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Wanting is Not Expected Utility\*

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In this paper, I criticize Ethan Jerzak’s view that ‘want’ has only one sense, the mixed expected utility sense. First, I show that his appeals to ‘really’-locutions fail to explain away the counterintuitive predictions of his view. Second, I present a class of cases, which I call “principled indifference” cases, that pose difficulties for any expected utility lexical entry for ‘want’. I argue that in order to account for these cases, one needs to concede that ‘want’ has a sense, according to which wanting is a matter of subjectively preferring *p*-alternatives to not-*p*-alternatives. Finally, I introduce some considerations for and against the view that ‘want’ also has another sense, which is roughly synonymous with ‘need’.

In a recent article, Ethan Jerzak identifies the *advisory use* of the verb ‘want’, which has gone largely unnoticed among philosophers and linguists.<sup>1</sup> A paradigmatic case is that of “better-informed advisers like the subway worker and the sommelier,” who—in telling you what you want—are “making use of *their* information, not restricting themselves to yours.”<sup>2</sup> Consider the following case:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ethan Jerzak, “Two Ways to Want?,” this JOURNAL, CXVI, 2 (2019): 65-98, at p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Kyle Blumberg and Harvey Lederman, “Revisionist Reporting,” *Philosophical Studies*, no. 178 (2021): 755–83, at p. 759.

*Wine*: Susan has been invited to a party and tasked with bringing the wine. She knows that the other guests have reasonably strong preferences, but, unfortunately, she knows basically nothing about wine. At the grocery store, she has a choice between a Pinot Noir (from California) and a Malbec (from Argentina), which she takes to be equally likely to be the optimal choice for the other guests. If an onlooker is somehow aware of Susan's actual situation and her guests' actual preferences (for the Malbec), then they may utter:

(1) She wants the Malbec.

Jerzak is quick to point out a striking fact about advisory uses such as (1): their felicity is not determined by facts about the reportee alone (by what is going on in Susan's head, as it were).<sup>4</sup> If we consider a scenario identical to *Wine*, with the exception that the guests' actual preferences are for the Pinot Noir, then the onlooker would be warranted in uttering (2) rather than (1):

(2) She wants the Pinot Noir.

Jerzak argues that advisory uses provide counterexamples to virtually all extant theories of desire ascription, crafted with *predictive uses* of 'want' in mind.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he proposes that we adopt a mixed expected utility account of 'want', which factors in both the subject's preferences and the *reporter's* credences.

If Jerzak is correct in saying that we need something along these lines to account for the sense in which (1) and (2) are true in their respective contexts, it is nevertheless a mistake to claim that the mixed expected utility sense is *the only* sense that 'want' has. In this paper, I

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<sup>4</sup> Jerzak, "Two Ways to Want?," *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Following Jerzak, I use the label "predictive use" to denote the use of 'want' that purports to explain or predict the behavior of the subject.

present a class of cases that cannot be accommodated by expected utility lexical entries for ‘want’.

In section I, I describe Jerzak’s view in greater detail. In section II, I criticize his argument from ‘really’-locutions, which is intended to support the claim that the mixed expected utility sense is the only sense of ‘want.’ In section III, I argue that *any* expected utility account of ‘want’ gives the wrong prediction in what I call “principled idifference” cases. By contrast, the orthodox view that to want *p* is, roughly, to prefer *p*-alternatives over not-*p*-alternatives handles these cases smoothly. In section IV, I discuss the relative merits of the views that (a) ‘want’ has the preference sense only and (b) that, in addition to the preference sense, ‘want’ has another sense, which is roughly synonymous with ‘need’. I conclude in section V.

#### I. TWO WAYS TO WANT

The orthodox view states that wanting something is a matter of subjectively preferring it over the relevant alternatives:<sup>6</sup>

*Preference*: “*S* wants *p*” is true iff for some alternative *A* such that *A* involves *p*, *S* prefers *A* to *A*’s relevant alternatives.<sup>7</sup>

Let us consider *Wine* again. The relevant alternatives include Susan buying the Malbec and Susan buying the Pinot Noir. Because Susan does not have an intrinsic preference for either of the wines, *Preference* seems to lack the resources to predict the true reading of (1).

