ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Assessing the normative significance of desire satisfaction

Seppe Segers[1] | Guido Pennings[2] | Heidi Mertes[3]

[1]Research institutes GROW and CAPHRI, Department of Health, Ethics, and Society, Maastricht University, the Netherlands, and Bioethics Institute Ghent and METAMEDICA, Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium

[2]Bioethics Institute Ghent, Department of Philosophy of Moral Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium

[3]Bioethics Institute Ghent and METAMEDICA, Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium

Correspondence
Seppe Segers, P. Debyeplein 1, 6229 HA Maastricht, The Netherlands
Email: seppe.segers@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Abstract

People have various desires, but it is a contested moral issue when a desire becomes of such importance that it legitimizes a moral claim on others. This paper explores how the normative significance of desire satisfaction can be assessed and argues that a normatively significant desire can constitute a pro tanto obligation to help satisfy it. The paper presents a framework that relates the normative significance of a given desire to the general goal of living a reasonably valuable life and inquires how the latter can be given determinate content without excluding a heterogeneity of the personal good. The paper contends that the set of possibly normatively significant desires is thus restricted by considerations about intelligibility, adequacy, and replaceability, which are mediated by societal background theories.

KEYWORDS
desires, moral demands, moral negotiation, moral theory, needs

1 | INTRODUCTION

People have various desires, and the possible objects of these desires are multifarious. Some desires can be considered to be rather whimsical, while others are more like life plans or central projects. It is a fact of life, however, that desire fulfillment is often thwarted. The possible causes of failure to meet a desire are multifarious as well. It may be that my desire to go kick

heaps of autumn leaves this afternoon goes unmet because it is high summer, because I have to go to work, because I broke a leg, and so on. Similarly, my desire to become, say, a medical doctor may remain unsatisfied because I do not have the money to pay for medical school, because my parents decided on another career plan for me, and so forth. While this latter desire may seem more important than the former, this raises the question what it is that vouches for the importance of desire satisfaction. While people are generally believed to be free to pursue their desires as long as doing so does not harm others, merely having a desire is commonly not regarded as instilling in others an obligation to help satisfy this desire. Most people find it important to see their friends and family regularly, to do the job they like, to engage in leisure activities they desire doing, and so on. Yet, the descriptive statement that people find it important to acquire certain desired goods does not in itself entail the normative conclusion that they ought to have them.

To instill in others a requirement to accommodate a certain goal, this goal would have to be normatively significant, meaning that it ought to be taken into account in our ethical evaluations (Barry 1967; Reader and Brock 2004; Miller 2012). The interesting normative questions, then, are how the normative significance of desire satisfaction can be assessed and on what grounds one judges whether or not a particular desire is a serious contender for third-party support. In this paper we explore these questions and argue that a normatively significant desire constitutes a pro tanto obligation to help satisfy it.

2 | NORMATIVE STANDARDS, THE GOOD, AND SETBACKS TO ONE'S LIFE GOALS

To normatively justify the intuition that some desires are better contenders for third-party support than others, an additional premise is required to show their different degree of normative significance. This presumes an understanding of why the satisfaction of a particular desire can be said to be normatively significant. The normative significance of a certain goal depends on its relationship with a normative standard from which the normative force derives (Darwall 2009, 142; Frankfurt 1984, 3). For example: the desire for food of a starving person exerts a strong normative claim on me, whereas the desire for food of a well-fed person does not, because in the first case survival is at stake, which is morally relevant, whereas gluttony is not.

A first difficulty, then, is to determine this normative standard: various candidates can be thought of, and all too often these are found to be contestable on other normative grounds (for example, mere survival, harm avoidance, agency, flourishing, and the like) (Springborg 1981; Reader and Brock 2004, 252). To avoid this, it could be suggested that one start from a vague "outline sketch" of the good life that admits of many instances of concrete specifications (Nussbaum 1998, 138). Something like the general need to live a reasonably valuable life could then be proposed as a norm from which other goods can derive their normative significance. When discussing the topic of personal good or well-being, philosophers often fall back on the concept of desire and use it to explain the diversity of conceptions of a valuable life (Brink 2008, 6). So, for one individual the wish to become a doctor may be part of her conception of a valuable life, while for others it could be to become a professional football player, a philosopher, a homemaker, and so forth. The example of the desire to pursue one career path rather than another can be regarded as one such good among various others that can make for a valuable life, like studies, hobbies, having a partner, and so on (McTernan 2015, 228). These goods can all be the subject of desire, and satisfying such desires may contribute to someone's ability to live a reasonably valuable life.

