

# Feature Book Review

*The Will: A Dual Aspect Theory*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. By Brian O'Shaughnessy.  
New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 608. \$33.99 paper.

It is rare that a large academic work in analytic philosophy should be reprinted in a new and revised edition some twenty-eight years after it first appeared. But it was eminently merited in the case of this work, which has influenced two generations of scholarship in action theory.

Although it is not evident (since there is no preface), there is quite a lot that is new in the second edition, including a chapter (I:8) that is a redaction of much of O'Shaughnessy's recent work on body image and bodily self-awareness in general, another (II:10) that restates his theory of intention in connection with his dual aspect theory of mind, one (II:12) that offers new argument for dual aspect theory in general on the basis of our experience of trying or striving in intentional movements, one (III:13) that defends his account of basic action, and one (II:16) that integrates first-person and third-person perspectives as a support for this account by the epistemology of dual aspect theory.<sup>1</sup> In this way the second edition does much to clarify that O'Shaughnessy does not understand willing/trying as a purely "inner" event and to strengthen the argument for dual aspectivism, which he thought most evident in the experience of bodily action. This is an important contribution, since dual aspect theory continues to be a serious option in philosophy of mind.

To understand O'Shaughnessy's approach and its importance, we must realize that he had to contend with deep prejudices against the very idea of "volition" left over from at least three waves of attacks in the twentieth century—the positivist backlash against German idealism, the rise of behaviorism in empirical psychology, and Gilbert Ryle's insistence that virtually every sense in which "will" had been used in philosophy involved some mistake or illusion. After O'Shaughnessy's monumental effort to restore the concept of "willing" to some respectability through a focus on the experience of controlling bodily action, volitional concepts have enjoyed a remarkable comeback in theories of action generally—to the point that Bernard Williams seemed out of touch when he made neo-Rylean complaint that Homer's minimalist moral psychology was fine without "willing" as any special kind of voluntary inner action distinct from intentional movement of the body. Thus it may be easier to appreciate the accomplishments of O'Shaughnessy's book in hindsight than it was in 1980. This work helped put an end to a kind of positivist dogmatism in moral psychology, much as Kripke, Lewis, and Plantinga did in metaphysics.

Thus O'Shaughnessy's classic has a crucial place in the development of twentieth-century moral psychology. The synoptic view provided by the new introduction is itself worth the price of the books and could be used as an entree to the entire subject

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed explanation of the changes made in the new edition, I am indebted to Dr. O'Shaughnessy, who emailed me a few months before his passing. While I cannot cover all these enhancements in this short review, I will address some of the key ones.

for graduate students. Although O'Shaughnessy offers a detailed and sometimes technical account of the bodily side of action, the introduction shows how deeply he knows the history of modern philosophy and how concerned he is to correct its divorce between mind and body by focusing on action-phenomena as an area in which the intimate links are revealed. His own use of "will" to refer primarily to the "striving" evident in intentional action (as opposed to other impulse-explained behavior) is to some extent indebted to Schopenhauer's version of the concept, which he sees as part of the nineteenth-century reintegration of human agency into the fabric of nature. In an important sense, O'Shaughnessy's theory aims to complete this development in a way that avoids the extreme physicalist reductions of the early twentieth century (p. 25). He notes the turn from metaphysical absolutes to "mediators" such as character, language, and meaning in phenomenology and in Wittgenstein, but then suggests that for this approach to bear fruit and avoid ending in metaphysical solipsism, it needs to focus on the connections seen in outward action. The original function of awareness and cognition must have been to "enhance life" by processing sensory stimuli to produce desires and a volitional effect that causes action upon the environment from which the stimuli came. By understanding the mental as part of this kind of feedback relation, with volition as the step from thought back to visceral change, we can avoid both "reductionist tendencies that pull 'downward' to the purely physical and 'upward' to the intellect," thereby erasing the mid-levels of affect and action that operate in "moral and artistic awareness" (p. 41). For O'Shaughnessy, mind cannot exist without action and a world to act on. "Will" is thus the linchpin in this vital connection. He defends the term as useful for picking out a kind of causal response to intention without which intention cannot control bodily movement, and also a kind of strength of will that consolidates an identity through "powerful act-desires and a personality strong enough to engender, sustain, and express such desires" (pp. 38–39). But this latter kind of volitional phenomenon seems distinctive because it involves a kind of (indirect) control over motivation itself.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the revival of volitional notions in the last three decades has gone well beyond O'Shaughnessy's focus on voluntariness as explained in terms of the "trying" or "striving" that directly connects certain intentions with the basic acts that they initiate (especially in bodily action, but also in mental acts like trying to remember or to focus one's attention). Recent work in action theory now commonly recognizes "decision" as a process that forms intentions and that is itself intentional (e.g., Pink, Mele). It also takes seriously the idea that there is a kind of "will" involved in caring or sustained devotion that is actively maintained by the agent (e.g., Frankfurt). Robert Kane has distinguished three senses of "will," ranging from the motives taken up in our intentions, to the voluntary formation of intentions (including the sense of "trying to decide" through deliberation), and the effort involved in trying to act on one's intentions. It is this final sense that is most in view in O'Shaughnessy's analysis. Although he has plenty to say on intentions to act immediately and their

