Presidential Address
The New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society

TRYING AND MENTAL CAUSATION

Timothy Cleveland

A runner tries to steal second. His trying consists in merely those intentional bodily movements that constitute running to second base in the appropriate circumstances. Someone tries to push a piano across a room. The trying just is pushing against the object. All one does in trying is to act. When one tries to do something—perform some intentional act, move one's body "on purpose"—all one does is perform an intentional action. This commonplace contrasts sharply with a particularly philosophical perspective on trying. Behind our ordinary and ubiquitous use of the verb "try," some philosophers see the essence of action revealed in special inner acts of will, willings, or volitions. In their view, all one does in acting is to try—that is, perform an inner mental act of willing that culminates in certain results. These acts of willing, so the story goes, bridge the gap between one's mental states and one's intentional bodily movements. A slogan captures this Cartesian perspective: "trying as the mental pineal gland." This tradition sees deep significance in our ordinary talk of trying. I want to challenge the very idea that reflections on everyday ordinary trying can reveal the essence of intentional action to be hidden inner events. In ordinary cases, at least, nothing is hidden. To try is to act.

This apparently uncontroversial theme engages a dispute deep in the philosophy of mind. Since Descartes, the question of the mind's role in bodily action has persisted. Human bodily action seems to arise from the interaction of two intrinsically different and irreducible realms—the mental and the physical. For Descartes this created the problem of explaining how an immaterial substance, the mind, causally interacts with a material substance, the body. Descartes' infamous solution was to provide a physical explanation. The pineal gland was the causal link between mind and body.

In contemporary philosophy, concern with the mind's role in physical action is manifest in the following fundamental question: what distinguishes those particular bodily movements associated with intentional actions from those that are not? Donald Davidson begins his essay "Agency" thus: "What events in the life of a person reveal agency; what deeds are his deeds and his doings in contrast to mere happenings in his history; what is the mark that distinguishes his actions?"[1] In a certain Cartesian tradition—that begins with Descartes and extends through Locke, Hume, Bentham, Mill, and into the twentieth century with H.A. Prichard—the answer is that physical actions occur when bodily movements are caused in the right way by an act of the will or volition. Call this view "volitionism."

The need for volitions in an adequate theory of action seems intuitive. Intentional bodily movements acquire their intentionality by being caused by states of mind, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions. Yet one can have a belief that one should perform an action, desire to perform it, and even form the intention to do it, but these states alone will not bring about one's acting. One must "will" the bodily movements. The willing provides

the special link between the mental states and the bodily movements, and so explains their intentionality. What is needed, it seems, is a special kind of event that causally mediates mental sates and bodily movements. These events are referred to variously as acts of will, willings, or volitions.

In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle ridiculed volitionism and it fell into disrepute. He wrote:

> Champions of the doctrine maintain...that any person is not merely able but bound to know that he is willing when he is doing so, since volitions are defined as a species of conscious process.... However, when a champion of the doctrine is himself asked how long ago he last executed his last volition, or how many acts of the will he executes in, say, reciting "Little Miss Muffet" backwards, he is apt to confess to finding difficulties in giving the answer....[2]

Ryle's sarcasm brings a scathing criticism. Our ordinary experiences in acting do not make volitionism more evident, but rather, more controversial.

New arguments based upon the nature of trying promise to avoid these difficulties. The intuition behind the emphasis on trying is this: the concept of trying seems to conform quite nicely to some basic intuitions about the notion of willing. By concentrating on an ordinary verb like "trying," rather than a theory-laden term like "volition," it seems one can provide a new and clearer way to approach the previously obscure questions about action. Jennifer Hornsby, thinking of critics of volitionism such as Ryle, writes: "*Tryings* are at an advantage here. "Try" is an ordinary enough word. And at least there is no problem about showing that people sometimes try to act, even if it takes a philosopher to find a serious interest in showing that when we act we always try to act."[3]

Indeed, the case for tryings as willings demands some serious philosophical muscle. The verdict rests on two major claims. (i) Whenever one acts, one tries. Call this thesis *the omnipresence of trying*.[4] (ii) Trying refers to, partially or wholly, the special kind of event that gives rise to bodily movements—an act of will or willing. Call this thesis *trying as willing*. The omnipresence of trying ensures that some facts about trying are general enough in scope to have implications for all human action. Trying as willing ensures that these facts will not be trivial.