The assumption that the good allows for many concrete specifications is, however, a double-edged sword, as it may risk becoming too accepting of desires (Kraut 1994, 40). Especially in cases where appeal is made for support, one may still want to find sufficiently solid ground to express

doubts about whether or not pursuing the desires in question would actually be good (for the person concerned and for the other parties that may be involved), without becoming objectionably paternalistic. For instance, what, if any, moral priority should be given to the case of people who are unhappy with their physical features but who cannot pay for aesthetic surgery? In general, a failure to acquire a specific desired good from a plethora of other goods need not necessarily mean that without this desired good this person's life would cease to be valuable. Yet, the failure to acquire a particular desired good might nevertheless yield frustration and might even be a setback to the person's life plan. As all unmet desires yield some frustration, however, it can be questioned why the one desire should receive special attention over the other. Sticking to our earlier examples: the failure to reach a desired career plan, the unmet desire for cosmetic surgery, as well as the thwarted desire to go kick autumn leaves may all yield frustration. Even though the intensity of these frustrations may vary, it is questionable whether such a quantitative criterion would give much normative guidance to distinguish normatively significant from nonnormatively significant desires. Even if it were possible to measure and predict the subjectively felt frustration of any given desire, such a descriptive fact would not be a sufficient basis for the normative conclusion that the desire ought to be met (Campagna 2008, 112). Moreover, it would give too much leeway to expensive tastes (see below).

How, then, should we handle such setbacks and frustrations? Garrett Thomson (1987) has made the point, framed in terms of harm, that the deprivation of a particular desired good does not constitute serious harm, as long as there are other particulars that can replace it. It is rather the deprivation of general types of activities and experiences that are a matter of moral priority. This idea may provide some guidance in the search for an understanding of the moral importance of desire satisfaction, though it requires further elaboration.

3 | HARM AND INTERMEDIATE NEEDS

As mentioned, Thomson framed his discussion of the normative significance of acquiring desired goods in terms of (serious) harm. A first issue with this view as it stands is that harm (let alone serious harm) is a poorly understood and still underexamined notion (Shiffrin 2012, 357). One of the challenges is to capture serious frustration of one's central projects as potentially harmful—for example, my desire to become a medical doctor—while avoiding counting all desire nonfulfillment—for example, the thwarted desire to kick piles of autumn leaves (Shiffrin 2012, 361). The difficulty is that if the link with harm counts as a reason to be considered normatively significant, and if there is no adequate way to prevent suffering some frustration from amounting to real harm, any felt desire would become normatively significant (James 1966; Brock 1998; Frankfurt 1984). This would lead to an explosion of normatively significant desires.

A second issue is that a mere reference to harm obscures the fact that not all desires have to be satisfied to avoid frustration. The dichotomous view of desire satisfaction—leading to an increase in well-being—versus desire frustration—leading to harm—neglects a third option: desire elimination. Some desires can cease to exist without being satisfied, for example: the above desire for aesthetic surgery could also be alleviated through psychological therapy. The effectiveness of this alternative will depend largely on the possibility of leading a reasonably valuable life without the surgery. If one is severely mutilated, this will, for example, be much more difficult than if one has a minor abnormality (say, a larger than average nose). The point here is that the desire to change the shape of one's nose does not provide an ipso facto reason for cosmetic surgery. In general: it can be possible to put an end to the harm due to unsatisfied desires by getting people to give up the desire through persuasion or the offer of an alternative (see below) (Brock 1998, 174; Frankfurt 1984, 9).

