

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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Millgram, Chapters 1–3

Chapter 1

- Millgram characterizes Instrumentalism as the received view.

Instrumentalism is the view that all practical reasoning is means-end reasoning. It says that there are various things you want, and the point of practical reasoning is to figure out how to get them. Instrumentalism is an exclusionist view: if it is right, then while you can think about how to get what you want, you can't think about what to want in the first place. (2)

- Instrumentalism poses a problem for moral reasoning. If reason cannot yield goals, then reason cannot yield the goal to be moral. A more general lesson: Theories of practical reasoning constrain theories of morality.

- Theories of practical reasoning can also shape one's philosophy of mind.

It is hard not to suspect that the prominence that beliefs and desires have in contemporary philosophical pictures of the mind (so-called 'belief-desire psychology') is due to a background view of practical reasoning that highlights beliefs and desires at the expense of emotions, visual imagery, fantasies, dreams, and other familiar residents of the human soul. If belief-desire psychology is mistaken, the best way to correct it is to correct the theory of practical reasoning that underwrites it; once again, if you care about having a satisfactory picture of the mind, you should care about having a satisfactory theory of practical reasoning. (3)

- Instrumentalism allows only scientifically/metaphysically reputable things — desires — to motivate. It blocks the normative — like values — from this role.

- But Millgram claims that Instrumentalism is incompatible with the truism that we learn what matters by experience.

But instrumentalism is incompatible with the claim this book is going to advance: if instrumentalism is true, experience cannot teach you what matters. On the instrumentalist view, you do not want things because they matter; rather, they matter because you want them. (5)

- Here is the gist of Millgram's argument:

The idea behind the argument is a simple one: we must be able to learn new interests from experience because we encounter new and unfamiliar situations. Genuine novelty is an inescapable feature of our world. In novel circumstances, the desires, aims, and interests we already have are too often suddenly obsolete. In order to have the guides to action that we need, we have to allow new circumstances to teach us what to care about. If we do not, we will cease to project unified agency into the world, and that is enough to show practical induction to be a legitimate method of inference. (6)

- Millgram will argue for practical induction as one kind of practical reasoning among others.

Chapter 2

- Millgram will argue that, as a matter of necessity, one cannot desire at will. This claim will then be used as a premise to argue against Instrumentalism.
- Some familiar examples which are supposed to illustrate our inability to desire at will:

We are all familiar with the fact that there are fairly severe restrictions on desiring at will. The marriage foundering on a lack of sensual desire will not be salvaged by determining to *have* such a desire, and there is nothing to be gained by the other party's insisting that one *try*. Presented with a hideous ceramic gewgaw, I cannot, with the best will in the world, please my misguided relative by actually *wanting* the thing. Similarly, we cannot, by the sheer exercise of will, bring about the cessation of desire: it is cold comfort to the disappointed applicant to point out that one need merely abandon one's desires in order to be content. (12)

- We can imagine evolutionary reasons against desiring at will, but what are the philosophical/conceptual reasons against this?
 - Millgram begins his case by arguing against the possibility of "desiring at will". This would be possible were our limits on desiring at will merely

contingent.

- Bernard Williams argued against the possibility of believing at will. Millgram will adapt this argument to desire.

If one starts down the path of filling out the list of conditions that must be satisfied for believing at will to be possible, the outline of something like the following condition on acquiring belief starts to present itself: one cannot take it that one has acquired and is maintaining a belief in a way that one takes to provide no reason to hold it true. I'm going to argue that there are analogous restrictions on desiring at will, and this is bound to suggest that there is some very similar condition to be teased out of the parallel constraints on deciding to desire. (15)

- Millgram's example: the laid-off salesman (16–17). Will he, and should he, buy the options he supposedly desires by pill? Keep in mind that he remembers that he has this desire simply because he took a pill.

- Another example: pill-induced (fair-weather?) friendship. (18)

- Q: Why is Millgram so confident that these inferential commitments will dissipate?

- Summary:

The apparent weakening and the indirection introduced into my inferences show that the alleged desire is not playing its normal inferential role. But since a desire is constituted by its inferential role, that is just to say that I do not have *that* desire. Desire-inducing pills do not induce the desires they purport to induce; at best, they provide occasion for desires to manage the urges they do induce. (21)

- Millgram makes the comparison to believing at pill. He claims that only if one forgets how one acquired this belief, or if one acquires new evidence, will it be retained. But, what does he base these claims on?

