Two Philosophies of Needs

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Abstract. Instrumentalists about need believe that all needs are instrumental, i.e., ontologically dependent upon ends, goals or purposes. Absolutists view some needs as non-instrumental. The aims of this article are: clearly to characterize the instrumentalism/absolutism debate that is of concern (mainly §1); to establish that both positions have recent and current adherents (mainly §1); to bring what is, in comparison with prior literature, a relatively high level of precision to the debate, employing some hitherto neglected, but important, insights (*passim*); to show, on grounds not previously

to the fore in the literature, that insofar as instrumentalism's advocates have provided arguments for the position, these are unsound (§2); to argue against instrumentalism using a new dilemma concerning whether 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' are interpreted in a mentalistic manner (§3); to elucidate the implications of the needs/need-satisfiers and preconditions/means distinctions for the debate (§4).

1. Instrumentalism and absolutism about needs

An instrumental need is a need that is had *because of* a certain end, goal or purpose. Were there no ends, goals or purposes, there could be no instrumental needs. At the time of writing this, I need (and have) a comfortable environment in which to write. I have this need not just because my having a comfortable environment is a necessary condition for my being able to exercise my ability to write, but because I currently aim to make progress with some writing. The necessary connection between having a comfortable environment and being able to do this ought not to be confused with the occurrent need for a comfortable environment itself: the former obtains even when writing is not one of the abilities I wish to exercise (and so when I am not in occurrent need of a comfortable environment, at least not for that purpose; compare Thomson 1987, p. 12; McLeod 2011, p. 213).

Absolute needs, if there are any, do not depend upon ends, goals and purposes. Instrumentalists and absolutists might agree upon a *conceptual* distinction between instrumental and absolute need. Instrumentalists hold, however, that the distinction is empty on the absolute side. Instrumentalist work includes Barry (1965, pp. 47–49), Plant (1980, *passim*), Flew (1981, pp. 122–127), Frankfurt (1984, p. 2), Liss (1993, pp. 46–47), Brannigan (1995, p. 310), Ohlsson (1995, pp. 96–98), Stempsey (1999, pp. 94–

95), Crisp (2002, p. 135), Brock (2013, p. 446), Gustavsson (2014, pp. 26–27), Gustavsson & Sandman (2015, p. 14) and Juth (2015, p. 75).

The absolutism that concerns us holds that there are both instrumental and absolute needs, *with neither being a species of, or reducible to, the other*. According to absolutism, a being can have a need that is not ontologically dependent upon ends, goals, or purposes (whether its own or of another being that shares its world). Absolutist work includes Anscombe (1958, p. 7), Feinberg, (1973, pp. 111–112), Braybrooke (1987, pp. 29–32), Wiggins (1991, pp. 7–9; 2005, p. 31), Thomson (1987; 2005), O'Neill (2005), Alvarez (2009) and McLeod (2011; 2014). An absolutist would typically regard as absolute such needs as, among others, our needs for food, water and shelter. On an absolutist understanding, while it may be within one's power not to satisfy one's absolute need it is not within one's power to cast it off (Thomson 1987, pp. 23–34; McLeod, 2011, p. 221; 2014, p. 294).

The absolutism/instrumentalism distinction, as here understood, concerns whether all needs are ontologically dependent upon ends, goals or purposes. While both positions regard claims of need as truth-apt and neither regards them as systematically false, neither position is primarily about matters semantic. They do not, of themselves, entail differing commitments over whether the verb 'need' has more than one sense and they are not about which, if any, claims of need are normative (in a sense relevant to morals). The fact that arguments for the absoluteness of some needs have been given

(e.g., Thomson 1987, pp. 2–6; Wiggins 1991, pp. 7–9) in which the premises do concern such semantic matters should not be allowed to obscure this point.

Instrumentalists take all needs to have a kind of derivative status: when a being has a need it has it because of an end, goal or purpose (not necessarily belonging to the being itself). It is perhaps worth noting that instrumentalism about needs is analogous, in some ways, to instrumentalism about practical reasoning. Instrumentalism about practical reasoning is the position according to which, in the words of one of its opponents, 'all practical reasoning is means-end reasoning' and 'practical reasoning proceeds from desires that are not themselves revisable by reasoning' (Millgram, 1997, p. 2).[1] Some of the claims of Smith (1994), who defends a 'Humean' (otherwise known as 'instrumentalist') view about motivating reasons, are strongly analogous to some of the claims made by those who adopt an instrumentalist position about needs.[2] Smith (1994, pp. 92–93, 116–117) holds that an agent has a motivating reason if and only if the agent has a desire for, or to do, something and that desire is suitably accompanied by a means-end belief about what would bring about the desire's satisfaction. On Smith's account, motivating reasons cannot exist but for desires. An instrumentalist about needs holds that a being has a need if and only if the being has an end, goal or purpose and there is an accompanying fact about what must happen in order for it to be attained or brought about: needs cannot exist but for ends, goals and purposes. Smith (1994, p. 116) presents his view that '[h]aving a motivating reason is, *inter alia*, having a goal' as

something that 'seems unassailable' and which 'has the status of a conceptual truth'. Similarly, advocates of instrumentalism about needs tend to present the view as though it were an axiom of theorizing about need (e.g., Frankfurt 1984, pp. 2–3; Brock 2013, p. 446).