Another problem with the dichotomous view is that people are frequently wrong about whether desire satisfaction will lead to an increase in well-being. Therefore the link between desire frustration and harm, while certainly correlated, is not causal but contingent. For example, the social norm that champions the cultural ideal of "life as a career" and encourages people to fit particular economic and social roles may for many people not be the most adequate way to find value in their life (Walker 2003).

Thus, mere reference to harm is too blunt to mark out the normative significance of desire satisfaction. To come to a more refined view, it may be helpful to expand on the notion of what Thomson (rather covertly) called "the deprivation of very general types of activities and experiences" (1987, 44). Absence of a desired good is said to have no moral priority if there are other goods that can replace the good. Being deprived of "general types of activities and experiences" that make for a valuable life is, however, a serious absence. Thomson's invocation of what he called "general types of activities and experiences," together with the idea that one can miss out on some but not all goods, suggests the following picture: there are certain indispensable categories of goods that are needed to live a reasonably valuable life, call them intermediate needs (Doyal and Gough 1991, 157). Intermediate needs overarch concrete goods that may contribute to living a valuable life, and accordingly they are preconditions that are to be met (to a greater or lesser extent) in order to live a reasonably valuable life. One can think of, for instance, adequate nutrition, adequate physical security, significant primary relationships, entertainment, personal identity, and the rest (Braybrooke 1987; Doyal and Gough 1991; Nussbaum 1998; Miller 2012). Various goods can serve these intermediate needs. My desire to become a doctor and someone's desire to become a philosopher can be regarded as responding to our intermediate need for, say, personal identity and self-development. On this view, the normative importance of desire satisfaction should thus be assessed not by directly linking it to harm but rather by linking it to intermediate needs as connected to the normative standard of living a reasonably valuable life. Reference to these categories of intermediate needs thus gives somewhat more determinate content to the concept of a reasonably valuable life, though it still allows for a large heterogeneity of personal goods. It avoids the risk of turning all desires into normatively significant ones. Also, as we started our inquiry from the idea of a *reasonably* valuable life, it is not required that all things that may contribute to these intermediate needs be at hand, only that a sufficient number of them are.

4 | INTELLIGIBILITY, ADEQUACY, AND SOCIETAL BACKGROUND THEORIES

Yet, even if we adopt the premise that the normative significance of a desire depends on its link with an intermediate need, we may still question whether not all desires can be linked to an intermediate need. If they can all be linked, we might again lose ground for distinguishing desires that may have normative significance from desires that do not. Now, it could be nuanced that merely stating that one's desire is linked to an intermediate need is not enough. Rather, one may expect the desirer to provide reasons why or how this desire matters to her, which would require an elaboration of how the desire relates to one or several intermediate needs. Some authors refer to this requirement as the intelligibility principle, which generally implies that for a desire to matter morally, the reasons for having this desire should be explainable to and recognizable by others (Bruckner 2016; MacIntyre 2016, 9).

It is questionable, however, whether this is sufficient to rid us of the objection that all desires can be linked to an intermediate need. Donald Bruckner, for instance, has argued that even so-called quirky desires can meet the intelligibility criterion (2016, 8). Quirky desires are desires that appear extremely strange or even absurd, but examples of such desires are quite common in philosophical literature. Think, for instance, of John Rawls's grass counter "whose only

pleasure is to count blades of grass" or of Philippa Foot's example of a man who desires to have an uneven number of hairs on his head (Rawls 1999, 379; Foot 1958, 94). Rawls suggests that we are inclined to think that such a person would probably be "peculiarly neurotic." Foot likewise concedes that such desires are odd. Bruckner insists, however, that wanting to count blades of grass can be made comprehensible to others, provided that the grass counter can offer reasons like "It's soothing, like walking on the beach" (2016, 8). After all, if this is the grass counter's reason for wanting to count blades of grass, this quirky desire could be framed as a token for meeting his intermediate need for, say, relaxation.

