Translating Desire (and Frustration)

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There is a trend in modern times towards taking the individual’s desire to be the indicator or basis of what the good life would be for the individual. The individual is encouraged to discover and to fulfil what she feels drawn to. This is seen as essential for the good life. In its different forms, questions like what kind of desire should be taken into account in relation to the good life, or how the individual’s desire is important for the good life, are answered differently. Amongst them, however, there seems to be a common idea that is shared, and this distinguishes these views from other theories of well-being. The common idea is that the individual’s desire is considered to be of moral significance. I will take two examples where desire-fulfilment is explicitly advocated as contributing to the good life.

The first one is positive psychology. Positive psychology is a branch of psychology developed in the 1960s by Martin Seligman. The impulse behind its deviation from the ‘mainstream’ psychology at that time was its concern to attend to the more positive aspects of human life. Seligman found that most psychological studies at that time focused on people who suffered from mental illness of some sort. Seligman saw that psychological research was capable of more – it was able, he believed, to help people to flourish and not just to be normal. The notion of flourishing or well-being as the goal of life in positive psychology, however, is not clear: it has different connotations and, in consequence, is measured and understood differently by different positive psychologists (Jayawickreme, Forgeard & Seligman, 2012). Accordingly it has been assimilated variously to feeling happy, to life satisfaction, to subjective well-being, to hedonic well-being, and to eudaimonic well-being, however variously these are defined. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that individual desire and its fulfilment play an important role in these different approaches and are considered to have positive effects in terms of the good life.

Another example is desire fulfilment theory, or desire theory. In its simplest form, this takes the view that every satisfaction of desire is to be considered good for the individual. This means that even if some desires appear to be causing damage in many ways (such as the desire to commit suicide), so long as it is what the person wants, its fulfilment is still to be considered good for the person. Getting what is wanted is believed to be ‘good in itself’ (Heathwood, 2016:135). Chris Heathwood, a central figure in desire fulfilment theory, pin-points the main theme of desire fulfilment theory in his discussion of a text by Peter Railton, who is referred to as the first person to give the name to the theory, in the 1970s. He writes: ‘… desiring is a paradigm way of finding something compelling or attractive, this principle suggests a link between welfare and desire’ (Heathwood, 2016:141). Desire is
believed to be an outer expression of an inner voice. Desiring shows us what we really want, what matters to us, and therefore what constitutes the good life for us.

To take desire fulfilment to be essential to the good life is not something new. In the Western philosophical tradition it can be traced back to Epicureanism. Modern desire fulfilment theory inherits the principle that all pleasure is good and all pain is bad from Epicureanism, though in a simplified way (in Epicureanism, not all pleasure is to be pursued, despite the principle). However, there is something about this theory that is distinctive to modern times. It is the idea of the inner voice, and hence the matching of desire to the inner voice, as we saw above. Charles Taylor argues in *The Ethics of Authenticity* that the idea of inner voice is a crucial pillar for the individualism that is prevalent in modern western societies. And it developed especially during the period of the Enlightenment. Taylor argues that the idea of inner voice seen in the modern culture of self-fulfilment is a flattened version of this earlier idea. The moral ideal which lies behind the idea – that of authenticity – is not now recognised (Taylor, 1992). I agree with Taylor about the narrowness of the idea of individual desire in this modern trend. I also agree with Taylor on the ideal of authenticity that lies behind some enlightenment philosophers. I think, therefore, that the individual desire discovery of which is encouraged, and whose satisfaction is to be pursued, in this modern trend, does contain the power to reveal something important. But it is not my intention to explore and try to recover the forgotten moral ideal from the enlightenment period. What I attempt to question, instead, will apply both to the modern narrowed version of authenticity and to the richer conception that Taylor tries to recover. The main question of this paper is about the possibility of knowing what we want, knowing our desire, and knowing the object of our desire.

