

*Instrumentalism and Desiring at Will*¹

YONATAN SHEMMER
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
USA

I Introduction

In his book *Practical Induction*,² Elijah Millgram mounts a powerful attack on instrumentalism. In particular, Millgram targets the instrumentalist claim that desires are by themselves reason-giving, that their reason-giving power is not grounded in any other independent fact. According to Millgram, desires, like beliefs, cannot license inferences (desires license inferences to conclusions about what we have reason to do; beliefs license inferences to other beliefs and to conclusions about what we have reason to do) if they do not depend for their own justification on some prior mental states. Beliefs depend on prior beliefs and desires on feelings of pleasure and these in turn are grounded respectively in facts about the world and about desirability. If our desires would not depend in this way on other facts it would be possible for us to rationally desire what we want when we want; we could, as he puts it, 'desire at will.'

1 I am grateful to Michael Bratman, Mark Green, Patricia Greenspan, Agnieszka Jaworska, Nadeem Hussain, David Hills, Elijah Millgram, Jennifer Rosner, Tamar Shapiro, Fred Schueler, Ken Taylor, Manuel Vargas, David Widerker, and audiences at the Northwest Philosophy Conference, at Ben Gurion University, at Haifa University, and at the Hebrew University for helpful discussion; I am also grateful to Michael Bratman, Agnieszka Jaworska, Nadeem Hussain, Elijah Millgram, Tamar Shapiro, and Ken Taylor for comments on earlier drafts.

2 Elijah Millgram, *Practical Induction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1997)

Millgram thinks that desires are not themselves reason-giving, and that they only indicate to the agent that a certain action or state of affairs is desirable and therefore rational. But what makes the action or state of affairs desirable and hence rational is independent from the desire. Proper desires are such that what they suggest we should do is in fact something that is desirable. When this is the case we may say that our desires are grounded in facts about desirability. However, these facts about desirability are beyond our control. It is because our desires are grounded in facts that are beyond our control that we cannot simply decide to change them when we want to. We may be able to create in ourselves desire-like attitudes that are not really representing or indicating what is desirable but such states would not provide a rational ground for inferences about what we have reason to do. It is the fact that we cannot rationally decide to desire what we want to desire, that shows, according to Millgram, that instrumentalism is false.

I will defend instrumentalism from Millgram's attack. I will claim that Millgram fails in his attempt to show that we cannot rationally decide to acquire desires when we want. I will show that there is no basis for attacking instrumentalism's fundamental assumption: that desires are independent sources of reasons for action.

I think that Millgram's attack on instrumentalism is mistaken, but his discussion points to an interesting and hitherto unrecognized relation between instrumentalism and desiring at will. The assumptions made by instrumentalism about the fundamental role that desires play in the justification of action make for a much more dynamic view than was previously acknowledged. On a traditional understanding of instrumentalism a deliberating agent must deliberate from a given set of desires and strive to satisfy them to the best of her ability. Even though desires may change during one's life, at the moment of deliberation the agent must view them as static. The question she asks herself, the question it is rational for her to ask, is not which desires should I have but rather what should I do given the desires I have. This, I believe, is a limited understanding of instrumentalism. Instrumentalism does not commit us to a static view about the goals, the ends, the desires, the commitments, and the ideals that constitute one's individual identity (I will henceforth use the term 'practical identity' to refer to this set of attitudes³). Hence

3 I borrow the term 'practical identity' from Christine Korsgaard, but I do not necessarily follow Korsgaard's use in my understanding of this term. Rather, I understand 'practical identity' to refer to the part of one's identity that consists of one's fundamental action-guiding mental attitudes. I use the term in a way that is to a large degree synonymous with Bernard Williams' notion of one's 'motivational

instrumentalism also does not commit us to a static view about a person's normative system. Instrumentalism is conceptually open to the idea that one's practical identity can undergo rational and intentional changes and is therefore open to the idea that one's normative system can undergo such rational and intentional changes. I will briefly outline this relation and its implication for our understanding of instrumentalism in the last part of this paper.

II Naive Instrumentalism, Sophisticated Instrumentalism and What Is Common To Both

Typically, instrumentalism is associated either with the view that if an agent desires a certain end he or she has a reason to bring about the means or the necessary means for the satisfaction of that end, or with that view supplemented by the claim that these means-ends considerations are the only grounds for reasons.

Millgram's argument, however, is not directed at instrumentalism as defined above. Rather, it is directed at what Millgram sees as the important or fundamental element of the instrumentalist position. For Millgram, what is crucial about instrumentalism is the view that intrinsic desires are reason-giving simply by virtue of being intrinsic desires⁴ and not because they are reliable indicators of the right or the good or the desirable. His characterization may not be the best way to capture the historical or the common usage of the term instrumentalism but I believe that it does capture something that is at the heart of instrumentalism. Therefore, with a slight amendment that I will presently discuss, I will follow Millgram in my understanding of instrumentalism.

The problem with Millgram's characterization of instrumentalism is that as it stands it is too narrow. Very few contemporary theorists would subscribe to instrumentalism as Millgram defines it. Most instrumentalists or Humean-instrumentalists do not think that every intrinsic desire is reason-giving. Some think that only the intrinsic desires we would have after we exercised imagination are reason-giving; others think that only intrinsic desires that are not screened by our second order desires or our higher order policies are reason-giving; and still others think that

set.' See Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 101; Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons,' in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981), 102, 105.