This tends to be a recurrent difficulty as long as one starts from the context-free perspective of subjectively felt desires. If, however, one starts from the perspective of the category of intermediate needs, one may become sensitive to an important, intersubjective aspect of a desire's intelligibility that allows one to exclude quirky desires from the set of possibly normatively significant desires. As A. J. Watt noted, the general intelligibility of a desire is also contingent "on what most people are disposed, by biological and social influences, to want" (1972, 559). That is, society upholds background theories that constitute some desires as more plausible contenders than others for meeting our intermediate needs (for example, society is expected to provide food packages to people who live in poverty, but such food distribution is not required to cater to a desire for, say, caviar) (Walker 2007, 69–71; MacIntyre 2016, 135). Such background theories are common beliefs about what people are supposed to do, expect, and understand, which create mutual intelligibility (Walker 2007, 69–71). More: as a society we not only have shared ideas about which intermediate needs are important for living a reasonably valuable life, we also uphold certain beliefs about which ways are (in)adequate to meet these intermediate needs (Kamenetzky 1981, 102; Fortin 2006, 13). That is, for a desire to be normatively significant, its satisfaction should adequately contribute to an intermediate need. After all, there would be little point in offering support to satisfy a desire if doing so would not or just barely contribute to an intermediate need, and thus to the person's ability to live a reasonably valuable life.

Thus, it does not suffice to provide a personal reason why a desire matters for one intermediate need or another; this reason should also be recognized as a good reason in terms of given societal background theories. In other words: instead of asking to which intermediate need(s) a given desire can be linked, the question is rather which desires qualify as plausible candidates to meet these intermediate needs given societal background theories. These background theories vouch for the fact that we find some desires more plausible for meeting our intermediate needs than others, and freaky desires like grass counting tend to be excluded from this set. With regard to the intermediate need for entertainment, for example, one can observe that society supports certain forms of cultural activities like theater, visits to the museum, outreach services, and the like, but it does not provide aid to satisfy desires for grass counting. This does not, however, preclude people from pursuing the satisfaction of this desire.

5 | CONTINGENCY AND NEGOTIABILITY

In the light of this, it becomes more comprehensible why society supports the satisfaction of certain desires, while making no effort to help satisfy others. Shared beliefs about the relevance of certain desires for meeting important intermediate needs provide a general sense of which desires merit support. Two important nuances are required here, however. First, these background theories are socially contingent, which also means that they are subject to change; hence, they are negotiable. This aspect of negotiability is important in view of the contention that being socially encouraged does not exclude normative scrutiny or contestation. Second, talk about adequacy, intelligibility, and society's influence is complicated by the fact that some desires are a function of belief.

Let us look into the latter remark first. We have already indicated that people are frequently wrong about whether desire satisfaction will increase their well-being: we desire things, relationships, actions because we believe their satisfaction will benefit us, or because society makes us believe it will, but we can be mistaken about this presumed benefit (Thomson 1987, 100; Miller 2012, 21). To complicate things even further, sometimes such false beliefs can result in self-fulfilling prophecies (and thus become true beliefs, but only for the believers). For example, the One Child Policy in China led to a decrease in the reported ideal family size in both urban and rural communities (toward one child being the desired number of children in urban communities, and two in rural communities) (Basten and Gu 2013). Given how clearly context dependent this desire is, one may question whether it is in fact true that having one child will contribute most to a valuable life in rural China (as opposed to no or two children, for instance). Once the policy is internalized as a desire, however, it is very well possible that people who obtain their desired family size (one child) will report having a more valuable life as compared to people whose desire is frustrated (by not being able to conceive or by an unplanned second pregnancy).

This indeed indicates that societal influence is an important factor, yet it is not because something is socially encouraged that it is also actually good, and vice versa. We can imagine dubious yet socially accepted practices, and so being socially accepted does not make something de facto morally good. Feminist authors often draw our attention to this idea (such as Catharine MacKinnon [1987]). This in turn connects to the remark about the negotiable character of the relationship between these background theories and personal desires: even if a practice is socially encouraged, it is still susceptible to normative contestation. People can make such shared understandings, their sustaining conditions, and their consequences a subject of explicit consideration (Walker 2007, 250–51). Thus, background theories can be made the topic of debate and can be shown to stand in want of good normative reasons supporting them. Pluralism about values should allow room for such debates: against the background of shared understandings, such debates can be regarded as negotiations in which one seeks to find reasons that can make certain claims on others more or less reasonable (Cohen 1989, 23–26; Walker 2007, 71).

