CHAPTER 1

Desires, goods, and 'good'
Some philosophical issues

1.1 Desires, why they matter, what they are; what is it to have a good reason for desiring something?

Human lives can go wrong in a variety of ways and from different causes: as a result of malnutrition, illness, injury, or untimely death, from the malice, envy, or insensitivity of others, because of lack of self-knowledge or excess of self-doubt – the list is a long one. I want to focus on lives that go wrong on account of misdirected or frustrated desire. These too can be of different kinds. Someone who had set her heart on just one thing – athletic success, fame as a celebrity, preeminence as a physicist – and fails to achieve it may thereafter lead the unhappy life of a disappointed woman. Someone who wants too many different things and is recurrently diverted from his pursuit of this by the attractions of that may suddenly find that he has squandered his life away without achieving very much. Someone who wants and aspires to too little, perhaps from fear of the pain of disappointment, may never recognize that their talents and skills have never been put to adequate use. Such examples make it clear that when lives go wrong in these various ways, frustrated or misdirected or inadequate desire has played a part, even if not the only part, in making them go wrong.

The woman who had set her heart on athletic success perhaps failed to achieve it because of an injury. But it is her inability to find and pursue other objects of desire that makes her life one of disappointment. The man who wants and aspires to too little does so perhaps because of lack of self-knowledge or excess of self-doubt or both. The flibbertigibbet who pursued too many things may have had friends who encouraged him in his wasteful ways, not friends who might have given him good advice. The woman or man who invests all their hopes in a single lifelong project and is then defeated in their final attempt to complete that project will, like Gatsby in Scott Fitzgerald's novel, have "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream." If then we, thinking about such cases, are to

enquire about how things might go well or badly with our own desires, we will have to keep in mind the relationships between our desires and many other aspects of our lives. One question to ask about those of us who lead such flawed lives is: Did we or they desire what we or they had good reason to desire, given their or our circumstances, character, relationships, and past history?

Before we can pose this question profitably, however, we should note some other characteristics of our desires. The first is the large variety of their objects and so also, since we individuate desires by their objects, the large variety of our desires. She wants, among other things, a cup of coffee, to solve this differential equation, to join the local theatre group, never to have to return to South Bend, Indiana. He wants to lose weight, to be successful as a teacher, to visit Florence before he dies. What they want is that such and such should be the case at some point in the future. Yet what we desire for the future is sometimes that things should continue just as they now are. She is well liked and wants to go on being well liked. He is the proud owner of a Bugatti and wants to go on being the proud owner of a Bugatti. Moreover, we often desire not only that things should go well for us but also that they should go well or badly for particular others. She wants her friend to do well in her examination and the local food bank to flourish. He would be delighted if something very bad happened to the salesman who cheated him when he bought the Bugatti.

Such everyday examples draw our attention to still other relevant features of some desires. There are desires that we all share, yet may not even notice, so long as they are easily and routinely satisfied – the desire to have enough to eat, for example. But for those for whom hunger, as a result of poverty or famine, is an inescapable daily experience of felt need, this desire will be urgent and impossible to set aside. Yet we should not make the mistake of identifying the desire to eat with the felt need of hunger. Consider the case of an experimental psychologist who is studying the effects of food deprivation on a number of subjects, including herself. One of those effects is an increasingly intense felt need for food. However, the experimenter wants not to eat – and does not want to eat – for an extended period of time so that she can study the accompanying changes in herself. The felt hunger is one thing, the desire to eat another. So it might be too with a fashion model anxious to remain extraordinarily and elegantly thin. She feels hunger, but she does not want to eat.

It is of course quite otherwise with human infants, for whom the expression of desire just is the expression of felt need and the expression of frustration at not having that need met immediately. The difference between

such infants and human adults is at least threefold. The adult, feeling some bodily need, is able to ask, as the infant cannot, 'Is here and now the place and time to meet this need?', and perhaps to answer as my imagined experimental psychologist and fashion model do. Such adults recognize that their needs, felt or otherwise, are one thing, what they want to do about satisfying or not satisfying them quite another. In so distinguishing needs and desires, adults differentiate themselves from infants in a second way. They look beyond the present to a series of futures, tomorrow, next month, next year, ten years later, when it will become possible to achieve some objects of present desires that are not yet attainable. And they know, although they do not always bear in mind, that how they act now may make it easier or more difficult or impossible to satisfy those desires in the future. So they sometimes have to consider whether or not they should forego satisfying some present desire for the sake of keeping open some future possibility.