4 When describing the instrumentalist view he says: 'Only desires count, and so desires have to count simply in virtue of being desires' (11).

only the desires that we would have after being exposed to full information are reason-giving.⁵

Millgram's definition is too narrow to capture most instrumentalist theories. What Millgram calls instrumentalism I will call naive instrumentalism.

I understand naive instrumentalism to be the view that every intrinsic desire gives its possessor a reason for action. On this view a desire does not necessarily give the agent an overriding reason; however, the reason it does give should be rationally counted or considered when deciding what one has an overriding reason to do.

I will distinguish between naive instrumentalism and what I will henceforth call sophisticated instrumentalism. Sophisticated instrumentalism is a family of views. These views have in common a certain way of revising naive instrumentalism. Sophisticated instrumentalist views recognize that not every intrinsic desire is reason-giving and they all restrict the set of intrinsic desires that are reason-giving. However, they do share with naive instrumentalism the view that those intrinsic desires (or complexes of desires) that are reason-giving are themselves sources of reasons. Those intrinsic desires do not merely indicate the existence of some other facts that generate normative requirements, other facts that are themselves independent of one's desires and motivating attitudes. Thus what is common to sophisticated instrumentalists and to naive instrumentalists is the view that *some* intrinsic desires are reason-giving in their own right.⁶ Since I suspect that most instrumentalists are sub-

5 Williams; also Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979). Harry Frankfurt is sometimes interpreted as claiming that only desires that are endorsed by our second order desires are reason-giving; Michael Bratman suggests that only intrinsic desires that are endorsed by higher order policies have 'subjective normative authority' for the agent. See M. Bratman, 'Two Problems About Human Agency,' *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* (2001), 321. His addition to this list, however, should be qualified for two reasons: first because he talks about subjective normativity and not about normativity tout court; and second because it is not clear that he considers himself a Humean-instrumentalist even in a broad understanding of these terms.

6 Note that the notion of instrumentalism discussed by Millgram (and my suggested corrected notion) avoids a recent criticism made against instrumentalism under its more common definitions. Christine Korsgaard has claimed that the idea that instrumental reasoning would give an agent a reason to bring about the means to the satisfaction of one's desires without there being a reason for satisfying the desire itself is untenable. Korsgaard writes: 'I think the argument shows that the instrumental principle cannot stand alone. Unless something attaches normativity to our ends, there can be no requirement to take the means to them' (C. Korsgaard, 'The Normativity of Practical Reason,' in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Garrett Cullity and

scribing to some form of sophisticated instrumentalism I will proceed to use the term instrumentalism as a synonym for sophisticated instrumentalism.

Millgram's argument was formulated as an argument against what I have called naive instrumentalism. But there is nothing about the argument that prevents its application to sophisticated instrumentalism. If it refutes naive instrumentalism then it should also refute sophisticated instrumentalism.⁷ Therefore, and even though Millgram did not intend it as such, I will read it as an argument against sophisticated instrumentalism.

III Desires and Desiring at Will

Before I proceed, let me say a few words about the notion of desires and the idea of desiring at will. I will follow common practice among instrumentalists and help myself to what is known as a broad notion of desires, or to what Williams has called *elements of one's motivational set*. In this understanding, 'desire' is a generic name for a variety of motivational attitudes: 'desires' in the standard English usage, feelings of obligation, feelings of commitment, caring....

What does desiring at will mean? To desire at will is to change your intrinsic desires as a direct result of your intentional decision to do so. There are, therefore, at least two important elements in the notion of desiring at will. Desiring at will is 1) an intentional change and 2) a direct change of intrinsic desires.⁸

The first thing to say about intentional changes of desires is that they are not unintentional. John Elster describes unintentional changes of desires as changes that happen 'behind our back.'⁹ These changes, he says, are the result of causal processes that we do not control and do not

Berys Gaut, eds. [New York: Oxford University Press 1997], 251). Accepting the idea that intrinsic desires (or some intrinsic desires) are themselves reason-giving is one way of providing a foundation for the normativity of end-means reasoning.

7 I further explain why Millgram's argument applies to sophisticated instrumentalism in footnote 28.

8 It is usually and implicitly assumed, both by instrumentalists and by non-instrumentalists, that such intentional and direct control of intrinsic desires is impossible. Gilbert Harman is a notable exception. See G. Harman, 'The Toxin Puzzle,' in *Rational Commitment and Social Justice*, J. Coleman and C. Morris, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998).

9 John Elster, 'Sour Grapes,' in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, B. Williams and A. Sen, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 224

guide. Unintentional changes are caused by urges of which we are not aware. Intentional changes of desires are controlled by desires of which we are aware. But this is not sufficient; we still have to say under what conditions we would count the formation of a new desire as an intentional formation of a desire.

The formation of a desire is an action, so our question is the general question of when an action is intentional. In the simple case an action is intentional if it is performed because the agent believes that by performing it she will be promoting an end that she wants to promote. The relations between the agent's desires and beliefs and her intentional actions may be more complicated than that, but for our current discussion this paradigmatic case suffices.¹⁰ So in the paradigmatic case the formation of the desire is intentional if the agent forms the desire because she believes that by forming it she will be promoting an end that she wants to promote.