Shortly, a more probing characterization of instrumentalism about needs will be offered than has so far arisen in the literature and specific works will be discussed in more detail. The citations so far show that both absolutism about needs and instrumentalism about needs have current supporters.

Lest the instrumentalism/absolutism distinction be thought spurious, or logically weaker than it actually is, let us note a crucial landmark in the conceptual territory: that absolutism is not instrumentalism-by-the-back-door. When an absolutist regards an absolute need as a need that must be met *for harm to be avoided*, this does not result in collapse of the absolute/instrumental distinction. Some beings without ends, goals or purposes of their own, such as plants, can be harmed. Feinberg (1973, pp. 111–112) characterises 'basic' needs as those needs that must be satisfied if the being that has them is not to be harmed. Wiggins (1991, pp. 10, 14) characterises 'absolute' needs in terms of harm necessarily resulting if the need is not satisfied. Nevertheless, Feinberg's and Wiggins's discussions neither entail nor were intended to entail that 'basic' or 'absolute' needs *are* instrumental (albeit not necessarily to the satisfaction of ends, goals, or purposes of the entity with the needs). Absolutism does not deny that all needs

are related to *outcomes*. Rather, it denies that all needs are dependent on ends, goals and purposes. Ends, goals and purposes can occur only as the ends, goals and purposes of entities able to have them: they essentially belong to agents and substances. Outcomes may be outcomes *for* agents and substances. Outcomes may be *of* events, processes and states of affairs. Whereas ends, goals and purposes must be *of* agents and substances, outcomes cannot be *of* agents or substances. The basic/absolute needs of a plant are not dependent, on the accounts of Feinberg and Wiggins, on *any* ends, goals or purposes, for a plant has these needs regardless of whether anyone cares about whether the plant is harmed or not: compare here Anscombe (1958, p. 7). An absolutist denies that all needs are, in one way (by being dependent upon the needful being's own ends, goals or purposes), or in another (by being dependent upon the ends, goals and purposes of a being that shares the needful being's world), instrumental. To claim that Feinberg's and Wiggins's position on the relationship between need and harm means that, whether knowingly or not, they view all needs as instrumental would be to fall into a confusion likely to prevent anyone in its grip from understanding the absolutist position on its own terms.[3]

The debate between absolutism and instrumentalism about needs bears upon debates in moral philosophy. For example, the instrumentalist's contention that needs are had only because of ends, goals or purposes, is sometimes supplemented with claims to the effect that needs, or true statements of need, can therefore never serve, on their

own, as normative reasons for action (e.g., Barry 1965, p. 48; Crisp 2002, p. 135; for the opposing view see, e.g., Thomson 1987; Lowe 2005). Moreover, the debate between instrumentalists and absolutists is relevant to the question of the relationship between needs and value. Instrumentalists typically hold that the value of meeting a need depends upon the value of the end that is thereby promoted (Taylor 1959, p. 111; Barry 1965, pp. 48–49; Plant 1980, p. 28; Goodin 1985, pp. 616, 621, 623; Liss 1993, p. 46). If needs are dependent upon ends, then ends cannot ultimately be evaluated according to whether they promote or frustrate the meeting of needs. By contrast, on an absolutist understanding, absolute needs can 'provide a bedrock for evaluation' (Thomson 1987, p. xi) in that the satisfaction of a subject's absolute needs 'cannot be less important than the quality [of the subject's] life' (Thomson 1987, p. 127). Nevertheless, it is upon the supposed *ontological dependency* of needs upon ends, goals and purposes (howsoever construed), that this article will focus. Whatever clarity the discussion brings to this issue might be helpful for subsequent work in moral philosophy. Let 'A needs X/to V' stand for any need claim that is of the form 'A needs X' or of the form 'A needs to V'. The instrumentalist tends to be committed to the following four theses:

(T1) Whenever it is a fact that A needs X/to V, then, for some F, A needs X/to V in order to F.

(T2) For all true claims of the form 'A needs X/to V', 'A needs X/to V' is elliptical for 'A needs X/to V in order to F'.[4]

(T3) In (T1) and (T2), 'F' ranges only over ends, goals and purposes.

(T4) Whenever a being has a need, the need ontologically depends upon an end, goal or purpose (either of the being itself or of another being that shares the being's world).[5]

Writers who support (T3) tend to leave it unclear as to whether by 'end', 'goal' or 'purpose', they mean the kind of ends, goals and purposes that only minded beings can have.[6] An end, goal or purpose, in this sense, is consciously intended or contemplated, though not necessarily at will, by an agent.[7] In contrast, Hacker (2007, p. 131) writes:

The *organs* of a plant have a purpose or a function, which is their contribution to maintaining the normal life and reproductive cycle of the plant. But a plant itself cannot be said to have purposes *of its own* or to *pursue* goals. Nevertheless, what a plant *does* is explained teleologically – that is, as being done for the sake of a goal (to obtain more light or water) or for a certain purpose (e.g. to facilitate

pollination). But these goals and purposes are not goals and purposes *of* the plant. The teleological behaviour of plants is *explicable* in non-teleological terms.