<sup>2</sup>See my account of "projective motivation" as a form of control that operates on motives within the process of forming intentions in *Will as Commitment and Resolve* (Bronx NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2007), chaps. 1–4.

role as explaining basic acts and instrumental actions, he is not much concerned with Kane's other senses of "mental willing." And, in a crucial section that explains why he uses the word "will," O'Shaughnessy offers his own version of Wittgenstein's argument that an infinite regress ensues if we treat acts of willing themselves as willed or intentional (pp. 67–73). This makes good sense when "willing" means the voluntary starting (immediately) of some limb movement, but less so if "willing" refers to deliberate intention-formation. "Decision" in this sense may be treated as a special kind of executive act that is itself voluntary.<sup>3</sup> Like Elizabeth Anscombe's *Intention*, O'Shaughnessy's work remains strongly influenced by Wittgenstein's views, and he emphasizes his distance from radical or "metaphysical" (in the bad "superscience" sense) forms of "volitionism" according to which willing is a completely interior act without a bodily aspect that still mysteriously affects the physical world (pp. 95–96, 261).

Yet O'Shaughnessy differs from Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Davidson in arguing that intention and related beliefs and "act-desires" (or pro-attitudes) are not enough to distinguish the "voluntary" from the "involuntary," or action from non-active processes like spontaneous laughter or muscle spasms. Bodily action also requires distinct acts of "willing" to enact intentions in bodily movements, and such willing or "trying" is not reducible to present intending (pp. 390–93). Voluntary action is a very general genus that includes acts that do not originate in a decision, that are not optional (e.g., when arising in response to a desire that becomes irresistible), and that do not depend on deliberation or rational consideration. Yet we still know that "falling, sleeping, waking, sneezing . . . [and] desiring" are non-voluntary, in contrast even to such compelled acts as "letting go" of the life-rope from exhaustion (pp. 366–70). The only feature that distinguishes all of the latter set from the former, according to O'Shaughnessy, is that voluntary acts involve a "volition" that explains our sense that they have a psychological origin.

There is a potential point of confusion here. We might expect O'Shaughnessy to add that acts can be "willed" in his sense even when they are not intentional at all, especially since he has emphasized that "bodily willing occurs in all forms of animal life," including those lacking self-consciousness (pp. 297–98). Should we then perhaps say that a fish turns or moves its fins voluntarily, even though unintentionally, by exercising a kind of direct volitional control over its body? But through most of the text O'Shaughnessy follows Davidson's view that voluntary acts (or "action" properly speaking) must be intentional under at least one description (p. 367), even while he insists that this cannot be an analysis of what constitutes voluntariness, since it already utilizes the concept of action (p. 349). Thus he argues that a basic form of intention is found in several kinds of actions that have often been considered "subintentional" (such as idly humming a tune or drumming one's fingers as one talks) since these include some consent to inclinations, some (non-thetic) awareness of the activity, and some ability to stop it at will (contrast spontaneous laughter). Even absent-mindedly moving one's tongue while driving involves a proprioceptive perception of the tongue-movement, which is characteristic of voluntariness

<sup>3</sup>See Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, pp. 70–71.

or control though “will” (p. 358). In what seems to be an amendment in the second edition, O’Shaughnessy concludes that intentions can be present even without prior decision and with nearly no focused attention. When they are noticed, we can immediately stop willing some activity that might seem at first to be sub-intentional. This might seem like an over-extension of the concept of “intention” (to get intentions and thus an “act of will” into all actions), but this concern may perhaps be addressed by distinguishing different kinds of intention, which do not all involve reflective awareness.

