

THE CONCEPT OF WILL OR VOLITION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GILBERT RYLE

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Abstract:

The concept of will or volition occupies an important part of the philosophy of mind. It includes all criteria of mental life like motives, desires, deliberations, decisions, choices, doing, striving, and trying actions. Descartes says that we have two activities i) a mental activity and ii) its effect i.e., a bodily activity. The acts of willing or acts of volition can be called mental activity. His theory of will lies in the fact that a person comprises two distinct substances. Gilbert Ryle calls this theory “the dogma of the ghost in the machine.” According to Ryle, volition is an artificial or technical term. He analyses the concept of free will in the ordinary language. But he rejects its metaphysical reality in the sense of willing activities. Ryle cannot be considered either for or against the freedom of will. He admits that there are actions for which men are completely accountable or responsible. He maintains that there are strong-willed persons and weak-willed persons. But he admits that no inner processes or occult are going on at a time when a man decides to act in a particular way. In this paper, first of all, I will discuss the concept of will in western philosophy as well as Gilbert Ryle’s conception of the same and will try to justify it.

Keywords- will, volition, mental, physical, bodily, motives, deliberations, Free will, actions, purposive, voluntariness, determinism, indeterminism.

Introduction:

Will or volition is the cognitive process by which an individual decides on and commits to a particular course of action. It is defined as a purposive activity. The concept of will is important in philosophy and psychology. It almost includes all the criteria of mental life. Will or volition includes the activities like motives, desires, deliberations, decisions, choices, doing, striving and trying actions, etc. Motive means what moves us to act in a particular way. A motive may mean an

efficient cause of action or a final cause of action. Motives instruct us to move, incite and act in a particular way. It is a spring of action or a feeling of want and it may be said to be a feeling of pleasure, pain, the emotion of anger, fear, or hatred. Thus, the motive is intimately related to all. The act of willingness is known as volition. Within the framework of philosophy, the will is important as one of the most important parts of the mind along with reason and understanding.

Like motive, desire is a factor in the act of volition or will. First, there is a feeling of want. It is converted into a desire by the self. When a desire is chosen by the self after deliberation there is a choice. Thus, there can be no volitions without desires. An inefficient desire is simply a desire. A dominant desire is called a wish. But the universe of desire is called the will.

The concept of will:

Will is a person's conscious determination to carry out a given action. It is the natural desire for something or the tendency regarding an intellectually known object. Volition or will activity can be of many different kinds. Volition is desire if it regards the goal or end; it is called resolution if it regards means and interest. It is a choice if it involves selection between various motives. Thus, we see that the concept of will includes motives, desire, deliberation, etc. Will, therefore, indicates the chosen desire that is consistent with our universe of desire and the one we intend to attain at any cost. A wish is a single dominant desire, while will depends on the dominance of a universe of desire.

Generally, it is believed that the mind or soul has three parts, namely thoughts, feeling, and will, and the mind function in three different modes such as the cognitive model, the emotive mode, and the conative mode. Without a will, the mind cannot function properly. Again, some philosophers think of a movement as being two things casually connected. (I) mental activity and (ii) its effect, i.e., a bodily movement. Instances of mental activity can be called acts of willingness. Volition or will is believed as a special act of the mind. It is through these volitions that the mind actualizes its ideas and plans. It is believed that there exist two separate entities mental and physical and there is no identity in their occurrences. The mental acts of volition are taken as cause and bodily acts as effects.

Thus, volition puts one's muscles into action. It assumes that mental states and processes enjoy one sort of existence and bodily states and processes enjoy another. An occurrence in one stage is never numerically identical to an occurrence in the other.

Will and Action:

Traditionally it is believed that there is a causal relation between will and action. Any action is always related to a will. First, there is the will to do certain action i.e. there is the mental activity called willing and then the action follows. Action is described as voluntary or involuntary, intentional or unintentional, successful or unsuccessful, moral or immoral as well as intelligent or stupid. But these distinctions apply only to that action as opposed to mechanical movement. A voluntary or intentional action is meant an action performed by a rational agent not through any blind impulse, but knowingly and intelligently with the provision and free choice of the means and end. Voluntary actions are the action of moral judgment. On the other hand, actions like inanimate, spontaneous, reflex, instinctive, ideo-motor, imitative, accidental, actions of children, insane persons, and idols are involuntary actions. They are non-moral actions. The three voluntary actions are attention, deliberation, and fixed purpose or resolution. Every man knows that he can turn his attention for a longer or a shorter time, and with more or less intenseness, as he pleases. It is a voluntary act and depends upon his will. But involuntary actions do not depend on will. They are spontaneous.

Determinism and Indeterminism:

The problem of freedom of the will has raised controversy among philosophers. Some philosophers advocate the doctrine that there is no freedom of will which is known as determinism or necessitarianism. Others advocate that there is freedom of will. According to determinism, a volition that is not determined by antecedent circumstances or the so-called free volition would be an event without a cause i.e., an impossible miracle. Life and mind being more complex forms of matter and mechanism are subject to the rigid laws of nature. Man cannot take initiative in any action. My muscles contract because of the inflow of nervous energy.