If you remember that the only reason you believe you spent your vacation on Mars was that you visited a cut-rate travel agency that specializes in selling belief-inducing pills rather than expensive vacations, you will not actually manage to retain the belief. But if you do not remember this, there is no reason why the pill should not be effective. (21)

- Those who successfully desire at pill fail to realize something.

I have not yet said what that realization is, but notice the implications of the fact that it is a *realization* for the contingency of our inability to desire at will — or ‘at pill’. If what the agent is realizing, when the technique fails, or what the agent is prevented from realizing, when it succeeds, is that some condition on the rational acceptability of his desire has not been met, then it is not simply an accident — and not merely an empirical fact — that one cannot decide to desire. (23)

- Consider the realization that supposedly undoes belief at will.

It is the realization that one has no reason to think one’s belief true, and every reason to think it untrue, that undoes the belief. (24)

Q: But why can’t one think something is true, though admit that there is no reason to think it true?

- Desires, Millgram claims, are constituted by inferential commitments. On p. 26, he distinguishes between forward and backward commitments. Millgram claims that thought requires a match between these forward- and backward-looking commitments.

- Argument: A recognition that backward-looking commitments have not been met (which is bound to happen when one recognizes one’s desires were acquired at will/pill) extinguishes the forward-looking commitments. This is to extinguish the desire itself.

- Millgram argues against the view that desirability just is being desired (DDT). This view would allow for desire at pill.

- Next, Millgram applies these preceding points to critique Instrumentalism.

On our way to establishing this thesis we have seen that views that are committed to desires being, *qua* desires, self-justifying, are untenable; the foremost such view is of course instrumentalism, which holds that all practical reasoning, and consequently all practical justification, is instrumental, or means-end. Instrumental reasoning bottoms out in desires that are not themselves instrumentally justified, and if instrumental reasoning is all the practical reasoning there is, simply having such desires must be enough to underwrite practical inferences from them. (35)

- Millgram offers some plausible rational restrictions on our desires: transitivity, a reasonable chance of satisfaction, and some continuity of desire.

- Instrumentalism is mistaken because desires have backward-looking commitments.

Chapter 3

- This chapter begins the case for practical induction.

I'm going to argue that there is an analog of induction in the practical domain. We can learn what matters from experience, and we can infer more general practical judgments from more particular practical judgments that are their instances. (43)

Millgram (wisely) sidesteps the task of presenting an account of induction in general.

- The effectiveness of practical induction is required for unity of agency.

Unity of agency, I will claim, consists in our ability to square our conflicting concerns, interests, and priorities, and the way we do this turns out to depend on bridging or connecting judgments that, as a matter of fact, we obtain through practical induction. (50)

- Inferential connectedness is especially important for unity of self.
- Practical syllogisms are defeasible. This, according to Millgram, is essential to unity of agency.

For unity of agency is a matter of bringing to bear one's practical judgments when they become relevant to deliberation; but this is precisely to deploy defeasible practical syllogisms, rather than to be subject to the exceptionless reflexes they become as this sensitivity is lost. An agent is synchronically unified to the degree that his practical syllogisms are defeasible. (55)

- Desires do not come with a quantitative value (strength) along a single dimension, allowing for the comparison of all pairs of desires.

Our desires do not normally have the strengths that would support comparisons with arbitrary other desires, and now it is clear why. The point of a desire is to guide action. A desire whose content far outruns the thought that one could have put into it is bound to get one into trouble when it is put to use; because one will find oneself committed to courses of action that one has not seriously considered, it will be a poor guide. The vast majority of possible comparisons between desires had better not have their

outcomes already encoded into those desires' strengths; someone who did form desires whose strengths permitted comparisons with arbitrary other desires would be making a serious practical blunder. (58)

So defeasibility amounts to more than the possibility of straightforward outweighing.

- Q: How then do we determine whether a practical syllogism is defeated in a particular instance? To illustrate this procedure, Millgram discusses two examples on pp. 59–63.