

How weak is your *want*?

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1 Introduction

More than twenty years ago, I published a paper ([von Fintel 1999](#)) that among other things presented an analysis of the semantics of desire ascriptions. In a footnote, I wrote:

with a good glass of red wine and paper and pencil it is astonishingly easy to come up with candidate analyses that are not blatantly implausible. Wouldn't it be nice if the language learner got some obvious clues about which meanings are serious contenders ...?

Well, while I'm not sure how much red wine is involved, there have since then been quite an astonishing number of attempts to lay down the correct meaning of *want* (and its siblings and cousins). I'm not about to compare and contrast the whole lot of them but I would like to make a few remarks on the issue of “strength”.

There is one very salient way in which my analysis differs from another, very influential, analysis: the one in [Heim 1992](#). According to my analysis someone who is truthfully described as wanting the striper dish on the menu will automatically be also someone who is truthfully described as wanting seafood (since striper is seafood). According to Heim 1992, that inference is invalid. The reason is that in that analysis, wanting seafood is a very strong property: you need to prefer any doxastically accessible seafood scenario to its most similar non-seafood scenario. In [von Fintel 2018](#), I give some reason to think that my “weaker” (and thus monotonic) analysis is preferable.

So, I'm on the record as a proponent of a weak-ish analysis of *want*. This note concerns recent contributions that argue for even weaker analyses. In the first case, I mostly just wanted to draw attention to the work since it has not yet been engaged with in even more recent contributions. In the second

case, I have skeptical remarks and then raise some questions for the kind of approach I tend to favor.

2 Staniszewski 2019

In a NELS proceedings paper, Staniszewski proposes that *want* underlyingly has a “possibility” meaning that only requires that *some* of the best worlds according to the attitude holder are worlds where the prejacent is true. He argues that this weak meaning is visible in several negated contexts:

- (1) a. Lena doesn’t want to leave.
- b. I no longer want to be called an idiot.

In (1a), we see the famous “neg-raising” property of *want*: the sentence is interpreted not as the absence of a desire to leave but as the presence of a desire not to leave. With Staniszewski’s weak semantics, this meaning comes out straightforwardly ($\neg\exists$ = there’s no best world where she leaves).

In (1b), an example due to Homer 2015, the relevant observation is that what is presupposed is not that it used to be the case that speaker wanted to be called an idiot, but merely that the speaker tolerated being called an idiot. The latter may or may not be captured by the possibility meaning (are there really any *best* worlds where one is called an idiot? Staniszewski bites the bullet and says yes), but it is certainly grist for the weak *want* mill.

For unembedded, unnegated occurrences of *want*, Staniszewski recovers the standard necessity semantics by applying an exhaustification operator that universally quantifies over subsets of the agent’s best worlds, which then means that all of those best worlds need to verify the prejacent. So, for Staniszewski, *want* is only weak in certain environments where exhaustification doesn’t apply.

In work in progress, Staniszewski elaborates and extends this analysis, including for some (but not all) other modal expressions (such as *be supposed to* and *should*). For some relevant handouts, see <https://sites.google.com/view/frankstaniszewski>.

3 Phillips-Brown 2021 and Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming

Phillips-Brown 2021 presents a scenario that is supposed to motivate a very weak *want* even in unembedded occurrences:

Imagine that you will be given a single ticket from a hat. Most of the tickets are worthless. Two tickets, though, have cash value, the red ticket (worth \$50) and the blue ticket (worth \$100). You want to get the red ticket, and of course you also want to get the blue ticket.

The crucial claim is that in the given scenario, “you” want the red ticket. We assume that it is assumed that “you” are a perfectly reasonable individual.

Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming report the scenario as well and endorse the relevant judgments:

- (2) a. I want to get the red ticket.
- b. I want to get the blue ticket.

Both [(2a)] and [(2b)] are acceptable here. In particular, [(2a)] sounds true, even though getting the red ticket clearly isn’t the best outcome.

Both papers then proceed to advocate for a weak semantics for *want*, according to which the prejacent needs to be evaluated as “good enough” by the agent. Blumberg & Hawthorne actually weaken the semantics endorsed by Phillips-Brown 2021 even further by making it monotonic (persuaded by arguments that I alluded to above).

I wish to file a complaint. I for one cannot endorse (2a). If someone in the given scenario told me that they want to get the red ticket, I would respond: “Why do you want the red ticket? The blue ticket is worth more!”

Now, if someone uttered a *want* with a disjunctive prejacent, I could accept that as a rational preference:

- (3) I want to get either the red ticket or the blue ticket.

But this isn’t someone who wants red. They *are ok with* red. For me at least, *want* is not the same as *be ok with*. More on this soon.

Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming present another case in their Fn.1:

Suppose your favorite type of pasta is spaghetti bolognese, with lasagna a close second. You’re late for dinner, so your friend orders for you. As you sit down, the waiter brings you a plate of lasagna. If your friend points to the food and asks ‘Did you want that?’, you can perfectly well say ‘Yes’. But lasagna isn’t best by your lights.

In this case, I agree that the conversation may in fact proceed the way it's reported. You could even say *Sure, it's just what I wanted*. But notice that this is a scenario where, given that lasagna is *ok with you*, it would be churlish to complain. Perhaps, what is said is a white lie, or perhaps one could construct it as true by manufacturing/feigning a background in which spaghetti bolognese was (were?) not included among the options.

Finally, [Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming](#) detect a difference between *want* on the one hand and *hope/wish* in the other hand, the latter in their view being less tolerant of merely good enough options. I do think that *want* and *hope* differ in quite a few very interesting aspects, but I just can't go along with detecting a difference in strength in the given scenarios.