In a similar vein, it is possible to make certain desires more understandable: since the mere fact of having a preference is not a sufficient reason in support of it, one can try to find reasons to make it more acceptable to others (Cohen 1989, 23–25; MacIntyre 2016, 186). Desires can gain recognition as a result of social and moral negotiations in which appeal is made to more generally shared values, in an attempt to change and refine understandings. In line with this, MacIntyre made the point that we can "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" (2016, 9). Importantly, in the way society shapes many of our desires it also provides us with grounds for our expectations of others (MacIntyre 2016, 135). Thus, what can reasonably be expected is restricted by the "interests that, on public reflection, we think it legitimate to appeal to in making claims on social resources" (Cohen 1989, 25). Deliberative justification may thus influence what can be expected from others, but it can also shape the content of one's personal preferences (for example, on discovering that one cannot offer persuasive reasons for one's desire) (Cohen 1989, 24). As a final remark one can add that these negotiations may also be influenced by other factors, such as the scarcity of goods and the level of technological advancements in a given society (Wiggins 1985).

6 | REPLACEABILITY

The set of possibly normatively significant desires is thus restricted by considerations about intelligibility and adequacy, which are to an important extent mediated by societal background theories. While this allows one to exclude so-called quirky desires, the remaining set of desires is still rather extensive. This set could even still include my desire to kick autumn leaves: many people may

empathize with this desire, or even share my desire, as its satisfaction may adequately contribute to the intermediate need for, say, entertainment (a desire for leaf kicking is not weird in the way that a desire for grass counting is weird: the former is a rather common trope in movies, songs, and even daily life—for example, people desiring to relive the nostalgia of childhood experience).

Yet, the mere fact that a desire can be intelligibly and adequately linked to an intermediate need, in view of given background theories, does not yet yield a satisfactory picture of what it is for a desired goal to be normatively significant. If I cannot go out to kick autumn leaves this afternoon but I can go to the cinema on Saturday or visit friends, then the loss of leaf kicking does not seem to be serious (Thomson 1987, 44). This indicates that the replaceability of the desired good is another element that impacts the normative significance of meeting a certain desire. We referred to this criterion when we invoked Thomson's argument that failing to meet intermediate needs is a serious threat to one's ability to live a valuable life, whereas absence of a desired good is said to have no moral priority if there are other goods that can replace it. The idea is that the presence of multiple available goods each of which could adequately contribute to an intermediate need lessens the moral force of any presumed claim to provide a particular desired good. This is because the satisfaction of an intermediate need becomes less dependent on the availability of a particular good if there are other relevant goods available that can replace it. This is reminiscent of Thomas Scanlon's discussion of what he called the "urgency of a benefit," which depends on how well off someone would be without the benefit, as well as on the alternatives available to this person (1975, 661). It follows from this that failing to meet a desire, even if it is central to my ideal life plan, need not hinder me from living a reasonably valuable life (although my life could have been more valuable had the desire been satisfied, provided that its satisfaction would adequately contribute to an intermediate need). My failure to meet my desire to succeed as a medical doctor, for instance, may be less severe if I have other life goals and if there are other goods available to meet my intermediate needs. Also, a desire to go to medical school can subside once studying for a different career has started.

The fact, however, that there are alternatives available to meet one's intermediate need (judged from an impersonal perspective) does not entail that one has a desire for any of the alternatives. There are two important nuances to this issue.