By 'directly changing a desire' I mean changing it in a way that would not be better described as 'affecting the desire by means of some other action of the agent.'¹¹ If in order to change my desire I need to flip a switch, the change of desire is not a direct change. Desiring at will involves only direct changes of desires.

One interesting result of the fact that desiring at will involves only direct changes of desires is that the change of desire cannot be mediated by a change of any of the underlying facts that according to some authors, Millgram among them, may ground the reason-giving force of our desires. It is for this reason that Millgram objects to the idea of desiring at will. A change in one's desires is conceptually possible, according to Millgram, only if it is mediated by a change in the facts about desirability¹²

10 In my approach to more complicated cases I follow Michael Bratman. According to Bratman an intentional action is an action done while having a certain present directed intention, such that the present directed intention is appropriately related to the action in a way that is partly determined by the agent's desires and beliefs. Even though a present directed intention is required in order to intentionally ϕ it need not be an intention to ϕ . See Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1987), 5-6.

11 In my understanding of the notion of 'direct actions' I follow Arthur Danto. His views concerning direct actions are presented both in 'What We Can Do' and in 'Basic Actions,' though he uses the term 'basic actions' to refer to what I am here calling direct actions. See A. Danto, 'What We Can Do,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963), 435-6; and A. Danto, 'Basic Actions,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1963) 141-8.

12 According to Millgram our feelings of pleasure are our best guide for the desirability of the objects of our desires (115).

(the desirability of the object of the desire) that ground the reason-giving force of these desires. So of course he would agree that if we could change what is desirable we could affect what we desire. But because desiring at will is a direct change of desires, it does not involve changing what we desire by way of changing what is desirable.¹³

It is especially important that the change of desire we are discussing is a rational change of desire since Millgram's objection is to the claim that we can change our desires at will rationally. And as the notion of rationality that Millgram is interested in attacking is instrumental rationality, what is of particular interest to Millgram is a change of intrinsic desires that is done for instrumental-legitimate reasons. That is, a change of desires whose justification is grounded in some other intrinsic desires of the agent. Imagine, for example, that I have an overriding desire to want to join an underground movement that resists a corrupt government. An instrumentalist that thinks that desiring at will is possible will claim that it may be possible and rational for me to acquire the desire to join the underground. Millgram will say that if it is desirable for me to join the underground then I should be able to adopt a desire to do so; however, the mere fact that I have a desire to want to join, and regardless of how strong this desire is, will not make it possible for me to acquire the desire rationally. In other words, Millgram thinks that a form of reasoning that the instrumentalist considers a natural or standard form of reasoning cannot legitimize certain types of actions, namely the acquisition and change of desires.

IV Millgram's Argument

Schematically, Millgram's argument has the following form.

1. Prove that it is impossible rationally to change one's desires at will.
 - a. A reductio: Assume that we can change our desires at will and show that this assumption leads to unacceptable conclusions.
 - i. Provide some additional arguments to convince the reader that the aforementioned conclusions are indeed unacceptable.

13 As we will see, both Millgram and I will allow into our discussion an example of a change of desire that is not direct, but that example does preserve the important feature of direct changes of desires discussed above; it is a change of desires that is not mediated by any changes in facts about desirability.

- b. Support the claim that we cannot rationally change our desires at will with an additional argument: if we could we would soon have an arbitrary set of desires.
2. Conclude by inference to the best explanation that instrumentalism is false, since the most plausible explanation for the inability to rationally and directly change our desires is the fact that their reason-giving force is grounded in some other independent fact. Changing our desires directly means attempting to bypass these grounding facts. Such an attempt is irrational.

The first part of Millgram's argument (1a) is a story. A man who wants to become a luxury-car salesman realizes that only if he himself desires the luxury items added to the cars will he be able to convince customers to buy the cars. Since he works on commission it is important to him to sell as many cars as possible. He takes a pill that is supposed to instill in him a desire for these items.¹⁴ It now seems that he enthusiastically desires these luxury items: a moon-roof, a talking seat belt, retractable headlights, and a rotating hood ornament. When recession strikes the salesman is laid off. Shortly thereafter, the salesman's former employer is offering the cars for a significantly reduced price. Millgram assumes that a real desire would give its possessor reason for action.¹⁵ So if the pill had really done its job then the man should think that the offer is a steal and act on it (we assume that he can afford the car). But he doesn't. Here is how Millgram describes the situation from the point of view of the salesman: 'As I deliberate, surely I am bound to recall that I have these "desires" only because I took a pill, and that I took the pill for entirely job-related reasons. Indeed, I had originally thought these things not worth desiring ... I would be crazy to act on these "desires" now' (17).

14 The story is supposed to bypass the question concerning the mechanisms that would allow us to desire at will and show us that even if we assume that there is no physical limitation on desiring at will (we assume that there is a pill that can do the job) we would have to admit that desiring at will is impossible. That would show that the impossibility is principled or conceptual.

I have explained above why the acquisition of a desire 'at pill' does not constitute — in the sense relevant for Millgram's argument — an indirect acquisition of desire.

