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## Wittgenstein and the Problem of Will in Philosophical Investigations

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on the nature of the will as presented in *Philosophical Investigations*. When Wittgenstein first encountered the problem of will, opinions on the issue seemed to be polarized between the ideas of empiricists and those of Schopenhauer. Firstly, empiricist account of the will will be examined; thereupon a brief investigation into current developments of empiricist ideas, particularly within cognitive science, will be undertaken as the basis of further discussion. In subsequent paragraphs, it will be demonstrated that the most fruitful results cannot be obtained from observations of the usual manifestations of will, but from an analysis of failed actions; several prominent examples have been provided by Wittgenstein. Lastly, it will be argued that while Wittgenstein opposed empiricist lines of thought, his philosophy may be reconciled with them in the light of results from contemporary philosophy.

### Introduction

When Young Wittgenstein started to reflect on philosophical problems at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, opinions on the problem of the nature of the will or willing appeared divided between the empiricist tradition (Hobbes, Locke, James, Russell) and Schopenhauer's philosophy. Locke attempted to explain willing as "an act of the Mind, directing its thought to the production of any action" (Locke 1979: 4.10.19). However, he found the description unsatisfactory and declared that it is notoriously difficult to describe the phenomenon of will because of its simplicity. It would be preferable, according to Locke, if everyone endeavoured to reflect the nature of the will directly within his own mind rather than trying to provide explanation in words, because such an explanation is necessarily insufficient (Locke 1979: 2.21.30).

Among other empiricist philosophers, James is the most relevant for the forthcoming discussion and a number of interpreters. For example Hyman (2011) and Wenzel (2016), believe that Wittgenstein's reflections on the nature of will in *Philosophical Investigations* are in reaction to James' ideas, which he opposes. This paper focuses on the discussion of will within this work (for the problem of will in *Notebooks* see Vacura 2017, in *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* see Wenzel 2016 and Hyman 2001). Wittgenstein's views cover merely a few pages of this book, these pages, however, attracted much attention and sparked multiple discussions.

James claims that whenever any part of the human body performs a movement a "set of impressions" are created, which originate in the moved part. Those impressions are *kinaesthetic*, meaning originating in organs that participated in the movement: "Not only are our muscles supplied with afferent as well as efferent nerves, but tendons, the ligaments, the articular surfaces, and the skin about the joins are all sensitive." (James 1890: 488) These impressions serve as guiding sensations when performing movement. Wittgenstein affirms this observation when he says: "It is

well-known fact that the sensory nerves and receptors are needed to make you know your position, posture, movements" (WCL: 272).

These kinaesthetic impressions result almost immediately in appropriate actions: "Every pulse of feeling which we have is the correlate of some neural activity that is already on its way to instigate movement." (James 1890: 526) Similarly, Wittgenstein disagrees that there must be some "wishing" preceding an action: "Wishing to do it is certainly in no way a condition preceding the doing of it" (WCL: 261). The idea of a special act of will that requires adding to the regular thought is according to James misguided and is based on "popular notion" that activity "must result from some super-added 'will-force'" (James 1890: 526).

James therefore provides a paradigmatic expression of the empiricist approach to will which Hacker (2000: 197–202) summarizes in following points: 1) empiricist tradition undermines the distinction between action and reaction, voluntary and involuntary acts; 2) the concept of agency is distorted or abolished; 3) what we do is in the first instance always to move our bodies (James 1890: 486); 4) more complex descriptions (for example, to write a letter) are redescriptions of simple body movements in the light of intentions, circumstances, effects, etc.; 5) there is disagreement on the nature of volition in relation to whether it is a mental act or mental event; 6) there is agreement that volitions are causes of the ensuing movement.

### Beyond the Empiricist Account of the Will

Contemporary empiricists argue that although James was generally correct, he made an error by omitting visual perception when describing connection of act of will to movement. The sensations guiding movement are not only kinaesthetic but also visual; most importantly, both types of sensation joint and correlated. Sensations of this kind are heightened in acts of self-touch. Self-touch consists of timely correlated parallel events of 1) internal experience of act of will 2) kinaesthetic impression from part of the body performing an action, and (sometimes); 3) visual sensation presenting both parts of the body touching each other. In particular, this type of complex sensation enables humans to learn to correlate internal acts of will with changes perceived in the external world.

Contemporary developmental psychology considers these correlated sensations important for development of simple motor skills in infants. Movements of very young infants (< 2 months) are at first random. Ability to coordinate muscles and to perform simple motor skills develops very early and this development is based on correlation of act of will, kinaesthetic sensations and visual perceptions of positions of objects (including body parts) in external space (Rochat 1998, Schutz-Bosbach 2009). Current research in embodied cognition and robotics even attempts to use this approach in artificial-skin robot efforts to independently self-learn motor skills (Roncone 2014).

Wittgenstein disagrees with James' approach to the will as based on kinaesthetic sensations. To the empiricist claim, "My kinaesthetic sensations apprise me of the movements and positions of my limbs", he answers: "I let my index finger make an easy pendulum movement of small amplitude. I either hardly feel it, or don't feel it at all" (PI II 2009: 56). However, whether this argument would hold against contemporary theories is debatable. Contemporary empiricists would argue that by adulthood, the relation between acts of will and limb position is already learned, and thus possible to predict even without kinaesthetic sensations or visual perceptions.

