

Mere Trying: Goals without Desires

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Abstract

It is possible to try to do something without desiring that you succeed. (Call this “Mere Trying.”) For instance, I can try to hit a golf ball straight, intending to exhibit to you the left-bias in my swing. This indicates that, in general, goal-setting in action can come apart from our desires. This paper defends the existence of Mere Trying from objections and discusses the interplay of goal-setting states exhibited by Mere Trying. Finally, I argue that the fact that acting on a goal need not imply desiring success undermines Nguyen’s (2019, 2020) suggestion that “striving play” involves forming a desire for instrumental reasons.

Keywords: Trying, Intention, Desire, Goals, Striving Play

1

Suppose I have a persistent leftward-bias in my golf swing.¹ When I try my utmost to hit the ball straight, it usually spins off thirty degrees to the left. (This is called a “hook.”) One day I try to demonstrate this to a friend, Anna, in hopes that she can diagnose the problem. I stand on a square mat at a driving range, orient myself perpendicular to the line formed by the front of the mat, and try to hit the ball straight ahead (i.e. along a line perpendicular to the front of the mat). Typically when I do this, the ball ends up spinning off thirty degrees leftward—and, on this occasion, I’m intending to produce a

¹This is, unfortunately, no fantastical example.

such a shot so that Anna can see what aspects of my normal straight-aiming swing are to blame. I make my swing and the ball does spin off to the left thirty degrees. Let's call this case *Demonstration*. Here is a *prima facie* observation:

A. Although, in *Demonstration*, I am trying to hit the ball straight, I do not want to hit it straight.

I'll call a case where someone tries to ϕ without wanting to ϕ a case of *Mere Trying*. *A* characterizes *Demonstration* a case of Mere Trying, and it strikes me as a perfectly ordinary way of describing the case. But Mere Trying is controversial—some philosophers have defended accounts of action according to which it is impossible.² So, let me provide some reasons for thinking that *A* is true.

I'll start with the second half of *A*: I do not want to hit the ball straight. Terms like “wanting” and “desire” are notoriously slippery, so to avoid verbal disputes, I'll stipulate what I mean by “wanting:” someone wants/desires to ϕ iff they prefer ϕ -ing to not ϕ -ing. As stipulations go this is, I think, well motivated. Philosophers have generally supposed that desires/wants have a deep connection to preferences, and a number have directly endorsed the the equivalence between desiring to ϕ and preferring ϕ -ing to not ϕ -ing (Davis 1981; Blumberg 2022). And between preference and desire/wanting, preference has arguably been the clearer and more fruitful conceptual tool for psychologists and economists trying to describe the motivational states that drive action. This stipulation does not trivialize the debate over Mere Trying: there is a substantive question whether you can try to ϕ without preferring ϕ -ing over not ϕ -ing.

Here's a justification for thinking that, in *Demonstration*, I do *not* want to hit the ball straight.³ My behavior suggests that I prefer not hitting the ball straight, in this instance, to hitting it straight. If the situation plays out as I described, i.e. I hit the ball with a hook, I won't show any signs of disappointment or frustration. But if, contrary to fact, I had actually hit the ball straight, then, given the set up, I likely *would* show frustration.

²See e.g. Adams 1991, 1994; McCann 1986; Ludwig 1992, 2021.

³No doubt, I have a standing desire to *be able* to hit the ball straight. But regarding this particular occasion, I need the ball to go left in order to exhibit the hook.

I might say, “Shoot” or “That’s a fluke.” I would try to redo the demonstration. Those reactions suggest that, in *Demonstration*, my preference is to not hit the ball the ball straight rather than to hit it straight, i.e they suggest I don’t want to hit it straight.

Now the first component of A: in *Demonstration* I am trying to hit the ball straight. Here’s an argument for that component. In *Demonstration*, I want to exhibit my swing to Anna exactly as it ordinarily is when I try to hit the ball straight. The easiest way I know how to do this is to try, on that occasion, to hit the ball straight. So that is what I do.