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1984), at pp. 89–90; David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), at pp. 36–37; Irene Heim, “Presupposition Projection and the Semantics of Attitude Verbs,” *Journal of Semantics*, ix, 3 (1992): 183–221, at p. 193; Kai Von Fintel, “NPI Licensing, Strawson Entailment, and Context Dependency,” *Journal of Semantics*, xvi, 2 (1999): 97–148; For a recent criticism of the orthodoxy, see Milo Phillips-Brown, “What Does Decision Theory Have to Do with Wanting?,” *Mind*, cxxx, 518 (2021): 413–37; For a defense of the orthodoxy, see: Kyle Blumberg and John Hawthorne, “Wanting What’s Not Best,” *Philosophical Studies*, 179 (2022): 1275–96.

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of accessibility, I attempted to keep the use of symbolism to a necessary minimum. As far as I can see, this does not affect the claims I make in the paper. Readers interested in the formal details of accounts discussed in this section I would like to refer to Jerzak’s article, as well as the works cited in the previous footnote.

A related concern is that the view does not handle uncertainty well. Suppose that Susan is deliberating over whether or not to buy home insurance. The four relevant alternatives include: (i) she buys insurance, but her house does not burn down; (ii) she buys insurance and her house burns down; (iii) she does not buy insurance and her house does not burn down; and (iv) she does not buy insurance and her house burns down. Arguably, if the insurance is appropriately priced given the value of the house and the likelihood of a house fire, it is felicitous to say:

(3) Susan wants to buy insurance.

However, *Preference* appears to have difficulties accounting for this result. This is because—it has been argued—if Susan is rational, then she takes (iii) to be the best-case scenario. But (iii) does not involve Susan buying the insurance. What the insurance example is commonly taken to show is that a notion more fine-grained than preference is required to account for the semantics of ‘want’.

Dmitry Levinson proposes that this job can be done by the decision-theoretic notion of *expected utility*.<sup>8</sup> He argues that wanting something is a matter of not only preference but also probability.

*EU*: “*S* wants *p*” is true iff  $EU(p) > EU(\neg p)$ , where

$EU(p)$ , the expected utility of *p*, is the sum of expected utilities of all of the relevant alternatives that involve *p*. The expected utility of an alternative *A*,  $EU(A)$ , is calculated by multiplying the utility *S* assigns to *A*,  $U_S(A)$ , by the subjective probability (credence) with which *S* thinks *A* will obtain, conditional on *p* being true,  $Cr_S(A|p)$ . Symbolically:

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<sup>8</sup> Dmitry Levinson, “Probabilistic Model-Theoretic Semantics for ‘Want,’” in *Proceedings of SALT*, XIII, 2003, 222–39.

$$EU(A) = U_S(A) * Cr_S(A|p)$$

It can be easily verified that factoring in the probabilities enables one to account for the truth of desire reports such as (3). For the sake of exposition, let us assume that the insurance costs \$50 and it covers all of the damage caused by the fire, if the fire occurs. Let us further stipulate that the probability of the fire is 1%, and that—if it occurs—it generates \$100,000 worth of damage. The expected utility of not buying insurance is the sum of the expected utilities of (iii) and (iv), that is,  $0.99*0 + 0.01*(-100000) = -100$ . The expected utility of buying insurance, in turn, is  $-50$ , because, regardless of whether or not the house burns down, Susan incurs only the cost of insurance. Because the expected utility of buying insurance is higher than the expected utility of not buying insurance, *EU* correctly predicts the truth of (3).

Although *EU* marks an improvement over *Preference* with respect to the insurance cases, the view incorrectly predicts (1) to be false. After all, Susan has no intrinsic preference for either of the wines. Rather, her preferences are parasitic on those of the other guests: if they prefer the Malbec, then she wants the Malbec; if they prefer the Pinot Noir, then she wants the Pinot Noir. Furthermore, for all Susan knows, both wines are equally likely to satisfy the other guests. So, neither Susan's utilities nor her credences tip the scale in favor of either of the wines.

Jerzak's diagnosis of why Levinson's theory is unable to account for utterances such as (1) is that it does not leave any conceptual space for the contribution of the ascribee. Owing to this, he propounds a mixed expected utility account,<sup>9</sup> which blends the ascribee's utilities with the ascriber's credences:

*MEU*: "S wants *p*" as uttered by *T* is true iff  $MEU(p) > MEU(\neg p)$ , where

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<sup>9</sup> One way of thinking about this is that in advisory uses, the ascribee supplies the ends, while the (better-informed) ascriber supplies the best means of achieving those ends. See Jerzak, "Two Ways to Want?," *op cit.*, pp. 82–83.

