NATURAL KINDS, PHYSICAL ACTIONS, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM

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There is a well known theory of natural kind terms which supposedly allows for the discovery of metaphysical essentialist truths. Recently, Brian O'Shaughnessy in *The Will* has claimed that this theory is directly applicable to the metaphysics of physical action.[1] Focusing on certain basic descriptions of actions couched in terms of "trying" and applying a doctrine he calls "psychological essentialism," O'Shaughnessy claims to derive an ontological distinction between "the willing event" and "the event willed." "Trying" is said to refer to, in part, a special kind of inner event essential to all physical action. This inner willing event causes the bodily movement and this whole complex constitutes an action. Thus, volitionism is defended, in terms of trying, as a kind of essentialism concerning physical action. I will argue that the essentialist considerations put forth in favor of this position either are not plausible or, when made plausible, are not powerful enough to establish volitionist conclusions concerning the nature of action. The willing of a limb movement may well be identical to the event of the limb movement.

According to O'Shaughnessy, descriptions of types of basic actions like "arm raisings" and "trying to raise one's arm," are akin to natural kind terms. Although these descriptions have been learned, used, and applied to certain events because they are associated with events having certain stereotypical properties (like being a movement of a suitable part of the body which fulfills the content of a certain desire and intention and being such that it seems to the agent that he acted), the reference of these descriptions is fixed by, and their meaning involves, direct reference to some paradigmatic cases of limb movement. What makes these cases of limb movement

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paradigmatic cases of "arm raising" or "trying to raise one's arm" are certain properties and these will be the essential properties of "arm raising" or "trying to raise one's arm." But these essential properties are not to be discovered by scientific investigation into the physical properties of limb movement. On the contrary, O'Shaughnessy says, "What is first and foremost needed is philosophical elucidation of the concept of physical action" (*Will*, 1, p. 59).

The result of this philosophical elucidation, supposedly, is that essential to physical action is not only an event of limb movement but also a special kind of willing event. This particular kind of volitional doctrine thus identifies the physical action with a complex event involving both a willing and the appropriate physical movements. The strategy for establishing this metaphysical conclusion is to focus on certain descriptions of basic actions couched in terms of "trying" and apply a doctrine O'Shaughnessy calls "psychological essentialism." The outcome is apparently a metaphysical essentialist truth concerning physical action. Trying supposedly reveals a special kind of inner event essential to all physical action. The inner willing event causes the bodily movement and this whole complex is referred to as "trying."

Exactly what his psychological essentialist presuppositions purportedly prove is stated by O'Shaughnessy as follows:

> Let us suppose an act Φ of φ-making occurs. Then the contentious thesis is this: that the concepts, *act of φ-making,* and *φ that is actively made,* are to be distinguished; and so are the phenomena. For example: arm raisings are not active arm rises. Expressed in my terminology of 'will': 'the willing of' is to be distinguished from 'the willed' (*Will*, 1, p. 6).

O'Shaughnessy distinguishes the *concept* of arm raising from the *concept* of arm rising. Moreover, he believes that this distinction is significant for any philosopher who wishes to develop a metaphysics of action. Certainly, I agree that the concepts "arm raising" and "arm rise" can be distinguished, but this does not mean that the same phenomenon cannot sometimes be subsumed under both concepts. In other words, I disagree with distinguishing the *phenomenon* of arm raising from the arm's actual movement. Of course, the *type* "arm rise" is not extensionally equivalent to the *type* "arm rising," but this fact does not entail that every token of the type "arm raising" must be a different phenomenon from some token of the type "arm rise." On the contrary, my position is that every token of the act-type "arm raising" is identical to a token of the bodily-type "arm rise." Therefore, in order to

208

continue to maintain this position, I will argue against the psychological essentialist considerations put forth in favor of the distinction between the phenomena referred to as ⌜the willing of ϕ⌝ and ⌜the willed event ϕ⌝. That is, the willing of ϕ may well be the event ϕ.[2]

To generate his psychological essentialist argument for his distinction, O'Shaughnessy first explicates what he means by the term "active." He writes, "The 'active' may be singled out as the type of phenomenon one can desire, decide, choose, and above all *intend to do*. That is, the 'active' is the type of phenomenon one can be *engaged in doing*" (*Will*, 1, p. 6). More clearly, and concisely, he means that 'active' is appropriate for *types* of phenomena that can be considered actions. With this term defined, the distinction between 'the willing of' and 'the willed' is supported by a type of essentialism. O'Shaughnessy begins by considering the crucial concept of "trying":

Consider the phenomenon type: trying—whether it be a mental trying such as a trying to recall, or a bodily trying like a trying to move a paralyzed limb. This phenomenon is active. All tryings are active. Indeed, necessarily all tryings are active and all tryings are surely necessarily active. Thus, being active seems as if it is, not merely a necessary, but a *de re essential* trait of trying. (*Will*, 1. pp. 6-7).

Although the essentialist import of this passage is obscure, O'Shaughnessy claims at least the following: any phenomenon in any possible world that falls under the type "trying" in this world must be a phenomenon that can be considered active in any possible world in which it occurs.[3] One can formulate O'Shaughnessy's claim as succinctly as:

(01) (e) (Trying $(e) \rightarrow \square$ Active (e)).[4]

(01) expresses what it means for trying to be *de re* essentially active.

