: in worlds where Sue buys insurance, Sue's peace of mind has greater utility than the cost of insurance (Büring, 2003; von Fintel, 2012). However, we can control for this aspect of the case by considering a similar scenario where Sue never finds out whether insurance is purchased:

> *Trip*: Sue is going on a cross-country trip. As a favor to Sue, Bill agreed to organize the car rental. She estimates that the chances of the car being in an accident are $\frac{1}{1000}$. But the results would be very bad: she'd have to pay for the cost of repairs which will be at least $\$10,000$. Comprehensive car insurance costs \$100. Sue won't be able to find out from Bill if he purchases insurance—he's at a meditation retreat for the duration of her trip, and personal calls are not allowed.

(9) Sue wants Bill to buy insurance.

(9) is true here, but Sue won't find out if insurance is bought, and so won't get peace of mind from the purchase.

$\mathcal{A} = \{\text{INSURANCE}, \overline{\text{INSURANCE}}\}$, where INSURANCE and $\overline{\text{INSURANCE}}$ are the propositions that Sue buys insurance, and that she doesn't buy insurance, respectively. Moreover, let us suppose that the only good alternative according to Sue is INSURANCE, i.e. $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Sue}) = \{\text{INSURANCE}\}$. In this case, Account 1 predicts that (8) should be true.

At this point, two natural meta-semantic questions arise for Account 1: (i) how exactly does the set of alternatives $\mathcal{A}$ get determined in context, and (ii) how are the good alternatives $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(S)$ selected from $\mathcal{A}$. We won't be able to provide a complete answer to the first question here. This is obviously an important topic, and our account won't be complete without a predictive theory of how this parameter gets fixed. That said, it is worth remarking that variants of this meta-semantic challenge arise for virtually all existing accounts of desire. This is because what a subject desires is usually analyzed as involving a background collection of possibilities. The general form of the meta-semantic question, then, is this: how exactly do these possibilities get determined in context? To make this point a bit more concrete, consider the popular ordering-based theory from §2.1. As mentioned in fn.6, it is common for theorists to identify this modal base with the subject's belief set (Heim, 1992; von Fintel, 1999). In some contexts, this seems plausible enough. For instance, when I'm ordering a sandwich, 'I want the ham and cheese' can be true even if what I most desire, e.g. lobster, goes beyond what I believe I can get. On the other hand, it has been recognized for some time (though it is often ignored) that subjects can want things that they believe (and in some cases are certain) won't obtain:

(10) a. I want this weekend to last forever (but of course I know it will be over in a few hours) (Heim, 1992, 199).

b. Wu wants to be promoted (but believes he won't be) [(Grano & Phillips-Brown, 2020) inspired by (Portner & Rubinstein, 2012)].

Clearly, in these cases what is desired is not constrained by what the subject believes or knows.[22] Why, then, is the modal base sometimes restricted to what the subject believes—as in the sandwich case—and sometimes not—as in (10a)? In other words, what fixes the modal base in context? This question is analogous to asking what, given our account, determines the background set of alternatives. Of course, the fact that this meta-semantic challenge arises for a broad range of accounts doesn't make trying to answer it any less important. But it is still worth registering that the issue is quite a general one.

[22]By contrast, such constraints seem to be operative in the case of hoping. For instance, as Blumberg & Hawthorne (forthcoming) observe, the analogues of the examples in (10) with 'hope' sound much worse.

As for the second question concerning how $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(S)$ is fixed, one model that we're attracted to is that it is determined by expected value. We can make this precise by following Phillips-Brown and supposing that context determines a threshold value t. Then where A is an alternative: $A \in \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(S)$ when $EV_S(A) > t$. Supposing $t < EV_{\text{Sue}}(\textsc{insurance})$ in the *Insurance* scenario, this would explain why $\textsc{insurance} \in \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Sue})$. If that's correct, then this has interesting consequences for the nature of desire. Theories that analyze desire in terms of subjective preference orderings, and decision-theoretic analyses that tie the desirability of a proposition to its expected value are often taken to be in competition with each other (Lassiter, 2011; von Fintel, 2012). However, if the ordering over alternatives is essentially determined by expected value, then this isn't the case. In order to adequately model the structure of desiderative attitudes, the central elements of *both* accounts are needed.[23] We will come back to this point in §5.