Consider the omnipresence of trying. It seems odd to say that one tries whenever one easily accomplishes something. I sign my name. Did I have to try to sign my name? Such uses may jar some ears. Suffice it to say that the arguments for the omnipresence of trying admit as much. They then employ H.P. Grice's distinction between truth-conditions and "conversational implicature."[5] It may be odd sometimes to say that a person tried, but it can be true nonetheless. It may be misleading to say, "I ate half a pizza," when I ate the whole pie, but I cannot be accused of speaking falsely. One cannot eat the whole pizza without eating half of it. The same can be argued for trying and acting. One cannot easily succeed without even trying, though saying as much might be odd. For the purposes of this paper, I will grant the omnipresence of trying—whenever one acts, one tries.

There is a barrage of arguments for interpreting tryings as willings, but one especially seems to get to the heart of the matter. People with a recently paralyzed or amputated limb sometimes claim they can still try to move that limb. They may be unaware the limb is paralyzed or amputated and contend that they are moving it. When informed that the limb never moved, they insist that, at least, they tried to move it. Because these acts of trying fail to achieve even the most minimal of bodily effects, they appear to isolate the essence of action as an event of willing or act of the will. The only difference it seems between the cases of paralytics' trying and ordinary overt bodily actions is that, in the one case, the agent's activity is successful in producing the intended effects, whereas in the other it is not. With paralysis, no muscles contractions occur, only brain activity at best. Based on such considerations, Brian O'Shaughnessy claims that every intentional overt physical movement "... is the surface tip of an event that reaches all the way back into the brain. Namely, an act of the will."[6] Seen in this light, trying, he says, "serves a crucial bridge function between the mind and body, not unlike that allotted to the pineal gland."[7]

Of course, it is obvious that brain events cause bodily movements and that science can provide a rigorous account of *these* causes in neurophysiological terms, and if need be, in more basic terms. But interpreting trying as willing must involve more than admitting that. It rests on the importance of trying in a mentalistic account of the intentionality of human action, an account that explains agency in terms of the *content* of one's mental states. The trying event must somehow bridge the agent's intentions and his bodily movements. Consider the intention of patient with a paralyzed arm. He intends to move his arm that is, unbeknownst to him, paralyzed. How is his intention related to his trying?

One must tread cautiously here. Talk of his intention is ambiguous. One must be careful to distinguish the *general intention,* which may never be acted upon, from the *intention one has in acting.* There are, at least, two kinds of intentions: future-directed intentions and act-relational or *de re* intentions. Suppose an agent claims that he intended to turn on a light. This claim might mean:

> (1) The agent intended that at some point in the future he perform an activity of turning on a light.

Note that this intention has general content and could be satisfied by many actions. But the agent might mean:

> (2) The agent performed some activity and intended *of that very activity* that *it* turn on the light.[8]

Note that this act-relational intention has *de re* content, part of which is the particular activity itself. Intention (1) captures the agent's general intention for the future. (2) makes explicit his intention in acting.

To understand the importance of *de re* intentions in acting, suppose we had said of the agent, "He intended to be turning on the light, but his action failed to flip the switch." In this case, when we explain his action by citing his intention, we mean:

(3) The agent performed some activity and intended *of that very activity* that *it* turn on the light and it failed to turn on the light.

The explanation of the agent's act in terms of his intention is conveyed only by the *de re* reading. Moreover, the fact that much of the time we act intentionally without ever formulating general future-directed intentions suggests that the *de re* readings of our intentions will be indispensable to our explanations of intentional action. Notice also that part of the content of the *de re* intention is the particular act the agent performed.

Recall now the paralytic's intention. He intended to move his arm. Unbeknownst to him, the arm was paralyzed, but he insists that he tried. The agent's intention in acting is best represented as:

(4) The agent performed a range of brain activity and intended of *that activity* that *it* result in his arm moving.

This case seems to aid the volitionist in revealing the brain activity as the special willing event. Had the patient's arm been in normal condition the brain activity would have caused the arm to move. The essential activity of the agent is brain activity, the rest is simply the immediate causal result of this special act. Being caused by this brain activity supposedly gives bodily movement its status as an action.