MEU( $p$ ), the *mixed* expected utility of  $p$ , is the sum of mixed expected utilities of all of the relevant alternatives that involve  $p$ . The mixed expected utility of an alternative  $A$ , MEU( $A$ ), is calculated by multiplying the utility  $S$  assigns to  $A$ ,  $U_S(A)$ , by the utterer's  $T$ 's credence in  $A$ , conditional on  $p$  being true,  $Cr_T(A)$ .<sup>10</sup> Symbolically:

$$\text{MEU}(A) = U_S(A) * Cr_T(A|p).$$

*MEU* departs from *EU* in only a subtle way. It takes the ascriber's, not the subject's, credences to be relevant for calculating expected utilities.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the two accounts deliver identical predictions for first-personal desire reports or situations in which the ascriber and the ascriber are equally well-informed. It is important to note, however, that the two views make diverging predictions about contexts in which the ascriber is better informed, such as *Wine*. We have seen already that *EU* fails to predict the truth of (1). *MEU*, by contrast, gets this result right. This is because the onlooker in *Wine* knows that Malbec will satisfy Susan's dining companions.

Although *MEU* does a good job of accounting for advisory uses such as (1), it delivers counterintuitive predictions regarding certain predictive uses. Consider the following scenario.

*Subway*: Susan is visiting NYC for the first time. On the second day of her visit, she plans to visit the Empire State Building. She has been told that the express F train is the quickest way to get there. However, unbeknown to her, the trains are down owing to maintenance work. Now, if a subway worker sees her at the F station and correctly infers her intention to go to midtown Manhattan, then they can felicitously utter:

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<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, Jerzak takes the credence to be determined by the *assessor*, not the utterer. The difference is irrelevant for what I am going to say in this paper, because I am not going to comment on the relativistic part of his theoretical package.

<sup>11</sup> Jerzak, "Two Ways to Want?," *op cit.*, 91–93.

(4) She wants to take a cab.

*MEU* correctly predicts the truth of (4). However, imagine that the subway worker, rather than being interested in commenting on the best way for Susan to get to her destination, intends to explain to their colleague why Susan has been standing on an empty platform for the past 15 minutes. In such a case, it would be more natural for them to say:

(5) She wants to take the F train.

However, *MEU* predicts (5) to be false. By contrast, both *EU* and *Preference* correctly predict it to be true. This is because when one's aim is to explain or predict the behavior of others, it typically makes sense to attempt to capture the subject's internal perspective as closely as possible. Indeed, the peculiar thing about (5) is that the better-informed observer refrains from "enriching" the prejacent with her own information,<sup>12</sup> because doing so would obscure an important fact about Susan.

Given what has been said thus far, a natural conclusion to draw would be that 'want' is at least two-way ambiguous. On this view, regular expected utilities (or simple preferences) are relevant when we are interested in explaining or predicting a subject's actions. Mixed expected utilities, in turn, come into play when we are engaged in speculations about what is best for whom.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is quite natural to say that (1) is in one sense true and in another sense false.

Jerzak concedes that the ambiguity account is a compelling explanation of the coexistence of advisory and predictive uses of 'want'. However, he argues that it is not the best

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Blumberg and Lederman, "Revisionist Reporting," *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Jerzak, "Two Ways to Want?," *op. cit.*, 88–89.

one. He thus ultimately recommends the *monosemy* view, according to which *MEU* is the only sense of ‘want’.<sup>14</sup> It will be convenient to distinguish between two closely related claims here:

*Monosemy*: ‘want’ has only one sense.

*Monosemy-MEU*: *MEU* is the only sense of ‘want’.

It is worth emphasizing here that *Monosemy-MEU* is a delightfully provocative claim indeed. Crucially, it makes a surprising prediction about *dissonance* cases, i.e., cases in which it makes a difference to the truth value of a desire report whether we calculate it using the predictive or advisory sense. For instance, *Monosemy-MEU* predicts (5) to be false in the context of *Subway*. In fact, it would predict (5) to be false even if Susan explicitly stated that she wants to take the F train, or if the subway worker was mistaken that the F train is down. This is because, according to *Monosemy-MEU*, the ascriber’s information state always trumps that of the ascribee.

## II. JERZAK’S ARGUMENTS FOR MONOSEMY

The most contentious prediction of Jerzak’s theory is that in dissonance cases, it is always the advisory sense that delivers the true reading of the sentence. Jerzak argues that we actually have independent reasons for thinking that this prediction is correct, despite how surprising it might seem at first glance. The idea is to use pragmatics to explain away the intuitions of falsity.

Suppose that two police officers are surveilling a thief. One of them had previously taken treasure from the thief’s hiding place. Upon being asked by her partner why the thief is furiously digging there, she replies:<sup>15</sup>

(6) He *knows* that the treasure is buried there.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.