Now let us return to our central desiderata. First, we want to be able to capture the fact that being best isn't necessary for being desired. Recall the *Tickets* case from above:

> *Tickets*: You will be given a single ticket from a hat. Most of the tickets are worthless. Two tickets, though, have cash value, the blue ticket (worth $100) and the red ticket (worth $50).

(1) a. I want to get the red ticket.
    b. I want to get the blue ticket.

Let us suppose that the relevant set of alternatives here is $\mathcal{A} = \{\textsc{red}, \textsc{blue}, \textsc{other}\}$, where RED is the proposition that you get the red ticket, BLUE is the proposition that you get the blue ticket, and OTHER is the proposition that you get a different color ticket. Then so long as both RED and BLUE are considered good, i.e. $\{\textsc{red}, \textsc{blue}\} \subseteq \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Me})$, both (1a) and (1b) are predicted to be true. In particular, even if RED isn't best, it can still be wanted.[24]

As for abominable conjunctions, we saw that (5) is unacceptable in the *Dinner* scenario:

[23] We use expected value because it is fairly simple, and allows us to fix ideas. We want to leave it open that the "good news value" of an outcome is better represented by using expected value in more sophisticated ways, or even by adopting a more sophisticated decision theory, e.g. prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1988) or risk-weighted utility theory (Buchak, 2013). Note moreover that even if the relevant notion of goodness isn't ultimately cashed out in decision-theoretic terms, the central tenets of our account remain unaffected.

[24] For those who think that being best is not sufficient for being desired, our account can accommodate this if we assume that the set of good alternatives can be empty in context, i.e. $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(S) = \emptyset$.

> *Dinner*: I'm meeting my friend for dinner. There are three items on the menu: spaghetti bolognese, chicken, and lasagna. I'm going to be late, so my friend—who has no idea about my preferences—is going to order for me. Given my past experience, I like the spaghetti most, I find the chicken to be good, and I hate the lasagna.

(5) # I want spaghetti, but I don't want pasta.

This is easily explained by our account. Let us suppose that the relevant set of alternatives is $\mathcal{A} = \{\textsc{spaghetti}, \textsc{chicken}, \textsc{lasagna}\}$, with $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Me}) = \{\textsc{spaghetti}, \textsc{chicken}\}$. Then the second conjunct in (5) can't be true, since there is some good *pasta*-entailing alternative, namely SPAGHETTI. And indeed, (5) is predicted be infelicitous for any value of $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Me})$.

Finally, it is simple to check that Weakening (repeated below) is valid.

Weakening *S wants p, S wants q* $\models$ *S wants p or q*

If ⌜S wants p⌝ is true, then there is some p-entailing alternative $A \in \mathcal{A}$ such that $A \in \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(S)$. But p entails $p \vee q$, and so there is some $p \vee q$-entailing alternative in $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(S)$. Thus, ⌜S wants p or q⌝ is true.

In terms of our primary aims, Account 1 provides us with what we want. However, as we'll see, the entry needs some refinement.

4.2 Representation

Account 1 captures some of the key ideas behind our proposal. But the entry needs to be amended. The problem is that it doesn't sufficiently constrain the relationship that holds between the propositional argument to 'want' and the background set of alternatives $\mathcal{A}$. For instance, it predicts that the clearly unacceptable (11) should be true in *Tickets*:

(11) # I don't want to get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari.

This is because no alternative in $\mathcal{A} = \{\textsc{red}, \textsc{blue}, \textsc{other}\}$ entails that I get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari. Consequently, no good alternative in the set entails this proposition, and so (11) is true.

