David Hume and the Concept of Volition: The Will as Wish
Thomas Keutner


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Hume's theory of action -- that the will is the cause of voluntary action -- is still one of the main accounts about the relationship of will and action in current discussion.

In the following I will first show that Wittgenstein revived Hume's theory in his early philosophy. I will argue that wishing is taken as a model for willing in both Hume's and the early Wittgenstein's theories. I am therefore speaking of a 'wish-theory of will'.

In his middle and later philosophy, however, Wittgenstein presents a completely different point of view. He acknowledges the deep difference between wishing and willing. In willing, but not in wishing, we do have knowledge, namely we can predict our future voluntary actions. This knowledge is to be distinguished from our knowledge of future events in nature. I believe that the wish-model of willing can be regarded as 'philosophically confused' in Wittgenstein's sense: he who says that we cannot know what our future voluntary actions will be, is in fact only attacking our linguistic conventions regarding the meaning of 'will' or 'intention,' though he thinks he is defending an empirical claim.

In conclusion it is claimed that the adherents of Hume's theory of action and also most of Wittgenstein's followers have not been aware of the consequences of Wittgenstein's conceptual criticism. So the discussion turns still (once again) around Hume's question: whether the relationship of willing and acting is a causal one or one "of logical compulsion."¹
1. David Hume's Theory of Action

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. VII, Part I, Hume gives several arguments in favour of the thesis that, "like all other natural events," the influence of volition over the organs of the body can only be known by experience. His second argument here is from the comparison of voluntary with involuntary movements. He is arguing against the thesis that the relationship between the will and voluntary movement might be that of logical necessity. If that were the case, then by inspecting the cause we would be aware of a certain power producing the effect. But we are not conscious of such a power in distinguishing this relationship from the one between will and involuntary movements. So we can only conclude that in most cases, when we have willed certain (namely voluntary) movements, the movement has followed upon our will, and that we must infer the necessity of this relationship.²

His first argument backs up the second: the relationship between will and voluntary movement, between soul and body, is a completely mysterious one: "Were we empowered, by a secret wish, to remove mountains, or control the planets in their orbit: this extensive authority would not be more extraordinary, nor more beyond our comprehension." (E 65)

Now, without wanting to milk too much out of this remark, I take it in fact to give Hume's model for his account of willing: If the influence of volition over the organs of the body in voluntary movement is known only by experience, volition is nothing but a wish. We normally would distinguish between wishing and willing in using 'wishing' where we at least believe that the wish will not come true. And this is just what follows from Hume's description
of the will: that we don't know and cannot know if the execution of the will will come true. An example is his distinction of voluntary and involuntary movement: if we don't know that our volition (of a voluntary movement) will come true, then will is perfectly equal in this respect to our wish (of an involuntary movement, or some other event).

So Hume points to a man, suddenly struck with palsy in a leg, who wills to move his leg: Hume's volition is logically independent of its execution. But his denial of knowledge in will blurs the distinction between willing and wishing. I will argue that there is an epistemic difference between willing and wishing, in spite of the logical independence of both from what is going to happen.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Wish-theory of Will

Wittgenstein develops his account of willing in an entry in his Notebooks, 1914-1916 (5.7.1916), which is taken over to the Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 6.373, 6.374:

The world is independent of my will. Even if everything that we wish ('wuenschen') were to happen, this would still only be, so to speak, a grace of fate, for what would guarantee it is not any logical connexion between will and world, and we could not in turn will the supposed physical connexion.

Here also willing, or intending, is regarded as idle wishing. Idle wishing is itself characterized by the facts that 1) everything could be the object of that wish -- that the past be different from what it was, that a certain mathematical proof would not hold, etc.; and 2) the wishing person does not do anything for the idle wish to come true. Regarding willing as a kind of idle wishing means the transference of
these conditions from wishing to willing. Willing is then regarded as something a willing person does not (and cannot) make true. That is why Wittgenstein in the quoted remark says of the fulfillment of a wish (and indeed of the execution of the will) that what is going to happen would be just "a grace of fate."