**Desire and the Rawlsian rational agent**

A naturalistic ethical view – which understands the good in terms of pleasure and the avoidance of pain – is the basis of both positive psychology and desire fulfilment theory. The attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain, via the fulfilment of desire, is seen to be good in itself (as opposed to being good for its ability to lead to other ends). But the individual’s desire is also taken to be of moral significance by thinkers who take a less naturalistic ethical view. In this view, the fulfilment of individual desire is understood to be morally worthwhile under certain conditions. Henry Sidgwick, for example, suggests that not all desires are to be pursued. We should only pursue those that *should* be desired, but not all those that are *actually* desired (Sidgwick, 198). John Rawls also argues for something similar.

A person’s good is determined by what is for him the most rational long-term plan of life given reasonably favourable circumstances. A man is happy when he is more or less successful in the way of carrying out this plan. To put it briefly, the good is the satisfaction of rational desire. We
are to suppose, then, that each individual has a rational plan of life drawn up subject to the conditions that confront him. This plan is designed to permit the harmonious satisfaction of his interest (Rawls, 1999: 79-80).

Although Rawls’ thought is not naturalistic to the same extent as that of the positive psychologists or the advocates of wellbeing, it still incorporates similar structures and is naturalistic in some degree. Rawls’ emphasis on the rationally planned life constitutes a modification of the idea of desire satisfaction. Rawls depicts the modern individual as the rational autonomous agent. The individual envisaged is capable of:

- evaluating what is wanted
- making rational decisions about whether to go for the pursuit of satisfaction of a particular desire
- weighing good and bad when conflicting desires are present at the same time, and making rational choice

While we are presented with the image of the individual as the rational agent, and shown what the individual is capable of and should be doing in terms of his desire if he is properly functioning, we also see an assumption of the knowability of our desire. It is a hidden assumption, in the sense that it is not questioned by Rawls. In assuming the knowability of our desire, the task for the individual is, as we saw here, to reason out what the desire is, and as a next step, take corresponding rational actions towards its fulfilment. This does not mean that for Rawls it is easy to know what our desires really are. It may be difficult and require effort. But what is missing, I believe, in assuming the knowability of desire, is an awareness of the key characteristic of human desire: that is, it is always in a process of formation and change. Rawls and other thinkers assume that individual desire and its object can be fixed and identified, even just temporarily, and understood, so that we know the direction of our movement and know where to go. It is as if, on Rawls’ view, the thought of the desire and, with luck, the realisation of the desire can both be fully present to us.

But the pursuit of a definition, even a temporary one, blinds us to see something more crucial about ourselves and about our desire. Contrary to Rawls’ idea of making the thought of desire present, in this paper I would like to try to explore a conception of absence – an idea that there is something elusive about desire, both in our thoughts about our desires and in their realisation. I shall do this by looking at the process of definition in light of Emerson’s idea of circles, and the idea of translation in a text of Derrida’s.
Emerson's Circles

Let us imagine a situation. A person aged 44 is offered a job promotion abroad. He works hard and has the ambition to do well in his career. Taking the job will be a big step towards this goal. But he has his life with his family here – his children are at school and his wife has a job. It seems difficult for all of them to move together, especially for his wife, who is unlikely to find a job there as good as her current one. He faces a difficult decision. If he moves abroad alone, he will get to do what he likes, but will not be able to stay with his family. If he turns the offer down, he will stay with his family but lose a great opportunity to realise his ambition. If the family moves with him abroad, he both gets to do what he likes and stay with the family - but this requires his wife’s compromise, even self-sacrifice. He wants to accept the job, but at the same time, he wants to be with the family, and wants the family be happy. Choosing any of them will lead to the fulfilment of some desires, but the frustration of some others. A Rawlsian approach to the dilemma would be to list out the pros and cons for fulfilling each desire, and choose the one which leads to the most desirable outcome, understood in terms of rational life plans.

In the imagined situation, the person has several conflicting desires at the same time. How to make the best choice is the crucial question. But lots of times our desire does not work like this. We do not always know what all the choices are. We do not always know what we want. And this not-knowing-what-is-wanted is, I think, as educationally significant as knowing what is wanted. Desire is more complicated that our accustomed ways of thinking recognise.

The following passage written by Emerson displays an experience of satisfaction that is not achieved by fulfilling a pre-existing desire.