While Hacker (2003, p. 136) maintains that whatever is needed 'is needed *for an end*', in his terminology, ends, goals and purposes include the contributions that organs make to normal functioning, outcomes relating to an organism's natural activities, the functions that artefacts are fashioned to perform *and* the desires, plans and ambitions of agents with volitional powers (Hacker 2003, pp. 128, 133). For an organism to have needs, it is not necessary for it to be sentient, to have volitional powers or to have goals of its own: the needs of plants include natural needs (Hacker 2003, p. 130). Thus, Hacker does not appear to suggest that all needs ontologically depend upon ends, goals or purposes. His position here serves to make clear the ambiguity of (T3) and (T4) and to show that there is an alternative to what is perhaps the more obvious, mentalistic, reading of them.

Let us consider the logical relationships between (T1)–(T4). (T1) does not entail (T2). One might admit that whatever is needed is needed *for* something (which is a paraphrase of (T1)) whilst also holding, without inconsistency, that some claims of need of the form 'A needs X/to V' are semantically complete (i.e., true or false just as they are). (T1) and (T2) together do not entail (T3). One might hold that the 'F' ranges over

outcomes or states of affairs, rather than over ends, goals and purposes. (If the 'F' were to range over states of affairs then (T1) and (T2) would have to be modified so as to replace 'in order to F' with 'in order that F' or something similar.) The exponent of (T4) has it that for any need it depends for its existence upon an end, goal or purpose. (T1)–(T3) together do not entail (T4), for ontological dependency is an asymmetrical matter about which (T1)–(T3) are silent.

Now the debate between instrumentalists and absolutists does *not* hinge upon whether the schema (T1) properly applies to all needs claims, or, more informally, upon the question of whether everything that is needed is needed *for* something. The contention that everything that is needed is needed *for* something is consistent with absolutism. Instrumentalists tend to miss this crucial point, upon which §2 expands.[8] An absolutist can agree that each true need claim can be analysed in terms of (T1)'s schema but the absolutist will deny that the F-place must always be filled by an end, goal or purpose.[9]

Commitment to (T1)–(T4) is reasonably attributable to Barry (1965), Ohlsson (1995) and, more definitely, Flew (1981), Plant (1980), Liss (1993) and Crisp (2002). Taylor (1959) and Frankfurt (1984) also seem to be committed to all four theses, though they do not make explicit appeal to the notion of one sentence's being elliptical for another.[10] Taking each thesis in turn, here are some quotations and references.

'Whenever someone says "*x* is needed" it always makes sense…to ask what purpose it is needed for', writes Barry (1965, p. 48). Several other writers, such as Flew (1981, p. 120), Plant (1980, p. 26), Liss (1993, p. 11), Ohlsson (1995, p. 95) and Gustavsson & Sandman (2015, p. 14) also make remarks that entail (T1).

Though Barry (1965, p. 47) remarks that the extent to which 'linguistic propriety demands that the end be supplied in the sentence' is a matter of degree, he suggests that it is an error 'to suppose that a need can somehow be established independently of an end'. Barry does not make explicit appeal to the notion of one's sentence's being elliptical for another, but Thomson (1987, p. 130, note 23) and Brandon (1993, p. 128) interpret him, quite reasonably, as a supporter of (T2). Flew remarks that 'to say that this or that is needed is to say that it is a necessity for the fulfilment of some function, or purpose, or end' (1981, p. 121). According to Plant (1980, p. 27) 'for any claim to…need to be intelligible, the end or purpose [for which the thing needed is needed] must be specified'. Liss (1993, p. 48), Ohlsson (1995) and Gustavsson & Sandman (2015, p. 14) also support (T2).

'Needs are means to ends: a subject always needs something for some purpose', writes Plant (1980, p. 244). Thus, Plant is among those who are committed to (T3). Barry (1965, p. 48), Flew (1981, p. 122), Ohlsson (1995, p. 95) and Gustavsson & Sandman (2015, p. 14) are also so committed. For his part, Liss (1993, pp. 45–47) takes all statements of the form 'A needs X in order to F' to refer to goals, committing

himself to (T3), and remarks, in a vivid illustration of (T4), that 'if there is no goal to have a need for' then there is 'no need'.