Intuitively, what goes wrong with (11) is that the proposition *I get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari* makes salient certain distinctions that are being ignored by the background set of alternatives. We can make this more precise through the following definition. Given a set of alternatives $\mathcal{A}$

and proposition p, let us say that p is *represented by* $\mathcal{A}$ just in case every alternative in $\mathcal{A}$ either entails p or entails $\neg p$.[25]

We propose adding a representation requirement to the semantics of desire reports. More precisely, we will include this as a definedness condition on desire ascriptions. This explains why (11) is unacceptable in context: presuppositions are known to project through negation (Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet, 2000), so (11) also requires that *I get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari* be represented by the background set of alternatives. However, RED neither entails *I get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari* nor its negation. Thus, (11) is predicted to suffer from presupposition failure, and thus be unacceptable. Our final entry for 'want' then looks as follows:[26,27]

> **Alternative-sensitive semantics for *want***
> $\ulcorner$S wants p$\urcorner$ is defined relative to $\langle w, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{G}\rangle$ only if p is represented by $\mathcal{A}$
>
> If defined, $\ulcorner$S wants p$\urcorner$ is true relative to $\langle w, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{G}\rangle$ iff for some $q \in \mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A},w}(S)$: $q \subseteq p$

Note that Weakening is still valid on this entry. To see this, it suffices to observe that if both p and q are represented by $\mathcal{A}$, then $p \vee q$ must be represented as well. For suppose otherwise. Then there must be an alternative $A \in \mathcal{A}$ that includes $\neg p$-worlds and $\neg q$-worlds along with p-worlds and q-worlds. But this contradicts both p and q being represented.[28]

[25] Cf. Cariani's (2013) notion of a proposition being "visible" with respect to a background partition of logical space.

[26] For convenience, we assume that presupposition failure has a semantic effect. But our general approach is compatible with pragmatic accounts of presupposition on which presupposition failure affects assertability rather than semantic value (Schlenker, 2009).

[27] (12) can be heard as true:

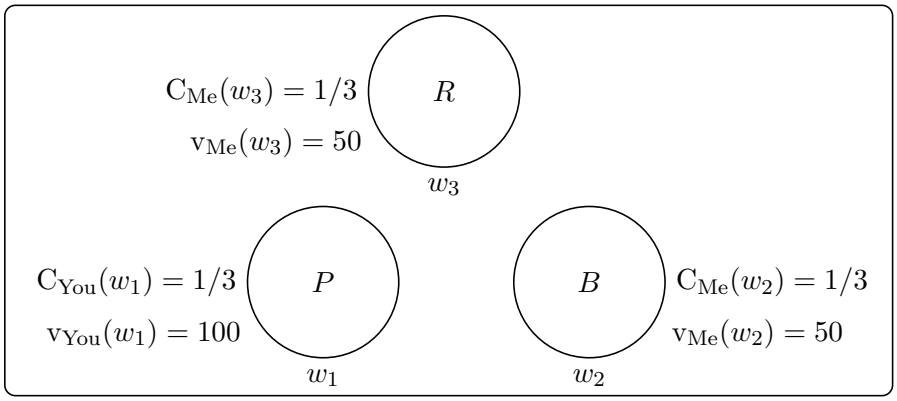
(12) I want to get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari.

We can explain this if we take on board the following widely accepted principle: hearers tend to interpret sentences so as to avoid presupposition failure. That is, within reasonable limits, hearers will make the assumptions necessary to avoid undefinedness. (This process is usually discussed under the heading "accommodation". The basic phenomenon goes back at least to Kartunnen (1974). See (von Fintel, 2004) for a more recent discussion.) For instance, even if I suspect that you have no siblings, I will come to assume that you have a sister once I've heard you utter 'I have to fetch my sister from the airport tomorrow'. That is, the presupposition triggered by the possessive 'my sister', namely that I have a sister, is taken to hold when evaluating my utterance. Similarly, when hearers interpret (12) as true, they are shifting to a set of alternatives on which *I get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari* is represented. And relative to such a set, it is plausible that at least one good alternative entails *I get the blue ticket and inherit a Ferrari*, in which case (12) should be true. Note that relative to such a set (11) will be false, and so will still be predicted to be unacceptable.