When I converse with a profound mind, or if at any time being alone I have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water, or go to the fire, being cold: no! but I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals, and showed the approaching traveller the inland mountains, with the tranquil eternal meadows spread at their base, whereon flocks graze, and shepherds pipe and dance.

(Emerson, Experience:13-14)

Emerson contrasts the experience of satisfaction he wants to draw attention to with the more physiological sense of satisfaction – that of drinking when thirsty, getting closer to the fire when cold. In the latter case, desire is often felt as a feeling of lack. This lack results in a certain discomfort and urges the person to fulfil whatever is lacking. Once the lack is filled, the pain stops, and the desire is no longer there, until the next time when the lack is felt again. In the former case, on the contrary, desire does not necessarily come from a feeling of lack. It is an experience of being presented with
something new, of seeing something that was not seen before. This satisfaction is not a fulfilment of lack; nor is it a fulfilment of a pre-existing desire. In this experience, new desires are discovered, and new desires are formed. The experience is not a process of closing down (and hence not exactly of satisfaction); it leads one to wanting more.  

Emerson, I think, presents an account of desires with space left for desires that are not yet present. Something new may come up in engaging with life, even when this engagement sometimes does not make immediate sense, or does not seem to be contributing to the good life. But I want also to bring into the discussion of desire his idea of drawing circles. If we for a moment go back to the example I gave at the beginning, when we say food is what is wanted, that is, food being the object of desire, what is happening is that we are drawing a picture of what our feeling seems to be going towards. In Emerson’s terms, we are drawing a circle in doing this. In drawing a circle, we choose amongst different objects, it seems, and put the ones that are relevant into the circle, and leave those that are irrelevant outside the circle. If this is what we do, and it seems to be, there is an assumption behind this: that definition and circumscription are possible, through the action of drawing, and perhaps through practice in doing this better. In Emerson’s poetic words, we are invited to think more about this action.

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary picture is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms. One moral we have already deduced in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Another analogy we shall now trace, that every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. (Emerson, 1984:1)

There is a clear religious connotation here, though this is suggestive rather than any kind of point of doctrine. Apart from this, many other circles (or connotations of circles) are revealed. If we conceive circles as understandings, or attempts to understand, there are many different ways of doing this. Whenever we think a circle is well drawn, there is always another circle that can be drawn. For Emerson, the purpose of drawing circles is not that we might one day draw an ideal circle; rather, the point is the process of finding new ways of drawing circles: ‘the one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.’ (Emerson, 1841:32)

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1 Similar ideas see Paul Standish ‘Towards an Economy of Higher Education’
use of ‘propriety’ here suggests a rigidity or ‘correctness’ in outlook that resists newness and tries to fit everything into pre-determined categories. One might say, then, that Rawls’ understanding of desire is characterised by a certain propriety of thought, where things are understood in terms of a certain ordering and transparency.

The thoughts expressed here are significant for educational research in part because of the immense influence of Rawls in contemporary liberal traditions. Much work in reflecting on, for example, school choice and opportunity, is shaped by Rawlsian ways of thinking, and this involves a conceptualisation of desire in relation to satisfaction in the manner I have indicated (e.g. Callan, 1985; Brighouse, 2008). Contemporary arguments for the importance of wellbeing, and for this as an aim of education, also rely on similar and sometimes more naturalistic understandings of desire (White, 2013). The experience of satisfaction Emerson presents to us is an experience of coming to something new, rather than getting something that matches expectations. And for this experience to be possible, one has to be open to things that one has not known and not been expecting, rather than working out the prospective satisfaction of the desire on the basis of what one already knows (and, that is, from within oneself). Instead of finding oneself and realising oneself, which is what desire fulfilment aims at, Emerson’s satisfaction is more of a matter of losing oneself. The sense of losing is also present in Derrida’s exploration of the nature of language.

