Agnes Callard on desire and satisfaction

Elucidations Podcast

April 15, 2022

Episode link here. Thanks to Jasmine Li for the transcription!

Matt Teichman:
Hello and welcome to Elucidations, a philosophy podcast recorded at the University of Chicago. I'm Matt Teichman.

Mark Hopwood:
And I'm Mark Hopwood.

Matt Teichman:
With us today is Agnes Callard, Neubauer Family Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. And she's here to talk to us about desire and satisfaction. Agnes Callard, welcome.

Agnes Callard:
Thank you.

Matt Teichman:
Satisfaction sounds kind of like: the feeling you get when you're satisfied. Is that what we're talking about here? Or are we using the term in some other, more specific technical sense?

Agnes Callard:
We are using the word in a different way. I don't think it's more *technical*, but it's different. There's a sense that your desire is satisfied when you get what you want—when you get the thing that you wanted—regardless of how you feel about it. In the feeling sense, getting what you want might not be so satisfying. But I would still count it as satisfaction in my 'getting what you want sense'.

Now, there's a further way that we might make the idea of getting what you want more precise—it's a way that philosophers have done—and it's something I call the *philosophers' theory of satisfaction*, which is that your desire is satisfied when it comes true. That is, when the thing that you wanted becomes a way that the world is. Say I want to get something to eat. Then what I want is not a way that the world is yet. I don't have food right now, but when I have food, then the way that the world is matches what I wanted. So what I wanted comes true. That's the philosophers' theory: the satisfaction of a desire is the truth of the thought that you had when you had the desire.

Mark Hopwood:
That's helpful in setting up what we're talking about. Now, you have a story that you tell to pose a problem about satisfaction in this sense, and it's a story about what happens when we arrive late for our train. So maybe you could tell us about that.

Agnes Callard:
Right. I'm imagining someone running to catch a train. Let's say the person is really desperate to catch this train—he really wants to get to New York. He's pushing people aside, he has his eye on the train, and finally, just at the last moment, he gets on the

train. And as the train starts to leave the station, he hears the announcement that it's the train to Chicago, not the train to New York. The question that I want to ask about this case is, is his desire satisfied?

Now, the first thing we have to do is we have to say 'which desire?' because it seems like he had a couple of different desires. The one I want to ask about is the desire to catch *this* train: the train standing on the platform. I want to ask, is that desire satisfied? And it seems like there are two possible answers. You can say it *was* satisfied and you can say it *wasn't* satisfied.

So let's look at what it is to say that the desire wasn't satisfied. You might say, look, he didn't get what he wanted, because he only wanted to get on the train because he wanted to get to New York. And so, when he got on the train, he didn't get *anything* that he wanted. He's not going to say to himself, 'Well, too bad. It's not the train to New York, but at least I caught the train'. There's no 'at least' about it. There's nothing that he got that he wanted, so his desire wasn't satisfied. But now, if we think what the philosopher thinks about satisfaction—namely that any time you desire something and that thing happens, your desire is satisfied—we're going to be forced to say that he *didn't really want* to get on this train. And maybe that's not the wrong thing to say. Maybe what we want to say is, look, what he really wanted wasn't to get on this train, but it was to get to New York. That's what he really wanted. So that's one option: to say the desire wasn't satisfied, and it follows from that that he didn't really want to get on the train. That's one picture.

Another picture is: it *was* satisfied. Here's the idea. Look, he wanted to get on this train and he got on this train. His desire was satisfied. He may not have felt very good about it, but we said from the start that satisfaction wasn't going to be about how you feel. So all that his desire being satisfied means is: the desire came true. The thought he had came true. Now, that can't be our whole story about the guy, because he's not very happy about it, right? That's because he had another desire—the desire to go to New York—that isn't satisfied. So on the second view, we want to say, is his desire was satisfied, but the person had *two* desires. He had a desire to get on this train and he had desire to go to New York. The one is satisfied; the other isn't.

