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Trying and the Arguments from Total Failure

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Abstract New Volitionalism is a name for certain widespread conception of the nature of intentional action. Some of the standard arguments for New Volitionalism, the so-called arguments from total failure, have even acquired the status of basic assumptions for many other kinds of philosophers. It is therefore of singular interest to investigate some of the most important arguments from total failure. This is what I propose to do in this paper. My aim is not be to demonstrate that these arguments are inconsistent or that total failure and naked tryings are metaphysically impossible. Rather, my aim is be to build a case against the possibility of naked, independently existing tryings, by questioning how well we understand the scenarios invoked in their favour. Thus, rather than attempting to present a definitive metaphysical refutation of New Volitionalism, I attempt to diminish or demolish its underlying motivation.

Keywords Trying · Arguments from total failure · Intentional action · Phenomenology of acting · Perception · Basic action

Introduction

New Volitionalism is a name for a certain conception of the nature of intentional action. It matured as a theory in the 70's and early 80's with important contributions by O'Shaughnessy (1973, 1980), McCann (1974, 1975), Hornsby (1980), and Armstrong (1981), and has gained many new supporters since then (for example, Smith (1988), Ginet (1990), Pietroski (1998), Lowe (2000), and Zhu (2004)). Moreover, some of the standard arguments for New Volitionalism, the so-called

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arguments from total failure, have acquired the status of basic assumptions for many other kinds of philosophers (for example, McGinn (1982), Searle (1983), and O'Brien (2003). It is therefore of singular interest to investigate some of the most important arguments from total failure. This is what I propose to do in this paper.

First, I present the core claims of New Volitionalism in such a way that we can see what role the arguments from total failure are supposed to play. Second, I present the argument from paralysis and state my objections to it. Third, I introduce the argument from the anaesthetised arm and argue why I think the argument fails. Fourth, I put forward a more general line of argument against New Volitionalism's conception of volition and action. My aim will not be to demonstrate that these arguments are inconsistent or that total failure and naked tryings are metaphysically impossible. Rather, my aim will be to build a case against the possibility of naked, independently existing tryings, by questioning how well we understand the scenarios invoked in their favour. Thus, rather than attempting to present a definitive metaphysical refutation of New Volitionalism, I will attempt to diminish or demolish its underlying motivation.

Core Claims of New Volitionalism

New Volitionalism is a general metaphysical theory about the springs of action with specific implications for a theory of action-individuation, the semantics of action-description, the explanation of action, and the epistemology and phenomenology of action. It is commonly taken to be grounded on two basic claims:

2.1. Any intentional action φ can be re-described as the agent's trying to φ.
2.2. An agent's trying to φ is an independent mental particular – a mental event capable of existing independently of any bodily or otherwise worldly effects.

Together these two basic claims entail a third claim, namely:

2.3. Any intentional action is or involves or implies the occurrence of a mental event which is the agent's trying to φ.

Given certain standard assumptions concerning causation and explanation, Claim 2.3 seems to imply a fourth claim about the etiology of the agent's action:

2.4. Every time an agent intentionally moves her body (and she does so every time she is acting intentionally), her bodily movements are caused by her trying to do them.

That is, when you intentionally turn your head, this head-turning will be caused by your trying to turn your head – and this trying is an independently existing mental particular.

I think we should refuse to accept this picture of agency. It will commit us to a false theory of action-explanation as well as to a false description of the phenomenology of action. How should we oppose the claims of New Volitionalism? There are good reasons to accept Claim 2.1. It merely says that each time an agent does something, what she does can be described as her trying to do it. No deep metaphysical implications seem to flow from this idea. All it requires is that all

actions can fail, for which reason there will always be some perspective from which the actions can justifiably be described as the agent's trying to do the action.[1]

The problem, I think, is Claim 2.2. It claims that an agent's trying to do some bodily action is in fact not her bodily action or her bodily initiation and engagement in the execution of the bodily action, but is a separate mental event capable of existing independently of any bodily behaviour. This is the claim I think we should reject. The most common way to argue for the existence of "mental trying-events" is by arguing for the possibility of total failure. Such arguments aim to establish that in the event where an agent tries to do something but fails completely, the agent's trying will remain intact and unharmed by the failure. There are two types of arguments from failure which I will discuss in turn.

The Argument from Sudden Paralysis

New Volitionalism is a substantive metaphysical theory about the causal origin of action: an agent's overt bodily action is caused by her covert volition, her trying. As said above, the Gricean argument behind Claim 2.1 merely establishes that any intentional action can be described as an agent's trying to do something. Hence, every time an agent is actually φ-ing intentionally, she is trying to φ. If it could somehow be shown that the implication does not work in the reverse direction, that is, if it could be argued that an agent can try to φ without actually φ-ing, then we seem to have arrived at a strong volitional theory.

Claim 2.1 does not imply anything about the internal, mental antecedents of action, and Claim 2.2 consequently needs to be established on independent grounds. We can accept a Gricean argument for Claim 2.1 without accepting Claim 2.2. This is important to notice because it sometimes seems to be forgotten by both proponents of and opponents to New Volitionalism.[2] We need to understand how the two claims and their respective arguments work together.