15 'A desire is something that makes certain inferential demands; for example, it is something that, *ceteris paribus*, I take it that I should act on, something whose object I try to obtain' (18). This of course does not mean that Millgram believes that our desires ground our reasons for action; they are better thought of as indicators of the fact that such reasons exist.

A few features of this argument are worth noting. First, its goal: the argument tries to show that the failure of desiring at will is due to a principled impossibility.¹⁶ Toward the end of the chapter Millgram says: 'We have established that (modulo qualifications which I will not now repeat) wanting to have a particular desire will not bring one to have it, and that this is not merely an empirical fact' (35).

Second, its structure: Millgram's argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*.¹⁷ From the assumption that desiring at will is possible, it follows that when we acquire a desire at will it is rational to act on it even after the reasons for its acquisition vanish. This conclusion follows if we only accept the claim, which Millgram does, that it is rational for us¹⁸ to act on our desires. Millgram thinks this conclusion is intuitively absurd and therefore rejects the first assumption.

I believe that the argument does not work. The story is supposed to convince us that the apparent desires were not really formed after all and thus to show that there is a principled impossibility of desiring at will. Millgram hopes that his reader will find the claim that 'it will be crazy to act on the newly acquired "desire"' intuitive.¹⁹ But as far as I can tell

16 Sydney Shoemaker, in response to Millgram's argument, claimed that if one could change one's taste for broccoli at will then there would be no reason why one couldn't change at will one's desire to eat broccoli. The impossibility of desiring at will, concluded Shoemaker, is an empirical and not a principled impossibility. While criticizing Millgram's argument, Shoemaker implicitly accepts Millgram's main objection to instrumentalism. Desires, the broccoli example suggests, do not ground our practical reasoning. There are practical reasons for having the desires we have, reasons that do not have their origin in our intrinsic desires, and only changing these reasons would enable a rational change in our desires. In this case only a change in our taste for broccoli would make the formation of a desire for broccoli rational.

A desire for broccoli because it tastes good, I suspect, is a misleading example. I may desire to eat broccoli today partly because broccoli tastes good to me (though that certainly would not be reason enough, since many things taste good to me) but that means that my desire to eat broccoli today is a desire I have partly for instrumental reasons. The important question is whether desires that I have for non-instrumental reasons (or those elements of my desires that do not derive from instrumental reasons) can be rationally changed at will. Only if we can reject Millgram's argument concerning the principled impossibility of changing our *intrinsic* desires at will can we defend instrumentalism from Millgram's objection. S. Shoemaker, 'Desiring at Will (and at Pill): A Reply to Millgram,' in *Preferences*, U. Wessels and C. Fehige, eds. (Berlin: De Gruyter 1997).

17 Millgram does not say that of his argument, but it is obviously structured as a *reductio*.

18 Other things being equal.

19 According to Millgram a desire is at least partly identified by the inferences it

the story does not prompt any such intuition. The most natural reaction to the story is feeling that one has not been provided with sufficient information, that in order to decide whether the newly acquired mental states are reason-giving or not one has to know whether they are desires or not. Without this information it is impossible to assess the claim that it is crazy to act on these mental states or that these mental states will vanish once the reasons for acquiring them vanish. If what the pill creates are real intrinsic desires then it is not crazy to act on them and they will not disappear when the reason for taking the pill disappears and the story is therefore simply mistold. If, on the other hand, what the pill creates are not desires then there is no reason to be surprised by their disappearance, nor a reason to conclude that desiring at will is impossible. The only conclusion that follows from the story, on the assumption that the pill did not succeed in creating intrinsic desires, is that the salesman took the wrong kind of pill.

The issue, in other words, is this: Millgram thinks that from the assumption that desiring at pill is possible, absurd conclusions follow, and he wants the reader who realizes that these absurdities follow to conclude that desiring at pill/will is not possible. He is right that these conclusions follow. However, if you really accept the assumption, these conclusions no longer seem absurd. Millgram's argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* in which the alleged absurdum is not absurd. To see this it may be helpful to consider how this kind of argument is supposed to function.

Reductio ad absurdum arguments are methodologically problematic. An ideal *reductio* leads to a logical inconsistency. But outside of courses in introductory logic these are rare. In a good *reductio* the absurdity in question is independent of the assumption one challenges and (if it is supposed to be intuitive, as Millgram's is) refuses to go away. It is argued against utilitarianism, for example, that in some extreme circumstances it gives a license to murder. But we have a strong intuition that murder should not be licensed by a theory of ethics. We have this intuition independently and prior to our view about the correct theory of ethics, and when we are presented with a theory that violates this intuition the intuition refuses to go away. I am afraid Millgram's purported absurdity fails these tests. He claims that it is absurd that an attitude will give us a reason for action when the reasons for the acquisition of this attitude vanish. As far as I can tell, no one is walking around with intuitions of

grounds. If an agent thinks that it would be crazy to act on a certain mental attitude, then that mental attitude will not be the basis for any inference to reasons for action and so it cannot be properly called a desire.

any sort about such an abstract question. And when one wants to check what her view on the matter is, the first thing she asks herself is what is the acquired attitude. If the attitude that was acquired is a desire, it seems to be a ground for action; if it is a pseudo desire, then not. So the absurdity in question turns out to be heavily dependent on the assumption Millgram wants to reject. And finally, even if one starts with Millgram's intuition, if one accepts the assumption that we can desire at will, the intuition seems to vanish.

