

## CONCEPT OF “WILLING” IN WITTGENSTEIN’S *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS*

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In §611 to §632 and in Part II, section 8 of his *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), and very briefly in §97 of his *Philosophical Grammar* (1974) Wittgenstein talks about action and the will. His main idea behind these passages is the view that our mental vocabulary does not refer to any “inner” acts, states or processes. Our inner states or processes are not *private objects* that are *known* only to the person who *has* them. For Wittgenstein, to say that someone is in a given mental state is to say that he is in any of a large collection of publicly observable things. He supports this view by examining the workings of a representative selection of mental concepts, such

as, understanding, deciding, believing, judging, expecting, intending, willing, etc. The present paper is an attempt to present a clear view of what Wittgenstein means by the concept of “willing” in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

It seems very difficult to find a common conceptual framework within which the notion of willing in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy can be captured. But it is clearly understood from various passages in *Philosophical Investigations* that Wittgenstein has tried to characterize willing in both positive and negative ways. In fact, there are certain passages from which we can spell out clearly that his negative characterization outweighs more than his positive characterization. By an analysis of his negative treatment of willing we will try to come out with a positive characterization of this concept in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. We will see that his philosophical arguments to show that willing is not a particular kind of act give some indication that his whole notion of it is compatible with the language of some kind of philosophical behaviorism.

According to Wittgenstein, the notion of willing as a specific inner act is quite mythic: there is no inner mechanism which brings our actions about. Although he was not specific about it Wittgenstein here seems to be reacting (Hyman, 2014) against the empiricist view about willing as represented by the classic exposition of John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1979). Locke writes as follows: “All our voluntary Motions... are produced in us only by the free Action or Thought of our own Minds... For example: My right Hand writes, whilst my left Hand is still: What causes rest in one, and motion in the other? Nothing but my Will, a Thought of my Mind.” (Locke 1979, 4.10.19) Willing, Locke explains, is ‘an act of the Mind, directing its thought to the production of any action, and thereby exerting its power to produce it’ (*ibid.*,

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2.21.28). *Willing* is its proper name; but Locke concedes that it is hard to find the right words to describe it. At one point, he describes it as 'a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or, as it were, commanding the doing or not doing such or such a particular action' (*ibid.*, 2.21.5). But he admits that the words *preferring*, *ordering*, and *commanding* do not capture the phenomenon precisely. He concludes that since willing is 'a very simple act, whosoever desires to understand what it is, will better find it by reflecting on his own mind, and observing what it does, when it *wills*, than by any variety of articulate sounds whatever' (*ibid.*, 2.21.30). In other words, one should not try to *define* the act of will: one should simply discover it by introspection.

Contra Locke, Wittgenstein argues that willing is not the name of an action; neither is it the name of a voluntary action. According to him, willing is not a causal mark of the voluntary. If "willing were some kind of causal bringing about, then it too could be brought "about". But the philosophical idea of willing excludes that possibility; "it makes no sense to speak of willing willing." (§613) As if the willing of willing were a preparatory act of willing. However, I can bring about situations in which I have to will something. But that is not to will willing. Wittgenstein writes: 'In the sense in which I can ever bring anything about (such as stomach-ache through over-eating), I can also bring about an act of willing, In this sense I bring about the act of willing to swim by jumping into the water. Doubtless I was trying to say: I can't will willing; that is, it makes no sense to speak of willing willing. "Willing" is not the name of an action; and so not the name of any voluntary action either. And my use of a wrong expression came from our wanting to think of willing as an immediate non-causal bringing about.' (§613)

From the last sentence of the above quotation it immediately follows that, for Wittgenstein, willing is not also some kind of special, non-causal bringing about. Here Wittgenstein suggests that there is an underlying picture which suggests the notion of a non-causal bringing about. "A misleading analogy lies at the root of this idea; the causal nexus seems to be established by a mechanism connecting two parts of a machine. The connection may be broken if the mechanism is disturbed. (We think only of disturbances to which a mechanism is normally subject, not, say, of cog-wheels suddenly going soft, or passing through one another, and so on.)" (§613) Willing, then, as we might picture it, is like part of the action mechanism, though it is not a physical item in the mechanism. So, it is a bringing about but not in the same sense as a causal mechanism. This is the reason of Wittgenstein speaking of the idea a "non-causal bringing about." But this seems to be a mystification. What is left of the analogy between voluntary bringing about and the causal mechanism if the notion of connecting parts of the mechanism is not present? Willing, for Wittgenstein, comes to be thought of as a mover which is not itself moved. He puts it in §618: 'One imagines the willing subject here as something without any mass (without any inertia); as a motor which has no inertia in itself to overcome. And so it is only mover, not moved. That is: One can say "I will, but my body does not obey me"—but not: "My will does not obey me." (Augustine.)'