And another remark goes: "I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless." (Notebooks 1914-1916, 11.6.16)

The tertium comparationis justifying this transference from wish to will is thought to be the logical independence of both willing and wishing from what is going to happen. This is shown by a further remark in the Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 5.135-5.1362:

There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation. There is no causal nexus to justify such an inference. We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present. Belief in the causal nexus is superstition. The freedom of the will consists in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future. We could know them only if causality were an inner necessity like that of logical inference. - The connexion between knowledge and what is known is that of logical necessity.

Like Hume, Wittgenstein is here rejecting two possible candidates for the explanation of the relationship between willing and execution: this relationship is not a logical connexion following the principle of contradiction -- it is not like the relationship of knowledge to the known, where, if 'I know that p' is true, 'p' is also true. (It is not a relationship between ideas.) Nor is it a causal relationship in the naturalistic sense; there simply
isn't such a thing as the prediction of an effect from the inspection of the cause in general. So this denial also holds for the prediction of the execution from the inspection of the will. The belief in this causal nexus is sheer superstition. Unlike Hume, Wittgenstein is not considering the possibility of another type of psychologically necessary causality.

As Wittgenstein in his early philosophy knows just these two relationships, logical necessity and logical independence, logic and contingency, only the second one remains. He cannot but treat willing and executing analogously to wish and fulfillment, underlining logical independence and thereby our ignorance about the future, about the execution of our will.

3. The Dissolution of the Wish-theory

Wittgenstein's main interest regarding the concept of willing or of intention during the period of his middle and later philosophy lies in the criticism of his own former theory as psychologistic.

But the now criticized psychologistic account of intention is intimately connected with the wish-theory of willing: if willing or intending is just a kind of mental state, if it is independent of what is going to happen, then its study must indeed be by introspection as is suggested by the psychologistic account.

It is exactly this presupposition of psychologism, which Wittgenstein is now rejecting: There is a relation of dependence between will and its execution. But this is not a logical dependence. Willing and execution, as wishing and fulfillment, are still to be regarded as logically independent of one another. The dependence is a grammatical one. And in respect to this dependence there is a
remarkable difference between willing and wishing. I will now try to show that it is possible to reject the wish-theory as what Wittgenstein called a "philosophical confusion." In the sense of his later philosophy this means the confusion of an implicit grammatical claim, regarding our conventions of the meaning of an expression, with an empirical claim concerning a certain state of affairs. A philosophical confusion in this sense is not falsifiable. All we can do is to try to show that the proponent of that claim follows a certain model. And of course we can refrain from following what (after the analysis) turns out to be just a proposal to reform the way we talk. As in the crucial entry to his Notebooks Wittgenstein is now aware of the essential difference between willing and wishing. He says in the Yellow Book, p. 55:

We must note that willing and wishing are entirely different. When I say I willed to raise my arm, I do not mean that I merely wished it very strongly and then the arm rose. Willing is not a thing which happens to me; it is a thing I do, the word 'wish' has a much wider use than 'will.'

And in Eine philosophische Betrachtung, p. 235:

(In the case of raising my arm) it is dangerous to confuse willing and wishing. - Because when I raise my arm, it is not so that I first wish it may rise, and then it actually does. (Though this too might happen in particular cases.)

And, in the Philosophical Investigations, Par. 616:

When I raise my arm, I have not wished it might go up. The voluntary action excludes this wish.