A third way in which human adults differ from human infants in respect of their desires is in their awareness not only of their future but also of their past. For they know that once they were small children and now they are not and that their desires as adults are significantly different from their desires as small children. That is, they know, even if they seldom reflect upon it, that their desires have a history, a history during which objects of desire have multiplied. Some of their earlier desires have been transformed, others replaced. New and changing experiences and new and changing relationships have provided a widening range of possible objects of desire. Infantile libido has become first adolescent and then adult sexual desire, infantile hunger has become a taste for fish and chips or foie gras. And wants as various as those catalogued earlier may now find a place in their lives.

If we find reason to reflect upon the history of our own desires, we soon become aware of other aspects of that history. First, it is inseparable not only from the history of our emotions, tastes, affections, habits, and beliefs but also from that of our biochemical and neurophysiological development. Our emotions are obviously closely related to our desires. We become angry when some harm that we very much did not want to see inflicted on a friend is gratuitously inflicted on him. We grieve when someone whose wellbeing we desired falls ill or dies. So too with our tastes and our affections. I want tickets for this concert because of my liking for this kind of music; I want the radio turned off because of my aversion to that other kind of music. I want this student to do well because of my affection for her parents. With habits and beliefs the relationships to desires are

again obvious. Initially I have no particular liking for this kind of music – Tudor madrigals, punk rock, whatever. Then I learn that someone whose judgment I greatly respect not only values this kind of music as a listener but is learning an instrument so as to become a performer. Impressed by this, I start listening carefully to recordings of it, I change my habits, I redirect my attention, and in time I find it rewarding to have done so. A change in belief and the development of a new habit result in changes in my desires, to what performers I want to listen, and on what occasions I want the radio turned off.

If we need convincing that the history of our desires is also inseparable from our biochemical and neurophysiological history, we need only remind ourselves of the kinds of effects that various illnesses and drugs, including alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana, can have upon our desires. But we should also notice a variety of discoveries made by neuroscientific researchers concerning what must not happen in the brain if our desires and emotions are to function as they normally do, discoveries about what happens when our lives are disordered by emotions and desires resulting from injury or other interference with the normal functioning of the brain. Why then with all these complexities should we focus especially on desires?

Consider two different types of occasion which give us good reason to reflect upon our desires. Occasions of the first type are part of the fabric of everyone's life, occasions when we cannot avoid making choices that will dictate the shape of our future lives, as when students decide for what kind of work to prepare themselves, or someone in midcareer faces alternative career paths, or someone decides to get married or not to get married, or someone decides to commit themselves to a life of religious contemplation or a life of revolutionary politics. Occasions of a second type are those when the routines of everyday life have been disrupted by, say, a serious illness or the outbreak of a war or a discovery that one has alienated one's friends, or by being unexpectedly told that one has been fired or is going to be divorced. In such situations it requires little reflection to recognize that if I am to answer the question 'What shall I do?' I had better first pause and pose the question 'What is it that I want?' Somewhat more reflection is needed to recognize that I also need to think critically about my present desires, to ask 'Is what I now want what I want myself to want?' and 'Do I have sufficiently good reasons to want what I now want?' and still further reflection to recognize that I will be likely to go astray in answering these questions if I do not also ask how I came to be the kind of person that I now am, with the desires that I now have, that is, to ask about the history of my desires.