Millgram adduces some supporting reasons to convince us that it would be crazy to act on the attitudes formed by the pill (1.a.i). He says that originally the salesman did not think these gadgets worth desiring. However, that only shows that he would have been crazy to buy these gadgets at the time when he did not yet desire them. But that does not tell us whether he has a reason to try to have the gadgets now. To determine that, we need to know whether he desires them now. If he does, what would be so crazy about acting on his desire?

Would we think someone who has a similar desire that was not acquired at pill crazy for acting on his desire? The answer is no. Our intuition, I submit, with regard to people who have desires for expensive objects, is that their desires for these objects make it perfectly rational²⁰ for them to try to acquire them, even if when they did not have these desires they did not consider the object of the desires worth having.²¹ I therefore think that we should reject Millgram's first supporting argument. If the pill succeeded in forming desires as promised, and the salesman really wants the luxury items, we have no reason to think that it would be crazy for him to buy the car — regardless of whether or not he desired luxury items before and regardless of whether or not he thought they were worth desiring. If, on the other hand, the pill fails to form the right desires then it is not clear how this story is relevant to the assessment of the possibility of desiring at will.²²

20 Of course this claim should be qualified by a *ceteris paribus* clause: if someone does not have the money, or thinks that over-consumption is harmful to the environment and has detrimental effects on people in Third World countries, then he may not find it rational to act on his desire to acquire expensive gadgets.

21 And even, I should add, if were it not for the fact that they desired those items, they would consider them unworthy of being desired/brought about.

22 Since Millgram was trying to show that the pill couldn't possibly create real desires my last remark may seem confusing. The point is this. Millgram tries to convince us, in various ways, that whatever the pill creates it would be irrational to act on that thing. My strategy was to resist these kinds of arguments and to say that until we know what attitude the pill creates we cannot know whether that attitude is

Millgram suggests another reason (argument) for thinking that acting on the attitude formed by the pill would be crazy. This second reason is found in the salesman's words: 'I am bound to recall that I have these "desires" only because I took a pill, and that I took the pill for entirely job-related reasons' (17). The argument is, therefore, that since the reasons for acquiring the desire disappeared, it would be crazy (there would be no reason) to act on the desire. But it is not clear what the reasoning is behind this argument. One may think that the argument is confusing the reasons for acquiring a desire with the content of the desire. If that is the case all we have to do is insist that the two are distinct. The salesman acquires the new desire in order to increase his sales. But the new desire is not a desire to increase one's sales. Rather it is a desire to have a car with fancy gadgets. The content of the new desire, we must insist, is distinct from the content of the reason for its acquisition.

Alternatively, one may think that the argument depends for its success on the implicit assumption that the reasons for acquiring a desire are the only possible grounds for acting on it. Understood that way, the argument begs the question. Millgram's goal is to prove that desires cannot by themselves give us reasons for action. So assuming that desires must depend on some other source of reasons, namely the reasons for their acquisition, in order to give us reason for action, is in part assuming what Millgram tries to prove. And in any case, the claim that desires depend for their reason-giving force on the reasons for their acquisition is implausible. People who desire to read books have good reason to read books. And the reason they have for reading books seems completely independent from the history of the desire. This independence from the history of the desire is not only a feature of instrumentalist views of practical reason. The question on any view of practical reason — whatever it claims are the grounds for reasons — should be not why the desire was acquired but rather whether it is now reason-giving.

Millgram could have tried to generalize his argument. He could have claimed that even if reasons for acquisition of desires are not the only

reason-giving or not. Now imagine that we have an independent way of knowing what kind of attitude was created — independent from information about whether that attitude is reason-giving or not. If we learn that what was created by a certain pill is a real desire then it is reason-giving. If, on the other hand, we learn that what was created by a certain pill is not a real desire then it may not be reason-giving. But all that tells us is that it wasn't a good pill. It did not do what its maker promised us it would do. Even if we learn that no actual pill can create real desires, all we learn is that pills are not good at creating desires. But that does not mean that we do not have our own mechanisms for creating desires, and it certainly does not mean that such mechanisms are conceptually impossible.

grounds for acting on one's desires it is still the case that the characteristic of desires that makes them reason-giving is lacking in desires that are acquired at will. But surveying the various sophisticated instrumentalist positions leaves one with the impression that such an argument would not have much to hold to. On these views, what makes a desire reason-giving is the fact that it passes some test that ensures that it is well informed; or that it is the agent's own; or that it is consistent with the agent's policies. I cannot in the scope of this paper consider these views in detail but it seems clear to me that there is nothing in particular about desires that are acquired at will that would make them fail these tests.²³ And so I do not think that such an attempt to generalize Millgram's argument would work.

Building on his conclusion that desiring at will is impossible, Millgram next tries to explain why it is impossible. However, his suggestion is more than an explanation. It is meant to bolster our conviction that desiring at will is impossible (1b).