In his discussion of needs, Barry's main aim is to establish that needs, or true claims of need, do not, by themselves, provide justifying reasons for action (1965, p. 48). Nevertheless, Barry (1965, pp. 47–49) also seems to endorse (T4), as do Gustavsson & Sandman (2015, p. 14). Plant (1980, p. 29) appears to take it that basic needs of human beings are 'generated' by desired goals and purposes and that a need is had *because* of a goal or purpose. Liss (1993, p. 46) has it that the existence of a goal is a necessary condition for the existence of a need, but that goals can exist without there being needs. Ohlsson (1995, pp. 94, 95) holds both that the noun 'need', when it does not mean 'fundamental drive', means 'necessary condition for some goal' and, going further than (T4), that a being has a need only if that same being has a goal. §2 provides evidence that Flew (1981) also endorses (T4).

In the writings of those to whom (T1)–(T4) have been attributed, it is more or less unclear whether by 'ends', 'goals' and 'purposes' they mean something mental. Neither Barry (1965) nor Ohlsson (1995) addresses this issue and it is not easy to tell what they mean by the terminology. On the other hand, Flew (1981) appears, as we shall see in the next section, to take needs to depend upon desires. Plant (1980, p. 29) appears to suggest that only humans with desires can have 'basic or human needs', since he construes the question of 'whether there are basic or human needs' as one that is to

be answered via the question of 'whether there are certain goals and purposes that all persons desire and that are wanted as ends in themselves'. While recognizing the distinction between what a person wants and what they need, and that a person can need a certain good without knowing that they need it, Liss (1993, pp. 54–55) appears to take needing to be dependent upon wanting.[11] If he means something non-psychological by 'goal', this is not evident. Liss (1993, pp. 46, 48) remarks that someone without goals would have no needs and that someone who does not want food because he intends to starve himself to death does not need food.

Instrumentalists and absolutists can agree that the common noun 'need' has an extension: that is, that there are such entities as needs.[12] The instrumentalist holds, and the absolutist denies, that 'instrumental need' and 'need' are co-extensive noun phrases. The instrumentalist is committed to the hard generalization that there are no needs that could exist even if there were no ends, goals or purposes. Sometimes, this appears to be on the basis that it is somehow a *conceptual truth* that all needs are instrumental.[13] To take instrumentalism to be a conceptual truth, however, is to preclude oneself from saying that, while conceptually coherent on both sides, the instrumental need/absolute need distinction is empty on the absolute side. In the debate about whether the extension of the common noun 'need' includes needs that are non-instrumental, any premise to the effect that it is a conceptual truth that all needs are instrumental would obviously beg

the question. Moreover, if absolutism is conceptually incoherent then its incoherence has yet to be demonstrated in the literature.

2. Instrumentalism and 'what for?'

When a claim of the form 'A needs X/to V' is made, the hearer may ask a question of the form 'What does A need X/to V for?'. Instrumentalists about need typically take this point to support their position, sometimes to the point of being sufficient for it: 'The thing needed is always needed for something: need is instrumental' (Liss 1993, p. 49).

Barry (1964, p. 48) claims that whenever a sentence of the form 'X is needed' is asserted, 'it always makes sense…to ask what purpose it is needed for'. Barry appears to attempt to draw a contrast between such sentences and sentences of the form 'A needs X', where A is a person. In the latter, unlike the former, thinks Barry (1964, p. 49), 'the ends to which' the sentence 'may refer are limited'. Whether or not Barry succeeds in drawing such a contrast, his remarks about sentences of the form 'A needs X' when A is a person do not appear to amount to a rejection of the view that it always makes sense, for any needs claim, to ask a 'What for?' question. Moreover, he asserts (but does not argue) that in all cases the needs are 'still derivative' in the sense of being dependent on ends.

Even if questions of the form 'What does A need X/to V for?' are pertinent to all need claims of the form 'A needs X/to V', this does not establish that all needs are dependent upon ends. We will show this via discussion of some of Flew's remarks about need. For Flew (1981, p. 123), there is a 'logical link between a person's need and that same person's wants'. Flew's wider discussion suggests that this amounts to needs being dependent upon desires, where these may be 'hypothetical and ideal […] rather than actual desires' (1981, p. 125). Flew (1981, pp. 123–125) suggests that our occurrent needs are dependent upon our actual or hypothetical desires and that the needs of a person rendered incapable of having occurrent desires depend upon desires the person would have if they were not thus incapacitated.

Flew provides no very clear or direct arguments for instrumentalism, but the following passage is suggestive of some arguments:

…what is needed…is needed…as a means to the fulfilment of some further function, purpose or end….if I say that I need something, it is never inept to ask: 'What for?' I need food and drink in order to maintain life and health; I need a lift in order to get me to Manchester in the morning; and so on….

…there is always something hypothetically imperative about any need. For to say that this or that is needed is to say that it is a necessity for the

fulfilment of some function, or purpose, or end: if I want any of those fulfilments then I must have those necessities. (Flew 1981, pp. 120–121)[14]

Two valid, but unsound, arguments for instrumentalism can be reconstructed from this passage. Here is the first:

1. Whenever a claim of the form 'A needs X' is asserted, 'it is never inept to ask: "What for?"'[15]

2. The proper answer to a question of the form 'What does A need X for?' is a sentence of the form 'A needs X in order to F'.