‘On the shores’ of language

Life is presented by Emerson as a process in which imperfect circles, as ways of understanding ourselves and the world, are constantly drawn and re-drawn. There is a constant mismatch between the current circles and the previous circles. While there may be overlaps between the current and the previous ones, there are always new areas that were not in the previous circles, and old areas that are not in the current ones. This constant mismatch between our previous understandings and current understandings is also a main concern for Jacques Derrida. Though these thinkers are on the face of it far apart from each other, both of them inspire us to think of what may be absent in our thinking by showing the mismatch that is seen in different understandings.

While Emerson uses the metaphor of circles to show the way that we often adopt an understanding of both ourselves and the world, an idea of inside and outside is shown. I think there is an interesting parallel in Derrida’s texts that is related to this idea when he talks about thoughts and feelings occurring ‘on the shores’ of the language.

You at once appreciate the source of my sufferings, the place of my passions, my desire, my prayers, the vocation of my hopes, since this language runs right across them all. But I am wrong, wrong to speak of a crossing and a place. For it is on the shores of the French language, uniquely,
and neither inside nor outside it, on the unplaceable line of its coast that, since forever, and lastingly \( [a \text{ à demeure}] \), I wonder if one can love, enjoy oneself \( [joui] \), pray, die from pain, or just die, plain and simple, in another language or without telling anyone about it, without even speaking at all. (Derrida, 1996:2)

Certainly Derrida is thinking in part about his own relation to French, but it is also clear that he does not take his own situation as exceptional: on the contrary, he implies that what he is able to experience through this apparently unusual experience is in fact characteristic of the relation to language more generally. I would like to try to see how we can understand the idea of ‘on the shores’ of the language in terms of places and what Derrida might have in mind when he is using this metaphor. In saying it is on the shores of the language, it excludes two places: (1) outside the language, and (2) inside the language. What does this mean?

-outside the language

When passions, desires, and hopes are thought of outside the language, they are thought of as something out there, independent of the language that is used to describe them. So imagine a person says ‘I want to go climbing the Himalayas’, it seems that this desire to climb the Himalayas is out there (in his mind or in his heart, already \( there \), as it were), and the language is used to express this existing desire. Derrida shows his doubt that thoughts and feelings are out there, independent of the language, when he says ‘I wonder if one can love … without even speaking at all’. To be able to have the desire to climb the Himalayas, one has to first know the existence of the Himalayas in the world (and perhaps the idea of the world), what climbing a mountain is like, what climbing a high mountain is like, and most importantly, what it can mean to do so. All of the knowledge and values involved are requisite for one to have the desire, in the first place, and to articulate the desire. The desire is formed in the condition where one has certain knowledge and values about it, and, that is to say, where one speaks.

-inside the language

How should we understand that it is not inside the language? I think it is the kind of complacency that comes with the habitual speaking of a language Derrida is cautious about. One’s desire to climb the Himalayas is formed in the language, but it is not fixed in the sense of being pinned down with the language. The impossibility of pinning down a desire that seems to be at issue here is similar to what we saw in discussing Emerson’s circles. Emerson’s temporary circles are contrary to any idea of fixed or stable truth in these matters. Derrida appeals to a ‘vague resemblance’ in describing himself \((\text{ibid}:19)\). Some characteristics can be found similar in the resemblance and the person himself, therefore a sense of what the person is can be conceived. However, a resemblance is only a resemblance; it is not the person himself. We should not assume that we know the person entirely from looking at the resemblance. If we come back to the example of the desire to climb the
Himalayas, it would be the case that, however it is made to sound by the person who expresses it, the desire to climb the Himalayas is not merely the desire to climb the Himalayas: it may also be a desire to prove oneself, a desire to see a very different part of the world, a desire to get healthy and challenge oneself, etc. The desire that is expressed is only part of the picture; it is only a resemblance. But Derrida’s concern goes beyond the misconception of the resemblance to what is there to be resembled. His concern about thinking passion, desire, hope and thought are to do with what he takes to be a crucial absence in the nature of the language. The absence, as well as the presence, of the language is the source for the passion, desire, hope, thought, etc.