[28] Note that monotonicity isn't classically valid on this entry, but is only "Strawson

With our final account at hand, we want to bring out an important structural difference between our approach and thresholdism. In short, thresholdism makes the semantic value of desire reports overly sensitive to utility and probability assignments. To see this, consider the following scenario:

> *Trip*: You have won a trip abroad. Assuming that you are granted the relevant visa, you will either be flown to Paris, Berlin, or Rio de Janeiro. You most desire visiting Paris, and you are indifferent between Berlin and Rio. More specifically, your credences/utilities are as follows:



$EV_{\text{You}}(\textit{Paris}) = 100$, and $EV_{\text{You}}(\textit{Europe}) = 75$. Let us suppose that the threshold is set at 70. Then thresholdism predicts that both (13a) and (13b) should be true:

(13) a. I want to visit Paris.
b. I want to visit Europe.

Similarly, supposing that the relevant alternatives are $\mathcal{A} = \{\text{PARIS}, \text{BERLIN}, \text{RIO}\}$, and that $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{You}) = \{\text{PARIS}\}$, our alternative-sensitive account also predicts that both of these reports should be true.

However, thresholdism predicts that (13b) should start to sound unacceptable as either (i) the utility of visiting Berlin decreases, or (ii) the probability of going to Berlin increases relative to Paris. For instance, suppose that the utility of visiting Berlin is lowered to 30. Then (13b) is predicted to be false. However, to our ears the report still sounds just as acceptable as in the original scenario. Similarly, suppose that the probability of going to Rio

valid" (von Fintel, 1999). But this doesn't affect our predictions about conjunctions such as (5): these will either be false or undefined on any set of alternatives.

decreases to 1/6, and the probability of going to Berlin increases to 1/2. Then (13b) is predicted to be false. But again, the report still sounds just as good as in the original scenario.[29] Indeed, thresholdism predicts that if my credence that I'll go to Berlin increases (suppose I come to learn that Germany has relaxed some of their visa requirements), then (14) should be true:

(14) # I wanted to visit Europe, but I don't anymore.

However, (14) is unacceptable: these sorts of changes in what I desire don't seem to be justified by shifts in my credence of going to Berlin.[30]

The more general problem here is that on thresholdism, the semantic value of ⌜S wants p⌝ is directly tied to the expected value of the prejacent p. By contrast, on our account the role that expected value plays is more indirect: it just determines which alternatives are good or not good; the expected value of the prejacent isn't relevant. Thus, even if the utility or probability of going to Berlin changes, this doesn't affect the fact that going to Paris is a good alternative. So, even if the utility/probability of going to Berlin changes, we still predict that (13b) should be true.

4.3 Desire and disjunction

Now we discuss a possible concern for our approach involving disjunctions in the scope of desire verbs. The issue can be brought out by considering the contrast between (4a) and (15) in the *Dinner* scenario (repeated from above):

> *Dinner*: I'm meeting my friend for dinner. There are three items on the menu: spaghetti bolognese, chicken, and lasagna. I'm going to be late, so my friend—who has no idea about my preferences—is going to order for me. Given my past experience, I like the spaghetti most, I find the chicken to be good, and I hate the lasagna.

(4a) I want spaghetti.

(15) # I want spaghetti or lasagna.

[29] It should be clear that similar effects can be obtained for other threshold values; we just use 70 as an illustration.

