

## Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

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Wants and Lacks

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Source: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 64, No. 14 (Jul. 20, 1967), pp. 455-456

Published by: Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024430>

Accessed: 23/08/2009 19:52

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## WANTS AND LACKS

... what is wanted must not be already in the wanter's power, or at least must not be known by him to be so. Aquinas pointed out that it is as impossible to want what one already has as it is to remember what is now happening (*Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, 30, 2 ad 1). . . . This obvious condition is sometimes strangely neglected by philosophers.

ANTHONY KENNY \*

In a footnote to the discussion above Kenny allows that one may be said to want what one already has and knows one has, provided 'wants' is taken here as an abbreviation for 'wants to keep'. It looks as though this qualification vitiates the whole point. If Antonio holds up a pair of jodhpurs to Bartholomew and asks, "Do you want these?" Antonio may be understood as asking either "Do you want to buy (or take or otherwise acquire) them?" or else "Do you want to keep them?" If Bartholomew already owns the jodhpurs and Antonio knows he does, we should doubtless understand Antonio's question in the second way—otherwise in the first. Now certainly it doesn't make sense to suppose that Bartholomew wants to *acquire* what he already has (any more than it would make sense to say that Bartholomew wants to keep what he hasn't yet acquired). So perhaps Kenny's claim that one cannot want what one already has and knows one has comes to no more than this: One cannot want to *acquire* what one already has and knows one has. So interpreted the claim is true, but trivial.

Otherwise it is false. At a cocktail party a wife finishes off her martini, fishes out the olive, and chews it with obvious enjoyment. She turns to her husband and asks, "Do you want your olive?" "I'm afraid I do," he replies.

The olive is in the husband's possession (it is "already in the want-er's power," in Kenny's phrase), and he knows it. Yet there is nothing odd about his insistence to his wife that he wants it. Should we say that what the husband really wants is to *keep* the olive? Yes, if we see him take a bottle out of his pocket, unscrew the top, and plop his olive inside. Otherwise not.

We certainly could say that the husband wants to *eat* the olive. But we should hardly want to say that what the husband wants is *not* (really) the olive, but *rather* to eat it. Perhaps he wants his olive because he wants to eat it. Still, he wants the olive, though he has it and knows he has it. Clearly one can want something one has and knows one has, though (trivially) one cannot want to *acquire* what one already has and knows one has.

\* *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 115–116.

Why should Kenny have been misled? Perhaps the fact that 'want' can mean 'lack' is responsible. For the claim that one cannot want what one already has and knows one has is certainly true if we take 'want' to mean 'lack'. But this is simply because one cannot lack what one already has; and this is so whether or not one knows one has it. Yet Kenny would surely allow that a man can want what he already has if he *doesn't know* he has it. In such a case a man can want (desire) something that he does not want (lack). So the fact that 'want' can mean 'lack' does not tend to show that one cannot want what one *knows* one already has.

Perhaps, however, the source of the difficulty is more subtle—and more interesting. A desire is not a feeling or a sensation. It is something that expresses, or would express, itself in goal-directed behavior. To be sure, one's behavior cannot be directed toward a goal that one has already attained and knows that one has attained. But behavior directed toward an (as yet unattained) goal can express one's desire for what one already has and knows one has. And there is no reason to say that the goal toward which one's behavior is directed is the *only* thing one *really* wants. The husband's wanting his olive expresses itself in his efforts to keep the olive. Still, he wants the olive. And he has it and knows he has it.

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#### NOTES AND NEWS

The editors of the JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY are grieved to learn of the death in April, 1967, of Charles A. Moore, Senior Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hawaii, Director of the four East-West Philosophers' Conferences, and Editor of *Philosophy East and West*.

The director of the next East-West Philosophers' Conference (1969) will be Professor Abraham Kaplan, who will divide his time between the University of Michigan and the University of Hawaii; Professor Moore will be replaced as journal editor by Dr. Eliot Deutsch.

The 1968 Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Western Division, will be held in St. Louis. The dates will be May 2-4, 1968. Further details will be announced later.

The Program Committee welcomes papers in any of the areas of philosophy. Except for specially arranged symposium contributions, papers are limited to 20 minutes reading time. Preference will be given to papers submitted in their entirety, but drafts or even abstracts alone will be considered in exceptional cases. Papers already accepted for publication will be con-