For Claim 2.1 to be true, it needs to be shown that even the most basic of an agent's actions can fail. If we assume that some intentional actions consist of making just some bodily movement, the challenge to the New Volitionalist is to demonstrate that we can make sense of the idea that agents can try to move but fail completely. The New Volitionalist will therefore have to argue that the failure must lie in a total failure to move, since it can be argued that if the action consists merely in moving the body and nothing else, then the action will have succeeded if there is just some movement (for the sake of argument, let us pretend that there is a straight forward

[1] This Gricean argument for the omni-applicability of the trying-description has received a lot of attention elsewhere, for example, Grice 1989, ch. 1 (orig. 1967), O'Shaughnessy 1973; McCann 1975; Hornsby 1980, ch. 3, Armstrong 1981; McGinn 1982, ch. 5, and Adams and Mele 1992. I will therefore not introduce and discuss it here. Let me just mention that not everybody accepts the Gricean argument and the idea that any action can described as an agent's trying. It has been denied by, for example, Danto 1963, p. 440, Broadie 1965/1966; Jones 1983, and Hacker 1996, ch. 5.

[2] Among the people I suspect have overlooked the fact that Claim 2.1 can be established independently of Claim 2.2 are McCann 1975 and Armstrong 1981, but equally some of their adversaries, e.g. Moya 1992.

sense of moving here – which, of course, there is not). If basic bodily action were infallible in this way, Claim 2.1 would be false.[3]

By making use of the idea that it is always possible to fall prey to a sudden and unexpected, complete paralysis, we should always be able to imagine a sceptical onlooker doubting that the agent will succeed in moving at all. If we can make sense of doubting the occurrence of any movement at all in all cases in which an agent intentionally moves her body, then we will be warranted in saying that the agent is trying to move in all cases of intentional bodily movement. Once again, it is clear that this Gricean argument by itself does not yield any substantive story about an agent's trying. It merely says that in the case where an agent intentionally moves her body, there will always be some possible situation of doubt for which reason we can claim that if she moves intentionally, she is trying to move. Thus, actual intentional movement can always be described as the agent's trying to move. To produce the metaphysical story about "tryings", the New Volitionalist has to add a substantive assumption to the Gricean argument.

This assumption is brought out by the following three scenarios. In the first one, we have an onlooker who is apparently justified in judging that the agent will not succeed in making any movement at all. When the agent does move, and does so naturally and without any problems, the onlooker can say that at least he knew that the agent would try to move. In the second scenario, the agent thinks she is capable of movement and is told to move on a go-signal. The moment she gets the go-signal, she is zapped and paralysed by a neuroscientist and does not succeed in activating so much as one tiny muscle. Nevertheless, she can tell us that she did try to move. In the third scenario, the agent now believes that she is completely paralysed and therefore does not expect to be able to move. However, she decides to try anyway, and unexpectedly she succeeds in making the movement in a natural way.[4]

The first scenario is in effect the Gricean argument for the description of intentional action in terms of trying. It says that any intentional bodily movement can be described as the agent's trying to move. The second scenario is invoked in order to argue from the conceivability of a sudden paralysis to the trying as a mental particular, a naked trying. It is supposed to give us the naked trying as what is left over if we delete the movement of the body. Together these two scenarios seem to show that naked trying is present whenever an agent intentionally moves her body. Obviously, a Volitionalism worth its name would want to claim something more than if a person intentionally moves her body, then there is both a (naked) trying to move and a movement. The Volitionalist would want to establish a causal connection between the trying and the movement. This is exactly what the third scenario is thought to do.

[3] This challenge to the New Volitionalist is posed by Danto 1966 and 1973, pp. 136–137. By showing that an agent can try to move but fail completely, the New Volitionalist has provided an argument both for the applicability of Claim 2.1 to minimal intentional bodily movement and for the existence of trying independently of bodily behaviour (Claim 2.2). There are, however, other ways of arguing for Claim 2.1. See General Worries: Basic Action below. It is therefore not the case that the Gricean argument for Claim 2.1 implies Claim 2.2.

[4] For an elaborate depiction and use of such scenarios, see O'Shaughnessy 1973.

If these scenarios are really to establish these strong volitionalist conclusions, then the New Volitionalist's use of the three scenarios must rely on the following substantive assumption: trying is an independent mental particular and is picked out as such in all three scenarios. That is to say, the same mental event, the same trying, can be referred by our onlooker in the first scenario, left over when our agent is zapped in the second scenario, and present when she succeeds in moving in the third scenario. Hence, trying in the same sense is involved in total failure and in ordinary successful action. This is exactly the assumption I would like to question. I will put pressure on the idea that trying in the case of complete paralysis is the same kind of trying we find in the case of ordinary successful action.

The New Volitionalist uses these scenarios to argue that the trying is always something different from the actual movement – and that an agent, therefore, can try to flick her finger without bodily doing anything. Furthermore, the New Volitionalist would want to argue that in the case where the agent tries to move, but does not expect to succeed in actually moving, we should say that she succeeded in moving her arm *because* she tried to move it. This establishes a causal connection between the trying and the moving in which the trying causes the movement.

It is commonly accepted that an effect is not logically or conceptually tied to its cause, and that it could have been produced in other ways. Thus, the movement that is in fact caused by the agent's trying could in other situations have been produced by a shove. The body's movement should therefore be characterised as neutral with respect to agency; it is itself not an action but merely something that happens to a physical body. All the agent can do is to try to move her body and the rest is up to nature, to borrow a famous phrase from Davidson (2001, p. 59). An agent's trying to do something is therefore, according to a New Volitionalist, an internal mental event the occurrence of which in no way depends on anything external to the brain of the agent.[5]

I think there are good reasons for doubting the success of the argument from paralysis. My objections to the argument from paralysis can be bundled into two different groups.