However, simply the existence of causal regularities between brain events and limb movements cannot confirm trying as willing. No one denies that brain activity plays a certain role in generating all our movements of bone and muscles whether these movements are voluntary or not. If neurophysiology tells us certain regularities exist, then we have reason to believe that they do. But if the volitionist view is simply that our bodily movements are in this sense generated by brain events, then this thesis is surely trivial. Volitionism must be more substantial. It must claim that this activity has a special essential property that movements, taken in isolation from that activity, lack. This states what it means to understand willing in terms of trying.

To understand why this substantial claim will be a difficult to defend, consider an ordinary case where an agent moves his arm and is said to have tried, say to open the door. His *de re* intention in acting suggests that his trying will simply be the movement.

(5) The agent performed a movement, and intended *of that movement* that *it* open the door, and *it* failed to open the door.

Trying in this case refers to the bodily movement that the agent performed. There is no reason to believe that the referent is only some brain activity of the agent.[9] Moreover, the movement's status as an action comes from it being part of the agent's *de re* intention in acting, from its being done with an intention or for a purpose.

The brain activity in the paralyzed-arm case rates as an action for the very same reason. Its status as an action is gained by its being done by the agent with an intention or for a purpose. Like other ordinary intentional bodily movements, the brain activity constitutes part of the agent's intention in acting. The agent's failure to move his arm may be due to a breakdown on his body's or brain's part, it may have a neurological explanation, but

this does not mean that we must interpret his trying as anything but a simple act he does—in this case a brain activity, and not as a volition. Trying to do something is doing something identifiable with some activity the agent intentionally performs. More specifically, when one tries, one intends of some particular bodily event that *it* be something or other. The paralytic's trying should not be expected to reveal, any more than any other bodily movement a person intentionally performs does, a special event involved in physical action.

Appealing only to causal regularities between brain events and bodily movements alone to substantiate trying as willing supports a trivial thesis at best. Neurophysiology is not naturalized volitionism. Volitionism focuses on bizarre cases of trying and assimilates all ordinary cases of action to these. Trying is simply an activity one performs intentionally. The more *outré* the circumstances, the more unusual this activity may be, but it is simply intentional action nonetheless.

Trying has been touted as the mental pineal gland. Yet the modern materialist who identifies the mind with the brain no longer has any theoretical need for an exact location where mental substance causally interacts with a distinct physical substance. Brain events cause the body to move in a way perfectly describable in the physicalistic, causal terms of neurophysiology. Nonetheless, a legacy of the Cartesian problem remains. The causal theory stated in terms of brain events, muscle contractions, and bodily motions will never explain how some bodily motions acquire their status as movements an agent intentionally performs. In the story of bodily movement told by the strictly causal laws of the physical sciences human agency disappears. The Cartesian problem of action is now to determine how brain events, of which certain mental predicates are true, cause certain bodily movements to be more than mere happenings in the physical world. The volitionists claim that focus on trying is key to solving this problem. In their view, "trying?" refers to a brain event responsible for the essence of human action.

I want to argue that events of trying cannot play this special causal role. My doubts arise this way. When the paralytic tries, there is some event the agent performs such that he intends of that event that it result in his arm moving. But this case is no different from an ordinary case of bodily action in this respect:

> (6) There is some event that the agent performs such that he intends of that event that it be φ. (Where "φ" is the description of the action under which it is intended.)

That is to say, the paralytic's trying and ordinary actions both involve *de re* intentions, or are characterized by *de re* intentionality.

The causal-minded volitionist may try to locate the willing in the *de re* intentionality of the brain activity. They may then explain that the *de re* intentional nature of the brain activity is causally passed on from a brain state with the content of a general intention. When the time comes to act,

> (7) The agent intends that now he performs a movement of his arm.

This general directed intention causes the intentional brain activity that is the trying. But general intention would never be enough to explain the intentional nature of the activity. The content of this general intention could be fulfilled and the activity remain unintentional. The intention could be fulfilled "by chance," as O'Shaughnessy says, "by the mere temporal conjunction of an act and an intention with matching content."[10] In intending, the agent intends, when the time comes to move his arm *intentionally*. The agent's immediate general intention is thus better represented as:

(8) The agent intends that now he performs an activity and he intends *of that very activity* that *it* be a movement of his arm.

In other words, the agent intends to perform an act of moving his arm intentionally. But now the specification of the necessary content of the agent's general, *de dicto* mental state of intending to move his arm presupposes the agent's *de re* intention, or one could say, the *de re* intentionality of the activity.