Matt Teichman:
So there are two things that we'd naturally be inclined to say about this situation. Option one seems to be: the person didn't really want to get on this particular train. What the person really wanted was to get to New York. And since that person didn't get to New York, that person's desire was not satisfied. And then the other thing we'd be inclined to say—this would be option two—is that the person had *two* desires. The one desire was satisfied, and the other desire wasn't satisfied. Which of these two views do you think is the correct one?

Agnes Callard:
I don't think either one is correct. Let me say a little more about the two views, and then I'll say why I think they're wrong. What I'm going to do is sort of push each of the views in an unappealing direction, but a natural direction for that view to go. The

first view—the answer no, the desire wasn't satisfied—is also a view which tells us that we didn't really want to get on this train. I'm going to call that view the *eliminativist*, because he *eliminates* the desire to get on the train. And what I'm going to show you is that that same guy is going to have to eliminate a lot more desires.

Let's try to ask why this guy wanted to get to New York. Nobody just wants to go to New York, right? Let's say he had a doctor's appointment—that's why he wants to go to New York. Because he wants to find out the results of a test, and he wants to do that because he wants to know if his disease is curable. Because if it is, then he's going to go to another doctor and then he's going to be treated for his disease, and then hopefully he'll be cured.

But let's say down the line, three years later, it turns out that the cure that the second doctor tried to give him didn't work. It seems like the same line of thought that let us eliminate the desire to get on this train is going to let us eliminate *all* the desires along the chain, going all the way to the desire for the cure. That's all he really wants, is a cure. Now, maybe we can go a little further. I mean, does anyone really have a desire for a cure independently of the health that that leads to? No. The only thing you really want is health. But would you want health if you thought it didn't make you happy? No. So maybe all you really want is happiness, but even happiness—like, what if it's bad to be happy?

It seems like where we end up is: all you *really* want is goodness, or the good. And you don't really want anything leading up to that, because anything leading up to that might turn out to take you away from the good. Insofar as it does, you didn't really want it. So the eliminativist doesn't just eliminate your desire to get on *this train*. He eliminates every particular desire that you have. That might be right. That might be how desire is. It might be that we all only desire the good, but that's at least a lot less appealing than it first looked.

That was my attempt to show that the eliminativist view is less appealing than it first appears. Now let me do the same thing with the other view. The other guy thinks your desire to get on the train was satisfied, so he can say that you really did have a desire to get on this train. Unlike the eliminativist, he's not forced to eliminate that desire. He has to import another desire—the desire to get to New York—to explain why you're not happy with the situation. But he thinks that those are independent of one another, so I'm going to call him a *separatist*. He thinks you have the desire to get on this train and the desire to get to New York. And he thinks that you have those two desires separately from one another, so that the one can be satisfied while the other is frustrated.

The question I want to ask about that theory is: if your desires are so separate from one another, why do they look so connected? Think about the case where he's running to catch the train, because he thinks it's the train to New York, but it's not. It's the train to Chicago. And he finds out a minute before he gets on the train that it's the train to Chicago. Suddenly, his desire to catch this train disappears, as if by magic. I think what we want to say is: well, it disappears because it's *intimately connected to*

his desire to go to New York. That is, he didn't just have a desire to catch this train all by itself. He had a desire to catch this train which was somehow *bound up with* his desire to go to New York. But the separatist has to say: no, those desires aren't bound up with one another. They're totally separate from one another. And I want to say, on that kind of a view, it looks like we have these little atoms of desires all pushing us in different directions and all unconnected from one another. That's a very unappealing picture of human psychology. It doesn't look like that's the way human beings think about the world, and about what they want. So that's to say why that view is unappealing. Neither of these are a refutation of that view—it could be that human psychology is weird in one of these two ways—but that at least gives us an inkling as to why you why you might want to look in another direction.