No Clear Intuitions

The scenarios depicted by the New Volitionalist make it sound as if we have clear intuitions concerning a case involving an agent's unexpected total failure or success. But in fact we have not. A quick look at the philosophical literature assures us that not everybody shares the intuition about what would happen if a person sets out to move but could not or thought she could not but could.[6]

[5] The claim that the internal event of trying is the agent's basic action is explicitly endorsed by Hornsby 1980, ch. 1–2, Smith 1988, and Pietroski 1998. Not every New Volitionalist is committed to this theory of action-individuation; however, they are all committed to the corresponding view of bodily movement as a mere happening. In particular, O'Shaughnessy 1973; McCann 1974, 1975; Hornsby 1980, ch. 1–3, Armstrong 1981, pp. 74f., McGinn 1982, ch. 5, Smith 1988, Ginet 1990, p. 23, Pietroski 1998, Section 3, and Lowe 2000, ch. 9, all rely on such a notion of agency-neutral physical movements.

[6] For intuitions conflicting with the intuition propounded by the New Volitionalist, see e.g. Schopenhauer 1844/1966, p. 36, 143, James 1950, p. 500, Wittgenstein 1958, pp. 151–153, and 1967, Sections 611–628, Broadie 1965/66, p. 38, Danto 1968, pp. 55–56, Danto 1973, esp. p. 136, Morris 1988; Brewer 1993; Cleveland 1997; Hurley 1998, ch. 7.

The same is true of the psychological literature. For over a hundred years, the psycho-physiological research on motor control and experience of movement has been divided on the issue. On the one hand, we find scientists insisting that there is some kind of phenomenal quality associated with the issuing of motor commands; and, on the other hand, we have scientists claiming that the phenomenal quality of voluntary movement comes from the actually performed movements.[7] In other words, it is simply not obvious how we should depict the situation of the paralysed person. There are no unambiguous intuitions that can tell us whether or not an afflicted person can try to move a paralysed arm in the exact same sense as a normal person can.

Idle and Effective Trying

More importantly, I think a proponent of the argument from paralysis is faced with two serious challenges:

a. When all we have left is a naked trying, how could the New Volitionalist make a distinction between idle and effective trying?
b. When all we have left is a naked trying, how could there be any difference at all between idle and effective trying?

The first challenge takes the form of a difficult if not devastating dilemma for the New Volitionalist, and it takes us directly to the second challenge.

The two challenges arise because the New Volitionalist is committed to accept the following two claims:

3.1. There is a crucial distinction between idle and effective trying.
3.2. The New Volitionalist cannot appeal to any actual movement in an explanation of this distinction.

Let me explain. As everybody else, the New Volitionalist must acknowledge the difference between an episode of idly thinking about or wishing to move one's body and an episode of effectively trying to move one's body. Let's call the first kind of episode for *idle trying* and the second kind *effective trying*. An example of an idle trying could be a trying that could not possibly connect to the world (for either a priori or empirical reasons), like a trying to make the chair move (by mere mental effort) or a "basic" trying to make the ears point in the direction of a sound. In short, it would be wishing. An effective trying, on the other hand, is the kind of trying involved when an agent intentionally does something.

An obvious way to account for this difference would be simply to say that effective trying is when an agent actually does something intentionally and idle trying is when a person merely thinks about or is imagining herself doing something. Of course, this type of account is not available to the New Volitionalist. The New Volitionalist is imagining a scenario where a completely paralysed person is trying to move her body and can therefore not allow herself to make any reference to actual behaviour. This gives us the first challenge posed to the New Volitionalist: Given

[7] See Boring 1977 and Scheerer 1987. The intuition also fails to be supported by unequivocal reports from paralysed persons, see Gandevia 1982.

that we are not allowed to draw on any mental or behavioural material beyond the naked trying, how can the New Volitionalist make the distinction between idle and effective trying? This is a challenge with bite because if she cannot make the distinction she will be vulnerable to the objection that naked trying is not trying at all but merely wishful thinking.

In answering this challenge the New Volitionalist is faced with a dilemma: Either she must make sense of the difference between merely wishfully thinking of φing and effectively trying to φ in terms of a difference in phenomenology or she must deny that the difference is phenomenologically accessible and attempt to spell it out in purely functional terms. As we shall see, neither alternative is attractive.

On the first horn of the dilemma, the New Volitionalist argues that the difference between idle and effective trying consists in differences in phenomenology. In a case where I am paralysed, what it is like to be wishfully thinking about moving my index finger and what it is like effectively trying to move my index finger (though, still not moving) is simply different. This difference is accessible and reportable. This explains what is going on in the second scenario above. Here the agent can report that she tried to move even though she did not because this is what it felt like. But what exactly is this difference in phenomenology between the idle and the effective cases thought to consist in?

It could not consist in a difference between the content of the idle trying and the content of the effective trying. Here is the reason why. Following O'Shaughnessy (1973, p. 375), we can claim that the representational content of the trying can be either propositional, imagistic (memory or imagination), or sensory (actual feedback from movement). Since sensory content is not a possibility for the proponent of the argument from paralysis, only propositional or imagistic content are real options. There are however no reasons to suppose that the propositional or imagistic content of an effective trying could not also become the content of an idle trying. After all, I am able to use the same verbal specifications in relation to both idle and effective tryings and I can idly imagine doing any movement that I can effectively try to do.

So, the difference must lie in something beyond the representational content. Here the thought could be that the difference between idle and effective trying could consist in a specific kind of non-representational quale: a perculiar kind of actish feel, a certain kind of internal twitch or mental strain or effort, or what not. Here all arguments come to a halt: this quale is just something we have to accept.[8] I see no good reasons to accept it, so I will not: there simply is no such raw feel of effective trying. I, for one, have never had any such experience, and it seems possible to doubt that anybody has actually ever had such an experience (recall, it must be an experience of trying that would stay exactly as it is whether or not it occurs together with a movement). But if we can make no distinction between idle and effective trying in phenomenological terms, we will be forced to move to the second horn of the dilemma.