Now, I take it that knowledge is the important distinguishing feature between willing and wishing that Wittgenstein is here hinting at. Whereas in the Tractatus the knowledge of what will happen is denied
to willing and wishing alike, because of the logical independence between willing and wishing on the one hand and what is going to happen on the other, knowledge is now ascribed to willing but not to wishing -- because of the particular grammatical link between willing and execution. Therefore Wittgenstein remarks:

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. (Philosophical Investigations, Par. 629)

Wittgenstein immediately goes on to emphasize that there is a fundamental difference between this foreknowledge (and the prediction based on it) and that of natural events (e.g., the prediction of a chemical reaction). But knowledge it is nevertheless. (Cf. Philosophical Investigations, Par. 630)

I think that only G.E.M. Anscombe in Intention has fully worked out the difference between these two kinds of knowledge. Let us suppose that a chemist goes astray with his prediction 'p' of a certain chemical reaction. In this case we would say that his prediction 'p' was wrong. We would say that he did not have that foreknowledge claimed by 'p.' Let us now suppose that somebody driving in his car expresses his intention to take the road to Deerfield (next left): 'I am going to take the road to Deerfield.' And let us assume that he is not lying to us, or forgetting his intention, or changing his mind, or prevented by some obstacle. But as we approach the branch to Deerfield, he goes straight on. We would then probably, as in the case of the chemist, say that he's made a mistake. But now there's a difference: while in both cases a correction of the mistake would consist in a correction of
the prediction, this correction could not be regarded as sufficient in the second case. We would in both cases say that the person in question did not know what would happen; but in the second case the person would have also to correct the action. It would be rather a kind of joke, if, under the given premises, the driver would say: 'Oh yes, I see, what I said was wrong' -- and continue to drive along.

Another way to put this would be: taken as an expression of intention, the prediction of the driver would not be affected by his mistake. Though we would say that he did know what would happen, we would not say that he didn't have that intention, and we would not deny his knowledge of how to execute it. We would therefore not deny his right to declare that same intention with those very same words again; so we would not deny that his claim to know was justified -- we would otherwise deny his capacity to correct his mistake.

Now, it might be that the driver would again fail to execute his declared intention. Our confidence would then be shaken. And if this were to happen several times, there would come the point at which we would say that his claim was unjustified too. But this would not leave our judgement about his intention untouched either: it would amount to denying his right to declare that intention. The relationship described thus far between willing, knowledge and execution is not a logical one. It is not true that always when there is an intention it is also true that there is an execution. This is not only clear from the above-mentioned cases of forgetting one's intention, changing one's mind or being prevented. It is also shown exactly by the possibility of being practically mistaken, as we might call it, where there also is an intention but
no execution corresponding to it. This last possibility is of a different order from the previous ones. Not forgetting, not changing one's mind, and not being prevented are what Hempel would call 'antecedent conditions' of the agent's acting on the intention in question; whereas in the case of the practical error the execution must be attempted before the error can take place. Thus the non-occurrence of practical error is not one of the antecedent conditions of the agent's acting; it is instead the other way around: acting is an antecedent condition of the non-occurrence or occurrence of practical error.

But neither is it a relationship of contingency: given that the person is not lying to us, forgetting his (her) intention etc., then that person will execute his (her) intention. And he or she will normally be successful in this execution and sometimes fail, committing a practical mistake. So (1) to say that this is not a logical relationship means that not always when it is true that somebody has an intention, is it also true that the execution will follow.

(2) To say that the relationship is not contingent either is to say that always when somebody intends to do x he will do so (if he is not forgetting etc.) or practically fail to do so, and that if he succeeds, this is not by grace of fate but

(3) rather because there is a grammatical relationship, as we might say according to Wittgenstein, between intention and execution: if somebody declares an intention, and does not lie to us etc. but then does nothing to make his declaration true, we would then say that he does not understand what it means to say 'I am going to....'
That he will execute his intention upon his declaration does not amount to saying that his intention is one of the premises from which a conclusion could be inferred saying that he will act. So the knowledge expressed in his prediction 'I am going to...' is not knowledge by proof. Rather somebody who expresses his intention that way declares that he will do something, namely to make that prediction true, to execute that intention. So he knows what will happen because he will do it.

It can now be made clear what the philosophical confusion of the wish-theorist consists. From the logical independence of willing on the one hand and the will's execution on the other, or from the possibility of failure in executing one's own intentions, the wish-theorist argues what he mistakenly thinks to be an empirical thesis: we have found in the past that we sometimes fail in executing our intentions; as this might always happen, we cannot claim practical knowledge, namely, that our intentions will be executed.