If it's all right, I want to try to think about what's wrong with those two views in another way, which will also lead the way into my view. I want to imagine a bunch of characters. And what I want to do is think about how they differ from the ordinary case of desire. Let me give you a list of the first bunch of characters, and then there's going to be a list of the second bunch of characters. All of these people, I'm going to claim, are not typical desirers.

The best case of the first bunch of characters is a divine being who knows everything about us and who cares about us deeply, but who is incapable of doing anything to help us. Imagine that this God gets so depressed by his inability to help us out that he kind of shuts off his access to us. He doesn't want to know what's going on with us anymore, but he continues to want things to go well for us. He loves us. He wants us to do well, but he doesn't know anything about us anymore. So I want to say he has a funny kind of desire. He has a desire that we fare well. But that desire is not a desire for anything in particular to happen for us, because he doesn't even know what's going on with us at the time. His desire can't grab into our world.

There are people like this in real life. You might imagine a grandparent who wants to get their grandchild a present, but who lives in a totally different culture from the grandchild—so that the grandparent doesn't know what would make the grandchild happy. Or you might imagine a drug addict who gets amnesia and is suffering from withdrawal symptoms, but he doesn't know that he is a drug addict, so he doesn't know that what would make him feel better is this drug. So he wants to feel better, but his wanting doesn't pick out any particular thing.

Okay, so those characters—keep them in mind; group them together—and now consider another group of characters. Consider somebody who, every time he thinks about something, it comes true. It's another kind of God. He doesn't want it to come true; it just happens. Now think about people in real life who are a little bit like this guy. People who are just following orders, or people who are obsessive in certain ways, feel like there's certain actions that they have to perform, even though they see nothing good about performing those actions.

That second group of people, I'm going to call them *power thinkers*. Because it seems like what they have are thoughts with a certain kind of power—the power

to come true—even though there isn't anything good about those thoughts. It's not beneficial to those people that the thoughts come true. The first group is kind of the opposite. They're people that I'm going to call the *weak wishers*. All they do is wish. They're weak. They just want good things to happen, but they don't know what would be the particular good thing that I could bring about right now. All they have is the goodness that the power thinkers are missing.

What I want to say is that the eliminativist—the person who thinks that I don't really want to catch this train, and who thinks that ultimately, all desire is just for the good—that person is drawing a picture of desire as being like the things that the weak wishers have. That merely benevolent God, the person saying: that's what we have when we have a desire, we are in that kind of a state. And the other guy, the separatist, is saying: no, no, no. When we have desires, we have these independent little mental states that don't relate to one another and just have the power to come true. He's saying that we're like the power thinkers when we have desires. What I want to say is: those pictures just have to be wrong, because desires aren't anything like that. They're not like weak wishes and they're not like power thoughts.

Mark Hopwood:

Let's look back at where we've come from. We started off with this case of the guy who's late for his train, and it turns out that he's in a rush and the train he catches is not the train to New York, it's the train to Chicago. What we wanted to know was: does this person's desire get satisfied? It looked like there could only possibly be two answers to that: it's yes, or it's no.

The problem is that we really don't want to say either of those. If we say yes, the desire is satisfied, we turn out to be what you've called a separatist, because we think there was another desire that wasn't in the picture at the start that wasn't satisfied. But that seems to lead us in this direction we don't want to go. Then if we follow the separatist, if we really flesh this picture out, we get a picture of desire that gives us these power thinkers. It gives us an implausible picture of what desire would be like, where there are all kinds of little desires that we have all over the place, but in no way connected to what we want, what's good for us on a higher level.

And then we have the 'no' answer. You know, the guy who catches the train and turns out to be going to Chicago doesn't get what he wants. But then, we run into this eliminativist picture. We run into a picture where it looks like: well, really, if we push this through to its ultimate conclusion, all we want is the good, which gives us another very implausible picture, the weak wishers. I love this picture of the grandparents who really want the best for you, but do they know what that is? They have no idea.