Millgram claims that if desiring at will were possible, then 'there would soon not be much agency to the alleged agent: planning, projects, and continuity would all be rendered impossible' (27). Why? Because if desiring at will were possible then our reasons for acquiring and sustaining desires would be, to use Millgram's phrase, 'just having wanted them' (27), and an agent who would acquire desires in that way 'would be for all practical purposes, an agent who acquired and lost desires entirely randomly' (27). But our desires, says Millgram, are not random. In fact, they cannot be random; if they were we would not be agents. This

23 Frankfurt, for example, may be taken to require that only desires that are really our own be taken into account in deliberation. Quite similarly, Korsgaard (at least where non-moral issues are concerned) requires that only desires that are endorsed by the agent from the perspective of one of her practical identities be taken into account in deliberation. And Bratman requires that only those desires consistent with our current plans be taken into account in deliberation. These are all ways of adding some sort of screening mechanism to the naive instrumentalist view. Instead of accepting all of our desires as reason givers, these theorists say that some should be excluded. However, these screening mechanisms will not screen off all the desires that are acquired at will, since desires that are rationally acquired at will are not particularly likely to be the ones that we do not identify with/do not endorse from the perspective of our practical identities/find inconsistent with our plans. Hence all these theories need not be in conflict with the view that desires can be acquired at will. And even if it turns out that on some occasion a desire that is acquired at will should not count as a reason for action (under one of these views) that would not show that desiring at will is impossible. It would only show that under these views some cases of acquisition of desires at will would yield desires that should not be taken as reasons for action.

conceptual link between our notion of agency and the structure of our motivational set is meant both to explain why desiring at will is impossible and to further convince us that it is impossible.

Millgram thinks that if we can acquire desires at will then the desires we will end up having will be random. Let us see if Millgram can justify his claim that desires that are acquired at will are random.

He attempts to justify this claim by saying that if desiring at will were possible then our reasons for acquiring and sustaining desires would be **'just having wanted them.'** But does the claim that we would acquire desires 'just because we want to' justify the conclusion that such acquisition of desires would be random and that the resulting motivational set would be random?

It is not clear what Millgram means when he says that if we could desire at will we would acquire desires just because we want to. He may mean that our reasons for acquiring and sustaining desires would be grounded in our motivational set. Instrumentalists, of course, should think that this is the right place to look for a justification for the acquisition and sustenance of desires. However, being grounded in our motivational set wouldn't make our desires random. Many believe that our reasons for acting are grounded in our motivational set²⁴ and it was never claimed that if they were right we would act in a random way.

Millgram is an exception here. He thinks that if our reasons for action are grounded in our motivational set and if that motivational set does not itself require any justification then non-randomness in our agency is a lucky accident (36). He then goes on to say that if this fact is not duly appreciated it is probably because second order desires are thought to be capable of ensuring some management, and hence stability, of our motivational set. However, Millgram claims, if his argument is correct then it is impossible to decide to desire and therefore second order desires may not be employed to explain why our motivational set is as stable as it is.

I think that Millgram makes an important point. If we deny the possibility of desiring at will, second order desires seem unable to do the job that many theories assign to them. But his point cannot be used in the argument we are considering. It cannot be used because what is under consideration is the suggestion that it is possible to decide to desire and, accordingly, that second order desires can influence the structure of our motivational set.

Let me quickly repeat the structure of these last steps in the discussion. Millgram offers an explanation for the fact that we cannot desire at will,

24 And even more agree that this is the case in non-moral contexts.

maybe even an argument that is supposed to buttress our belief in that fact. The explanation/argument is as follows: if we could acquire desires at will then our motivational set and with it our agency would lose their stability and unity. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to assume that desires of the second order monitor and manage the changes in our motivational set. But this is impossible because the influence of second order desires requires that we will be able to desire at will.

When the explanation/argument is presented that way it is not hard to see that it fails. Whether it is an explanation or an argument the structure is identical. It is an attempt to show that an acquisition of desires at will would lead to the destruction of the unity of agency. But such an attempt cannot build on the supposition that desiring at will is impossible. If it is an attempt to give an argument then it is circular. If it is an explanation it is empty.

We have tried to understand why Millgram thinks that desiring at will is impossible. When he said that if desiring at will were possible then our reasons for acquiring and sustaining desires would be '**just having wanted them**' we assumed that he meant that the source of justification for the acquisition of desires would be in our motivational set. We concluded that if this is what he meant then we do not understand his explanation.

Perhaps, then, there is another way to understand Millgram's claim that desires would be random if they were acquired 'just because we wanted them.' Maybe what Millgram means by 'just because we wanted them' is that if we could desire at will then any time we wanted a desire we would acquire it. That is, maybe he means that if we could desire at will then every whim or desire or consideration of interest would lead us to acquire some desire or other. However, if this is what he means, then he is simply wrong. It is not true that we would form a desire every time we wanted to, just as it is not true that we act every time we want to act. Action is determined by a complicated mechanism of deliberation. This mechanism involves balancing desires, considering means for ends, planning (and if desiring at will is possible, then deliberation also involves considering which desires to adopt, which to reject, and which to change). As a result, many of our desires do not get acted upon. Similarly, rational desiring at will is controlled by a complicated deliberative mechanism that allows only a small percentage of the considered desire changes to be performed.²⁵ Moreover, not only would a small

25 It is important to note that my reply to Millgram's argument here does not rest on the assumption that all desiring at will is (or would be) rational. Irrational changes of desires may certainly be part of our mental life even if desiring at will is possible.

percentage of the considered desire changes be endorsed but there would also be nothing random about this choice. It would be a direct function of the agent's motivational set and of the agent's belief system at the time of deliberation²⁶.

