

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Desire-thwarting Theory

This chapter is concerned with the questions: Is the desire-thwarting theory acceptable? If not, why? Let me outline this theory first.

#### 2.1 EXPLICATION OF THE DESIRE-THWARTING THEORY

Most philosophers cannot accept the conclusion of the Epicurean argument. In order to reject it, some of them have adopted the desire-thwarting (or desire-frustration) theory. This theory is based on a principle that *something is a harm or misfortune for us if it thwarts our desires; or something is a harm or misfortune for us if it thwarts the fulfilment of our desires*.<sup>1</sup> Speaking roughly, the desire-thwarting theory can be expressed by the following argument:

- (1) Something is a harm or misfortune for us if it thwarts our desires.
- (2) Death thwarts our desires.
- (3) Therefore, death is a harm or misfortune for us.<sup>2</sup>

Call this argument the 'original argument'.

The desire-thwarting theory is defended, most notably, by Bernard Williams. Let me now briefly outline Williams' defence of the desire-thwarting theory.

In his admirable paper “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”, Williams argues:

If I desire something, then, other things being equal, I prefer a state of affairs in which I get it from one in which I do not get it, and (again, other things being equal) plan for a future in which I get it rather than not. But one future, for sure, in which I would not get it would be one in which I was dead. To want something, we may also say, is to that extent to have reason for resisting what excludes having that thing; and death certainly does that, for a very large range of things that one wants. If that is right, then for any of those things, wanting something itself gives one a reason for avoiding death. Even though if I do not succeed, I will not know that, nor what I am missing, from the perspective of the wanting agent it is rational to aim for states of affairs in which his want is satisfied, and hence to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil.<sup>3</sup>

If Williams’ exploration of the desire-thwarting theory goes only as far as this stage, then perhaps his desire-thwarting theory can be expressed by the original argument. However, his account does not end here. He continues to elucidate it by distinguishing between ‘conditional’ and ‘unconditional’ (or categorical) desires.<sup>4</sup>

Conditional desires can be understood as desires about a situation at some future time which depend on the assumption that we shall be alive at that time; if we think that we shall be dead, we are indifferent about the situation.<sup>5</sup> Williams gives the following explanation of conditional desires:

It is admittedly true that many of the things I want, I want only on the assumption that I am going to be alive; and some people, for instance some of the old, desperately want certain things when nevertheless they would much rather that they and their wants were dead.<sup>6</sup>

Fischer also offers an easy and clear example: 'For example, one might want to be treated well, if one remains alive, but wish, all things considered, that one were dead.'<sup>7</sup>

More formally, conditional desires can be put in the following way:

I want the following to be the case: If I am alive at T, then X will be the case at T (X is some state of affairs or situation which my conditional desire concerns).<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, desires that are not in this way dependent on our being alive are *unconditional*.

It is very clear, on this analysis, and as Williams also believes, that death cannot thwart conditional desires. However, Williams believes that death *can* thwart unconditional (categorical) desires. Therefore, he claims that death's harm consists in its frustration of a person's unconditional (or categorical) desires.<sup>9</sup> This is a brief outline of Williams' defence of the desire-thwarting theory.

According to the above discussion, it is obvious that the original argument is flawed. Thus, it is not suitable to use the original argument to defend the desire-thwarting theory. For Williams the original argument should be modified as:

- (1) Something is a harm or misfortune for us if it thwarts any of our desires.
- (2) Death thwarts our *unconditional* (or categorical) desires.
- (3) Therefore, death is a harm or misfortune for us.

Call this argument the 'unconditional argument'.

In other words, the desire-thwarting theory, for Williams, should be expressed by the unconditional argument.

It is clear that theoretically the unconditional argument is more appropriate than the original argument. However, Steven Luper-Foy rejects the unconditional argument. Luper-Foy believes that *not all* unconditional desires can be thwarted by death. Indeed, there are some unconditional desires which cannot be thwarted by death. To show this, he distinguishes 'dependent' and 'independent' desires.

With regard to independent desires, he says:

Some of our aims [or desires] are such that our chances of successfully accomplishing them are not really affected by what we do in the course of our lives or even by whether or not we are alive. Being alive does not help us achieve these ends [or desires]; hence they cannot be thwarted by our deaths...call these *independent* goals [or desires]...My desire that the moon continue to orbit Earth, for example, is an independent goal [or desire]...<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, dependent desires are expressed by Luper-Foy as, '[Those goals or desires] whose chances of being achieved do depend on our activities we can call *dependent* goals [or desires]'.<sup>11</sup>

In short, asserts Luper-Foy, there can be two kinds of unconditional desires—*independent* unconditional desires and *dependent* unconditional desires. Although *dependent* unconditional desires can be thwarted by death, *independent* unconditional desires cannot.

Fischer also makes a similar point. He distinguishes the following two kinds of 'unconditional (or categorical)' desires:

- (1) Impersonal unconditional desires: desires that some condition obtain in the future irrespective of its causal genesis. For example, we want it to be the case that poverty, starvation, and disease are eradicated, that political oppression is ended, that our environment is preserved, that our families, friends, and nations prosper, and so on.
- (2) Egocentric unconditional desires: desires that some condition obtain in the future as a result of what I do. For example, I may wish not just that a book is written, but that a book is written *by me*, and I may wish not just that a family is raised, but that a family is raised *by me*, and so forth.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, at least in certain contexts, 'impersonal unconditional' desires cannot be thwarted by death.

Accordingly, it is apparent that the unconditional argument is defective or at least needs modification. Thus, it is not suitable to use the unconditional

argument to express the desire-thwarting theory. For Luper-Foy, the unconditional argument should be modified as:

- (1) Something is a harm or misfortune for us if it thwarts any of our desires.
- (2) Death thwarts *certain* kind(s) of our unconditional desires.
- (3) Therefore, death is a harm or misfortune for us.

Call this argument the 'desire-thwarting argument'.

In other words, the desire-thwarting theory, for Luper-Foy, should be expressed by the desire-thwarting argument. Apparently, the desire-thwarting argument is theoretically more satisfactory than the unconditional argument.

So understood, the desire-thwarting theory seems very reasonable. However, in the next section, I will show that even the desire-thwarting theory is expressed by the desire-thwarting argument—the best version of the three—it is still problematic.

## 2.2 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE DESIRE-THWARTING THEORY

According to the analysis in the last section, the desire-thwarting theory can be appropriately expressed as:

- (1) Something is a harm or misfortune for us if it thwarts any of our desires.
- (2) Death thwarts *certain* kind(s) of our unconditional desires.
- (3) Therefore, death is a harm or misfortune for us.

Call this argument the 'desire-thwarting argument'.

Unfortunately, the desire-thwarting argument, and, thus, the desire-thwarting theory, is flawed. Let me now demonstrate the reason.

In the desire-thwarting argument, (3) is a logical consequence of (1) and (2). (2) can be generally accepted.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if the desire-thwarting argument is problematic, then the essential problem should be in (1). In other words, in order to reject the desire-thwarting argument, and, thus, the desire-thwarting



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0505-3>

Can Death Be a Harm to the Person Who Dies?

Li, J.

2002, X, 198 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0505-3