3. Sentences of the form 'A needs X in order to F' refer to 'some further function, purpose, or end'.

4. If A needs X in order to F and F is some function, purpose or end, then A's need is hypothetically imperative rather than absolute.[16]

5. No true sentences of the form 'A needs X' concern absolute needs. (From 1, 2, 3, 4)

6. If there were any absolute needs, then some true sentences of the form 'A needs X' would concern them.

7. There are no absolute needs. (From 5, 6)

Premise 4 can be refuted by counter-example. The idea of the hypothetically imperative is, as Flew writes, the idea of that which one must do or have *given* that one has certain desires: for example, one must practise if one wants to become an excellent musician. If A needs X in order to F and F is a function, then since functions are not dependent for their existence on desires (von Wright 1963, pp. 52–54), it need not be the case that A's need for X is a hypothetical one. Whether or not I want to breathe, I need oxygen in order to breathe. So naturally it follows that if I want to breathe then I must have oxygen. That hypothetical imperative depends for its truth on the absolute truth that oxygen is necessary for breathing. (The 'for' here does not suggest an end: see below.) The force of the 'must' in the hypothetical imperative relies on a necessity that is not hypothetical. The case shows that when I have an instrumental need, this is sometimes because I have an absolute need and I want to do what satisfaction of that absolute need enables me to do. There is no eliminating the absolute need in favour of a need that is purely instrumental: rather, the absolute need is, in this case, a condition upon the possibility of the instrumental need.

A second, simpler, argument can be reconstructed from Flew's remarks:

1.   If there were absolute needs then there would be some sentences of the form 'A needs X' such that it would be 'inept to ask: "What for?"'.

2.   There are no sentences of the form 'A needs X' such that it would be 'inept to ask: "What for?"'

3.   No needs are absolute. (From 1, 2)

Premise 1 here is too strong. Some absolutists take it that in some contexts, claims of the form 'A needs X' have it built into their semantics as to what A needs X *for*. For example, Thomson (1987, p. 15) holds that in these cases what A needs X for is the avoidance of harm. This view does not of itself entail that it is sometimes 'inept' to ask 'What for?' in relation to a claim of need.

Suppose we have a claim of the form 'A needs X', e.g., 'Brown needs food'. Smith asks what Brown needs food for. Jones says that Brown needs food for survival while McAdam says that Brown needs food for a party. Now the debate moves a step back, to the phrase 'necessary for'. Flew (1981, pp. 120–121) has it, in effect, that claims of the form 'A needs X' are always elliptical for claims of the form 'A needs X in order to F'. Claims of the latter form entail, on his account, claims of the form 'If A is (as intended) to F then A must have X'. As has already been noted, the force of this 'must' cannot come from A's desire to F alone. It requires also that A's having X is *necessary for* A's F-ing. Now that *necessity for* is *not* in any way a product of A's desire. That sort of desire-independent *necessity for* is something to which the *absolutist* about need is well-

advised to appeal. The phrase 'necessary for' has instrumental and non-instrumental usages. The following examples show this.[17]

    (1) It is necessary for me to obtain a ticket to Liverpool.

    (2) It is necessary for me to have physical parts.

Suppose that both (1) and (2) are asserted. We can paraphrase the sentences as:

    (3) I need a ticket to Liverpool.

    (4) I need to have physical parts.

Now suppose I am an organism and suppose that organisms necessarily have physical parts. In this case, (4) is true. (4), however, is not indicative of a need, or at least of the kind of need that is of interest in moral and political philosophy.[18] Having physical parts is not something I can lack and yet continue (however briefly) to exist. The ethically interesting needs are among those needs that can go unsatisfied without this resulting in the immediate perishing of their bearers. The absolute usages of the phrase 'necessary for' however, are of interest because they point to cases of natural necessity. Typically, to say, for example, that it is necessary for Brown to eat in order to survive is *not* to introduce a teleological usage of 'in order to'. Rather, it is to claim that it is impossible

for Brown to survive without eating: this claim is teleological neither in fact nor in appearance. Whether or not absolutism is correct, the arguments for instrumentalism that are in the literature are unsound, for they rely upon the falsehood that *necessity for* must be teleological.

3. A dilemma for instrumentalism

Either 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose', as they occur in (T3) and (T4), are to be taken to be restricted to the ends, goals and purposes that only minded beings can have as their own or they are to have wider, 'functional' reference.

If 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' refer to ends, goals and purposes that only minded beings can have as their own, then instrumentalism has the implausible consequence that only minded beings can have needs of their own. If, on the other hand, 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' are not meant to refer only to the ends, goals and purposes that only minded beings can have as their own, then (T1)–(T3) are consistent with absolutism and it remains the case that the dependency indicated in (T4) cannot obtain.