First, when the normative significance of desire satisfaction is at stake (as well as the related question of how far others should go to accommodate it), one should not merely assess how strong the person's desire is but rather "inquire into the reasons for which these benefits are considered desirable," also in comparison with the alternatives (Scanlon 1975, 660). When inquiring into these reasons, one may find that the person's actually desired good has "little to recommend it as compared with other alternatives available to him," for example in terms of adequacy for meeting an intermediate need (Scanlon 1975, 661).[1] For instance, a claim to help satisfy a person's thwarted desire for caviar as a way of meeting an intermediate need for nutrition does not hit home when other (more) adequate alternatives (bread, rice, pasta) are offered to the person but are refused by her, because she really only wants caviar. Similarly, when someone with poor football skills demands support to become a professional football player, reference to the person's poor skills would presumably be a plausible reason not to offer that support.[2] If this person protests that the desire is really important for her intermediate need for, say, personal development, one could test her rejoinder by inquiring whether it is plausible

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[1]In concrete situations, such assessments will be complex and will depend on a detailed account of the relative importance of the reasons that undergird the desire in question, compared with other alternatives. Interestingly, as a reference point for such assessments, Scanlon refers to "what we consider to be a normal life" (1975, 665). This is similar to our comments about how the notion of a reasonably valuable life maps onto societal background theories.

[2]One might say something similar about someone who leaves high school with very poor results in biology but wants to study medicine. Some, however, might argue for a more inclusive approach here, say, extra tutoring, in view of, for instance, the higher societal utility of doctors compared to footballers. This debate is complicated by practical concerns, that is, about how an oversupply of physicians may cause rising costs for public health care and jeopardize the quality of care.

to say that this respective intermediate need would not be reasonably satisfied without that which she desires. That is, if there are alternatives available to meet one's intermediate need but one only wants the desired good, then the reason for which it is desired is hardly about meeting one's intermediate need. So, in both examples the desirer is free to pursue the satisfaction of her desire, but there would be no moral duty for others to help and contribute scarce social goods to such an end.

The second important nuance is that while people are free to persevere in trying to meet their (thwarted) desires, without the capacity "to ask what reasons one has for continuing as one does and how those reasons compare with the reasons for acting otherwise" they will likely be disappointed (MacIntyre 2016, 312). One may indeed grant that despite possible alternatives, a person may not have a desire for any of these other options and that she may be frustrated about her initial desire being spoiled (for example, "I wanted to become a doctor, not an electrician"). This may especially be the case for desires that relate to central aspects of one's personal life, though also for these desires the normative impact of failures to meet them depends on whether there are other goods available to meet one's intermediate needs. That is why the ability to imagine and anticipate alternative courses of action, different goals and different ways of achieving them are important qualities of good practical reasoning. Desires can be frustrated due to faits accomplis, but also due to "misdirected desires and flawed practical reasoning" (MacIntyre 2016, 309). Both cases underscore the value of understanding the obstacles to achieving one's goals and determining which desires one should treat as realistic and which as "vain wishes" (for example, "I wanted to become a doctor, but I know I lack the patience to study anatomy in Latin. However, I have good technical skills, I like hands-on problem solving, and I know that electricians are in the list of bottleneck vacancies, so it may be better to become an electrician") (MacIntyre 2016, 133). A restricted view of one's possible alternatives may also cause people to "expect too little" in the face of given obstacles to their goals (MacIntyre 2016, 212). That is, so-called adaptive preferences may lead to a "downgrading [of] the inaccessible options … to the vanishing point of sheer resignation" (Elster 2016, 120–21). The ability to imagine other possibilities (so-called character planning) would, instead, tend to upgrade the accessible options (Elster 2016, 118–21). This underscores the importance of a societal organization that allows people to develop the capacity to be flexible in the face of adversity.

We should add that social institutions have to be criticized if they make available only "an unduly limited or practically inefficient class of ways" to meet one's intermediate needs or if they function in a discriminatory manner (Scanlon 1975, 662). Here, the ability to imagine alternative possibilities connects to what we said earlier about the negotiability of the way in which background theories influence which desires are recognized as plausible ways to meet our intermediate needs. The ability to criticize current practices requires the ability not only to imagine how things might be otherwise but also to inquire how they might be made otherwise (MacIntyre 2016, 212). This requires an openness to possibilities of transformation, rather than taking the social order as a given. In general, this points to the political task of designing institutions and distributing resources in such a way as to enable people to develop their preferences, to move them across the threshold into capability to choose well, and to make their desires and interests felt in the determination of social policy (Walker 2007, 228; Scanlon 1975, 658; Nussbaum 1998, 151–52).