How do we best make sense of the fact that the police officer is not trying to deceive her partner, even though she knows that the presupposition of (6) is not satisfied? In answering this question, Jerzak takes a cue from the observation that it is coherent for the police officer to follow up on (6) with the following:

(7) Of course, the thief does not *really* know that the treasure is buried there, because it is in our police car.

The thought is that the felicity of (7), in particular the ‘really’-locution, is a telltale sign that the occurrence of ‘knows’ in (6) is non-literal. If this analysis is correct, then it follows that one can sometimes felicitously utter a sentence that they know to be literally false to better explain or predict a subject’s behavior.

Indeed, Jerzak believes that the very same phenomenon governs the predictive uses of ‘want’, about which *MEU* makes contentious predictions. Suppose that Susan mistakenly thinks that the other dinner guests prefer the Pinot Noir. An onlooker might then attempt to explain her walking toward the unpopular California shelf in the wine store by saying, first:

(8) She wants the Pinot Noir.

Shortly thereafter, they would follow up with:

(9) Of course, she does not *really* want the Pinot Noir, because her companions prefer the Malbec, and someone should go tell her that.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 91.

Jerzak takes (9) to suggest that only the advisory sense of ‘want’ is the literal one. On this analysis, (8) is literally false, just as predicted by *Monosemy-MEU*.<sup>17</sup> I want to raise three concerns about this argument.

First, the word ‘really’ in English covers a multitude of different distinctions.<sup>18</sup> Consider the following exchange:

- (10) a      Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker Street.  
      b      Of course, he does not *really* live there, because he does not exist.

If, following Jerzak, we take ‘really’ to be indicative of the literal/non-literal distinction, then we have to conclude that (10a) is literally false. However, according to the Lewisian orthodoxy, there is a robust sense in which (10a) expresses a literal truth about the world of stories of Arthur Conan Doyle.<sup>19</sup> According to this analysis, (10a) contains a tacit fictional operator “in the world of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories,” and—as such—turns out to be true.

Furthermore, it is a familiar idea to extend this analysis to folk psychology. A relevant quotation from Daniel Dennett states that “A notional world should be viewed as a sort of *fictional* world devised by a theorist, a third-party observer, in order to characterize the narrow

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<sup>17</sup> This strategy may be particularly appealing to Neo-Russellians, who are already committed to saying that it is sometimes communicatively useful to utter falsehoods, such as “Lois doesn’t believe that Clark Kent can fly,” to explain the subject’s behavior. For *locus classicus*, see Nathan Salmon, *Frege’s Puzzle* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1986); cf. Gary Ostertag, “A Puzzle about Disbelief,” *THIS JOURNAL*, CII, 11 (2005): 573–93.

However, it has to be stressed that the only felicitous falsehoods posited by Neo-Russellians include *negative* attitude reports. Since Jerzak wants to explain away the intuitive truth of *positive* attitude reports, like (8), his strategy is not cost-free even for Neo-Russellians. See John Hawthorne and David Manley, *The Reference Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), at p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne A. Davis, “The Two Senses of Desire,” *Philosophical Studies*, XLV, 2 (1984): 191–92; Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, eds., *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 347–383, at p. 360.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Devitt, *Designation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” in *Philosophical Papers Vol. I* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 261–75; Fred Kroon and Alberto Voltolini, “Fiction,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/fiction/>.

psychological states of the subject.”<sup>20</sup> On this approach, (6) and (8) both include a tacit sentential operator “in the fictional world of the ascriber,” and, as such, come out true. The word ‘really’ in (7) and (9), in turn, is used to mark a shift from the subject’s notional world to the conversational common ground. The availability of this alternative analysis reveals an unargued-for assumption in Jerzak’s argument: the ‘really’-locutions in (7) and (9) mark the literal/non-literal distinction.

Second, it is far from clear that ‘really’-locutions provide evidence that the senses deemed “not real” are superfluous. In one of their experiments about dual-character concepts, Joshua Knobe, Sandeep Prasada, and George Newman asked the participants to read the following scenario:

*Mother*: Peggy is a famous celebrity with two young children, whom she is always in the midst of feeding, clothing or otherwise pampering. However, it turns out that Peggy does not have any real feelings for the children and is only taking care of them because she is concerned about publicity and wants the media to portray her as a caring and compassionate person.<sup>21</sup>

Having read *Mother*, the participants were inclined to endorse statements of the form: “There is a sense in which she is clearly a mother, but ultimately, if you think about what it really means to be a mother, you would have to say that she is not a mother at all.” However, as Kevin Tobia, Newman, and Knobe aptly point out in another paper, it is implausible to interpret this as evidence that the participants are denying that Peggy is literally a mother.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1989), at p. 153.