There are several other differences between acts of will and thoughts. The one difference that is relevant to this discussion is that volitions are accompanied by a) perceived changes in the external world and sometimes kinaesthetic sensations (in the case of successful actions) or b) at least

kinaesthetic sensations alone (in the case of unsuccessful action, e.g. when movement is restricted by shackles) (see WCL: 262). In the case of unsuccessful action, nonetheless a change in the external world is expected and perceived. This expectation is based on previous experience of many similar successful actions that comprised of an act of will, kinaesthetic impression and visually perceived change in external world (i.e. based on a memory). The absence of an expected change in the external world is precisely what makes the action unsuccessful. The unsuccessful action, which does not satisfy expectation, produces an emotion, a specific type of disappointment (compare with protention in Husserl 1991: 112). Conversely, successful actions are not accompanied with any such explicitly felt emotions, probably because the majority of actions (the continuous stream of body movements) are successful, as adults are sufficiently competent in navigating their environment and failures are rare.

The efforts to capture the character of act of will usually focused on introspective analysis, and therefore failed to find any such act. While Wittgenstein's view in *Notebooks* is that "Wishing is not acting. But willing is acting" (NB 1979: 88) in *Philosophical Investigations* he put similar claim in the quotation marks and uses it as the starting point of further research. (PI 2009: 615)

Instead of trying to capture introspectively an act of will, our focus will centre upon experiences of unfulfilled expectations accompanying unsuccessful actions. Then we may better understand what makes willing so phenomenally unique.

### The Analysis of Failed Actions

Wittgenstein himself provides two particular examples of failed actions. The first mentions drawing a square with its diagonals with a pencil, not seeing the hand directly but only in a mirror. Wittgenstein reports an unexpected experience – a person cannot control the hand reliably, lines go in the wrong direction and the overall feeling is that here one *cannot will* (PGL 1988: 76, Hacker 2000: 210).

This unfamiliar strange experience is caused by a lack of correlation of will, kinaesthetic sensation and visual perception. The person drawing the picture intends to move the hand in a specific direction, kinaesthetic sensation corresponds correctly with the intended movement, however visual perceptions show the hand moving in a different direction. This unexpected movement causes this strange feeling; its strangeness created by the rarity of such an experience. In the absolute majority of life events, these three components of action correlate perfectly. In some cases, for example when in shackles, a person may try to move and the move is not realized, but very specific kinaesthetic and other haptic sensations result, caused by muscles and skin-related sensations usually associated with an effort to move. However, there is also a specific sensation caused by something (the shackles) that prevents movement and touches the skin at some point, and its pressure is usually intense (in relation to intensity of muscular effort). All these sensations associated with movement restriction have been familiar since childhood. The mirror experiment produces a completely different type of discorrelated sensation, and that accounts for why it seems so unfamiliar.

The second of Wittgenstein's example is the following: "If we cross our fingers in a special way, we are sometimes unable to move a particular finger when someone tells us to do so, if he only *points* to the finger – merely shows it to the eye. However, if he touches it, we *can* move it." (PI 2009: 617)

In this case it is this special arrangement of fingers that causes their misidentification – the visual perception of fingers is misleading and one cannot *intuitively* identify fingers correctly. On a rational level, it is certainly known which finger is which, yet on an intuitive level, those in such situations perceive at least one of the fingers as being another. This misidentification means that when somebody points to one finger, a different one is moved in response. This happens on both an

intuitive and reflexive level without intervention of reason. Wittgenstein says: "One would like to describe this experience as follows: we are unable to *will* to move the finger. This case is quite different from that in which someone is, say, holding it." (PI 2009: 617)

This inability to move the finger is again caused by the lack of correlation of willing, kinaesthetic sensation and visual perception. Crossing fingers leads to them being misidentified on an intuitive level, so proceeding with act of will to move a finger results in correct kinaesthetic sensation (a finger is moving), but uncorrelated visual perception (a different finger is moving). Strangeness of this experience is caused by rarity of this situation. We are so habituated to correlations of "correct" triplets of act of will, kinaesthetic sensation and visual perception, because there are almost no situations that contradict these correlations. Even if someone is holding a finger, visual perception of the finger that is being restricted correlates with kinaesthetic sensations and the owner's volition.

The situation changes when someone touches the finger – suddenly it is possible to move it. But to describe the previous experience, Wittgenstein uses following words: "... one can't find any point of application for the will until finger is touched." (PI 2009: 617)

We have spoken about acts of will. However, is there anything like the act of will and if so, how can it be exactly defined? We have seen that Wittgenstein discusses relation of willing to "the action itself" (PI 2009: 615) and we can consider "act of will" to be equal to "willing". Action is usually also manifested by some movement of some part of person's body. However, we can still ask what an action is, if we separate it from the movement that accompanies it. Wittgenstein asks in this respect: "When 'I raise my arm', my arm rises. And now a problem emerges: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm rises from the fact that I raise my arm?" (PI 2009: 621, see also WCL: 262). Hyman (2011) believes that Wittgenstein's answer to this question is "nothing".

We may however argue that another difference between will and thought is that thought is conceptual. If someone is thinking about action and not acting at the same time, can they say that they have a will to act? It would be more appropriate to describe such a situation as contemplating an action, or merely wishing one can act in situation where it is perceived that action will be unsuccessful. Wittgenstein's discussion of will in *Philosophical Investigations* (PI 2009: 615) can be interpreted also as observation that wishing is a conceptual mental act, while willing is non-conceptual. Only when there is conscientious muscular tension is there a concrete will to do something and that is conceivably what Wittgenstein meant when he related willing to action itself. Therefore, it can be theorized that the correct answer to Wittgenstein's question is that the act of will as non-conceptual evades any effort to be characterized by words so may seem as "nothing". Thus, this research returns to Locke's original observation regarding obscure nature of the will.

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