-on the shores

To understand the absence, and to understand what it means to say that passion and thought are on the shores of language we can first see Derrida’s reasons for being against the idea that humans possess language. Derrida constructs a contradictory statement: ‘I only have one language; it is not mine’ (ibid:1). The language in this context is French. The life history of Derrida certainly plays a crucial role in developing the idea of language as such (Derrida was born in Algeria, when it was a French colony). Nonetheless, the idea he develops out of the particular personal experience is not constrained. It raises a crucial question about the nature of language and the nature of human being. Thus, he writes:

An immanent structure of promise or desire, an expectation without a horizon of expectation, informs all speech. As soon as I speak, before even formulating a promise, an expectation, or a desire as such, and when I still do not know what will happen to me or what awaits me at the end of a sentence, neither who nor what awaits whom or what, I am within this promise or this threat – which, from then on, gathers the language together, the promised or threatened language, promising all the way to the point of threatening and vice versa, thus gathered together in its very dissemination. (ibid:22)

Derrida does not think language is a tool for expressing well-shaped thoughts and feelings. He sees the experience of speaking as a forming of them. To speak is to find words, to choose appropriate words, and to gather them together. When we try to express an idea, an emotion, a desire, or an event, what happens is an active forming of what is described. There is the possibility that we make sense in the gathering of the words. But there is also the possibility that we may fail to make sense, if it is badly done. That is the risk we take in speaking, and the risk is inevitable.

What we have seen, then, is a transition in possible conceptions of desire - from the most naturalistic conceptions in positive psychology and wellbeing, to a more sophisticated or refined conception of desire in Rawls; and then through ideas of desire that weaken or dispense with the connection with lack in Emerson and Derrida, with Derrida demonstrating most clearly the operation of desire in language itself. In what follows my purpose is to turn the attention from desire itself and towards the
nature and effects of its frustration. In order to do this, I shall explore aspects of the work of Adam Phillips.

**Adam Phillips: desire and frustration**

In the light of Emerson’s and Derrida’s texts, I have tried to explore the problems of seeing desire as capable of being made fully present, and I hope to have shown that, ontologically, desire is not as transparent as it is considered by Rawls. One of the reasons that desire is not transparent is that, in a real sense, it is for the most part yet-to-be-formed (how can we come to see something that is not there?). Emerson’s texts inspire us to think that our attempts to understand ourselves and the world are tantamount to the constant drawing and redrawing of a picture; but the picture is never complete and never perfect: the circles are steps on the way. At a more fundamental level Derrida draws attention to the uncontrollability that is contained in the very experience of speaking, even within thinking itself. Speaking is not a matter of expressing what is already there; the start of a sentence does not necessarily guarantee the end of it. Our thought and feeling get their full shape in our choosing and forming the words for their expression; indeed the expression can precede or lead the way with the thought. The risk we all take in speaking, or in expression in general – the risk of not being able to complete what we want to say, to determine the effects of what we say – also signifies the possibility that we find something that surprises ourselves in the process (when we try to complete what we are saying). The risk also has to do with the open possibility of how our words will be received by others. But this “risk” should not be seen as a threat to communication so much as a description of the very way that human signs work, how they make sense, with all the potential richness that they have. To see discovering individual desire as the process of finding what is there, instead of finding what could be there (but not yet), is much more limited, especially from an educational point of view.

It is perhaps a familiar idea now that sometimes in therapy a crucial move forward is made where the patient finds a new phrase, even a new word, for the condition she is experiencing – as if the new formulation opens the way to a new understanding, even a new construction of who and where she is in relation to this problem. This seems to illustrate the workings of language that Derrida describes. And this insight is very much present in the work of Adam Phillips. Writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, Phillips thus explores the characteristic of desire as non-transparent and in-the-process-of-formation. His illuminating and rich interpretations of the experience of frustration echo the sense in which desire is absent in the way we considered above. He writes:

*In our frustration we muddle through, or what we do with frustration is make a muddle of it (as if, when it comes to frustration, clarities are available, but not for us). There is, though, one ineluctable fact, one experience that is integral to our development, something that is structural to human relations right from their very beginning; and that is, that if someone can satisfy you*
they can frustrate you. Only someone who gives you satisfaction can give you frustration. … You know someone matters to you if they can frustrate you. (Phillips, 2013:14-15)