We began by taking note of some ways in which someone's life could go wrong because there was something amiss with her or his desires. What we have now recognized is that whether a life goes well or badly may depend and often does depend on whether in the types of situation that I have identified someone thinks well or badly about their present, past, and future desires. To understand what it is to think well or badly about our desires, we need first to say more about what a desire is and about how desires relate to actions. A good place to begin is with Elizabeth Anscombe's remark that "The primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*."[1] Here the word 'primitive' is important. What small children desire they try to get. But, as we already noticed, as they grow older they learn to delay satisfying some of their desires and develop desires that can be satisfied only at some time, even some distant time, in the future. If then it is true of some adult that she very much wants to travel to Italy next summer, it does not follow that she is doing anything to implement that desire now, but only perhaps that she is so disposed that, if and when the opportunity occurs and it is the appropriate time, she will do such things as buy tickets and make hotel reservations and that, when at the moment she entertains thoughts of Italy, she thinks such thoughts as 'I hope to be there next summer'. Yet here we are wise to say 'perhaps'. For she may indeed want very much to go to Italy next summer and yet see no possibility of doing so. In this case her dispositions are such that if the obstacles to her traveling to Italy were to be removed, which, so she firmly believes, they will not be, then she would indeed be disposed to do such things as buy tickets and make hotel reservations and to entertain the hopes of an expectant traveler.

There are then, even in such simple cases, a range of ways in which someone's desires may find expression in their thoughts and actions. At one extreme are idle wishes for states of affairs that are impossible and known to be impossible by those who wish for them. "I wish," say I, who have a voice like a corncrake and know it, "that I could sing like Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau." About such wishes there is nothing to be done, as in all those cases where we very much want something to happen, but whether it happens or not is not at all in our power. At the other extreme are desires that translate immediately into action. I want not to get wet and, as it starts to rain, I put up my umbrella. I want to quench my thirst now and I fill a glass with water and drink it. The same action can of course on different occasions express different desires, and the same desire can be expressed in different actions. Putting up my umbrella might be an expression of my

[1] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2nd edn., 1958, p. 67.

desire to show someone what an elegant and expensive umbrella I own. And my desire to quench my thirst might be expressed in my searching for a drinking fountain.

Between those extremes are a range of other cases. If what I want is that things should go on as they are, my desire will be expressed in my letting things be, at least until and unless something happens to disturb them. If what I want is that something – anything – should disturb the hopelessly boring routine of my life, my desire will be expressed in my openness to invitations to disturbance and disruption. If what I want is that my wants should be other than they now are, my actions will be directed, often in complex ways, to altering my habits, redirecting my attention, perhaps to conditioning myself not to respond to certain stimuli. (Whether we want to want otherwise than we now do or instead want to want just what we now do is obviously often of crucial importance at turning points in our lives. Philosophers owe their understanding of the significance of such second order desires to Harry Frankfurt's 1971 paper, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person."[2] What all such cases, as contrasted with idle wishes, have in common is that our desires are expressed both in action and in those states of mind that motivate us to act. Of course, it is not only desires that motivate; so do emotions and tastes. And so too do those attitudes that some philosophers have named pro-attitudes, attitudes of liking or approval (or anti-attitudes, dislikings, aversions). I have, let us say, an attitude of approval toward those who work to mitigate the evils of world hunger. When someone asks me to make a donation in support of this cause, it is this pro-attitude that is expressed in my immediate positive response. But notice that what the request to contribute elicits is a desire, a desire to help, a desire expressed in my handing over dollar bills. As with emotions and tastes, pro-attitudes issue in actions as they do only because of their relationships to desires and to actions expressive of desires.

Some philosophers have talked as if every action must have some particular motivation of its own, as if the question 'Why did she do that?' will always have an answer that refers us immediately to some particular desire, emotion, or the like. But this is to ignore how much of our activity is what it is because of the structures and patterns of each individual's normal day, normal week, normal year. So often enough the first answer to the 'Why?' question should be of the form 'It's a Friday afternoon and that is what she generally does on Friday afternoons.' For most of the lives of most people,

[2] Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 1, reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 11–25.