On the first horn of this dilemma, 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' are understood not merely as outcomes, but as endeavours that are essentially conceived of, and possibly pursued, by agents.[19] The claim that needs are dependent upon ends, in this sense, commits its exponent to the view that need is a mind-dependent phenomenon.[20] On this

view, a world without minded beings would be a world without need. For the absolutist, on the other hand, while the satisfaction of those needs the absolutist regards as absolute may be necessary for the continued pursuit of an agent's desires (whatever their content), it is not this relationship between needs and desires in virtue of which the needs exist.[21] For the absolutist, there can be organisms that have needs of their own but no desires. On this horn of the dilemma, absolutism has a strong presumptive correctness that no known arguments for instrumentalism come close to being powerful enough to overcome. As well as conferring instrumental needs upon the plants they look after, gardeners and farmers aim to know and to tend to the natural needs of the plants: the natural needs of plants do not typically arise from any human aims or projects (Attfield 1981, pp. 36–43; Hacker 2007, p. 130). No-one who accepts this can, on the first horn of the dilemma, regard instrumentalism as at all plausible.

For the second horn of the dilemma, suppose that 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' are to be interpreted in a teleological manner that is not restricted to conscious intentions. In that circumstance, the absolutist can agree with (T1)–(T3). For independent reasons, (T4) remains implausible. When 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' are interpreted teleologically rather than in a mentalistic manner, with some parts of an organism and some of the organism's activities being held to be explicable teleologically, it remains the case that it is organisms themselves that are the primary bearers of natural needs. The ends, goals and purposes of an organism's organs and of its activities are explicable

in terms of the meeting of the organism's natural needs, rather than being themselves explanatorily prior to the organism's natural needs; moreover, the organism's natural needs cannot be ontologically dependent upon those ends, goals or purposes. Those of an organism's natural needs that are essential to all members of its species, which we may call its 'natural species needs', such as my need for water, can only exist if the organism itself exists but they do not *depend for their existence* upon the organism.[22] If the needs were ontologically dependent upon the organism then, given the asymmetry of ontological dependency, the organism could exist without having them. An organism and that organism's natural species needs are, of necessity, co-existent: there is therefore no relationship of ontological dependency, in either direction, between them. Now even if it is supposed that a plant itself, for example, has ends, goals or purposes of its own, none of these can be ontologically prior to all of the plant's natural needs: in order for the ends, goals or purposes to be ontologically prior to the plant's natural species needs, the ends, goals or purposes would have to be ontologically prior to the plant itself, which contradicts the supposition that they are the plant's own.

In fact, no party to the debate seems to suppose that plants have ends, goals and purposes of their own. Granting that plants do not have their own ends, goals or purposes, the needs of plants must, on this horn of the dilemma (as on the first) depend upon the ends, goals and purposes of beings that do have ends, goals and purposes of

their own. We thus arrive at the same result as on the first horn of the dilemma: the instrumentalist cannot admit that plants have natural needs of their own.

4. Needs, satisfiers, preconditions and means

Needs are distinct from their satisfiers: for example, my need for water is distinct from water itself, which is the need's satisfier (Taylor 1959, p. 106; White 1975, p. 104; Thomson 1987, p. 12; Wiggins 1991, p. 16; Liss 1993, pp. 44–45; Hope, Østerdal & Hasman 2010, p. 471; McLeod 2011, pp. 212, 219; McLeod 2014, p. 294). This distinction can also be illustrated by pointing to the difference, implicit in Wiggins (1991, pp. 2–4), between the following two questions: (i) What is it to need? (ii) What is needed? The first question is about the character of need. The second is about what it is that satisfies need. The distinction between needs and their satisfiers undermines the contention that needs themselves are always instrumental. Even if all needs-satisfiers are instruments, it does not follow that all needs are instruments. An instrument is something that is a means to an end: a need (as opposed to its satisfier) is not. A need is not of use-value to its bearer, whereas an instrument is of use-value to its user. Our needs cannot, in contrast with our abilities, be exercised. At least typically, our needs (as opposed to their satisfiers) are not useful to us as individuals.

It is pertinent also to note the importance of a further distinction, implicit in Anscombe (1958, p. 7), between preconditions and means. If I want to write a long book, then surviving for several more years may, for me, be a means to my end. Here it is my survival itself, not my need for it, which is a means. To write the book, I need to have a certain level of education. My being educated to that level, though partly a means to the end of my being capable of writing, would not normally be a means to the end of writing the book (and so is not, unlike, e.g., a computer purchased for the task, an instrument towards it). Being educated to the level in question would typically be a precondition for, rather than a means towards, writing the book.