So we have a problem. We've not necessarily said that these two views are exactly refuted, but if we follow them through, it gives us a very unappealing picture of desire. It doesn't look like something we'd be happy to call a theory of desire. But you might ask: now where do we go? We've exhausted both of the possible answers to our first question. It seemed like a reasonable question. Does the guy get his desire satisfied or

not? Is it yes or is it no? Presumably, you think there's another answer, or you think there's another way of thinking about the question. What is that?

Agnes Callard:

I think the problem came in when the philosopher told us that what we really mean when we say that the satisfaction of a desire is getting what you want—that what we really mean by that is that it's the coming true of the thought that you had. Because on my view, you have more than one thought. Or another way to put that is, whenever you want anything, you want more than one thing. And it's because you want more than one thing that the answer to the question 'did you get what you want?' is sometimes complicated.

On my view, the person who was trying to catch the train wanted to catch the train, *this* train, and he wanted to get to New York. And those were both aspects of his desire, of his single desire. That can be true of him, because, on my view, it's true of everyone, whenever they desire anything. Whenever there's anything that we want, there are two sides to it: there's the specific side and the general side. The specific side is the particular thing that we're going after in the world, and the general side is the feature of that thing that makes it good or appealing or attractive to us. Those are both parts of every desire on my view. And so if you try to find one thing, the truth of which is going to be the satisfaction of a desire, you're inevitably going to get a lopsided picture of desire.

Matt Teichman:

So we have this view according to which a desire has, as it were, a bipartite structure. It has these two components. Maybe we could just run that through an example. How would that work?

Agnes Callard:

What I called the two parts of desire—the specific side and the general side—let me use some different names, which are the terms that I like to use for it. The specific side of desire, I'm going to call that your *object*. That's the thing in the world that you're pursuing, like catching this train. The general side of desire is what makes that thing attractive or appealing to you, like the fact that this train can get you to New York.

Maybe this is the place to say something about another claim that philosophers typically make about desire. And it goes along with the philosophers' theory of desire. The philosophers' theory of desire is that a desire is satisfied when it comes true. But beliefs can also come true. What does the philosopher think the difference is between a desire and a belief, if they can both come true? Philosophers like to say they come true in different ways—or anyway, they're supposed to. The way that a belief is supposed to come true is that you're supposed to match your beliefs to the world, where the world is held fixed and your beliefs vary to change so as to depict it correctly.

Desires are supposed to work the other way around. The philosophers' theory says that with a desire, there's some picture of the world that you have, and you *change* the world to fit your picture. The world is what varies and your desire is what's held fixed. One way to see how my theory works is to see that there is a problem with that

picture—with the picture that desire has the opposite what's called *direction of fit* from belief. That is: in the case of desire, it's the world that's supposed to change to fit your desire. Say I'm hungry and I want a sandwich. I have a desire, right? I have a desire for a sandwich from the deli downstairs. Now, here's what the philosophers' theory tells us. (This is the original philosophers' theory supplemented with this new thing that tells us the difference between desire and belief.) The philosophers' theory tells us that the satisfaction of that desire is its coming true, and it's supposed to come true in virtue of the world changing to match it. When I desire a sandwich from the deli downstairs, I can then change the world. That is, I can go downstairs and buy the sandwich. And then my desire is satisfied.

What I think is wrong with that picture is that it's incomplete. And the way you can see that it's incomplete is that it can't be an accident that the thing I came to desire, namely going downstairs to get the sandwich, was something that was available to me to do. Because imagine I didn't form that desire. Imagine I got hungry, and so I formed the desire to get a sandwich from a deli in Paris. It'd be pretty hard for me to change the world to fit that desire. Or imagine I form the desire to get a sandwich from the moon. It'd be *impossible* for me to change the world to fit that desire. Is it just an accident that when I formed desires, I formed desires that I can change the world to fit?