The intentional nature of the brain activity performed is not *causally* explained by virtue of the fact that the agent can be ascribed an intention or other mental state with general content. In order to ascribe intentions or other mental states with general content to a person, what must be taken as basic is a *teleological* notion of a person intending of a particular event that it be something or other. The ascribing of a *de re* intention in acting, or ascribing *de re* intentionality to the events performed, conveys, as George Wilson puts it, "that the action—or the bodily movements in which the action consisted—was *directed* by the agent *toward* the achievement of some objective...."[11] The ascription of mental states with general content relevant to explaining a person's behavior must presuppose this basic teleological notion.

What has become of the Cartesian problem? Philosophy these days does not exactly abound with Cartesian substance dualists. Today philosophers are of a more physicalist bent than Descartes, and the original causal interaction problem of relating different substances cannot get a grip. But a problem of explanation structurally similar enough to Descartes' to be called "Cartesian" does remain to haunt the sophisticated physicalist. If all substance is physical then what role do our theories of the mental, theories stated in terms of mental predicates, play in explaining the behavior of physical things? This problem is especially acute when the concern is to explain the behavior of human beings. Sometimes it seems the only satisfactory manner in which to explain a person's behavior is to cite the causes in mental terms of "belief," "desire," and "intention." But if the physical world, which is really all there is, is closed under physical laws, and if the mental terms cannot be translated without loss into purely physical terms, what causal explanatory relevance can talk of beliefs, desires, and intentions have?

The problem can be out as a paradox: one thinks that the only satisfactory explanations of behavior are stated in terms of mental cause, but one also believes that true physical laws would causally explain the behavior of everything in physical terms. If mental terms cannot be translated without loss into physical terms, something must go. One could become an eliminitivist and, opting for the physical, abandon any hope of any real explanations in mental terms. But insofar as one believes in the necessity or soundness of

some mentalistic causal explanations, one seems to have a problem. The problem is akin to Descartes' causal interaction problem when put in terms of the worry of a ghost in a machine. For the Cartesian dualist, if one can explain all physical behavior causally via physical laws, then postulating a non-physical substance does all the work of a ghost in a machine. The problem now is that causal explanations in mental terms are irrelevant to the true causal story told solely in physical terms; they are like talking about ghostly properties when one can fully explain the behavior of the machine in terms of its physical properties alone. This "ghost" of the ghost in the machine is the problem of "mental causation."

What happens to the problem of mental causation when one rejects the Cartesian picture of trying as willing? Recall the notion of an agent's *de re* intention in acting. The agent performs an activity and

(*) intends of that very activity that it be φ.

The *de re* intention is not a mental cause of the activity; the very activity is part of the content of the intention. Explanations of a person's behavior that depend on the ascription of *de re* intentions should not be understood as causal explanations but instead as interpretations of the behavior as teleological. So, explanations of behavior that appeal to *de re* intentions should not be seen as competing with causal explanations in physical terms. The problem will not arise here at least. These considerations, I hope, will help exorcise the ghost of the Cartesian picture and the myth of trying as the mental pineal gland.

NOTES

1. Donald Davidson, "Agency," *Essays on Action and Events* (Oxford, 1980) 43-61, 43.
2. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949) 65.
3. Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 47.
4. The label is Brian O'Shaughnessy's, *The Will*, vol. 2. (Cambridge U P, 1980) 75-112.
5. H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," *The Logic of Grammar*. D. Davidson and G. Harman, eds. (Encino, CA: Dickerson P, 1975) 64-75.
6. O'Shaughnessy, *The Will*, vol. 2, 264.
7. O'Shaughnessy 352.
8. This distinction is reflected in the different scope of the quantifiers. The general future-directed intention is *de dicto*:

Ag intended that *F*[(∃*e*)(he performs *e* & *e* be a turning on of the light)].

The act-relational is *de re*:

(∃*e*)(*Ag* performed *e* & he intended of *e* that it be a turning on of the light).

9. Not all volitionists claim that trying always refers merely to the brain activity. O'Shaughnessy insists that 'trying' refers to a complex event: the brain activity and bodily movements it results in. Jennifer Hornsby disagrees. She thinks all trying and all action is merely brain activity.
10. O'Shaughnessy 325.
11. George M. Wilson, "Davidson on Intentional Action," *Actions and Events: Essays on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, eds. E. LePore and B. McLaughlin (Basil Blackwell, 1985): 29-43, 36.