there is a daily, weekly, and annual routine. This does not mean that there are not many occasions for spontaneity, for choice, and for improvisation, but these generally have as their context structures that each of us can take for granted in our interactions with others. I enter the café at 7.30 am on my way to work, knowing that someone will have made the coffee. She phones the office after 9.00, knowing that the secretary will be there to answer the phone. He arrives at the station at 10.00, since the train is due to arrive ten minutes later. And on the mornings when someone sleeps late or the coffee machine or the telephone or the train breaks down, there are standard ways of responding and coping and standard ways of responding when someone fails to cope. Let us call the dispositions to act and to react in these patterned ways – somewhat extending our everyday use of the word – habits. For the moment it is enough to note the importance of such habits and their relationship to those institutionalized routines that structure our everyday lives. But later we will have to ask questions about how our lives come to be thus structured and how in consequence our desires are transformed. For the moment I turn from habits to beliefs.

Beliefs may on occasion play a crucial part in making our desires and the actions issuing from our desires what they are. Someone may be satisfied with her present life only because she believes that there is no more pleasing alternative that is open to her. What she takes to be possible depends on her beliefs both about herself and about the relevant aspects of the social world. Imagination too has a part to play. It may never have occurred to her that she might run away and join the circus or learn to speak Japanese and take a job in Kyoto. Indeed, if someone were to suggest either of these courses of action to her, her response would be dismissive, because she would be unable to imagine herself as, say, a trapeze artist or an interpreter for tourists curious about Zen Buddhism. Her beliefs and her imagination combine to set limits to what she takes to be possible and so to her present desires. And this is not the only way in which beliefs may be related to desires.

Each of us, in acting as we do, has to take some account of the desires of others with whom we interact. Sometimes we may want to act as they desire because we love them, or because we fear them, or because we want to secure their cooperation. We may perhaps see them as dangerous competitors for scarce resources, so that, if we are to satisfy our own desires, we must prevent them from satisfying theirs. In all these cases it matters to us that our beliefs about their desires are true beliefs, just as it matters to them that their beliefs about our desires are true beliefs. Sometimes we

may find it difficult to believe of certain others that they really do desire what, on the best interpretation that we can devise, they seem to desire. How, we ask, could anyone want *that*? What would be the good of acting so as to achieve *that*? These are very much the same questions that, as we noted earlier, we put to ourselves when we become reflective about our own desires. To be reflective about one's desires is to ask whether one has sufficiently good reasons for desiring whatever it is that one presently desires. To have a good reason for desiring something – when that desire is not an idle wish – is to have a good reason for acting in some particular way. So what is it to act for a good reason?

We need first to note that whether or not someone has a good reason to act in this or that particular way is one thing. Whether she or he is aware that they have a good reason so to act is another. And whether they so act just because they have a good reason so to act is a third. To act for a good reason is to act for the sake of achieving some good or preventing or avoiding some evil. The good to be achieved may be achieved simply in performing that particular action, as when someone acts generously by feeding a hungry person who would otherwise go unfed. Or it may be achieved by contributing to some shared activity, as when someone acts gracefully and beautifully by playing the cello in a performance of a Beethoven quartet. Or it may be achieved by producing some good as an effect, as when someone by eating and drinking temperately becomes healthy. To spell out the notion of acting for a good reason fully, we would have both to say more about these distinctions and to make some further distinctions, but enough has been said to make the point that we have a good reason to want some particular object of desire only if and when to act so as to achieve the object of that desire is to act so as to achieve some good.

We may of course have good reason to act in some particular way without having *sufficiently* good reason so to act, as when I have good reason to act self-interestedly by fleeing from some danger, but better reason to act courageously by standing fast in defense of innocent others who will otherwise lose their lives. So too I may have good reason to want something, but better reason to want something else. And I am able to justify acting so as to satisfy some desire, only if I can show that I had good reason for so acting and no better reason for acting otherwise. When I ask, therefore, whether I do or do not have good reason or sufficiently good reason to satisfy this or that particular desire, I am asking what good or goods are or might be at stake in my acting so as to satisfy it rather than some other desire.