Readers must also be careful with the symbolism involved in O’Shaughnessy’s analysis. At the very start, in the glossary, we are introduced to his notation in which  $\varphi$  stands for an event (such as an arm rise) that is involved in a standard action such as knocking on a door, while  $\Phi$  stands for the basic “bodily action” (e.g., willing of arm rise) in which  $\varphi$  is realized (p. xiv). This suggests that the action of raising one’s arm is the same as the willing of some bodily movement, but readers are used to distinguishing these (i.e., to separating the “willing” from “ $\Phi$ ”). And sometimes it sounds like O’Shaughnessy agrees. In the third part we are introduced to a modest and “plausible” volitionist account of actions according to which a “voluntary . . . bodily act  $\Phi$ ” is related to an “inner” event  $V$  that is caused by an act-desire and related “intention to  $\Phi$ ” and that is in turn a “ $\varphi$ -making” (p. 363). This last phrase refers to something that tends to bring about the bodily motions  $\varphi$  that are willed in this basic act. Although he does not ultimately endorse this form of volitionism, its explanation seems to distinguish the volition-event  $V$  from the basic bodily act  $\Phi$  as a whole, and from the movements  $\varphi$  that are essential to  $\Phi$ —movements that  $V$  directly starts and makes voluntary by a kind of “trying.” Yet earlier when introducing the unwillingness of willing itself, O’Shaughnessy uses “an act  $\Phi$ ” for “the willing of some  $\varphi$ ,” where this phrase means “immediately bringing about  $\varphi$ ” (pp. 67–68). So, the volition “event”  $V$  must at least be part of  $\Phi$ —the part that happens alone when it fails to bring about  $\varphi$ . When it works, apparently  $V$  would be a  $\Phi$ : “a trying to open a door that succeeds can be identical with (say) and act of pushing or kicking the door (open)” (p. 376). O’Shaughnessy later refers to the  $V$ -part by itself as “ $S(\Phi)$ ,” which stands for “a striving or trying or attempting to do such [a basic] act” (p. 385). But again, care is needed. Neither the symbolism  $S(\Phi)$  nor its definition means “an effort to do  $\Phi$ ” (since this would then sometimes mean a trying to will); instead, it refers to the striving aspect of  $\Phi$ , which is the effort to cause  $\varphi$ . At least I think this is the most coherent interpretation.

We cannot use  $\Phi$  for an instrumental action under a familiar intention-description such as hitting a ball by swinging a bat through arm movement, and make  $V$  or  $S(\Phi)$  stand for the effort to hit the ball. For O’Shaughnessy says that his formula only applies when  $\varphi$  is not an alteration brought about instrumentally by some bodily act, such as a car starting when a button is pressed. In this case, it would only be the finger movement involved in pressing the button that is strictly speaking “willed” (p. 68), though we say naturally enough that we were “trying to start the car.” This limit is crucial to O’Shaughnessy’s dual aspectism, which develops from his extended argument that animal willing does not extend beyond the body (chapter 2), and that we “try” to move or change things beyond our body only in

instrumental senses (chapter 3). If radically interiorist forms of volitionism were correct, then objects of the will at least potentially could extend beyond the body (p. 105), but in fact this makes no sense; it would force us to deny the distinction between direct and instrumental acts (p. 109). So, it turns out that only bodily movements under direct types of muscular control are candidates for being a  $\phi$  (that is, a direct object of willing).

I find this argument largely convincing, despite two problems. First, as critics have pointed out, we do not ordinarily think of particular bodily movements under fine-grained descriptions as the focus of our “efforts” to act unless we are concentrating on technique (for example, I’m now trying to complete a review, not trying to move my fingers “just so” over the computer keys). Second, recent work in action theory has cast doubt on the concept of “basic bodily acts” that O’Shaughnessy and others (e.g., Ginet) defended in the late twentieth century, preferring instead to look at intentional action as intelligible in light of a more wholistic set of relations (e.g., Moya). That said, O’Shaughnessy still makes an important point in arguing that there is a kind of voluntariness that only applies through a bodily motor mechanism in which a power of physical movement is exercised (chapter 3), which depends on “feeling” through which parts of the body are “immediately given” (p. 297). This explains the importance of the long-term body image for his account (chapter 8): we need such a body-image for bodily willing to be operable. So, perhaps surprisingly, I could not be a review-writing agent if I were not volitionally connected with bodily parts such as my fingers. The more one reads the details of this sustained analysis, the more convincing it is that the operations involved in action blend mental operations with physical extension. This is a work on embodiment at least as important for this theme as anything Merleau-Ponty wrote, and a work on animal form that is as profound on this topic as anything published since Aristotle.