<sup>21</sup> Joshua Knobe, Sandeep Prasada, and George E. Newman, “Dual Character Concepts and the Normative Dimension of Conceptual Representation,” *Cognition*, CXXVII, 2 (2013): 242–257, at p. 256.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin P. Tobia, George E. Newman, and Joshua Knobe, “Water Is and Is Not H<sub>2</sub>O,” *Mind & Language*, XXXV, 2, (2020): 183–208, at p. 202. See also: Andreas Stokke, “Protagonist Projection,” *Mind & Language*, XXVIII, 2, (2013): 204–232, at pp. 208-210.

Third, and most importantly, ‘really’-locutions do not even seem to unequivocally support the primacy of the advisory sense over the predictive sense. I take the following to be a fine-sounding follow-up to (1):

- (11) “Of course, she does not *really* want the Malbec, because she has no clue which wine her companions prefer. She will probably end up shelling out on both if no one helps her.”

Indeed, it is hard to think of a non-*ad hoc* reason why one would assign more weight to (7) than to (11).<sup>23</sup>

Jerzak’s second reason for preferring the monosemy view is the *Modified Occam’s Razor*, a methodological principle championed by Paul Grice, according to which “[s]enses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.”<sup>24</sup> Applied to the case in question, the principle works in favor of the monosemy view only *if* it can do all of the explanatory work that its ambiguity alternative can do. In the next section, I shall argue that it cannot. In particular, I shall present a class of cases that pose difficulties for *any* expected utility view of ‘want’. I shall also show that they are smoothly accounted for by *Preference*.

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<sup>23</sup> It may be that whether one finds (7) or (11) to be better-sounding depends on one’s views regarding what Derek Parfit calls “theories about self-interest.” One extreme view holds that what’s best for one just is what one subjectively prefers. On the other end of the spectrum are objective list theories, according to which there are some goods the possession of which makes one better off, whether or not one thinks it does. Now, the thought is that proponents of the former view would prefer (11) over (7); proponents of the latter the other way around. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), at pp. 492–503. Thanks to Callum MacRae for drawing my attention to this intriguing possibility.

<sup>24</sup> H. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), at p. 47; cf. Saul Kripke, “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, II, 1 (1977): 255–76, at p. 268. For some recent criticisms of the Razor, see: Felipe S. Amaral, “Definite Descriptions Are Ambiguous,” *Analysis*, LXVIII, 4 (2008): 288–97, at pp. 290–94; Michael Devitt, *Overlooking Conventions. The Trouble with Linguistic Pragmatism* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), at pp. 143–69; Ben Phillips, “Modified Occam’s Razor,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, XC, 2 (2012): 371–82; Robyn Carston, “Polysemy: Pragmatics and Sense Conventions,” *Mind & Language*, XXXVI, 1 (2021): 108–33, at pp. 120–123; cf. Thomas D. Bontly, “Modified Occam’s Razor: Parsimony, Pragmatics, and the Acquisition of Word Meaning,” *Mind & Language*, XX, 3 (2005): 288–312.

### III. PRINCIPLED INDIFFERENCE

Consider the following scenario:

*Dating:* After graduating from college with flying colors, Susan decides it is time to start taking her romantic life more seriously. Being tall herself, she has a strong preference to date someone who is at least as tall as she is. In fact, that's all she cares about. She doesn't have any preference regarding the nationality of her date. Despite being aware that people of certain nationalities are likely to be taller than others, she firmly believes that forming a dating preference based on nationality would be prejudicial.

As far as Susan's preferences go, she is indifferent about the nationality of her date. An alternative in which she dates a tall Vietnamese person is just as good as one in which she dates a tall Dutch person. It is only the likelihood of her date being tall, conditional on her date's nationality, that can make a difference to her expected utilities of dating people of certain nationalities. Given that the scenario does not specify any such information, both *EU* and *MEU* predict the following statement to be false:

(12) Susan wants to date a Dutch person.

This is clearly the right verdict. However, suppose that Susan and the speaker learn of the statistical trends suggesting that Dutch people are on the average taller than people of any other nationality. Now, *EU* and *MEU* both predict (12) to be true.