According to the second horn of the dilemma, the difference between an agent's idle and effective trying is not phenomenological. Rather than a difference in

[8] Not many philosophers argue for this kind of qualia-theory of action or trying. It is however defended by Ginet 1990 and Hossack 2003. More mainstream Volitionalists like Armstrong 1981, p. 75, and O'Shaughnessy 2003, pp. 352, 354, deny the existence of any introspectable actish-quale.

phenomenology, we are here dealing with a difference in function. One proposal could be that an effective trying is one that normally is appropriately caused by intentions and normally goes on to cause, via appropriate channels, an overt behaviour. An idle trying, by contrast, is one that is caused by desires but itself has no direct effect on overt behaviour.

This functional difference is not introspectible and reportable; at least it plays no role if it is. But this is not an attractive position. If there is no phenomenological difference between idle and effective trying, a difference that is reportable, then there seems to be no good reasons for interpreting the above three scenarios in terms of the agent's trying. There are three related reasons for this.

First of all, trying is supposed to explain our *intentional* action. Intentional action seems to presuppose that the agent is aware of what she is doing – that is, not only her intention and reasons but also some relevant aspect of her actual action is accessible to her. In other words, an agent acting intentionally must have some knowledge about what she is doing. But if what she is doing has no phenomenology, then this would seem impossible. The agent might be aware of the effects of the trying – the arm and hand movement, the itch-relieving scratch – but since all these events would be neutral with respect to agency (they could have been brought about accidentally or passively), awareness of these effects does not on the New Volitionalist account amount to an awareness of intentional action. If the agent was not conscious of trying to scratch her nose, then the actual scratching could not be described as intentional.

Second, from the perspective of the agent, it is plausible to assume that if there is no phenomenology associated with the trying, the paralysed agent will have no reason to believe she tried – she would never know. But if she has no reason to believe that she tried or if she could never know, then there is no reason to suppose that she would say that she had tried (scenario two) or that she would try (scenario three). Consequently, if the agent cannot be taken to report on her own mental life on grounds of a kind of privileged access, then there is no reason to explain what is going on in terms of trying.

Third, on the face of it, what is happening in these scenarios could equally well be explained by the agent's beliefs, desires, and intentions.[9] Hence, if the phenomenology of trying is omitted, there simply no longer is any motive for postulating the existence of naked tryings. In sum, by denying the relevance of any phenomenology of trying, the argument from paralysis seems to be threatened by inconsistency. The New Volitionalist is forced back to the first horn: there must be some phenomenology of naked trying such that the subject can distinguish between idle and effective trying.

I see no obvious way in which the New Volitionalist could answer this dilemma. This brings us directly to the second challenge: Given that we are not allowed to draw on any mental or behavioural material beyond the naked trying, how is it at all possible to make any distinction between idle and effective trying? This is an open challenge. I am sure there are possible answers to it, but none that I can think of seem convincing to me. Let me sum up this objection to the argument from

[9] See Audi 1993, ch. 3.

paralysis: if we strip the trying naked by deleting the bodily execution, we will have no easy and convincing way of making the obvious distinction between idle and effective trying. And if that is so, the New Volitionalist seems to be vulnerable to the objection that the naked trying is not a genuine trying but more like an idle wish.

The Argument from the Anaesthetised Arm

There is another way to argue for the separable existence of the trying as a mental event, in order to argue for Claim 2.2, which does not rely on the validity of the argument from paralysis. Hornsby argues for an internalist conception of trying by the famous case, related in James (1950), of Landry's patient.[10] This patient was apparently completely deafferented in his arm and was thus unable to sense his own movement. Landry writes of the patient: "If, having the intention of executing a certain movement, *I prevent him*, he does not perceive it, and supposes the limb to have taken the position he intended to give it (quoted by James 1950, p. 490)." The situation could have been the following: the patient is asked to raise his arm, but being both deafferented and blindfolded he does not notice that the experimenter is holding his arm down. On removing the blindfold, he is surprised to discover that he had in fact not moved his arm at all – that is, he believed his arm to be at the location to which he intended to move it.

If this story is correct, the patient could not have been aware of his own bodily movement (on the assumption that he had a total loss of afferent feedback). Thus, given that he was consciously trying to move, this trying-experience could not be dependent on any awareness of actual movement. It does seem extremely appealing to say that the patient did consciously try, because how else could we explain the fact that the agent apparently not only believed that he had tried, but also that he had succeeded. Hornsby's argument here is that "unless *we* say of him that he tried, we cannot see why he should think he succeeded" (1980, p. 41).

Even though Hornsby's use of the Landry Case is compelling, I think there are good reasons for resisting it. Again, my objections can be bundled into two different groups.

No Clear Case

It seems to me that if we take a closer look at how the Landry Case is used by James (1950), the picture is less clear than Hornsby suggests. James mentions Landry and his patient in a catalogue of cases that is supposed to prove that complex motor tasks can be executed only if the subject has a specific kind of "*guiding sensation*" (p. 490): most importantly, kinaesthetic feedback from the actual movements. The aim of James' discussion was to establish that only *awareness* of peripheral feedback from movements is needed for the execution and experience of one's own *voluntary* movement. According to James, *sensation* of "central commands" plays no role

[10] For similar use of the Landry Case, see Searle 1983, p. 89.

whatsoever in our ability to make voluntary movements or in our experience of individual executions as voluntary. He did not deny that central motor commands play an ineliminable physiological role, he just objected to the idea that it is in virtue of a conscious feeling of the efferent commands, a "sense of innervation", that the subject has motor abilities and experiences (e.g. pp. 493–94).