[30] Another way of bringing out the concern here is through the following observation: if you know that I want to go to Paris more than any other city, then you have enough information to conclude that I want to go to Europe. In particular, you don't need to know anything about my preferences with respect to other European cities.

Although (4a) is acceptable, (15) is not. A natural response to (15) would be 'But if you got the lasagna, you certainly wouldn't like that'. However, let us suppose that the relevant set of alternatives is $\mathcal{A} = \{\text{SPAGHETTI}, \text{CHICKEN}, \text{LASAGNA}\}$, with $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Me}) = \{\text{SPAGHETTI}, \text{CHICKEN}\}$. Then both (4a) and (15) are predicted to be true. In particular, SPAGHETTI entails *I get spaghetti or lasagna*, and this proposition is represented by $\mathcal{A}$. So, (15) is true. More generally, ⌜S wants p or q⌝ tends to suggest that S is positively disposed towards both p and q, but our semantics doesn't capture this.[31,32]

In response, it is important to stress is that this "acceptability" inference involving disjunction cannot stem from the meaning of the verb 'want'. This is because the relevant effect disappears in certain contexts, i.e. it is *optional*. For instance, suppose I find out that my dining companion is a vegetarian, and that both pasta dishes are meat-free. Then even if I know nothing about my companion's preferences but know that he is looking forward to his meal, it is natural for me to say 'He won't eat chicken. He wants spaghetti or lasagna'. Clearly, I am not claiming that my companion finds both spaghetti and lasagna acceptable—he could well hate spaghetti. The effect is also suspended when desire reports are embedded under quantifiers. Consider (16) in the following scenario:

> *Function*: Ten people are at a function with a set dinner menu. One of three items will be served: spaghetti bolognese, chicken, and lasagna. Five people love spaghetti, and hate lasagna; while the other five love lasagna, and hate spaghetti.

(16) Everyone wants spaghetti or lasagna.

(16) is perfectly felicitous here. However, for no individual x does x find both spaghetti and lasagna acceptable. Finally, the effect seems to go away completely when the desire report appears in the scope of a variety of operators, for instance negation:

(17) I don't want spaghetti or lasagna.

[31] Given our existential semantics for 'want', we could frame the effect as one where ⌜S wants p or q⌝ suggests that both p and q are each entailed by good alternatives, and thus that both ⌜S wants p⌝ and ⌜S wants q⌝ are true. But instead we have chosen to frame the effect more neutrally so that it doesn't presuppose the correctness of our account.

[32] It should be clear that this effect is tied to explicit disjunction. For instance, if I said 'I want pasta', you might ask which particular dish I'd like, but my utterance doesn't signal that getting either dish would be satisfactory. But 'I get pasta' and 'I get spaghetti or lasagna' are contextually equivalent.

It is also worth noting that no analysis of desire that we are aware of explains this effect. For instance, thresholdism predicts that (15) should be true so long as the utility of getting spaghetti is high enough. But even in these contexts the report sounds bad.

(17) is not compatible with me wanting spaghetti. But it would be if the acceptability condition was present. For then (17) could be truly merely because I find lasagna unacceptable (and thus fail to find both spaghetti and lasagna acceptable).[33] Summarizing: the particular inference to which embedded disjunctions give rise can be suspended in certain environments. However, if this effect was part of the standing meaning of 'want', we would expect it to *always* be present. So, we would do well to leave off altering our analysis of desire in response to examples such as (15).

Still, one might wonder why embedded disjunctions tend to give rise to the observed effect. We won't try to provide a complete answer to this question here, though we will make some suggestive remarks. We find it plausible that the acceptability inference is related to some other well-known phenomena involving disjunction in the scope of modal expressions.[34] More specifically, consider disjunctions in the scope of deontics such as 'may' and 'ought':

(19) a. You may mail the letter. $\not\Rightarrow$
b. You may mail the letter or burn it.

(20) a. You ought to mail the letter. $\not\Rightarrow$
b. You ought to mail the letter or burn it.