As mentioned, O’Shaughnessy takes us through a moderate form of volitionism that avoids the vices of the more familiar radical versions (chapter 11). It is still volitionist because it recognizes the volition-event  $V$  as “inner” in the sense that it is psychological and has no non-psychological parts; thus it endorses “the reality of the will, which it takes to be a psychological phenomenon of inner life” (p. 365), in accord with natural intuition evident in common usage involving action-language. He argues that this account is better than Davidson’s theories of action (which he calls “intentionalist extroversion”), that it correctly aims to explain the most basic sense of “voluntary” that is equivalent to whatever distinguishes “action” in general from mere event (p. 375), and that it can overcome the dilemma that either a “volition” is voluntary in virtue of some other volition (leading to an infinite regress) or a volition is involuntary (pp. 371–72). His proposed solution is that tryings or  $V$ s are voluntary, not because they have a volition-cause, but instead simply because they make basic bodily actions voluntary: “voluntary actions of  $\phi$ -making” [=  $\Phi$ s] “are voluntary because  $\phi$  is suitably caused by a volition  $V$ ” (p. 378).

Here I fear that the account may descend into circularity, as if a  $V$  could count as voluntary just because it makes some basic act  $\Phi$  voluntary by causing in the right way the bodily motion  $\phi$  that is the object of  $V$  and essential to  $\Phi$ . This account seems to offer no explanation for how  $V$ s are controlled by the agent. But

perhaps this must remain primitive. I agree with O'Shaughnessy that bodily tryings or "strivings" have their (basic) voluntariness essentially, rather than derivatively as do various bodily movements involved in familiar actions (p. 379). And in general, any account of any kind of "control" either has to find a controlling element that itself counts as essentially and immediately (non-derivatively) controlled, or to disperse control among a holistic set of relations; either way, control will involve some mystery. Still, proposed controlling elements will not possess their essentially active or agentive quality in virtue of having other elements to guide or steer; powers do not generally arise from having their natural objects.

O'Shaughnessy also famously argues that, although the modest volitionism just described is close to the truth, it should be replaced with a "dual aspect" theory of basic voluntariness or action in general that accepts acts of volition or trying/striving but denies that they are separate from the resulting  $\phi$ s or count as "the distinct cause of either the activation of the motor mechanism or of  $\phi$ " (p. 382). Instead, volitions cause actively performed bodily movements but are themselves as much "bodily" as "psychical." This theory will be familiar to many, but readers in action theory will be pleased that O'Shaughnessy has added a new chapter clarifying and defending its dual aspect implications (chapter 12). Crucial steps in this argument are that tryings are distinct from intendings that cause them, as we see especially well in unusual cases where one intends to try to move (p. 393); that purely "interior" striving could not be visible in limb movement, but the efforts we experience as active in bodily action do meet the standards for being visible (pp. 396–97); that some instrumental tryings are immediately known to us as physical acts even when we do not know their further purpose (pp. 398–99); and that such efforts are also psychological (p. 403). This new chapter leads into a conception of the "psycho-physical" that repays close attention and provides the basis for another new chapter in which O'Shaughnessy gives an improved analytical definition of action (chapter 13). The epistemic underpinnings and implications of this account are analyzed in yet another new chapter (chapter 16).

Thus, just two years before recent his death, Brian O'Shaughnessy offered a wealth of new and fascinating material to the field he helped remake. "Trying" is no longer thought of as some mental "pineal gland." Instead, it is the one phenomenon in which we can see that conscious states must have physical aspects. In the twentieth century there were few philosophers who could combine such extended technical analysis with breadth of vision, let alone restate it in a better form almost three decades later. It is sad that such a monumental work as *The Will* could never be published by an academic press today. The philosophical world is poorer for this.