The satisfaction of some of our needs, including some desire-independent needs that we share with all our fellow humans, is a precondition for (and not essentially a means towards) the development of the capacity to formulate conscious ends. The meeting of certain biological needs must take place before I can even have any conscious ends of my own (Doyal & Gough 1991, p. 69; Alvarez 2009, p. 493). What is, before I am able to form my own conscious ends, a precondition for my having any such ends does not retrospectively become a means towards the meeting of some of these ends once I am able to form them. The capacity to have ends of one's own, as opposed to the potentiality to develop it, only arises at a certain developmental stage. The phenomenon of biological need is prior to that of instrumental need, since the only organisms that can have ends of their own are highly evolved organisms whose

principal biological needs are satisfied. If needs were essentially instrumental, in that they depended for their existence upon there being agents with ends, whatever those ends might be, then this point about biological need could not be true. This appeal to the absoluteness of some biological needs is not intended to suggest that all absolute needs are biological: it may well be plausible, for example, that humans typically have some absolute psychological needs and some absolute needs that stem from their status as persons (in a more or less Kantian sense). The case is used simply because it is vivid and easier to think about and because instrumentalism is a hard generalization which one good counterexample is enough to refute.

5. Conclusion

On a mentalistic understanding of what an end is, instrumentalism requires that every organism with a need either has a mentalistic end of its own or (in the case of organisms incapable of having such ends) has its needs thanks to the ends of other beings. Absolutism, on the other hand, allows for the commonsense view that organisms that are incapable of having mentalistic ends have needs that they would have even if there were no minded beings in their world. When instrumentalism is construed, alternatively, as a thesis about the dependency of needs on non-mentalistic ends, goals and purposes,

its dependency claim cannot stand up: there is no real distinction between being an organism and having biological needs.[23]

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[1] The second conjunct cannot charitably be interpreted as entailing that *no* desires are revisable by reasoning: rather, the claim is that those desires upon which practical reasoning ultimately depends are not themselves revisable by reasoning. See Smith (1994, p. 8).

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[2] On the distinction between motivating and normative reasons, see Smith (1994, pp. 94–98).

[3] Ohlsson (1995, p. 97) writes that 'the distinction that [absolutists] want to emphasize is that between necessary conditions for arbitrarily chosen goals and some goal which can be taken as given and presupposed by certain statements about fundamental needs'. On the contrary, the absolutist's claim is that some needs do not stem from goals at all. Wiggins (1991, p. 10) holds that claims of absolute need of persons are *equivalent* to claims of instrumental need in which the end is harm avoidance. This does not appear to have been intended to entail that absolute need is a species of instrumental need: see McLeod (2014, p. 295).

[4] The position of Taylor (1959, pp. 109–111), who thinks that some claims of the form 'A needs X' are 'pure recommendations', motivates the inclusion of 'it is a fact that' in (T1) and 'true' in (T2).

[5] Frankfurt (1984, pp. 2–3) says it is among some 'elementary theoretical considerations' about need that 'nothing is needed except in virtue of being an indispensable condition for the attainment of a certain end'. This seems simultaneously to commit him to (T3) and (T4). He also endorses (T1): 'When something is needed it must…always be possible to specify what it is needed *for*' (1984, p. 3).

[6] The words 'end', 'goal' and 'purpose' are included in (T3) and (T4) because instrumentalists use one or more of these terms when stating their own position. As in

the source literature, I leave unaddressed the question of whether these terms are interchangeable.

[7] For beings capable of desire, many of their ends, goals and purposes will presumably derive from, or even, if Smith (1994, p. 116) is right, *be*, desires. Millgram (1997, p. 11) holds that 'one cannot desire at will'. This article is neutral about that. As part of his argument, Millgram (1997 pp. 14–23, 28–31, 33–35) appeals to the imagined case of a pill that is supposed, presumably to the knowledge of the taker, when taking it, to result in a desire had 'at pill'. Millgram (1997, p. 15) thinks that, in fact, the inferential commitments involved in desires mean there could be no desire had at pill unless the taker forgot having, in order to induce the intended desire, taken the pill (which might be achieved, for example, if the pill also had this memory-cancelling effect), or the taker came to think that there were independent reasons for the desire, or if the taker 'suffers a failure of rationality'. Now an agent *could*, on my account of what an absolute need is, take a pill that results in the agent having an absolute need that would not have been had but for having taken the pill. Suppose, for example, that the pill contains a poison for which there is an antidote. If I take the pill, then, I will have an absolute need for the antidote. That situation has come about because –and this is a casual 'because'– I took the poisonous pill. Now even if, in doing so, I *wanted* (e.g., as part of an experiment) to end up in need of the antidote, this need is, in the sense relevant to this article, *independent* of my having taken the pill. On an absolutist conception, if I have just

taken the pill then I now need the antidote no matter what my desires are *now*. An absolute need is absolute not because it is causally independent of a desire (although I would contend that many such needs are so independent) but because it is ontologically independent of ends, goals and purposes (whether these are construed, as Smith construes goals, as intentions or merely in a teleological manner). In the case of instrumental needs, if these depend ontologically on desires and desires cannot normally be had 'at pill', then neither can instrumental needs.

[8] E.g., Gustavsson (2014, p. 23) writes: '[T]he crucial difference is between writers who claim that all needs are instrumental (taking the form of "x needs y in order to z") and those who deny this claim and argue that some needs are categorical or dispositional (taking the form "if x really needs y then x needs y, period").' As we shall see in §2, the arguments for instrumentalism that are in the literature include the premise (sometimes regarded as a sufficient condition for instrumentalism) that everything needed is needed *for* something.