Of course it is conceivable that this might always happen. But then the possibility of speaking of intentions would be lost.

In this respect willing is similar to wishing. Therefore the second thesis of the wish-theorist might be formulated as a definitional one: 'willing' means 'a particular kind of overwhelming strong wish.'

But these facts, namely the logical independence of willing and execution, and that sometimes our intentions are not executed, are not at issue. The point is rather a grammatical one: by ascribing an intention to somebody (and by expressing an intention of our own) we ascribe (or declare) a certain knowledge. This is how we use 'intention';
this is what the expression means. The same is not the case with 'wish.' We use 'wish' to mean that we at least believe we do not know if the fulfillment will come true. Therefore willing is not a particular kind of wishing.

So the wish-theorist argues from logical independence to the likeness of willing and wishing with regard to knowledge. But he can do so only because in the case of wishing, as opposed to the case of willing, the particular grammatical link to knowledge is absent.  

Now the proponent of the wish-theory, confronted with this grammatical analysis, might nevertheless stick to his thesis that we cannot know. But in this case the thesis would have changed its status. If we don't follow him in his proposal, we are not committing ourselves, as the wish-theorist might have originally thought, to the view that there is a logical dependence between willing and execution. Practical error shows just this relationship to be one of logical independence. We only insist on a grammatical rule, namely that 'intending such-and-such' means 'knowing that such-and-such will happen.' So if the wish-theorist sticks to his proposal all he insists on is to change that grammatical rule. And there is no reason to follow him in this proposal.

His empirical claim turned out to be just a grammatical proposal. Unlike an empirical claim, the proposal of a rule cannot be disproved. But it might be rejected, if it is not backed by arguments. His argument was the argument of failure. But the consideration of practical error shows that this argument does not touch our practical knowledge.
4. Hume's Theory of Action in Contemporary Discussion

I will compare two accounts of the topic of willing and execution taken from current discussion, namely D. Davidson's causal theory of action and G.H. von Wright's theory of the logical dependence between the verification of the intention and the execution. I will argue that the confrontation between the two theories is about Hume's thesis of the logical independence between willing and executing. Depending on the respective assertion or negation of logical independence each of them draws his conclusion concerning our knowledge of what will happen.

In "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" Davidson argues that a "primary reason," composed of a desire and a belief about how to fulfill that desire, is the cause of the action which the belief is about. I have argued throughout this paper (and hence will not argue once again), that this description is not correct, not because the desire (plus the belief) and the execution are logically dependent on one another, but because they are grammatically dependent.

G.H. von Wright argues in his Explanation and Understanding that there is in a sense a logical independence between willing and executing; but this means only that we might change our mind or might be prevented. In another sense there is a 'logical or conceptual' connection between the two. For von Wright this is shown by the fact that we cannot verify the existence of an intention without relying on the existence of the respective execution, and vice versa. Now this result alone would suffice to disprove the causal theory. But von Wright not only endeavours to prove his result, he also tries to show how there might be a logical necessity in the relationship between intention and execution. This
necessity, he finally argues, exists only post hoc: given all the premises of a practical syllogism before the action, he who deliberates that way does not have to act, even if he does not change his mind and is not prevented. 9

Davidson, following the modern interpretation of causality, sticks to the Humean and Tractatus-epistemology: as the proposal of a causal law is to be understood simply as the bringing forward of a hypothesis, we cannot in the end really know if the execution will follow upon our volition.

It is the conclusion of von Wright's analysis that the relationship in question is not necessary if inspected ante actum. So again it looks as if we would not know if the execution would follow upon our will. But von Wright interprets this use of the relationship -- of a "practical syllogism" -- as being that of a commitment. 10 Here he seems to be as near as possible to the insight that the relationship is something completely different from that of a logical necessity. But since his use of "knowledge" is already determined by the paradigm that we know if we can give a proof, he doesn't make much out of this term, which he mentions by the way. He might otherwise have recognised that -- as with intention -- we can say that somebody commits himself to an action (and that we ourselves can do that) only if we can also say that he (we) know(s) how to carry it out.