But this is implausible. Susan's lack of preference regarding the nationality of her date is not a contingent consequence of her not having access to the relevant statistical data; it is a matter of principle. What is special about such cases of principled indifference is that no amount

of statistical information can influence what the subject can be truly said to want.<sup>25</sup> Given that factoring in the probability of certain outcomes is an essential feature of expected utility accounts of ‘want’, I submit that no expected utility account can accommodate principled indifference cases, such as *Dating*. By contrast, *Preference* handles these cases smoothly. Because Susan does not strongly prefer the tall Dutch date alternative over any of the tall non-Dutch date alternatives, the view correctly predicts (12) to be false.<sup>26</sup>

But perhaps it is possible to tweak *MEU* a bit, rendering it capable of accounting for preference tie cases such as *Dating*? The simplest way of doing that would be by building an unequal utilities requirement into its truth conditions:

*MEU\**: “*S* wants *p*” as uttered by *T* is true iff  $MEU(p) > MEU(\neg p)$  and  $U_s(A) \neq U_s(\ddot{A})$ , where  $A$  is the *p*-involving alternative with the highest utility,  $\ddot{A}$  is the  $\neg p$ -involving alternative with the highest utility, and the other symbols are defined as previously.<sup>27</sup> Thanks to its second conjunct, *MEU\** correctly predicts (12) to be false.

However, this view makes false predictions about certain advisory uses (which, as we have seen, are one of the reasons for embracing an expected utility account in the first place). Consider the following scenario.

*Grad School*: Susan intends to pursue a PhD in philosophy. Her top choices are two very competitive programs at UNI1 and UNI2. As far as she can tell, she would be equally happy at either of the two programs. However, she cannot afford to apply

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<sup>25</sup> We are setting aside the special case in which dating a Dutch person is the only way of dating a tall person. If this were the case, (12) would have a true reading.

<sup>26</sup> It can be easily verified that preference tie cases, like US OPEN, pose a difficulty for other recent expected utility-invoking entries for ‘want,’ such as those put forward in Phillips-Brown, “What Does Decision Theory Have to Do with Wanting?,” *op. cit.*; Blumberg and Hawthorne, “Wanting What’s Not Best,” *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Thanks to Gary Ostertag for pressing me to consider this view.

to both. Knowing that UNI2 has a much higher acceptance rate, her undergraduate advisor utters the following:

(13) You want to apply to UNI2.

Clearly, (13) has a true reading in this context, but (MEU\*) predicts it to be false, precisely owing to the in-built unequal utilities requirement.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. HOW MANY SENSES FOR ‘WANT’?

I have discussed four data points: insurance cases ((3)), advisory uses ((1) in *Wine* and (4) in *Subway*), predictive uses ((5) in *Subway*), and principled indifference ((12)). None of the three theories of desire reports is capable of accounting for all of the data. *Preference* explains predictive uses and principled indifference. *EU* explains insurance cases and, arguably, predictive uses. *MEU* explains insurance cases and advisory uses. These considerations are summed up in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Empirical coverage of various theories of desire reports. A plus indicates that a given theory is capable of explaining a given data point.**

		Data Points			
		Insurance	Advisory	Predictive	Principled indifference
Theories	<i>Preference</i>	–	–	+	+
	<i>EU</i>	+	–	+	–
	<i>MEU</i>	+	+	–	–

It seems that the view that ‘want’ has two senses, *Preference* and *MEU*, would accommodate all of the data. Indeed, Jerzak declares it to be his fallback view.<sup>29</sup> However, there

<sup>28</sup> The same point can be made using Jerzak’s original *Wine* case.

<sup>29</sup> Jerzak, “Two Ways to Want?,” *op. cit.*, p. 88. Strictly speaking, Jerzak is considering the view that ‘want’ is ambiguous between *EU* and *MEU*. This seems to be because he is assuming that *EU* is capable of accounting for all the datapoints that *Preference* is. As I have shown in the previous section, this assumption has to be rejected.

are good reasons to doubt that it is correct. If it were, then we should be able to hear both readings of want ascriptions in cases in which the two senses of ‘want’ pull in opposite directions, as it were. In particular, the ambiguity view in question predicts that it should be possible to hear both a true and a false reading of (1) in *Wine*, (4) in *Subway*, and (12) in *Dating*, respectively. Although this seems to be the case for (1) in *Wine* or (4) in *Subway*, it is arguably difficult to hear a true reading of (12) in *Dating*. I thus submit that ‘want’ does not have an expected utility sense.

If the above is correct, then we seem to be faced with a choice between two views. The first, *Monosemy-preference*, claims that ‘want’ has one sense only, namely, *Preference*. The second contends that ‘want’ is ambiguous between (i) *Preference* and (ii) another sense that is not an expected utility sense. I shall conclude by offering some tentative considerations in favor of each of the views. I leave it to the reader to decide which of the views they find to be more compelling.