Thus, the determinists deny any freedom of will. They hold the human will is bound by the iron grip of eternal and immutable laws. There is no freedom anywhere, only an unending necessity. The psychology of voluntary action implies determinism. Our volitions are determined by our motives and desires. Volition is determined by the strength of motive. The strength of motive again is determined by the physical and social environment and partly by the character of the individual. The character of the individual is again, determined partly by heredity and partly by the structure of the individual's nervous system. Thus, our volitions are rigidly determined. But the arguments advanced by determinism against freedom of will are not adequate. While we act, we are also conscious that we are doing it deliberately and intentionally. Freedom of will is a

necessary postulate of our moral life. The terms ‘duty’, ‘obligation’ etc. would be meaningless without any reference to freedom of will. Freedom of will either means indeterminism or self-determinism. Indeterminism holds that the self can determine its own volition without any motive or reason. But freedom does not mean indeterminism. The self is free in the sense that it determines its own volition and course of action. We determine our volitions in the light of moral ideals. The self determines its volitions according to the ideal of the highest good. Therefore, freedom means self-determinism. The concept of self-determinism reconciles a golden mean between extreme determinism and total indeterminism.

Thomas Reid offers the following definition of will:

“Every man is conscious of a power to determine, in things which he conceives to depend upon his determination. To this power, we give the name of will.”¹

According to Reid, the term ‘will’ is often put to signify the act of determining, which more is properly called volition. Volition signifies the act of being willing and determined, and will is put indifferently to signify either the power of willing or the act. But in the writings of some philosophers, the term will have a more extensive meaning. In the general division of our faculties into understanding and will, passions, appetites, and affections are comprehended under the will; and so, it is made to signify not only our determination to act or not to act but every motive and incitement to action. Thus, desire, aversion, hope, fear, joy, sorrow, all our appetites, passions, affections, etc. are modifications of the will. But the motives to action, and the determination to act or not to act, are things that have no common nature.

Will in Western philosophy:

In western philosophy, Rene Descartes is the most prominent philosopher to determine the nature of will. He says that we have two activities (i) a mental activity and (ii) its effect, i.e., a bodily activity. The acts of willingness or acts of volition can be called mental activity. Descartes’ theory of will lies in the fact that a person comprises two distinct substances, i.e., soul and body. Gilbert Ryle calls this theory “the dogma of the ghost in the machine.”

According to Descartes, the workings of the body are the motion of matter in space. The causes of these motions must be either other motions or matter or in the privileged case of human beings. But the mental activities are not movements of matter in space. Mental activities can cause muscles to contract. For example, to describe a man as intentionally pulling the trigger is to state

that such a mental thrust or activity did cause the contraction of his finger muscles. Descartes, in his treatise on the passions of the soul, deals with the feelings like fear, anger, joy, love, admiration, respect, scorn, pride, humility, bravery, pity, sadness, etc. which signify will as mental phenomena.

Locke defines volition as “An act of the mind knowingly exerting that dominion it takes itself to have over any part of the man by employing in it or withholding it from any particular action”. Volition may more briefly as he defined the determination of the mind to do, or not to do something which we concrete to be in our power. Locke mainly held two propositions regarding the concept of will – (i) We get the idea of active power through reflection (introspection) when we perform some voluntary movement, and (ii) We cannot comprehend ‘how our minds move or stop our bodies by thought.

D.M. Armstrong’s book ‘‘A Materialist Theory of the Mind’’ is an attempt to give an account of all mental states as a state of the person apt for the bringing about of certain sorts of physical behavior. Classical theories of mind saw it as an inner arena. Behaviorism saw the mind as an outward act.

Regarding the concept of will, Armstrong says-

“It is convenient to begin the account of the mental concepts with a discussion of the will. When I speak of ‘the will’ I intend the phrase to be taken in the broadest possible sense. It is intended to cover every sort of mental process that is of the conative sort, as opposed to the cognitive sort, or any other sort there may be, it is a label for a whole great department of mental activities.”²

Armstrong discusses the words ‘to act purposively’. Purposive activity is behavior with a mental cause. But not all behavior brought about by a mental state is purposive activity. Anxiety may produce a rapid heartbeat but the beating of the heart is not purposive activity. The beating of the heart is merely a bodily happening while striking somebody on purpose is an action. But this is no more than the verbal satisfaction if we want to uphold a ‘casual’ theory of purposive activity. For we cannot say what the difference is between mere bodily happenings and actions proper. But we can say that actions are physical events that are caused in a certain way. If somebody raises his arm intending to strike another, then he raises his arm with a purpose. But if he raises his arm without any mental action, but simply because it comes into his hand to do so, we may not always wish to say that he has any purpose in raising his arm. But here the phrase ‘activity purposively’ is intended to cover both these cases. It is a mistake to think that all purposive acting is a matter of

physical as opposed to mental happenings. Working out a long division sum in one’s head is as much a case of purposive activity as deliberately striking somebody. Modern philosophy has shown a tendency to ignore the case where the purposive train of events is purely mental. Thus, will cover every sort of mental process that is conative., cognitive, emotive, etc. It is a level for a whole great department of mental activities. The philosophy of the will has received a good deal of attention in recent years ago. Will is an inner cause.