It appears that (19a) does not imply (19b), since the latter seems to give permission to burn the letter, but the former does not.[35] And (20a) seems to suggest that it permissible for you to burn the letter, which doesn't follow from (20b).[36] What exactly is the best way to capture these effects is a matter of healthy dispute, which we won't attempt to adjudicate here.[37] What's more important for our purposes is that the similarity between these

[33]Similarly, the effect goes away under the modal 'will' as well as probability operators:

(18) a. He will want spaghetti or lasagna.
b. There is a chance that he wants spaghetti or lasagna.

Neither (18a) nor (18b) tends in general to suggest that my companion is positively disposed to both spaghetti and lasagna.

[34]For a similar diagnosis of the behavior of disjunction under 'want', see (Crnič, 2011).

[35]The literature on this so-called "free choice" effect is vast. See among others (Kamp, 1974, 1978; Zimmermann, 2000; Kratzer & Shimoyama, 2002; Asher & Bonevac, 2005; Geurts, 2005; Schulz, 2005; Simons, 2005; Alonso-Ovalle, 2006; Aloni, 2007; Fox, 2007; Klinedinst, 2007; Ciardelli *et al.*, 2009; Chemla, 2009; Barker, 2010; Franke, 2011; Aher, 2012; Roelofsen, 2013; Charlow, 2015; Fusco, 2015b; Starr, 2016; Willer, 2017; Romoli & Santorio, 2017; Aloni, 2018).

[36]See, e.g. (Ross, 1941; Chierchia *et al.*, 2009; Cariani, 2013; Fusco, 2015a) for discussion of this effect.

[37]Some theorists have also tried to connect these effects featuring deontics to the theory of scalar implicatures. We won't attempt to survey this work, or the merits of these approaches, but see, e.g. (Fox, 2007; von Fintel, 2012) for further discussion.

effects and the acceptability inference exhibited by disjunctions under 'want' is striking.[38] It raises the possibility that all of these phenomena could have a common explanation. If that's correct, then a promising first step in theorizing about disjunction under 'want' will consider accounts of examples such as (19)-(20).[39]

4.4 Internal negation

We end this section by considering an important challenge for the kind of account we've been developing which comes from reports which feature internal negation. To our ears, the ascriptions in (22) are infelicitous in the *Dinner* scenario:

(22) a. # I want to not get spaghetti.
b. # I want to not get chicken.

Roughly put, the general pattern here is that it is unacceptable to report a subject as wanting the explicit negation of a good outcome. But our semantics predicts that these examples should be true relative to $\mathcal{A} = \{\text{SPAGHETTI}, \text{CHICKEN}, \text{LASAGNA}\}$, with $\mathcal{G}^{\mathcal{A}}(\text{Me}) = \{\text{SPAGHETTI}, \text{CHICKEN}\}$. For CHICKEN is a good alternative which entails that I don't get spaghetti. Similarly, SPAGHETTI is a good alternative which entails that I don't get chicken.

We think that this problem runs fairly deep in the sense that *I get chicken* is to all intents and purposes equivalent to *I don't get pasta*, and yet (23a) is felicitous while (23b) is not:[40]

[38] Indeed, our observations concerning negation in (17) are inspired by well-known observations about the behavior of deontics under negation—see (Alonso-Ovalle, 2006; Starr, 2016; Romoli & Santorio, 2019) among others. For instance, (21a) is equivalent to (21b), and not the weaker (21c):

(21) a. Mary may not read *Ulysses* or *Madame Bovary*.
b. = Mary may not read *Ulysses* and Mary may not read *Madame Bovary*
c. ≠ Mary may not read *Ulysses* or Mary may not read *Madame Bovary*

[39] Blumberg & Goldstein (2021) already note that their theory of the behavior of disjunctions in the scope of deontics could have application to desire verbs. They explain the relevant effects by positing an optional operator at logical form which checks that its prejacent is neither entailed nor contradicted by its local context (Schlenker, 2009). Supposing that the local context for the complement of 'want' is the union of the set of good alternatives, and that the posited operator is sister to each disjunct in (15), one can show that the report is true only if there is some good alternative that entails I get lasagna.