Wittgenstein also denies that willing is an experience. In his *Notebooks 1914-1916*, he first mentions this point: "The act of will is not an experience." (p. 89, dated 9.11.16) In experience, Wittgenstein insists, something is given to us, something happens, or something is perceived. But in willing, a thing does not happen to us, rather we *do* something. The will cannot be a phenomenon, for every phenomenon only *happens*,

is perceived by us, but is not something we *do*. In his *Philosophical Grammar* Wittgenstein substantiates this claim in the following way:

"The will can't be a phenomenon, for whatever phenomenon you take is something that *simply happens*, something we undergo, not something we *do*. The will isn't *something* I see happen, it's more like my being involved in my actions, my *being* my actions." Look at your arm and move it and you will experience this very vividly: "You aren't observing it moving itself, you aren't having an experience - not just an experience, anyway - you're *doing* something." You may tell yourself that you could also imagine exactly the same thing happening to your hand, but merely observed and not willed by you. But shut your eyes, and move your arm so that you have, among other things, a certain experience: now ask yourself whether you still can imagine that you were having the same experience but without willing it. (§97, p. 144)

For Wittgenstein, willing is not an instrument or device whereby we perform such voluntary actions as walking, talking or imagining. It is not like a brake one uses to stop a movement or a lever one uses to shift power from one to another pulley. "When I raise my arm 'voluntarily' I do not use any instrument to bring the movement about. My wish is not such an instrument." (§614) If we try to think of willing as instrument and not agent, it tends to reappear in the guise of an agent. "I'll walk," I might say, "so, I'd better will to bring my walking." So used, my willing will no longer serve to make the walking mine or even voluntary. That would be matter of *my* using willing, *my* doing that, and not a matter of its being willing that I happened to use.

Willing is not, Wittgenstein remarks, any kind of wishing something. In *Notebooks 1914-16*, dated 4.1.1916 Wittgenstein remarked: "Wishing is not acting. But willing is acting." (p.

88) To wish that something happen is to imply that this happening is not a voluntary action. When someone raises his or her arm, s/he does not wish that his or her arm might go up; any voluntary action, Wittgenstein says, excludes that wish. Thus, in §615 he remarks: "Willing, if it is not to be a sort of wishing, must be the action itself. It cannot be allowed to stop anywhere short of the action." If it is the action, then it is so in the ordinary sense of the word; so it is speaking, writing, walking, lifting a thing, imagining something. But it is also trying, attempting, making an effort,—to speak, to write, to lift a thing, to imagine something etc.' What Wittgenstein means by the above remark is that if willing is just speaking, writing, walking, it can hardly be what makes instances of those actions voluntary. It may be pointed out here that Wittgenstein always argues against the idea of willing as mental states or mental acts, representing the deliberateness of voluntary actions, as something separate from the action itself. For him, willing is immanent in action itself; it neither evokes an action nor remain standing before action. In a certain way it is acting itself.

In §621 Wittgenstein raises the question whether willing is the kinaesthetic sensation associated with voluntary activities. "Let us not forget this: when 'I raise my arm', my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm? ((Are the kinaesthetic sensations my willing?))" If willing is the kinaesthetic sensation, it might be among types of feelings associated with effort, trying, muscular movements, and the like. But Wittgenstein insists that "when I raise my arm I do not usually *try* to raise it." (§622) It is typically effortless. "At all costs I will get to that house."—But if there is no difficulty about it—*can* I try at all costs to get to the house?" (§623)

Wittgenstein here is reacting to William James’ view on willing (Hyman, 2014) as presented in *The Principles of Psychology*. James explains voluntary action by postulating sensations corresponding to each of the physical movements we are able to perform. James holds that I am aware of the movements of my limbs when I walk and of my lips when I speak because these movements produce characteristic kinaesthetic feelings in my mind; and he holds that my voluntary movements are caused by the images or ideas of kinaesthetic feelings stored in my memory. For example, when I raise my arm, the motion of my arm is caused by an idea of the feeling associated with this movement. No ‘will-force’ over and above the idea needs to occur. Hence, according to James’s view, the occurrence of the idea, pure and simple, is what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm.