James' argument was simple. We can try to move only by having an idea of the movement that attaches this trying to this specific type of movement of a particular limb. That is, the trying must have a content which ties the trying to its object. On introspection, all we can ever find are peripheral sensations caused by the movements – that is, kinaesthetic sensations or motor images (caused by prior kinaesthetic sensations). We will never find anything that even resembles a motor command, such as a "sense of innervation", and the idea of a separable awareness of motor commands preceding the actual execution must therefore be dismissed as false (cf. p. 500).

James, thus, took the Landry Case as evidence for an idea that stands in opposition to Hornsby's. Indeed, in James's quote from Landry the latter says of his patient that "after having made him close his eyes, if one asks him to move one of his limbs either wholly or in part, he does it but cannot tell whether the effected movement is large or small, strong or weak, or *even if it has taken place at all*" (p. 490; my italics). In other words, the patient did not have a firm belief concerning where he had moved his deafferented limb. His experience of trying could not on its own rationalise any judgement or belief about what he was actually doing. Hornsby does not (nor does any other volitionalist) mention this part of James' quote from Landry, and for good reasons. It does not support the conclusion she wants to draw. It definitely allows for the possibility that an episode of trying in the deafferented person is qualitatively different from the normal case. Contrary to the idea of a trying as separable from the awareness of movement, it seems to suggest that we cannot even be aware of what exactly we are trying to do if we have no feeling of the execution. When there is no sensory feedback, the trying seems to lose its direction or specificity.[11]

In sum, the Landry Case, and others like it, do not unambiguously support the idea of naked tryings. On the contrary, such cases could equally well be taken to support the view that an agent's trying or volitional content is inseparably merged with the actual execution – at least this was how Landry and James understood the case.

Content and Phenomenology of the Naked Trying

Independently of this first worry, there is a second and more important problem for the argument from the anaesthetised arm. The argument is not only committed to the

[11] Hurley 1998, pp. 272–76, offers an argument against internalism with respect to trying roughly to this effect. Also Melden 1968, pp. 74–75, argues that if volition were to be separated from execution, it would lose its specificity. Something similar seems to be suggested by Cole in his description of the deafferented person Ian Waterman, Cole 1995, p. 34. See also Gallagher and Cole 1998, p. 135. Some volitionalists do away with the content in order to avoid the problems concerning its specification, for example, Ginet 1990, pp. 31–38.

existence of some phenomenology of the naked trying – this is the obvious way to explain the patient's belief and surprise, but the argument is also committed to a certain form of characterisation of this phenomenology. Hornsby's argument is committed to the following three claims about the phenomenology of trying.

4.1 From the perspective of Landry's patient, there is no phenomenological difference between an episode of trying without movement and an episode of trying with a movement.

Only if Hornsby accepts this claim can she argue that the patient believes he had moved (when he had not) and that he was surprised when he found out that the doctors had fooled him.

4.2 We can generalise from Landry's case to the normal episode of trying.

Since the whole interest of the Landry Case lies in its ability to throw light on the normal situation of trying, Hornsby must be committed to the claim that at least some relevant aspects of the Landry Case can be generalised to cover also the normal case. Claim 4.1 and 4.2 entail a third claim:

4.3 The phenomenology of the trying in the Landry Case is in relevant respects the same as the phenomenology of ordinary successful action.

This third claim is however open to serious doubts. And if Claim 4.3 can shown to be false, then there must be something wrong with the premises from which we have derived it.

Let us first ask how the generalisation from the Landry Case to the ordinary case (Claim 4.2) is thought to work. One suggestion might be that there is nothing structurally unusual or abnormal about the case of a deafferented person who is trying to move his arm. Indeed, this neuropathological case brings into focus the structure of the normal episode of trying. Thus, when the deafferented person tries to move his arm, he will normally see his arm moving. Seeing that one's arm is moving is what normally happens when one tries to move it, but this seeing is neither part of the trying, nor part of one's experience or knowledge of trying.[12] This is exactly what the Landry Case is supposed to prove: it apparently makes no difference to the agent's experience of trying that he is perceptually completely blinded. This extrinsic relation between trying and knowledge of trying, on the one hand, and seeing, on the other, is what the Landry Case makes manifest.

Hornsby could thus argue that there is no relevant difference between how Landry's patient relates to the seeing of his movement and how the normal agent relates to her proprioceptive feeling of her movement. In either case, perception of the bodily effects of trying is external to the trying itself, its content, and its phenomenology. The trying and its phenomenology are independent of the bodily behaviour.

Now, let us ask how a possible explanation of the idea that the phenomenology of naked trying is the same as the phenomenology of successful acting (Claim 4.1)

[12] For an explicit endorsement of this claim, see O'Shaughnessy 1992.

might work. One way to argue for this claim is to suppose that the trying as its content has a representation of successful action. The New Volitionalist could argue that in the case of complete blockage of movement and total sensory deprivation, the experience of the merely trying agent is similar to the experience of the successful agent, because the content of the trying always is a representation of an action as successfully executed. The trying is an experience as of successfully moving one's body. If an agent tries to φ and receives no contradictory evidence from the senses or otherwise, she will therefore assume that she successfully φed.[13]

When we mix these two possible accounts of Claim 4.1 and 4.2, we get the thought that the phenomenology of a deafferented and blindfolded person's trying to move her hand to a location in egocentric space (say, trying to move her hand just above her head) is the same as the normal person's attempt to do the same thing. This thought, however, is dubious to say the least. Here is an argument to show us why.