V The Second Part of Millgram's Argument — An Inference To the Best Explanation (2.)

As I have said before, Millgram thinks that there is a deeper explanation of the conceptual impossibility of desiring at will than the fact that it would lead to a random acquisition of desires. The explanation, he believes, is that instrumentalism is false. He believes that an attitude may give a reason only if there are reasons for having that attitude. And since he thinks that desires are reason-giving attitudes,²⁷ then it must be the case that we have reasons (external to the desires) to have them.

Millgram contends that this is true of desires just as it is true of beliefs. Beliefs could not give us reasons for further beliefs unless we had reasons for holding them, and we have reasons for holding them if we either retain the reasons we had for acquiring them or we gain new reasons for having them. Similarly, desires could not give us reasons for action unless we either maintained the reasons for their acquisition or gained new reasons for holding them. However, according to Millgram, if desiring at will were possible then desires would be giving us reasons for action even when there would not be any external reason (external to the desire) for holding them. They would be giving us reasons for

But this fact does not prevent us from grounding a partial explanation of the range of desiring at will in the claim that our rational capacities limit the extent to which we put to use our ability to change our desires. Similarly the fact that we do not act on every desire we happen to have is partly explained by the limits that our rational capacities put on our decision making — and this explanation holds despite the fact that we sometimes behave irrationally.

26 The word 'function' may suggest that I believe that such deliberation would always have only one rational outcome. This is not my view. The idea is only that the rational decision to desire at will would not be less a function of our motivational set than would be the rational decision to act. In fact, desiring at will is best thought of as simply another type of action that is open to a rational agent.

27 Remember that Millgram does not think that desires by themselves are reason-giving; what desires do is transmit a reason for action whose source is external to the desire. However, once we have a desire, and precisely because desires indicate the existence of a source of reason, we can take ourselves to have a reason to achieve what we desire.

action even if the reasons for their acquisition would vanish and we would not have acquired any new reason for holding them.

Thus if desires cannot be reason-giving unless they have some external justification — that is, if instrumentalism is false²⁸ — then desiring at will is conceptually impossible.²⁹

28 Since on sophisticated instrumentalist views there are conditions under which a desire is not a real desire and is not reason-giving, one might want to view these conditions as the justifying grounds that Millgram thinks a desire must have in order to be reason-giving. Therefore, one might think that Millgram would not direct his argument against sophisticated instrumentalism. I think that this is a misunderstanding of sophisticated instrumentalist views.

Sophisticated instrumentalism does not provide our desires with the kind of justificatory grounding that Millgram thinks desires must have and that desires do have on non-instrumentalist views. To see why, we should explain what Millgram means when he requires that desires will be normatively grounded in some independent facts. On Millgram's view a desire is just an indicator for the existence of other more basic reasons for action. When Millgram says that a desire gives us reasons for action he means that the desire transfers the normative force of some other facts — it plays a role similar to the one played by an interim conclusion in a long derivation. By itself, it does not contribute anything to the truth of the final conclusion. Sophisticated instrumentalism sees desires in a very different light. On sophisticated instrumentalist views desires make an independent contribution to the reasons we have for action. Even if on sophisticated instrumentalist views there are other factors that determine our reasons for action, these other factors cannot determine them by themselves.

Take, for example, Brandt's view that only desires that we will not lose if we gain full information are real desires and therefore really reason-giving. Consider the following scenario: not knowing what the weather is like, I desire to go to the beach. If I knew what the weather is like I would still want to go to the beach. Hence, on Brandt's view, my desire to go to the beach is reason-giving. The conditions that ensure that my desire is reason-giving are facts about the weather, in particular the fact that the weather is nice. But my knowledge of that fact would certainly not be sufficient to justify my going to the beach. I might know that it is a beautiful day and desire to stay at home and drink guava juice and hence have no reason whatsoever to go to the beach.

On sophisticated instrumentalist views the conditions without which my desire would not be reason-giving are not sufficient to justify my action. To have a reason for action I additionally need a desire, and thus the desire is a necessary and independent source of reason for action. This is why sophisticated instrumentalism is a kind of instrumentalist view and not a variation on the views that make our desires mere indicators for some other facts that in turn are the real ground for our reasons for action. And this is also why Millgram would reject sophisticated instrumentalism just as he rejects naïve instrumentalism. On Millgram's view it does not make sense that a desire will be an independent contributor to our reasons for action, a contributor that does not in turn have deeper sources.

29 If one's desires depended for their reason-giving force on evaluative beliefs then if one could believe at will then one could influence a change in one's desires. And

But Millgram does not provide an argument for the claim that the case of desires is analogous to that of beliefs and neither does he provide a direct argument for the claim that our desires cannot be justifying if we lose the reasons for their acquisition. In other words, Millgram does not provide us with a direct argument for the claim that desires are not fundamental in the justification of action or that instrumentalism is false. Rather he wants to argue in the other direction. He wants to build on his alleged proof that desiring at will is conceptually impossible and conclude by inference to the best explanation that desires must get a justification from a source that is external to them.