Is there any reason to doubt that, in *Demonstration*, I am “really” trying to hit the ball straight? Could we say for instance, “All you are actually trying to do is mimic perfectly the way you would swing if you were trying to hit the ball straight. You’re not trying, in addition, to hit the ball straight.” (c.f. McCann 1986, Adams 1991, 1994.)⁴

It is true that I am trying to mimic perfectly my ordinary swing when I try to hit the ball straight. And, in principle, it might be possible to do this without actually trying to hit the ball straight. But, as I say, one good and easy way to perform this mimicry is to actually *try* to hit the ball straight. In fact, I don’t know how else I might do it. The minute motions that go into rotating my hands, arms, legs and torso in the way characteristic of my ordinary straight-aiming swing are mostly are below my conscious awareness. If you asked me to show you the orientation of my hands in the middle of my downswing, I would have to consult a video of myself performing a whole swing to give you an answer. Since I do not know what motions are characteristic of my ordinary straight-aiming swing, the best way I have of trying to perform the act of mimicry in question is simply to try to hit the ball straight.

This fact, I think, gives *Demonstration*, an edge over other cases that have been discussed as examples of Mere Trying. For philosophers have produced a number of such examples—typically they are cases, like *Demonstration*, where an agent has reasons to

⁴Another way of putting this point might be: “You are not trying to hit the ball straight, you are trying to demonstrate a straight-aiming swing.” I would give the same answer to an objection formulated this way.

try to ϕ that aren't actually reasons to ϕ .⁵ For instance, you might try to touch a twelve-foot ceiling simply to show how high you can jump. Now, I think most of these are fine examples of Mere Trying, but, for a skeptic, they look open to the objection that the agent is merely “going through the motions.”⁶ And this objection is not totally implausible. Suppose, you asked me, in the middle of a field, to imitate someone trying to touch a twelve-foot ceiling above them. I know what I would do: extend my arms upward, look up, and jump as high as I can. Obviously, I'm perfectly capable of doing this without trying to touch anything. A person who is indoors with a twelve-foot ceiling above them, who “tries” to touch the ceiling in order to show how high they can jump might really be doing exactly what I am doing in the field—and for the same reason they needn't *really* be trying to touch the ceiling. But, regarding *Demonstration*, the suggestion that I'm merely going through the motions of trying to hit the ball straight without actually trying to hit it straight strains credulity. I don't know what “going through” those motions really consists in, and I have no independent grip on how to perform them without actually trying to hit the ball straight.

Are there any other good reasons to think that, in *Demonstration*, I am not genuinely trying to hit the ball straight? We might believe it on a theoretical basis. As I mentioned, philosophers have proposed theories of action according to which it is *impossible* to try ϕ unless you desire to ϕ .⁷ Frederick Adams (1991, 1994) is one notable proponent of such a theory. On Adam's view, to characterize some behavior as trying/attempting to ϕ is to say that it is behavior directed by the intention to ϕ (Adams 1994 p. 619). And, according to his theory, having an intention to ϕ constitutively depends on having a desire to ϕ . So it follows that, for any behavior to count as “trying to ϕ ” the agent undertaking it must have a desire to ϕ . The theoretical background that motivates these commitments is roughly the following. Desires are states of a system that represent goals and cause the

⁵See Harman 1986; Mele 1990, 1991, 1994; Hornsby 1995, 2010; Holguín and Lederman 2024. Another sort of example comes from Chan 2004. Chan's denial of the existence of extrinsic desires leads him to think there are cases where an agent intends to ϕ and tries to ϕ without desiring to ϕ .

⁶Adams 1991, 1994 criticizes Mele 1990's chess example on precisely these grounds. So, contra Mele, I don't see the chess player example as differing importantly from “touch-the-ceiling” style cases.