Unlike Davidson, von Wright draws a distinction between willing and wishing. 11 But he conceives of this distinction in terms of logical independence: desires, he says, could have a causal influence on behaviour. So I take both of them to be wish-theorists of a sort: by seeing in logical independence the essential feature for the description of
the relationship between willing and execution, whether that feature might be present (Davidson) or not (von Wright).

The main thesis of this paper is that grammatical, and not logical, features make the correct description of that relationship possible, and that the investigation of these features -- forgotten by the empiricists -- have again been neglected in current discussion. This might be a symptom of the enormous fascination of the theoretical way of looking at the world.

Thomas Keutner
Fern Universität, Hagen, FRG

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4. Wittgenstein possibly developed this view of causality in his complex dialogue with Bertrand Russell, who wrote at that time:

Historically, the notion of cause has been bound up with that of human volition. The typical cause would be the fiat of a king. The cause is supposed to be 'active,' the effect 'passive.' From this it is easy to pass on to the suggestion that a 'true' cause must contain some prevision of the effect; hence the effect becomes the 'end'
at which the cause aims, and teleology replaces causation in the explanation of nature. But all such ideas, as applied to physics, are mere anthropomorphic superstitions. (Our Knowledge of the External World, Cambridge 1914, p. 173)

It is interesting that Russell immediately goes on to define intentional action as caused by desire:

Consider such a statement as 'Brutus killed Caesar'... We may say that to kill a person is to cause his death intentionally. This means that desire for a person's death causes a certain act, because it is believed that that act will cause the person's death; or more accurately, the desire and the belief jointly cause the act. (L.c., p. 174)

We may say that if this is the accurate reconstruction of intentional action, then the model of human volition for causality in nature would have caused no trouble.

5. This is shown by William James' philosophy of action, which is often serving as a kind of target for Wittgenstein's later criticism of psychologism. In The Principles of Psychology, after having established the prevalence of an idea as the terminus of the psychology of volition, James gives the following commentary:

I will to write, and the act follows. I will to sneeze, and it does not. I will that the distant table slide over the floor towards me; it also does not. My willing representation can no more instigate my sneezing-centre than it can instigate the table to activity. But in both cases it is as true and good willing as it was when I willed to write.

He adds this footnote:

Many persons say that when they disbelieve in the effects ensuing, as in the case of the table, they cannot will it. They 'cannot exert a volition that a table should move.' This personal difference may be partly verbal. Different people may attach different connotations to the word 'will.' I incline to think that we
differ psychologically as well. When one knows that he has no power, one's desire of a thing is called a wish and not a will. The sense of impotence inhibits the volition. Only by abstracting from the thought of the impossibility am I able energetically to imagine strongly the table sliding over the floor, to make the bodily 'effort' which I do, and to will it to come towards me. It may be that some people are unable to perform this abstraction, and that the image of the table stationary on the floor inhibits the contradictory image of its moving, which is the object to be willed. (L.c., Vol. II, p. 560)

Here James states in the text, that willing is independent of what happens, like the idle wish. (Certainly it is an idle wish if "I will the distant table to slide..." under these circumstances.)

He is then aware that there is a difference between the two, reflected by the linguistic fact that we have these two expressions, wishing and willing. But he can conceive of this difference only as given a psychological one, that certain people are unable, under certain conditions, to perform a certain psychological act.

6. See her beautiful example, Intention, Par. 32.

7. Which is not to say that there isn't any grammatical link between "wishing" and fulfilment: we would not say that somebody wished such-and-such if, given the opportunity to get such-and-such when no other, contradictory wishes interfere, he does not turn his wish into an intention and try to get it.


11. von Wright, Explanation and Understanding, p. 95.