4 Some lessons I've learned so far

4.1 We need to distinguish what's best from what's good enough

It is quite plausible in the ticket scenario to say:

- (4) I want the blue ticket but I'm ok with the red ticket.

A problem I have with the "good enough" analyses of *want* is that they fail to make a clear distinction between *want* and *be ok with*.

4.2 We need to distinguish indifference from conflict

We're approaching an intersection. It seems that one can go around the town center by turning left or right. You ask: "which way should we turn?" I say: "go left, go right, your choice". So, I'm indifferent. Either option is good enough for me; just don't go straight since that's one ugly town center.

I find a strong difference between *want* and *be ok with*:

- (5) a. ??I want to go left. I want to go right. Your choice.
b. I'm ok with going left. I'm ok with going right. Your choice.

A "good enough" semantics for *be ok with* seems appropriate, since it predicts (5b) to be as fine as it is. But for *want*, we want something stronger, a semantics that predicts that (5a) is as contradictory (or conflicted) as it is.¹

¹ In [von Stechow 2012](#), I make the same complaint about something like a "good enough" semantics for the priority modal *ought*.

4.3 We Kratzerians need to work out an analysis of *be ok with*

I suppose we could say that what Phillips-Brown 2021 and Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming are working towards is an adequate semantics for *be ok with*. And we could stick with, say, von Fintel 1999, for the semantics of *want*. But it is tempting to think that *be ok with* should simply be the dual of *want* (I take it that this would be in line with the ideas in Staniszewski 2019). This would mean within the von Fintel 1999 analysis that *x is ok with p* says that *some* of *x*'s best worlds are *p*-worlds.²

This may not work. I want the blue ticket and so all of my best worlds are blue ticket worlds. That means that none of my best worlds are red ticket worlds. But I could coherently add that I'd be ok with the red ticket. So, it seems that I can be ok with red even though none of my best worlds are red. But then *be ok with* isn't the *some*-variant of *want*.

An alternative is to think of *be ok with* as involving a relaxing of preferences, which in a Kratzerian framework might mean that the ordering of worlds becomes coarser.³ When the ordering becomes coarser, the set of best worlds can become larger and so more options may be represented within the best set.

It makes sense to think that the difference between someone who says they want the blue ticket and someone who says that they want either the blue or the red is the coarseness of the ordering. The second individual lumps together the \$100 payoff and the \$50 payoff ... better than nothing, right?

Note that in the mouth of one and the same individual, the following seems incoherent:

(6) I want the blue ticket and I want either the blue ticket or the red ticket.

In the picture I'm envisioning, the two conjuncts are true with respect to different orderings (the second conjunct needs a coarser ordering) and across conjunction, perhaps, the ordering cannot easily shift.

But then what's going on in the following, arguably quite coherent, statement of preferences?

² Thanks to Kyle Blumberg for raising this point to me.

³ A lucid overview of the issues here can be found in Section 5.3 and especially its Subsection 5.3.2 ("The nitpicker's guide to graded intensionality") of Pasternak 2019.

(7) I want the blue ticket but I'm also ok with the red one.

It seems that *be ok with* triggers or at least does not mind a coarsening of the preference ordering.

How far do we let the coarsening go? The coarsest ordering is a trivial ordering: all of the worlds are ranked equally. In that case, you're ok with anything you consider possible. Quite Zen, I guess.

Maybe every individual has a cutoff point on the scale of ever coarser preference orderings below which they will not go. We could then imagine that a preference structure comes with an ordered set of orderings and *want* picks up the strictest ordering and *be ok with* goes for the laxest ordering. I do not know whether this idea has legs.

One last thought: there is a possible connection here to the puzzle of plural superlatives. When one says that the highest mountains are in the Himalayas, one is not suggesting that those highest mountains are all the same height, just that they are higher than any other mountains. Similarly, when one talks of the best candidates for the job, one is not saying that there aren't relevant distinctions between the best candidates, making one better than the other. (NB: presumably one shouldn't be tempted to develop a "good enough" semantics for "best" just because among the best, some may be better than others.) There is a need in the analysis of plural superlatives for a contextually supplied cutoff point: *the highest mountains* can't include all the mountains. This is discussed in [Fitzgibbons, Sharvit & Gajewski 2008](#) and [Scontras 2008](#). Maybe our analysis of *want* and *be ok with* could learn something from that work?

4.4 When the best is not good enough

[Phillips-Brown 2021](#) argues that there are cases where the best is not good enough and an agent will not want the thing that is best according to their preferences. He writes (p.417f):

Being best is not sufficient for being wanted because sometimes we want none of the options we're faced with, even the best one — a fact that has gone unacknowledged by advocates of what's-best accounts. Imagine that you have been kidnapped and must make an awful choice: either shoot one of the two people in front of you or do nothing, in which case both will be shot. Not being a sociopath, you want neither to shoot nor to

refrain from shooting and have the two be shot! Although it's not true that you want to shoot, shooting is nonetheless best: you prefer shooting the one to not shooting the one and having both be shot. Shooting is best, but you don't want it. [...]

Or suppose that you are deeply, deeply depressed. There is *nothing at all* in the whole world that you want. Life is misery. Even so, you do prefer some things to others. Something is best, but nothing is wanted.

Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming have their doubts on whether this argument is cogent, but I'm quite sympathetic to Phillips-Brown's judgment here. Maybe this needs to be taken into account when we think about "cutoff points". Can we impose a cutoff point for *want* as well such that best worlds that don't exceed the cutoff are not good enough to underwrite a *want*?

5 Conclusion for now

This is just a quick note pointing out some recently surfaced interesting issues in the semantics of *want*. There will be more to be said, and it's not impossible that I will eventually say some of those things.

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