⁷See e.g. Adams 1991, 1994; McCann 1986; Ludwig 1992, 2021.

system to pursue those goals; when a system has an intention to pursue some goal, this goal has to be set by the system's desires (*ibid.* p. 619). To characterize some behavior as *an attempt to ϕ* is to characterize the behavior as having an "intentional object," a goal. This is only legitimate if it is controlled by an internal state which has ϕ -ing as its goal. Such a state just is an intention to ϕ , which inherits its content from a desire to ϕ (*ibid.* p. 620).

This, I think, overlooks the fact that there is a role for goal-setting, in the explanation of action, where the content of the goal is not directly determined by the agent's desires. As we've said, in *Demonstration*, I don't desire to hit the ball straight. But all the same, when I am standing on the mat looking down at the ball, my movements are guided by a state that represents hitting the ball straight as a goal. I keep my eye directed at the ball and, throughout the swing, I use perceptual feedback to adjust my motions with the aim of orienting the club so that it connects with the ball squarely along a path perpendicular to the mat. This state makes a causal difference to the motions I produce.⁸ If, in *Demonstration*, I instead set myself the goal of, say, striking the ball along a path that veers slightly away from my body and adjusted my movements in response to perceptual feedback with respect to *that* goal, I likely would have produced a significantly different motion than my ordinary straight-aiming swing—even if, in fact, my ordinary straight-aiming swing is characterized by such a path. And there is nothing illegitimate about ascribing this state *hitting the ball straight* as its "intentional object" or goal, even if this goal is not directly inherited from a desire to hit the ball straight. The state initiates a sequence of motor-controlling states, the success conditions of which are given independently of this particular action, and their cumulative success conditions can be described as moving my body so as to orient the club to connect with the ball squarely along a path perpendicular to the mat. Trying involves guiding your movements with respect to a goal—but the goal may or may not be something you desire.

⁸There is a large and rich empirical literature documenting the impact of conscious "aiming" on the motor planning system. For some illustrative examples, see Krakauer and Mazzoni 2006, Taylor et al. 2014, Day et al. 2016.

2

The possibility of Mere Trying shows that conative—“action guiding”—psychological states, as such, need not conform in their content to our desires. In every instance where an agent tries to ϕ their behavior is caused by a state that represents ϕ -ing as a goal, but, if Mere Trying is possible, this state need not be caused by or constitutively depend on a desire to ϕ .

Cases of Mere Trying also indicate that, in the explanation of a particular action, multiple conative states can interact in complex ways. In *Demonstration* I have one conative state that represents demonstrating my hook as a goal—I have characterized this state as an *intention*—and another conative state that represents hitting the ball straight as a goal. Intuitively, the latter is subordinate to the former. The former state has a content that does reflect my desires—I want to demonstrate the hook. And, *prima facie*, the former state causes the latter: the intention to do the demonstration causes me to form a conative state directed at hitting the ball straight. By contrast, the later state is the more proximate cause of the motor-command directing my movements. Finally, although the content of these two states are incompatible and I know this—I know that I cannot both demonstrate my hook and hit the ball straight—I am not irrational for holding these two conative states.

These points are anticipated, in a slightly different context, by Michael Bratman (Bratman 1984, 1987 Chapters 8 and 9). For Bratman, intentions are planning states—a distinguished sort of conative state that is subject to norms of rational coherence; and not all action guiding states are subject to the same norms. This is part of the lesson of his video game player example. In that example, an ambidextrous video game player simultaneously plays two video games with a controller in each hand, where the goal of each game is to shoot a ship with a missile. The player knows that the games are coordinated in such a way that that it is impossible to hit both ships—if the missile successfully hits the ship in either game, both games shut down. Bratman thinks that, in this case, the agent does not have an intention to hit the left ship or an intention to