I think the answer is no. When I'm hungry, I have what I call an aim. A general purpose. Like getting rid of this painful hunger feeling. And I allow that purpose to be shaped by the way the world is. I know, for instance, that the way that my hunger tends to be satisfied is by eating and that if I'm going to eat, I'm going to have to buy some food and that there's food downstairs in the deli. All those thoughts about the way the world is shape my hunger so that my hunger varies while the world stays fixed. But then, once I've come up with that desire, once I have formed the desire for a sandwich, I can then change the world to fit that desire. That's a way of saying that the bipartite structure of desire—that is, the object-aim structure of desire—reflects a difference in the direction of fit of those two parts of desire.

Matt Teichman:

But it seems like there's a difference in those two directions. It seems like when I have a general aim and I project that onto the world and come up with something more specific—an object through which I will achieve the aim—the fit there is looser than it is in the case of going out and making the world resemble the object that's become the second component of my desire.

For example, it seems like if the fit between the world and my aim, which is what creates the object in this case to go to get a sandwich from the deli, rather than from Paris, was as close as the fit between what I want to happen—namely not be hungry anymore–and that happening—not being hungry anymore—I could just desire nothing other than what already is the case and never do anything. So it seems like there's a difference in how tight the fit is in each direction.

Agnes Callard:

Yeah, the idea of having an aim is the idea of pursuing some kind of goodness before you've figured out *how* you might pursue that goodness. It's like this: say I want to get somewhere. I might want to get somewhere before I know what the various ways are of getting there. And so, I don't yet want to get there by Route A because I don't even know about Route A yet. All I know is I want to get to that place. That's the kind of gap that there's always going to be between object and aim, because we aim for the things we aim for *before* we know how they might be realized in the world.

Mark Hopwood:

One comment that occasionally gets made about philosophy is that it either looks obviously false or obviously true. And in this case, you might say, well, what's the big news here? We know that sometimes we want to get somewhere before we work out how we're going to get there. What are we really saying here? One thing that struck me about your view that I like is that it challenges what seems to be a really prevalent conception of desire in modern society, particularly in modern economics, where people's desires are something that are taken to be given in advance, in a way that, on your view, it seems like they're not. Often we'll talk about certain social arrangements or how to distribute goods, or how to set up a society or an institution in a way that imagines that what we want to do is make sure that everyone gets as many of their desires satisfied as possible, and that those desires are the primary data. It's like we spontaneously come up with them, and *they're* what we're equipped with when we make our way out into the world, and *then* the business of satisfying them gets going.

On your view, it seems it's really much more complex than that, and it's much more of a compromise than that. By the time we get to having a desire, we've already engaged with the world quite a lot. We've already made a compromise between our higher aims and our more immediate objects. And that seemed to me to challenge a lot of the ways that we're really naturally inclined to think about how to go about satisfying our own and other people's desires. I wonder if you think that makes sense.

Agnes Callard:

That does make a lot of sense: the idea of satisfaction as a compromise is a good slogan, or way to put my view. You could see my view as a kind of reinterpretation or reinvigoration of a Platonic idea. Plato had this idea that you shouldn't think of a reason as a slave to desire, and it looks like on what you're calling the modern economic view, we are slaves to our own desires. We have these desires; they're sitting in front of us. And our job is to satisfy them as best as possible. To see that that's the wrong way of looking at things—I mean, you can just think about the case of parents and children, right? Parents don't go about trying to satisfy their children's desires, or trying to satisfy them as well as possible, because children don't have the right desires. It's assumed that adult human beings have formed their desires on the basis of their considered reflections on what they ultimately want, or on their aims, let's say. But that can hide the fact that such reflection took place—that is, the assumption that

those desires are the product of such reflection—can hide the fact that the reflection had to take place. So if you look at sort of degenerate cases like the case of children's desire, that can reveal to you that the story of the *formation* of a desire has to be part of your understanding of what it is to *satisfy* the desire.

Matt Teichman:

Agnes Callard, thank you very much for joining us.

Agnes Callard:

Thank you. It was fun.

Elucidations Podcast
Agnes Callard on desire and satisfaction
April 15, 2022

Elucidations. <www.elucidations.vercel.app/posts/transcript-episode-1>