Often a normal agent tries to move her hand to a certain location, tries to push a button or to grasp a glass. These are all actions oriented at spatial locations and objects that are perceptually present to the agent. It is a compelling suggestion that perceptual attention is somehow part of one's trying to reach, push, or grasp a perceptually presented object. After all, only if the agent is able to attend to the object will she be able to do things intentionally with it. Her aim is to do something to *that* thing. This is what she is trying to do.

Reflecting on this kind of object-oriented action makes it attractive, I submit, to hold that at least part of the content of the trying is specified perceptually. If we subtract perception from the normal case, what the agent is trying to do would seem to lose its specificity as a trying to interact with a particular object in one's surrounding. Imagine that you are trying to shot a deer, visually tracking its movements as it passes behind a shrub and is out of sight for a few seconds before appearing again. Still aiming at the deer as it reappears, are you not engaged in the same trying as before the deer disappeared briefly behind the shrub? I would say that you are engaged in exactly the same continued trying and that it is the same trying partly because it still has the same particular object: you are trying to shot *that* deer.

If you take away perception, the content of the trying will become purely descriptive. This is exactly what seems to happen to Landry's patient. The content of his intention or trying to move his arm is provided by the instruction to raise it issued by his experimenter. Deprived of any perceptual or sensory specification of his surroundings, he will be unable to set himself specific worldly goals. I do not

[13] This argument from total failure is structurally parallel to the argument from illusion or hallucination where the thought is that the content and the phenomenology of the hallucinatory state are identical to the veridical perception in relevant respects. But there are also some important differences between the two arguments. The argument from illusion receives much of its power from the fact that it intuitively latches on to illusory and false experiences in ordinary life. The argument from total failure, however, finds no intuitive foothold in our ordinary practical experiences. How often – if ever – have you found yourself not to be acting even though you had a full sense of embodied action? I venture never. Not that it is metaphysically impossible, but it is empirically unlikely given the intricate dynamic causal relations between willing, guiding, and moving in ordinary temporally extended motor action.

have any proof of this claim, but it strikes me as overwhelmingly plausible that when it comes to our simple object-oriented actions, the content of our tryings must be partly specified perceptually or partly by the perceived object.[14]

If the content of the trying is different in the Landry Case and in ordinary trying, then it seems plausible that the functions which these different types of content can play must differ too. One way to understand this claim is as follow. If the content of the naked trying is robbed of the normal perceptual specification of its target, it is natural to think that its function will change. If we allow that perceptual attention is in some way part of or partly involved in a normal trying to do something to an object, it will be natural to assume that the content of the trying is related or hooked on to the object of attention and for this reason will be able to guide the behaviour of the agent to its goal. I'm trying to grasp *that* stick, where *that* stick — because of my attention to it — will, as part of the content of my trying to grasp it, be able to guide my action. By contrast, the content of the naked trying with its purely descriptive specification would not be able to guide my action to particular targets in my surroundings in this way.

If both the content and the function of the trying is different in the Landry Case and in ordinary trying, then surely the phenomenology must be different too. And so it seems to be. In the normal case, we engage smoothly with objects in our immediate surroundings. There is no gap between our internally caused movements and our encounters with the outside world. And consequently, we experience not two separate episodes or items when we engage with objects. We do not experience our trying oriented at an object and our perceptual attention to the object as distinct and unrelated episodes. We try to reach or grasp a particular object at a particular location relative to our body partly by attending to it. This integration of mind and world in our experience of trying to do something to a particular object is intelligible — or at least made easier to understand — if we assume that perception or the perceived objects are part of the content of the trying, for which reason the trying can acquire the function of guiding the behaviour towards *that* particular object.

If, by contrast, perception or its objects is not part of the content, then our experience of trying and our perceptual experience of what we make happen in the world would fall apart. Our phenomenology of action would be split up in two components: an experience of "naked-trying" and a perceptual experience of happenings in the world. This seems to be exactly the case for Landry's patient. The most we can possibly get from James' descriptions is that Landry's patient might have had some rudimentary feeling of initiating some bodily movement. This can be glossed as a "trying to raise the arm". But there is no reason to suppose that we are dealing with a full-blown mental state of its own with an articulate content.

Certainly, there is some articulate content which can glossed as "raising the arm", but this is exactly the content handed over to the patient by the experimenter. This content might enter into the patient's desires and intentions, but there is no reason to suppose that it is the content of normal effective trying. If we take seriously James' description of the patient, according to which the patient is unable to tell how he is

[14] This has been argued by Peacocke 1981 and Campbell 2003.

moving or if he is moving at all, then we might suppose that all the patient is left with when perception is subtracted from his naked trying is nothing but a dumb feeling of initiating bodily activity (something like "there is some activity" or "I initiate [blank]"), which would not be anything like a normal person's trying to do things with her body. Together with natural background assumptions (such as, "the experimenter is not fooling me"), the content acquired from the experimenter's instruction and the dumb feeling of initiating activity are enough to explain the patient's belief in success and surprise on finding failure.

If this is correct, then the phenomenology of acting in the Landry Case differs from the normal case. It breaks down into a dumb feeling of initiation and a perception of results. It would rather be like flicking a switch and waiting for the result. In flicking a switch we are not able to follow, guide and control the chain of effects. We must just await the final appearance of a perceptible result: say, a sound or light. Our knowledge that the effect will obtain is in this case a kind of reliabilism. We have a reliable belief that the light will go on. So, if we are blindfolded and asked to flick the switch, we will be able to predict that as a result the light will go on. But it would make no difference to us, in our blindfolded state, if the light did not go on as a result of our flicking the switch but instead because of what somebody else did, so long as the light was on when the blindfold was removed. That is to say that *in our blindfolded state*, our experience of flicking the switch and believing that the light went on will stay unchanged whether the light went on as a result of our doing or not. Experience and belief do in this case not track and monitor – and thereby guide – the process.