Wittgenstein does not merely deny that voluntary movements are caused by memory images of kinaesthetic feelings: he rejects the very idea that kinaesthetic feelings ‘advise me’ of the movement and position of my limbs. It is true, of course, that I can normally feel—i.e. I am normally aware of—how my limbs are disposed and how they are moving. But it does not follow that I am normally aware of feelings—‘certain queer feelings in my muscles and joints’, as Wittgenstein puts it in §624—which advise me of these things. And as a matter of fact, I am not normally aware of such feelings: “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. Perhaps a little in the tip of the finger, as a slight tension. (Not at all in the joint.) And this sensation advises me of the movement?—for I can describe the movement exactly.” (*PI* II, sec. VIII, p.185) So the reason why we imagine that kinaesthetic feelings advise me of the movement and position

of my limbs may be that we are confusing being aware of something and being aware of sensations or sense-impressions caused by something.

One may answer to the question “How do you know that you have raised your arm?” as “I feel it.” But for Wittgenstein, this answer is wrong, because it suggests that you recognize the special feeling, i.e., the kinaesthetic sensation, and *can tell from recognizing them* that their constant accompaniment, the raising of the arm, has occurred. The fact is that the certainty that you have raised your arm is itself a criterion of recognizing the feeling here. As Wittgenstein writes in §625: “And are you certain that you recognize it right?—You are certain that you have raised your arm; isn’t this the criterion, the measure, of the recognition?” In his “Review of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*” (*Mind*, LXVIII, 1954) P. F. Strawson remarks that “there are two things that Wittgenstein is *not* saying. He is not saying that one would have this certainty in the absence of any feeling, or in the presence of an unaccustomed feeling. It is no doubt *because* of the kinaesthetic sensations that I know; but it is not *from* them that I tell. Nor is he saying that I could never (say, if suitably stimulated) be mistaken about this. Here is a case where I know, but don’t have a way of knowing, of telling.” (p. 94)

Wittgenstein reiterates the above claim that willing is not “feeling” in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations* in the following way. ‘But after all,’ Wittgenstein imagines his interlocutor saying, ‘you must feel it, otherwise you wouldn’t know (without looking) how your finger was moving’ (p. 185). To this he replies: “But ‘knowing’ it only means: being able to describe it.—I may be able to tell the direction from which a sound comes only because it affects one ear more strongly than the other, but I don’t feel this in my ears; yet it has its effect: I *know* the direction from which the sound comes; for instance, I

look in that direction.” (*Ibid.*) Wittgenstein’s point is that whatever physiological mechanism enables me to know where a sound is coming from, there is no need to postulate a sensation corresponding to the direction. Similarly, whatever mechanism enables me to know how my finger is moving, there is no need to postulate a kinaesthetic sensation corresponding to the movement of my finger either. Pain, Wittgenstein points out, provides another analogy. I know that the itch is in my toe, but not because the itch has a toeish quality about it. And memory, he adds, provides yet another. I know I had toast for breakfast, but not because a feeling of pastness is associated with my thought of eating toast. As he writes: “It is the same with the idea that it must be some feature of our pain that advises us of the whereabouts of the pain in the body, and some feature of our memory image that tells us the time to which it belongs.” (*Ibid.*)

Finally, Wittgenstein considers the idea that willing to raise my arm is *deciding* to raise it:

‘Examine the following description of a voluntary action: ‘I form the decision to pull the bell at 5 o’clock, and when it strikes 5, my arm makes this movement.’—Is that the correct description, and not this one: ‘... and when it strikes 5, I raise my arm’?—One would like to supplement the first description: ‘and see! my arm goes up when it strikes 5.’ And this ‘and see!’ is precisely what doesn’t belong here. I do not say ‘See, my arm is going up!’ when I raise it.’ (§627)

What Wittgenstein is saying here, in effect, is that if willing is deciding, the so-called act it is supposed to cause cannot be an act at all: it can only be a phenomenon I observe.

Finally, we may ask: What is “left over” if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm? Wittgenstein’s reply is that what is “left over” is just what

characterizes voluntary movements. The difference between my raising my arm and my arm simply going up in the air does not consist in the presence of the former case an “interior” act of will. What commonly characterizes voluntary movements is the knowledge of what one is doing, absence of surprise as to what is happening, and foreknowledge of one’s voluntary movements. Thus Wittgenstein remarks in §628: “Voluntary movement is marked by the absence of surprise.” And in §629: “When people talk about the possibility of foreknowledge of the future they always forget the fact of the prediction of one’s own voluntary movements.”

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