[40] Indeed, notice that on the natural way of choosing alternatives, for example $\mathcal{A} = \{\text{SPAGHETTI}, \text{CHICKEN}, \text{LASAGNA}\}$, the propositions *I get chicken* and *I don't get pasta* are true and false at exactly the same alternatives.

(23) a. I want chicken.
b. # I want to not get pasta.

So, these data points involving internal negation seem to distinguish more finely than traditional semantic frameworks allow.[41,42]

One possible response here is to maintain that internal, narrow-scope negation is interpreted wide-scope in these examples. For instance, the idea is that (22a) has the following underlying form:

(26) ¬(I want spaghetti)

Our account predicts that (26) is false, which would explain its unacceptability. However, at this stage it is rather unclear why seemingly narrow-scope negation should be subject to this sort of movement. These issues merit careful further exploration.

5 Conclusion

To summarize, we have tried to develop an account on which being best isn't necessary for being desired, which does not predict that abominable conjunctions should be acceptable, and which also validates Weakening. We think that our alternative-sensitive theory provides us with an elegant model of these constraints, and more generally yields a promising approach to desire that has the potential to account for a fairly wide range of phenomena.[43]

[41] Here is another way to bring out this point. Suppose that you desire both the vegetarian lasagna and the beef bolognese. Then (24a) seems true but (24b) does not:

(24) a. You want to get non-vegetarian food.
b. # You want to not get vegetarian food.

Or suppose that there are ten diners: all ten desire the vegetarian lasagna, while five of them also desire the beef bolognese. Then (25a) is acceptable but (25b) is not:

(25) a. Five diners want to get non-vegetarian food.
b. # Five diners want to not get vegetarian food.

But to all intents and purposes, *x gets non-vegetarian food* is equivalent to *x does not get vegetarian food*.

[42] This means that thresholdism also predicts that (23b) should be true, given any context where the threshold is set so that (23a) comes out true. More generally, examples featuring internal negation also pose a problem for thresholdism.

[43] Although the theory in (Phillips-Brown, 2021) isn't alternative-sensitive, the account in (Phillips-Brown, 2018) is. Just as we have suggested in this paper, Phillips-Brown (2018) maintains that what is relevant for the evaluation of a desire ascription is the subject's

We'll conclude by considering where we stand in the dialectic between ordering-based accounts of desire on the one hand, and decision-theoretic approaches on the other. One can see Phillips-Brown as essentially arguing for decision-theoretic analyses over ordering-based analyses on the grounds that the former, but not the latter, can make sense of the fact that subjects can desire that which isn't best. But we have suggested that if one is careful, one can develop an ordering-based theory that captures this fact. Moreover, our sophisticated ordering-based account does better than its decision-theoretic counterparts along several dimensions. So, although the phenomenon of wanting what isn't best moves us to revisit some of the assumptions that tend to be made in formulating ordering-based theories (namely that subjective orderings range over worlds rather than coarser-grained entities such as propositions), we think that the general ordering-based framework remains in good standing. Of course, this is not to say that decision-theoretic considerations play no role in the evaluation of desire reports—they do. But their impact on the logico-semantic features of desire ascriptions is fairly subtle, and is not reducible to a straightforward calculation of the expected value of the prejacent.

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preferences over a set of pair-wise incompatible propositions. His semantics is similar to the ordering-based semantics discussed in §2.1, but "lifted" to a domain of propositions. Although his account validates Weakening, it also makes being best necessary for being desired, and so doesn't accommodate the central data discussed here. For reasons of space, we leave a careful comparison of our account with the analysis in (Phillips-Brown, 2021) for future work.

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