To this there may be an immediate objection. Someone – anyone – may say "But surely we always have *some* reason to satisfy *any* desire. When asked to give our reasons for acting as we did, don't we often say that by acting as we did we got what we wanted? And isn't this in itself a perfectly good reason? We may perhaps have further reasons, but we don't need them." With those who make this complaint, I will at once agree that often enough in our culture 'Doing that got me what I wanted' is taken to have been a good, even a sufficient reason for some agent's having done whatever she or he did. Such an agent's claim may be no more than that it is good that this particular desire of theirs should have been satisfied. And there are of course many desires that, in particular contexts, it is good to satisfy. But the more radical claim voiced in the objection is that any desire provides not just a motive, but also some reason for acting so as to satisfy that desire. What should we say to this?

To ask what reasons I have for choosing to act in this way rather than that, in order to satisfy some desire, is to ask what would justify me as a rational agent in acting in this way rather than that. And to justify an action just is to show that the good to be achieved by so acting outweighs the good to be achieved by any alternative course of action open to the agent. Of course questions about rational justification are not the only questions that may be posed about our reasons for acting as we do. Others may on occasion find our desires and the actions that give expression to those desires not so much unjustified as unintelligible. We become intelligible to others just insofar as they can identify and understand as possible goods the goods that furnish us with reasons for desiring as we do and acting as we do. If, therefore, someone were to give as their sole reason for acting as they do that it achieves the satisfaction of some desire, without also claiming that in satisfying their desire they were achieving some good, they would have done nothing to make their action intelligible as an intended action, let alone to show that it was justified.

Yet it is of course true that considerations that have to do with our desires play a variety of parts in our practical reasoning. That I want something badly may in some circumstances give me a reason for satisfying that desire, if, for example, I will be distracted from acting as I should be acting, so long as that desire remains unsatisfied. That I want something badly may in other circumstances give me a reason for not satisfying that desire, if, for example, it is Lent and I am resisting my tendencies toward self-indulgence. But in all such cases considerations about our desires have the place that they have in our practical reasoning only because of the

relationship between satisfying or failing to satisfy this or that desire and the achievement of this or that good.

A very different rejoinder to my claim that our desires are both intelligible and justifiable only if we have good reason to act so as to satisfy them would be made by someone who recognized that I have come very close to reiterating Aquinas's thesis that "Every desire is for some good" (*Summa Theologiae* I–IIae, qu. 8, art. 1, resp.) and who held that there are counterexamples that are fatal to that thesis. Aquinas's view was that every desire has as its object something taken to be good by the agent, and some critics have supposed that he cannot therefore allow for those cases where someone desires something that is on any reasonable account bad and where the agent knows that it is bad, as when the fat man with a heart condition wants to feast on profiteroles. Those critics have misunderstood Aquinas's claim. What the imprudent fat man desires is the pleasure afforded by the delicious taste of the profiteroles, and this is indeed a good. So the fat man's desire is for some good. But in that his desire is for something that will shorten his life and impoverish his family, it is also a desire for something bad. So in acting for the sake of some good, he knowingly acts from a desire for what is bad. And there is no inconsistency here. We must look elsewhere for counterexamples to Aquinas's thesis.

Walking along the street I idly kick a stone. 'What did you do that for?' 'I just felt like it.' 'But what did you want to do it for?' 'I had no particular reason for wanting to do it.' Such impulses belong to a familiar class of momentary whims, where there is indeed a species of desire, but no particular good in view. Less common are those plainly neurotic desires that are unintelligible not only to others but also to the agent whose desires they are. Someone finds herself wanting to walk only on that side of the road where the house numbers are odd rather than even. She cannot say why. Her desire, as she feels it and expresses it, is not for any good. These are genuine counterexamples not only to Aquinas's thesis but also to such contemporary versions of it as that advanced by Joseph Raz, according to which it is not desires, but intentional actions that are always directed toward something that the agent takes to be of genuine worth: "intentional actions are actions that we perform because we endorse them in light of what we believe about them, and that means that we must believe that they have features that make them attractive, or as we say, features that give them value."[3] How, then, should we respond to such counterexamples?

[3] Joseph Raz, "On the Guise of the Good," in *Desire, Practical Reason and the Good*, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 116.