

Necessarily Incompatible Consistent Wants

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Abstract This paper argues that the wants or desires of a person can be consistent with each other and still necessarily incompatible with each other and for interesting reasons. It is argued here that this problem is not rare and that there is no solution in sight.

Keywords Desires · Consistency · Necessary incompatibility · Paradox

If a person's wants are mutually consistent, then there are possible circumstances under which they can all be realized. *Prima facie*, this is very plausible. But consider a case like the following one:

I want to go to the dentist at some point. But I do not want to go today. Even worse, for each day of my (remaining) life, it is true that on that day, I do not want to go to the dentist on that day. And, finally, I only go to the dentist on some particular day if on that day I want to go to the dentist on that day.

There is no inconsistency between the contents of my different wants. First, my want today not to go to the dentist today obviously has a different content from my want on another day not to go to the dentist on that day. And, second, the content of each of my particular “day-specific” wants concerning the visit to the dentist is different from my general want to see the dentist at some point. All these contents are mutually consistent with each other. Even if I believed that today is the last day of my life, my want to go to the dentist at some point but not today would not be incoherent. There is nothing wrong with wishing to live longer than one does—even if it is only in order to go to the dentist in the end.¹

However, there is still a problem. My day-specific wants and my general wants cannot all be realized. Either I go to the dentist at some point but then one of my day-

¹From the fact that on day 1, S wants to avoid the dentist on day 1 together with the fact that on day 2 S wants to avoid the dentist on day 2; it does not follow that at any time or in any sense S wants to avoid the dentist on both days 1 and 2. This does not even follow for rational subjects. Even if our subject knows what her last day will be (and knows on which days she is alive and on which days not); we cannot infer that she wants to avoid the dentist on all days of her life which would be inconsistent with the want to see the dentist at some point. Nothing much changes if we consider *de re*-contents: in particular, the *de re*-content of the subject's want to see the dentist on one of the days of her actual life: Relative the set of all actual days of her life, the subject wants to see the dentist on one of those days. This *de re*-content is inconsistent with the conjunction of the contents of all the particular wants. However, as mentioned above, wants are not closed under conjunction.

specific wants is frustrated; or none of my day-specific wants is frustrated but then I will not ever go to the dentist.

This is not a contingent incompatibility. My want to have coffee is contingently incompatible with my want to have a cake if I do not have enough money for both (but could possibly have enough for both). The incompatibility in our case here is a necessary one. Given the nature of the case, my wants cannot all be realized. There is no problem if we consider the person just at an isolated moment in time; there is a problem, however, if we take a cross-temporal view. The person suffers from NDI: Necessary diachronic incompatibility of her mutually consistent wants. If the person's wants constitute reasons or are based on reasons, the incompatibility is also one of the reasons. What is remarkable about this phenomenon is not that there is incompatibility of mutually consistent wants—which is unsurprising—but rather, the incompatibility is a necessary one, despite the consistency of the contents of the relevant wants.

Is NDI bad, given that none of the individual wants is deficient in any way? Should rational persons try to avoid any NDI? If one cannot predict all one's future wants concerning a certain issue (like, visits to the dentist), and if that is required for avoiding NDI concerning that issue, then it is hard to see how one could have an obligation of rationality to avoid NDI, given that *ought* implies *can*. But what if one expects on some different basis to have a series of day-specific wants which are NDI-incompatible with some general want of oneself? In such a case, the rational person would do something about her wants (change some of them), given that she notices (or can be expected to notice) this incompatibility. However, such cases will be rather rare.

So, realistically, we should assume that little if anything can be done about NDI if it occurs. NDI seems quite widespread and not restricted to our attitudes about visits to the dentist. For instance, a person might have a very good reason to want to die at some point (e.g., because immortality is not desirable) but she also might have a very good reason on each day of her life to want to survive that day. And so on.

NDI is based on a possible tension between two kinds of wants persons have: “indexical” wants about what happens now or in the near future and non-indexical wants about what happens at some point in time, whether now, soon, or at some other time. The tension reminds one of the Nagelian tensions between a subjective and an objective perspective² as well as the structurally similar preface paradox for rational belief.³

Whatever explanation one favors, it is a basic fact of life that sometimes our wants are necessarily incompatible with each other even if mutually consistent. Consistency does not guarantee compatibility. Under circumstances like the ones described above, one cannot get what one wants and for interesting reasons.

² See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986)

³ See D.C. Makinson, ‘The Paradox of the Preface,’ *Analysis* 25 (1965), 205–207. - In the latter case, there appears to be inconsistency between what is rationally believable whereas in the former case, there is incompatibility between what is realizable.