hit the right ship (Bratman 1984 pg. 383, 1987 pg. 115). (If he had either, then, given the symmetry of the case, he should have both. And having both, given what he knows, would be irrational.) But Bratman also affirms that the agent is both *trying* to hit the left ship and *trying* to hit the right ship (Bratman 1984 pg. 388 , 1987 pg. 118). These tryings are psychologically-guided activities—the movements of each of the player’s hands are guided by the goal of hitting the respective ships. Bratman calls the states that do this guidance “guiding desires” (1987 pg. 137-138). Guiding desires, he suggests, are not subject to norms of rational coherence with each other or with the agent’s intentions. This point can applied to *Demonstration* too: although I have a conative state that represents hitting the ball straight as a goal, that state isn’t an intention and I’m under no rational pressure to bring my intention to demonstrate my hook into coherence with it.

Bratman’s video game example is not a case of Mere Trying. He characterizes the player as *wanting* to hit the left ship and also *wanting* to hit the right ship. It is a case where an agent tries to ϕ without intending to ϕ , not without wanting/desiring to ϕ . Although I’m largely in sympathy with Bratman’s account, I think cases of Mere Trying show that his discussion is insufficiently general. The picture presented in Bratman 1987 suggests that, if an agent tries (or “endeavors”) to do something that they are not intending to do, then their trying is controlled by a guiding desire.⁹ But, in *Demonstration*, although I am trying to hit the ball straight, it would be misleading to call the conative state that controls my movements a guiding desire to hit the ball straight. There is no reason to characterize this state as a species of desire. In *Demonstration*, I don’t have a desire to hit the ball straight, and no such desire is required to explain my action.

My aim has simply been to argue that Mere Trying occurs, and, therefore, that we can form and act on conative states which do not have their content grounded in our desires. I won’t attempt to embed my account in a broader systematic theory of action,

⁹See Bratman 1987 Chapter 9. Bratman sometimes speaks in a way that treats “trying” and “endeavoring” as equivalent, but he also claims that any agent who endeavors to ϕ wants to ϕ (*ibid.* pg. 137). One way to illustrate the sense in which, in my view, his account is artificially narrow would be to say: there are *tryings*, activities guided by the representation of a goal, that are not *endeavors* as Bratman describes them.

but I think such a project would be fruitful. For instance, I think it may shed light on the nature of compulsion. In the next section, I show how the account can be used to clarify some puzzles related to Thi Nguyen’s (Nguyen 2019, 2020) account of games.

3

The motivational structure on display in *Demonstration* has is similar to what Thi Nguyen (2019, 2020) has identified as characteristic of “striving play.” And reflecting on *Demonstration* brings out an ambiguity in Nguyen’s discussion of the ends we take on in striving play.

Nguyen’s account of striving play is a development of Bernard Suits’ analysis of games as “a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits 1978 pg. 41). To engage in striving play is to adopt the ends given by the game for the sake of *struggling toward those ends* (Nguyen 2020 pg. 8-9, 2019 pg. 5-6). (For simplicity, I’ll treat “achieving the ends given by the game” as interchangeable with “winning.”) Often when we play a game, we may have no independent interest in winning—we play because we value *playing*. We find something valuable about the struggling activity that constitutes playing the game. Since this this struggling activity intrinsically involves adopting winning as an end, we adopt winning as an end *for the sake* of struggling toward that end. This is striving play.

I argued in the last two sections that “adopting a goal/end” is separable from desiring/wanting to achieve that end; you can form and act on a conative state that represents ϕ -ing as a goal without desiring to ϕ . Nguyen collapses this distinction. He claims that when we adopt a goal in the context of striving play, we acquire a desire to achieve that goal. He says that the striving player temporarily acquires an “interest” in winning (Nguyen 2019 p. 5), and that they bring themselves to temporarily care about an end (Nguyen 2020 p. 10). I don’t doubt that when people play games, they often *do* acquire a desire to win. But since Nguyen doesn’t distinguish between “adopting ϕ -ing as a goal” and “desiring to ϕ ,” he presents the acquisition of a desire to win as manifesting a curious

sort of practical reasoning. “In striving play,” he says, “we acquire desires for instrumental reasons. We desire to win for the sake of the struggle, and not for the desirability of the win itself” (Nguyen 2019 p. 26).