Wittgenstein has given us a classical formulation of the problem of purposive activity. To say that I raise my arm entails that my arm rises. But my arm a rise without my having raised it. What must be added to the rising of my arm to give ‘behavior proper’? This problem was first introduced by Wittgenstein and following him it was raised by the modern analytic philosopher Gilbert Ryle. But before Wittgenstein it was unchallenged orthodoxy. Armstrong further admits that having purposes and intentions are not events or processes but are states of our mind. They are states with casual powers. They are the powers of initiating and sustaining physical or mental activity trains.

Gilbert Ryle’s concept of Will or Volition:

Ryle discusses the traditional notion of ‘Volition’ or the ‘Will’. He says that there is nothing like ‘volition’ or the ‘will’. According to Ryle, volition is an artificial or technical term. Common people do not use it in everyday conversation. Volitions, thrusts, and coming to the physical body from the inner world of the mind is a myth. Ryle analyses the concept of free will in the ordinary language. But he rejects its metaphysical reality in the sense of willing activities. Volitions or wills do not have an entity of their own. These processes are not experienced in our everyday life. The traditional philosophers admit three classes of mental processes i.e., thought, feeling, and will and it has three modes – the cognitive mode, the emotive mode, and the conative mode. But Ryle says, “This traditional dogma is not only not self-evident, but it is also such a welter of confusions and false inferences that it is best to give up any attempt to refashion it. It should be treated as one of the curious of theory.”³

Ryle cannot be considered either for or against the freedom of will. On the other hand, he admits that there are actions for which men are completely accountable or responsible. Ryle maintains that there are strong-willed persons and weak-willed persons. But he admits that no inner processes or occult are going on at a time when a man decides to act in a particular way. Thus, Ryle does not deny the willed actions, but he denies the process implied in the action. That

means the individual’s choice to act in a certain way rather than another, amounts to his acting that way. Of course, this is observable by others. Regarding the nature of will, Ryle says,

“The concept of volition is in a different case. We do not know in daily life how to use it, for we do not use it in daily life and do not consequently, learn by practice how to apply it, and how not to misapply it, it is an artificial concept. We have to study certain specialist theories to find out how it is to be manipulated. It does not, of course, follow from its being a technical concept that it is an illegitimate or useless concept.”⁴

Although we have some attribute of voluntariness or intelligence to action, we cannot for that reason suppose that there exists some inner, inscrutable process to cause the observable voluntary actions. Ryle says, “Volitions have been postulated as special acts, or operations, ‘in the mind’ using which a mind gets its ideas translated into facts.”⁵ Ryle admits that we perform a volition that put out our muscles into action. Thus, volition signifies an action, not any mental entity. We can say volition as praise or blame, good or bad only when a bodily movement takes place from such volition. Ryle rejects the will as an inevitable extension of the myth of the ghost in the machine. It assumes that mental states and processes enjoy one sort of existence and bodily states and processes enjoy another. An occurrence in one stage is never numerically identical to an occurrence in the other.

Conclusion:

But there is something that Ryle’s argument proves incontestably. It proves all purposive activity can be the effect of such things as deliberating. Deliberating what to do is itself a purposive activity. Purposive mental activity has the object of forming a purpose to undertake some further action. So, if deliberation is required for purposive action, prior deliberation will be required for deliberation, and so ad infinitum. But does the argument prove that purposive activity is not an activity with a mental cause? A casual theory of purposive activity can take the second horn of Ryle’s dilemma. We must in the first place distinguish between acts of will and more operations or motions of the will. An act springs from our will. An act of the will is, therefore. Something that is itself brought into existence by the will. An intention formed as a result of deliberation would be an example. It follows that not all our acts can spring from acts of will, but that we must in the end come to acts that spring from mere operations of the will. Operations of the will are mere happenings. They have causes but these causes do not lie in the will.

Thus, Armstrong remarks, "Actions are purposive in the sense that they are caused by the will. Operations of the will are purposive in the sense that they cause actions. Only acts of will are purposive in both senses. So, there is no regress involved in saying that actions are caused by the operations of the will."⁶

Thus, volition or will cannot be rejected as a technical or mysterious term as Ryle does. As conscious human beings, we must have to admit at least the presence of volition or will.

Notes and references:

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2. Armstrong, D.M.: Materialist Theory of the Mind, p. 131
3. Ryle, G: The Concept of Mind, p. 61
4. Ibid, p. 61
5. Ibid, p. 62
6. Armstrong, D.M.: Materialist Theory of Mind, 137.

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