7 | THE PRO TANTO CHARACTER OF CLAIMS AND THE QUESTION OF ELIMINATION

From what has been said so far, it can now be argued that the moral significance of desire satisfaction, along with the strength of the respective claim for support, depends on whether

or not one has access to other goods that can adequately help meet one's intermediate needs. From this, it can also be concluded that someone without much perspective of attaining valued goals in life has a stronger pro tanto claim to have a particular desire satisfied than someone who has many other alternative life goals and whose various intermediate needs are generally met. Pro tanto refers to the (already implicitly invoked) idea that a claim can be outweighed by other considerations or moral norms in actual contexts (Reader and Brock 2004, 253). Thus, even a person who is generally deprived of, say, entertainment goods, would not obtain an ipso facto right to claim support to help her satisfy her deep desire to become, say, a collector of exclusive sports cars, even though this would adequately meet her intermediate need. In general, one has to consider things like opportunity costs, availability of resources, and other possible conflicts with other persons' interests. From this perspective, a stronger case could be made to provide the individual from our previous example access to less expensive goods that are generally recognized as adequate ways to meet one's intermediate needs, allowing one to live a reasonably valuable life (so, with respect to a need for entertainment, for example, outreach services, free or reduced access to sports and cultural activities, and the like). Similarly, even if the aforementioned caviar aficionado would be generally deprived of nutrition, it could be argued in like manner that a stronger case could be made to provide her with nutritious food packages, but not caviar.

We can now also attempt to answer the earlier question about how to decide between desire satisfaction and desire elimination: in a case of suffering because of a desire that persists even though the corresponding intermediate need(s) can be met by alternative adequate goods, redirection may be a reasonable option (for example, rehabilitation to help one see other possibilities), especially if meeting the desire comes at the risk of burdening other people's interests. Harry Frankfurt gives the example of a man who wants a certain sports car "so badly that he will suffer sustained and crippling misery unless he obtains it" (1984, 10). Likewise, I may come to believe that spending my time kicking autumn leaves or collecting exclusive sports cars is where my good lies and may even appeal to others for financial support to facilitate it. Or, more realistically, people may strongly desire to change the way they look (get a different nose, fancier clothes, and so on) because they believe this would, for instance, allow them to finally make some good friends or acquire a better self-image. While this might make them more confident, therapy or assertiveness trainings may do so as well. Now, if people become seized by persevering with desires for replaceable goods or goods that would not adequately contribute to their intermediate needs, the normative significance of these desires is low, and we may indeed express doubts about whether these objects of desire are worth the attempt to satisfy them (Kraut 1994, 42).

8 | CONCLUSION

The extent to which support to help people satisfy their desires should be warranted is a contested moral issue. We attempted here an analysis for assessing the normative significance of desire satisfaction and inquired how desires can ground claims for support from others to help meet them. We started our analysis by arguing that mere reference to harm is too blunt to mark out the normative significance of desire satisfaction. Instead, we proposed the broad and general need to live a reasonably valuable life as a normative standard from which other goods can derive their normative significance. Starting from such a vague outline sketch of the good life allows for a certain heterogeneity of the personal good. To avoid an explosion of normatively significant desires, however, it is necessary to give more determinate content to this standard. We therefore referred to general categories of goods that are needed to live a reasonably valuable life, which we called intermediate needs. Various goods can serve these intermediate needs, and these various goods can be the subject of

desire. Yet, only desires that can be linked to an intermediate need in line with what we have called social background theories can possibly be normatively significant. Thus, a desire can only acquire normative significance if it is connected, through these intermediate needs and mediated by given societal background theories, to the normative standard of living a reasonably valuable life. The normative significance of a desire further depends on the adequacy of the desired good to contribute to a person's intermediate needs, and on the replaceability of the desired good. When a desire is normatively significant in this respect, it constitutes a pro tanto obligation to help satisfy it, meaning that a claim for support to help satisfy that desire can still be outweighed by other considerations or moral norms in actual contexts.

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