The blindfolded deafferented person seems to be in the same relation to his own bodily movement as we are to switching on the light when we are blindfolded. In the blindfolded condition, Landry's patient is only able to make more or less reliable estimates or conjectures. The best way to make sense of the deafferented and blindfolded subject's trying to raise his arm, I submit, would be to say that he tries in the sense that he does whatever he can to bring about the rising of the arm. On that model, his rudimentary trying, his dumb feeling of initiating activity, would be like flicking an internal switch regularly but still mysteriously resulting in a movement. What can I say? The normal experience of voluntary movement is not like that. Normally, we do not guess or predict how we are voluntarily moving, not even when we are not observing ourselves or are blindfolded. Even though I am not in contact with the inner neural workings of motor control, I am not completely cut off from the process by which I act with my body. The only way I can try to turn my head is by starting to turn it, that is, by my moving my head. Here my experience of trying is my experience of intentionally doing something. In other words, there is a case for holding Claim 4.3 to be false. This is the crux: if Claim 4.3 is false, the New Volitionalist is forced to drop one of the premises leading to 4.3.

So, once again, our Volitionalist is faced with a difficult dilemma. She must give up either Claim 4.1 or Claim 4.2. She can only endorse the claim that the Landry Case can be generalised to cover normal action (Claim 4.2) by giving up the claim that the phenomenology of naked trying is the same as the phenomenology of acting (Claim 4.1). And she can only endorse the idea that the phenomenology of trying and acting are the same (Claim 4.1) by giving up the idea that the Landry Case can be generalised (Claim 4.2). In either case, the argument will fail. The argument from

the anaesthetised arm does not establish the existence of naked trying capable of existing in complete independence of any acting.

General Worries: Basic Action

Say that none of my specific arguments against the New Volitionalist's two versions of the argument from total failure are successful. Still, there will be arguments of a more general character against a New Volitionalist conception of trying as self-standing volitional events. One could, for example, argue that the New Volitionalist is committed to an utterly implausible account of how agents are related to their own bodies when they are acting;[15] or one could argue that the New Volitionalist is committed to a false conception of the temporality of action according to which the agent's contribution has finished almost before her bodily action has begun;[16] or one could argue that as a consequence of pushing the agent's real action or contribution into her mind, the New Volitionalist creates an unsurpassable problem about knowledge of other people's actions.[17] These arguments have received some attention in the literature, and I will not discuss them further here.

There is a different line of argument one could press against the New Volitionalist that I have not encountered anywhere in the literature. It concerns the New Volitionalist's conception of basic intentional action and would go something like this. All the New Volitionalist accounts of which I know have focused on agents' trying to move their body. There has been a tendency to conceive of the agent's basic intentional action as her intentionally moving her body: for example, the agent's raising her arm. A good question is how deep this identification of basic intentional action with the agent's trying to move her body runs in New Volitionalism. Is New Volitionalism committed to the idea that basic action always is trying to move? Or has bodily movement merely been a convenient example of an agent's basic trying to φ?

I think the first option is the case. I cannot in this brief section develop a full argument for this claim, but here are some preliminary reasons. The Gricean argument for Claim 2.1 assumes that a necessary application condition for a trying-description to an agent's intentional action is that the action is fallible. Only fallible actions can be described in terms of trying. The New Volitionalist uses the Gricean argument to show that *any* intentional action can be described as an agent's trying. One way to block this first Gricean move of the New Volitionalist account is to deny that all actions are fallible. In this spirit, it has been argued by some authors that only complex actions, like attracting a waiter's attention, can be described in terms of trying, while simple or basic action, like moving one's arm, cannot, since they are

[15] As argued, for example, by Anscombe 2000, Section 19 (discussed by Hursthouse 2000, pp. 88f.), Morris 1988; Brewer 1993, and Haddock 2005.

[16] This argument has been formulated by Stout 2001. Not all Volitionalists are equally vulnerable to this objection. O'Shaughnessy (1991 and 2003), Zhu (2004) and in some places Ginet (1990, pp. 33–34) and McCann (1998, p. 140) all seem to support the idea that the trying has an action-guiding and -sustaining function—the trying lasts all through the action.

[17] See Brewer 1993, and for some replies, see Hornsby 1997.

infallible. When it comes to basic bodily action, there will be successful execution if there is just some bodily movement – any token of this type of basic action will by definition be successful.[18]

The argument from total failure is used by the New Volitionalist both to answer this challenge and to argue for the separable existence of trying as mental particular. The argument is thought to demonstrate, on the one hand, that even our most minimal actions, our bodily movements, can fail since they can fail to occur at all and, on the other hand, that in the case of a total failure trying becomes manifest as a separable mental particular. It thus seems as if New Volitionalism is committed to the idea that if an agent executes some bodily action, then she trying to move her body in some way. It is in the context of such a commitment that the New Volitionalist's use of the arguments from total failure makes sense. As far as I can see, it is only when we focus on mere bodily movement that failure to act gives us a trying isolated from actual doing.

Say that this reasoning is correct and New Volitionalism is committed to the claim that whenever an agent performs a bodily action she is trying to move her body, the question I want raise is this: How informative or helpful is this theory of "basic" trying as a general account of ordinary intentional behaviour? Given that we hardly if ever attend to our bodies when we engage in intentional action, how well does the New Volitionalist's account fit the actual structure of our intentional engagement with the world? A pertinent question to pose in this connection is at what level we would ordinarily locate the most basic description (or aspect) of the agent's behaviour under which it is intentional. From the perspective of the agent, is it really correct to say that minimal bodily movements constitute her basic actions?