*IV.1 One sense.* Thus far, I have uncritically accepted Jerzak’s diagnoses of insurance cases and advisory uses. However, if it were possible to show—*pace* Jerzak—that they can be accounted for by *Preference*, then this would speak in favor of *Monosemy-preference*.

Recall the following sentence:

(14) Susan wants to buy insurance.

The reason it is claimed to be a problem for *Preference* is that, arguably, Susan’s preferred alternative is the one in which her house does not burn down, and she does not buy the insurance. But this assumption has been contested.<sup>30</sup> In particular, it has been pointed out that life in a no-

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Büring, “To Want It Is to Want to Be There: A Note on Levinson,” paper presented at the *la Bretteche Workshop on the Division of Linguistic Labor*, 2003,



insurance, no-house-fire world is attractive only provided that one knows that one lives in such a world. But most people are not in such an epistemic position. This fact can be captured by stipulating that the only alternatives that are relevant for most people are those in which they do not know whether or not their house will burn down. If this is correct, then it follows that an average insurance buyer prefers the insurance worlds over the no-insurance alternatives, even though they have good reason to think that their house will not burn down (indeed, a common rationale for buying insurance is that the peace of mind is worth the money). But, if this is the case, then insurance cases do not pose a difficulty for *Preference*.

As regards the advisory uses of ‘want’, it is important to point out that they paradigmatically occur in second-personal addresses.<sup>31</sup> Once we acknowledge this, it becomes tempting to analyze them as implicatures. Suppose that ‘want’ has only one literal meaning, namely, *preference*. It is common knowledge that each person *X* is generally better at knowing what *X* wants than anyone else is. Owing to this, in a context in which the speaker clearly does not have special knowledge of their interlocutor’s desires, an utterance of the form “you want to *p*” is likely to violate the second maxim of quality (do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence).<sup>32</sup> This violation sends the audience on a search for a non-literal meaning of the speaker utterance. In many such contexts, an advisory meaning, along the lines of “you ought to

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<http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/general/Conf/LaBretesche/papers/buring.pdf>; Kai von Fintel, “The Best We Can (Expect to) Get? Challenges to the Classic Semantics for Deontic Modals,” Paper presented in a session on *Deontic Modals at the Central APA*, February 17, 2012, <http://mit.edu/fintel/fintel-2012-apa-ought.pdf>; cf. Blumberg and Hawthorne, “Wanting What’s Not Best”, *op. cit.*, p. 1284, fn. 21.

<sup>31</sup> An intriguing possibility, that I do not have the space to explore here, is that the ‘you’ in advisory uses is generic rather than second-personal, as in “In England you drive on the left.” For a discussion of the generic ‘you’, see, for example, Ariana Orvell, Ethan Kross, and Susan A. Gelman, “How ‘you’ makes meaning,” *Science*, CCCLV, 6331, pp. 1299–1302. Thank you to Nick Pappas for bringing this up.

<sup>32</sup> Grice, “Studies in the Way of Words,” *op. cit.*, p. 27.

*p*,” seems to be a plausible candidate interpretation.<sup>33</sup> Presumably, third-personal advisory uses—insofar as they are available—can be analyzed in a similar way.<sup>34</sup>

*IV.2. Two senses.* If advisory uses were arrived at *via* implicature, they should—all other things being equal—be readily available in other languages that have a word whose literal meaning is similar to that of the English ‘want’. This seems not to be the case. An informal survey of German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Korean, and Polish revealed that advisory uses are not as readily available as they are in English, at least not without a lot of stage-setting.<sup>35,36</sup> This seems to suggest that the availability of advisory uses is a quirk of English ‘want’ and, hence, probably not a pragmatic phenomenon.

Indeed, there is a compelling explanation for why English would develop such an idiosyncrasy. The psychological meaning of ‘want’, which I submit is best captured by *Preference*, is a fairly recent addition to English. Its first recorded use dates back to the early eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> It developed from an older sense, which was to lack something or to need something. The latter sense, although no longer dominant, is still present in contemporary English. Take, for instance, the statement “that chair wants fixing,” or consider the title of

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<sup>33</sup> How is the advisory reading arrived at? Here is a possible derivation. A speech act can be made indirectly by asserting that its felicity conditions are met. One of the felicity conditions of the speech act of giving advice is that following the advice would satisfy the addressee’s preferences. If *Preference* is the literal meaning of ‘want’, then saying “saying you want to *p*” asserts that *p*-ing would satisfy the hearer’s preferences. John R. Searle, “Indirect Speech Acts,” in *Syntax and Semantics Volume 3. Speech Acts*, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 59–82.