Showing that desires, like beliefs, must get a justification from a source that is external to them amounts to showing that desires do not have a foundational status in the justification of action, or in other words, it amounts to a rejection of instrumentalism.

Let us look at the argument more closely:

- a. Desires give reasons for action (they may not be sources of normativity, but they at least provide reliable evidence for there being reasons for action).
- b. If desiring at will were conceptually possible, it would be conceptually possible to have an attitude that gives reasons for action without having reasons for having that attitude. This is the case because it would be possible to acquire intrinsic desires for instrumental reasons then lose these instrumental reasons and thus be left with an intrinsic desire for whose sustenance there is no justifying reason.
- c. Desiring at will is conceptually impossible.
How, asks Millgram, are we to explain c?
The best explanation for c. given the truth of a. and b. is:
- d. An attitude gives reason for action only if there are reasons for having that attitude.
But d. is simply another way of expressing the claim that instrumentalism is mistaken. What is essential to instrumentalism is the idea that at least some desires or some complexes of motivational attitudes are reason-giving, and that they are reason-giving independent of other sources of normativity.

that would be the case even if instrumentalism would be false. But such a change in desires would not be a direct change of desires it would be a change that is mediated by a change in one's evaluative beliefs.

However, if we reject the first part of Millgram's argument, that is, the proof that desiring at will is conceptually impossible — as I have claimed we should — we are left with an ungrounded argument against instrumentalism.

Elsewhere³⁰ I have argued that at least instrumentalists have good reasons to think that we in fact desire at will. But for all I have said here, even if instrumentalism is correct desiring at will may be psychologically impossible.

I have also not attempted to provide a positive argument for the fundamental thesis of instrumentalism. Justifying the claim that some complexes of desires are sources of normativity is, I believe, the greatest task that awaits instrumentalists.

VI The Importance of Millgram's Argument

I do not think that Millgram's argument against instrumentalism succeeds. But even if I am right, Millgram's argument teaches us an important lesson. There is an interesting and previously unrecognized relation between instrumentalism and desiring at will. Although instrumentalism does not entail desiring at will, instrumentalists have good reason to be sympathetic to the possibility of desiring at will. If instrumentalism is correct then desires are foundational sources of reasons for action. This does not mean that every intrinsic desire is reason-giving or that every intrinsic desire is justified. It does mean, however, that some desires or complexes of motivational attitudes that are reason-giving do not depend for their status as reason-giving attitudes on any other sources of normativity. Thus if we are psychologically capable of acquiring such complexes of motivational attitudes then we can acquire independent reason-giving attitudes on the sole basis that we desire to do so. In other words, if desiring at will is psychologically real then it is a fundamental part of our system of practical reasoning.

And this in turn means that instrumentalism need not be the reactionary theory that people usually think it is. If you are an instrumentalist, it is often claimed, then you think that the goals people have and the objects of their desires are ones that they are stuck with, or more precisely, that these goals and objects of desires are ones they cannot rationally select. The idea is that since our desires do not depend for their justification and for the reasons they give us for action on any other

30 Yonatan Shemmer, *Desiring at Will — Reasons, Motivation and Motivational Change*. Doctoral dissertation, Stanford 2002.

grounding facts then there is no basis that could justify their change. If the justification of our desires depended on some other grounding facts and we realized that these facts were not as we thought they were, only then could we justify the acquisition or the elimination of a desire. Indeed, alternative theories of practical reason or of ethics seem to have a more dynamic view of an agent's goals and practical identity. Consider the view that the justification of our desires and their reason-giving force depends on the value of the objects of our desires. On that view if we realize that our evaluative beliefs are wrong we are then justified and perhaps required to change our desires and goals appropriately. Thus on alternative normative views reasoning may lead us to change our desires and goals. But it is usually thought that instrumentalism cannot commend such changes.

I think that Millgram's argument helps us realize that this is not the case. It is precisely the fact that our desires do not depend for their justification on any other facts that makes it rationally possible to change them (when we have good instrumental reasons to do so) without worrying about the need for any additional justificatory support. On the instrumentalist view once we form a new intrinsic desire then such a desire will by itself be reason-giving, and if we eliminate an intrinsic desire there is no other justificatory source (there are no deeper justificatory roots) that we must placate.

If the lesson I want to draw from Millgram's argument is correct then instrumentalism too may be a dynamic view about our fundamental reasons for action³¹ about our goals and about our practical identity.

Received: November 2002

Revised: July 2003

Revised: May 2004

31 In a sense instrumentalists have been making similar claims for a while. It is commonly maintained that agents may discover new means to old goals and even that they may discover that the goals they thought they had were not their real goals. But accepting these suggestions introduces only a limited conception of change in one's practical identity. An instrumentalist who accepts these suggestions may still believe that one's real goals are either static or the outcome of contingent social influences — and thus not rationally changeable. If we accept, on the other hand, the link suggested by Millgram between instrumentalism and desiring at will, we open the way for a truly dynamic understanding of instrumentalism. (See Williams, 105; Brandt, 113.)