It is important to keep in mind that our descriptions of an action as either basic or non-basic depend on the descriptive framework we are employing. I take it for granted that in our attempts to understand intentional action and voluntary agency we want first of all a theoretical framework that will allow the phenomenon of voluntary agency to appear as what it is. It is an important insight that certain causal and impersonal frameworks do not allow for this.[19] In order to appreciate what is going on as an agent's voluntarily doing something, we need a framework that adopts the agent's point of view: an event is only an agent's doing something intentionally if the agent in some way conceives of this event as her trying to do something.

This fact has obvious implications for our use of notions of basic and non-basic action. According to an agent-centred framework, the notions of basic and non-basic action apply to the descriptions or aspects of an agent's action that the agent herself conceives of as basic and non-basic. A convincing suggestion is that the agent's conception of basic and non-basic should be spelled out in terms of the teleological structure of the agent's practical understanding of what she is doing. A description of the agent's action captures a basic aspect of that action if this aspect is basic in terms of the agent's current goals, knowledge–how, and practical reasoning. According to this understanding, we should define basic intentional action as whatever an agent is

[18] See note 3 above.

[19] This point has been forcefully argued by Nagel 1986, pp. 110–111, and Hornsby 1997, ch. 8.

capable of doing without explicitly thinking about how to do it by doing something else and is in fact now so doing.[20] Other descriptive frameworks will not be agent-centred and teleological, and depending on their basic assumptions, they will single out other aspects of the action as basic.

Say that I am correct that New Volitionalism in the form I have considered is committed to the idea that an agent's basic action is her moving her body or trying to move her body: it is on the background of this assumption that the two Volitionalist core claims (2.1 and 2.2) are usually interpreted. However, we do not have to accept this notion of basic action – indeed, I think it is advisable that we give it up. It is not consistent with a properly agent-centred framework for description of voluntary agency. Only on rare occasions does the agent intend or try to move her body in order to accomplish some non-basic action. It would be pathologically abnormal to try to move one's vocal organs (lips, tongue etc.) in order to speak or to try to move one's hand and arm forward, to open the hand and then to close it in order to grasp something in front of one. Rather, we basically say something or basically grasp something. That is, from the perspective of the agent, this is what is describable as her most basic action.[21] If this is a coherent suggestion, then it would be our simple object-involving or object-oriented actions that should be characterised as basic.[22]

This seems to tell against the New Volitionalist's account of action. We should suspect that something is wrong with the assumptions that force the New Volitionalist to focus on minimal bodily movements. If basic actions are not ordinarily an agent's minimal bodily movements but rather her object-oriented actions, then some of the motivation for the New Volitionalist argument from total failure withers away. Nobody would be tempted to doubt that that temporally stretched, object-oriented actions can fail. If we deny that basic actions are the bodily movements, which agents make in order to act intentionally in the world, and insist instead that it is the agent's doing something to or with objects in her surrounding that is basic, then it is simply obvious that all our actions are fallible. All we can ever do is to try. But we would not be tempted to understand this trying as a self-standing mental particular capable of existing independently of any execution.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued against two versions of the argument from total failure. Arguments from total failure are used in order to prove the existence of naked trying. The two versions of the argument I have considered both fail. It might be that none of the individual arguments that I have presented single-handedly can refute the core

[20] For this so-called "teleological" notion of basic action, see Hornsby 1980, ch. 6, and Enç 2003, ch. 2.

[21] This has also recently been argued by Hornsby 2005. It is interesting to note how far Hornsby in recent writings has moved away from her initial endorsement of New Volitionalism. See, for example, Hornsby 1998. For a discussion of Hornsby's view of bodily action, see Haddock 2005.

[22] Note that this conception of basic intentional action not only fits our commonsensical ways of talking about action and our ordinary experiences of intentional activity, but also fits data from behavioural and neuroscientific psychology. Plenty of data show that agents are unaware of the finer details of their bodily movements. For a review of some the relevant data, see Jeannerod 1999.

Claim 2.2, but together I think they add up to a good case against New Volitionalism. I therefore see no reason to accept the New Volitionalist's core Claim 2.2 that an agent's trying to φ is an independent mental particular – a mental event capable of existing independently of any bodily or otherwise worldly effects.

Even though I think we should reject New Volitionalism and the picture of the mental to which it subscribes, I do not think we should reject all of its basic volitionalist insights. We can accept that every time an agent performs an intentional action it can be described as her trying to do something and we can accept that the content and phenomenology of the trying is the same as the content and phenomenology of the acting. When we have given up the idea of a naked trying present in all action, there will be an easy way to explain this identity of content and phenomenology: the trying is the acting, or an aspect of the acting.

The question will now be whether this kind of position is defendable without either committing oneself, on the one hand, to some form of behaviourist elimination of the experience of willing in favour of descriptions couched purely in terms of stimuli and motor behaviour; or, on the other hand, to a form of functionalist reduction of the experience of willing to causal roles of other mental states and motor output. There might be room for the position that an agent's execution of intentional action is distinguished by its volitional aspect: the agent's experience of willing is a genuine and irreducible phenomenon which nevertheless cannot exist independently of the agent's bodily behaviour or bodily engagement in the acting. An experience of willing which would lose its volitional character and content if it were to be cut loose from the embodied experience of the acting agent. We should not jump to any conclusions. More research is needed in order to clarify the options.[23]

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