<sup>34</sup> Thanks to Gary Ostertag and Dan Harris for helpful discussions of the ideas contained in this paragraph.

<sup>35</sup> Jerzak adds to this list French and Spanish. Jerzak, “Two Ways to Want?,” *op. cit.*, p. 69, fn. 3. Interestingly, one of my informants claimed to be able to retrieve an advisory use of ‘want’ in French.

<sup>36</sup> Some informants have suggested that a literal translation of “You want to X” into their respective native tongues comes across as a bit rude. A Greek speaker suggested that such a sentence could perhaps be used to “help the audience discover and articulate” their desire, but not to give them any advice. Finally, a Hungarian speaker reported that the Hungarian translation of “You want to X” made them think of a movie trope, where the speaker is trying to get the hearer to do X by way of hypnosis.

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.etymonline.com/word/want#etymonline\\_v\\_25441](https://www.etymonline.com/word/want#etymonline_v_25441) [accessed on 7/29/2022].

Norman Rockwell's 1946 painting *Freedom from Want*.<sup>38</sup> This, in turn, lends credence to the hypothesis that when someone uses the word 'want' to issue advice, they are exploiting not the more recent psychological sense, but rather the word's older sense of lacking or needing.

It is worth pointing out that this hypothesis—unlike the hypothesis that 'want' is ambiguous between *Preference* and *MEU*—is compatible with the observation that advisory readings are available in *Wine* and *Subway*, but not in *Dating*. This is because, according to it, the English verb 'to want' has two senses, one roughly synonymous with 'to desire' and the other roughly synonymous with 'to need':

- (15) She wants the Malbec.
  - a. She desires the Malbec.
  - b. She needs the Malbec.
- (16) She wants to take the F train.
  - a. She desires to take the F train.
  - b. She needs to take the F train.
- (17) Susan wants to date a Dutch person.
  - a. Susan desires to date a Dutch person.
  - b. Susan needs to date a Dutch person.

What the three sentences have in common is that their a-readings, corresponding to the predictive uses, are false in their respective contexts. The crucial difference between (15) and (16) on the one hand, and (17) on the other hand, is that only the former have true b-readings, corresponding to the advisory uses. Indeed, given the details of the *Dating* scenario, it is dubious

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<sup>38</sup> <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/want#English> [accessed on 7/29/2022].

that Susan needs to date a Dutch person – even if statistical trends suggest that Dutch people are more likely to be tall. Presumably, this has to do with the fact dating a Dutch person is neither the only, nor obviously the best way of dating a tall person.

To fully evaluate the merits of the ambiguity view, a more concrete proposal for a lexical entry for the ‘need’ sense of ‘want’ is required. What I take myself to have shown here is that the machinery of expected utility is most likely not apt for the task. One direction that I find particularly promising is a version of contextualism *a la* Kratzer.<sup>39</sup> Such a view yields the promise of accounting for the fact that ‘want’ has multiple literal senses while avoiding positing a fully-fledged lexical ambiguity. To do that, we would have to allow ‘want’ to take non-bouletic ordering sources—in particular, teleological ones that would account for advisory uses.<sup>40</sup> An important challenge for such a view would be to explain why the counterparts of ‘want’ in many other Indo-European languages do not seem to allow non-bouletic ordering sources, as attested by the fact that advisory uses are generally not readily available in those languages.<sup>41</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that principled indifference cases pose difficulties for any expected utility accounts of ‘want’. It follows that Jerzak was wrong to suggest that *MEU* is the only sense of ‘want’, or indeed that ‘want’ has an expected utility sense. By contrast, *Preference* smoothly accounts for the troublesome data points. More remains to be said to determine whether

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<sup>39</sup> Angelika Kratzer, *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For an influential statement, see von Stechow, “NPI Licensing, Strawson Entailment, and Context Dependency,” *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Ashley Shaw recently formulated a similar proposal for ‘need’. Ashley Shaw, “The necessity of ‘need’,” *Ethics*, CXXXIII, 3, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> One possible response could invoke a hypothesis about the unidirectional path of development of modal expressions in the style of Joan Bybee, Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca, *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). The idea would be that it is possible for a bouletic ordering source to develop from a teleological ordering source, but not the other way around. On this line of argument, the distinctive feature of the English ‘want’ would be either that its original meaning was teleological, or that its teleological sense has not disappeared yet. Whether anything along these lines is true is, of course, an empirical question.

*Preference* is the only sense of 'want', or whether it has another sense that is roughly synonymous with 'need'.