[9] Compare Gustavsson's remark (2014, p. 26), that 'the relevant difference between [the two positions] is not whether there are one or two concepts of need but rather how z is understood [in the schema "x needs y in order to z"]': that is to say, on what fills the z-place. The difference between Gustavsson and me here is that he interprets the schema as requiring that the z-place must always be filled by a term that refers to a goal even

when the schema is applied to the absolutist position. Absolutism as I have characterized it is, on Gustavsson's account, ruled out of logical space.

[10] White (1975, pp. 105, 121) holds that needs relate to end-states, but by 'end-states' he appears to mean all outcomes whatever. Brandon (1993, p. 127, note 3) appears to back this interpretation. By contrast, Thomson (1987, p. 129 note 4), Wiggins (1991, p. 7) and Ramsay (1992, p. 3) appear to take White to be an instrumentalist. This may be because White endorses (T1) and (T2). (T1) and (T2) do not, however, entail instrumentalism (as the main text makes clear). In fairness to Wiggins, he perhaps characterizes White not as an instrumentalist, but as a philosopher whose account of needs is broadly right for 'purely instrumental needing' but not for absolute needing. If by 'end-state' White means something more akin to the meaning of 'outcome' than to that of 'purpose' or 'goal', then White is no supporter of (T3). His commitment to (T1) is evident from the following remark: 'If A *needs* to V, there must be something he has to V for (in order to, etc.)' (1975, p. 103). White (1975, 105) endorses (T2). If I interpret White's position correctly, he would agree that the conjunction of (T1) and (T2) does not entail (T3). As it happens, White also seems to reject (T4). If ends arise from choices and (T4) is true, then there cannot be mind-independent needs. Given that White (1975, pp. 105, 111) associates ends (as opposed to end-states) with choice and takes it that there are mind-independent needs, he is precluded from endorsing (and

never in fact says anything that commits him to) the claim that all needs are instrumental.

[11] David Seedhouse, the author of the foreword to Liss's book, approvingly remarks (Liss 1993, p. 2) that on Liss's account health care needs owe their existence to chosen goals. The influence of absolutist writing on needs from the 1980s has evidently not been so pervasive as to prevent philosophers in subsequent decades from subscribing even to the dependency of needs upon preferences, still less to the essentially instrumental character of all needing.

[12] This does not require that are such *objects* as needs: rather, it leaves unanswered the question of the ontological status of needs with respect to category distinctions in metaphysics.

[13] Gustavsson & Sandman (2015, p. 14) have it that the instrumental nature of need is a matter of 'conceptual structure'. Juth (2015, p. 74, note 3) writes that: 'the *concept* of need is always instrumental, but […] some needs […] have special moral force or give rise to legitimate claims [….] ''categorical needs'' is not a linguistic category, but a moral one'. Neither article appears to provide any original arguments for instrumentalism. Arguments, in other work, that are relevant to the issue of whether it is a conceptual truth that needs are always instrumental are discussed in the next section.

[14] On the idea that needing is needing *for*, compare White (1975, p. 103).

[15] Premise 1 might well be disputed, along lines suggested by Wiggins (1991, pp. 7–9), but that avenue is not pursued here. It is evident that Flew intends his remark that 'if I say that I need something it is never inept to ask: "What for?"' (1981, p. 120) to illustrate a point about all need claims, not just first-person singular ones. He does not explain what he means by 'inept': he is probably alluding to the allegation of failure fully to grasp the semantics of some claims of need.

[16] Flew does not himself use the term 'absolute'. He invalidly infers the hypothetically imperative nature of claims of need from his claim that 'to say that this or that is needed is to say that it is a necessity for the fulfilment of some function, or purpose, or end' (1981, p. 121). In the above reconstruction, the inclusion of 4 as a separate premise enables a valid argument to be reconstructed from his remarks. To say that some need claims are absolute, rather than hypothetically imperative, is not, of course, to say that those need claims are categorical imperatives; indeed, it is not to say that the need claims in question are in any sense imperatives.

[17] On this point, and the second example, compare Brandon (1993, p. 128) and McLeod (2011, pp. 220–221).

[18] Compare White (1975, p. 104).

[19] Compare von Wright (1963, p. 76; 1983, p. 3; 1986, p. 61); Plant (1980, p. 245).

[20] Hare's remark (1969, p. 256) that 'there is an intimate logical relation between what is needed and what is desired' appears to be an allusion to such dependency.

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[21] Compare Hope, Østerdal & Hasman (2010, p. 472).

[22] The notion of ontological dependency is nuanced and it is not possible to explore it in detail here. Suffice it to say that the fact that A can exist only if B exists is insufficient for the ontological dependency of A upon B. Suppose that it is necessary that there are numbers. It follows that I can exist only if there are numbers. This hardly establishes, in any sense, that I owe my existence to that of numbers. See further Lowe (2010).

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