We are invited then to look critically at the familiar dichotomous way of thinking about satisfaction and frustration, according to which desire fulfilment is either successful or not. If I want to have a cake, I either end up having it or not having it. A desire is either satisfied or frustrated. Satisfaction and frustration are results, at two opposite ends of the spectrum, so it seems. Phillips, by contrast, in pointing out that these two apparently polarised consequences can be aroused by the same person or the same thing, urges us to see this as a circular relation, rather than a linear one: satisfaction and frustration are not opposite poles on a continuum; desire and frustration are interwoven in complex ways. Nor are frustration and satisfaction mere results: they are also starting-points, and can lead to each other.

Frustrating experience, therefore, can have a positive effect: it can lead us to see what matters, and therefore can be the pre-condition for satisfaction, shaping desire. And while it may be no more than a reminder or what we have already known, it can also show something new, something that has not been thought before. Phillips writes:

Falling in love, finding your passion, are attempts to locate, to picture, to represent what you unconsciously feel frustrated about, and by. In this sense we are always trying to find, to get a sense of, what is missing, what we need, what, in Lacan’s terminology, we lack.’ (ibid:19)

Frustration makes us see the desire that is not there. It makes the previously absent object of desire present. What Phillips does here is to explain from a phenomenological point of view that the two feelings can be occasioned by the same event, and even at the same time. Perhaps this helps to show also why my desire to do philosophy is not exactly satisfied or frustrated, at least not simply these things, but also progressively intensified. Of course this is not to deny that there are little satisfactions and frustrations! I think this is partly what Emerson means by circles, the little completions, the little frustrations, each giving way to some further purpose.

This paper has tried to show that our desire is not as transparent as it is assumed in many modern theories concerned with desire and its relation to well-being. The main reason, as I try to suggest by looking at Emerson, Derrida and Phillips’ ideas, is that desire is always in the process of formation. I would like to make clear that I sympathise with Taylor in seeing the matter of fulfilling individual desire as related to authenticity. So trying to find what one desires, and act appropriately in its pursuit, is of moral significance. However, I do not agree with Taylor in conceiving the individual’s desire as the expression of an already existing ‘inner voice’ or attunement to a ‘voice within’. Of course such expressions are partly metaphorical, and much will depend upon how they are fleshed out. The inner voice cannot be something already there but must be something that is formed through one’s interactions with the world. It must have some kind of basis in physiology, but the desire that derives
from this transcends that physiology in complex and unforeseen ways. For example, the infant cries for food, but then this desire becomes transformed over time into something far more sophisticated – say, her longing to have a meal with her lover in a romantic restaurant. And desires develop that are not connected with physiological need in any recognisable way – for example, the desire to study history. One needs language, and indeed the ways of thinking that we learn when learning language, to be able to do develop such desires. Therefore, the extent to which one can discover what is desired through a process of introspection and by rational thinking is very limited.

A main goal for contemporary education is said to be helping pupils to find out what they truly want to do. Jargon phrases like ‘knowing yourself’, ‘discovering yourself’, or ‘realising your potential’ are commonplace. Furthermore, the idea that life and learning can be organised through a process of rational planning now has a hold on schooling and higher education in multiple ways – from the idea of life-planning to the construction of outcomes-based curricula and to technicist conceptions of the nature of teaching itself. In broader terms, popular psychology and ideas of wellbeing, as well as the more refined conception of desire found in Rawls, are apt to repress negative experience, and this is part of the problem of our time. Negative experience, including the experience of frustration, needs to be acknowledged, not denied, because it will eventually surface in one form or another. Not to do this is to fail to understand the nature of desire. It is a recipe for further frustration because the learner has not learned to accept the inevitability or necessity of frustration, its naturalness to the human condition and its internal relationship to desire. If, by contrast, we see desire, and the idea of the self in terms of what desire expresses, or represents, as always in-the-process-of-formation, it should become clearer that education must help students to form desires that are not yet there.

References