As Nguyen recognizes, this looks like the wrong kind of reason for a desire to ϕ . It’s a reason that bears on the benefits of forming a desire to ϕ , not on the desirability of ϕ -ing. Philosophers have written a great deal about this phenomenon—that there can be wrong kinds of reasons for forming a mental state of specific kind—typically in application to belief and intention.¹⁰ The role that reasons play in generating/justifying desires is more controversial¹¹ than for beliefs/intentions, but, none-the-less, it looks like there also *are* wrong kinds of reasons for desires. Bribes for desires seem to have the hallmarks that make bribes for beliefs/intentions wrong-kinds-of-reason cases. Suppose somebody offered me \$500 simply to form the desire to bathe in the sewer; suppose, further, that I think they will infallibly be able to tell if I have this desire whether or not I act on it. In such a case, I would take it to be overall beneficial for me to form the desire to bathe in the sewer. But this consideration would not be *effective* in getting me to desire bathing in the sewer. Further, this consideration does not seem to bear on the desirability of bathing in the sewer at all—it hasn’t made me aware of any facts that show bathing in the sewer to be prudent, pleasant, or interesting, etc.

In my view, Nguyen’s description of the “instrumental reason” for forming a desire to win is the wrong kind of reason. It is a consideration that shows that having a desire to win would be valuable (because it would motivate you to engage in some valuable striving), but, as Nguyen acknowledges, this does not bear on the desirability of winning. To disarm this objection, Nguyen points out that there is an important difference between the instrumental reasons that, in striving play, motivate a desire to win and simple “bribes-for-desires” cases. In a bribe-for-desire case, you are provided with a reason simply to *form* a desire without being provided a reason to act toward fulfilling

¹⁰See, for example, Olson 2004, D’Arms and Jacobson 2000, Hieronymi 2005, Kelly 2002, M. Schroeder 2012. Section 3.1 of Howard 2023 provides an overview of this literature as it relates to Fitting Attitude Theories of Value.

¹¹See T. Schroeder 2020 Section 3.2.

that desire (ibid. p. 28). In striving play, you have a reason to form the desire to win *and* to act on that desire—because the desire is only valuable insofar as it motivates you to act, i.e. to engage in some valuable striving. But it’s difficult to see why this difference should matter. Suppose someone were to propose to me: “If you form and act on the desire to walk into this road and get hit by a car, I will pay you \$500. (Don’t worry, these are paid stunt drivers who I can guarantee will not hit you.)” This gives me a good reason to form and act on a desire to get hit by a car. But, all the same, it is the wrong kind of reason to desire to get hit by a car.

It is easy to dissolve this difficulty. Striving play constitutively involves adopting winning as a goal in the sense that it constitutively involves *trying* to win (C.f. Baron-Schmitt 2023 pg. 258). But trying to win need not involve wanting or desiring to win. So striving play as such does not involve forming a desire for the wrong kind of reason. Of course, this will leave unexplained the fact that, often, people who play games “just for the sake of playing” seemingly do end up desiring to win. But there are a number of explanations one could go on to provide. For example, it could be that, when we engage in striving play we typically not only try to win but also temporarily indulge in the fiction that winning is important (Baron-Schmitt 2023).

I think Nguyen is right to suggest that the “disposable ends” that are characteristic of striving play arise many different areas of human life. But, in these other contexts, it is often important to disassociate adopting an end from wanting/desiring to achieve that end. For instance, taking on a professional role often involves adopting goals that you may or may not care about. Consider a detective who strongly suspects her father committed a murder. The detective is professionally obligated to try to find out who committed the murder, but she might strongly desire not to know who committed it. I think the detective can fulfill her professional obligations without wanting to know the answer. The fact that her ultimate preference is to stay ignorant doesn’t make it impossible to do her job.

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