O'Shaughnessy calls this proposition about trying "the 'eloquent' fact" (*Will*, 1, p. 7). Although the truth of this proposition is questionable, O'Shaughnessy accepts it as if it were a given. Moreover, this so-called fact, he says, suggests broader essentialist applications: " . . . like 'animal,' 'gold,' 'cat,' 'person,' 'pain,' the term 'active' has only *de re* essentialist applications. That is, as all that is gold is *de re* necessarily so, so with active" (*Will*, 1, p. 7). From this essentialism based on the property of being active, O'Shaughnessy then generalizes his essentialism to all psychological types:

It seems to me overwhelmingly likely that any mental phenomenon is either *de re* essentially active (such as listenings) or *de re* essentially inactive (such as hearings). Indeed, that activeness and inactiveness simply are traits that can only be *de re* essential. (*Will*, 1, p. 8).

Some psychological events are actions. Examples: walking, listening, trying to remember. And that they are active is something that is *immediately and conceptually given*, for it is overtly and simply attested *in their names* or *via their types*. (*Will*, 1, p. 16).

These claims exemplify what O'Shaughnessy calls "psychological essentialism." Psychological essentialism can be formulated specifically by the following four principles, which are suggested by the above passages. "Every mental event is either necessarily active or necessarily inactive":

(02) (e) (Mental (e) → ($\Box$ Active (e) v $\Box$ Inactive (e))))

"If an event is active, it is necessarily active":

(03) (e) (Active (e) → $\Box$ Active (e)).

"If an event is inactive, it is necessarily inactive":

(04) (e) (Inactive (e) → $\Box$ Inactive (e)).

"Necessarily, if an event is an action, then it is active":

(05) $\Box$ (e) (Action (e) → Active (e)).

From (03) and (05), it follows: (06) that any action is necessarily active. Based upon this psychological essentialism, (02) through (05), and the essentialist principle concerning trying, (01), O'Shaughnessy claims that his distinction is inevitable.

Before attempting to understand how the distinction between "the willing of" and "the willed" is derived from psychological essentialism, I will partially elucidate some of O'Shaughnessy's claims. Although the statements quoted from his text are stated obscurely, they can be given some sense. First, he says that tryings are necessarily active, (01). That is, included in the extension of the psychological type "trying" are only phenomena that possess the property of activeness and moreover possess it essentially. So, there is an essential property which helps determine the extension of the type "trying." Second, O'Shaughnessy compares this semantic situation with a similar one involving natural kind terms such as "gold." Following Putnam and Kripke, he believes that the extensions of such terms are determined by their essential properties. "Gold" has only *de re* essential

applications because included in its extension are only those things which have a certain essential property, namely the atomic number 79. Likewise, "trying" has only *de re* essentialist applications. Also, if something is active, it is necessarily active, (03). Yet for "active" he does not mention the appropriate essential property that determines its extension. "Being active" in this sense must be a primitive property. Fourth, he claims that all mental and psychological types have, like "trying," only *de re* essential applications because they all have the property of being active essentially or of being inactive essentially, (02). Fifth, he claims that due to their names or types, necessarily events that are actions are active. In other words, it is an analytic truth that the type described by "His moving of his arm" contains only active events. From this essentialism supposedly comes the distinction between "the willing of" and "the willed."

Serious problems with this move from psychological essentialism to volitionism will be evident if one carefully considers O'Shaughnessy's argument for the distinction. His argument proceeds in *reductio* fashion as follows. Suppose some arm raisings were identical with some arm risings. He says, "It might be supposed that some ϕ-s are inactive" (*Will*, 1, p. 7). This supposition he takes to be absurd; he continues, "But how can we suppose that in many cases being active is thus a merely *de dicto* necessary trait of the phenomena which possess it, whereas in the unique case of trying it is *de re* essential?" O'Shaughnessy's reasoning is convoluted but his argument can be spelled out. Suppose ϕ is an intentional arm raising. Thus, ϕ, because it is identical to a trying, is *de re* essentially active. Arm rises are *at best* sometimes active and sometimes inactive. Therefore, if ϕ was identical to an arm rise, "then it would follow that 'raising of arm' could not be a *de re* essential property, and that the activeness of arm raisings is *de dicto* essential" (*Will*, 1, p. 8). Because of his psychological essentialism, O'Shaughnessy takes this to be a *reductio*. This argument can be formulated explicitly using the principles formalized above, along with a new one suggested by O'Shaughnessy's reasoning. "An arm rising is never *de re* essentially active":

(07) (e) (Arm rising $(e) \rightarrow \sim \square$ (Active (e))).

The argument proceeds as follows.

1. Suppose for *reductio* that a is an arm rising, b is an arm raising, and $a = b$.

2. (e) (Arm Raising $(e) \rightarrow \square$ Active $(e))$.   by (06)

3. (e) (Arm Rising $(e) \rightarrow \sim \square$ Active $(e))$.   (07)

4. $\square$ Active (b) from 1,2

5. $\sim \square$ Active (a) from 1,3

6. $\sim \square$ Active (b) from 1,5

7. $\square$ Active (b) & $\sim \square$ Active (b) from 4,6

Since 7 is a contradiction, the supposition that something can be an arm raising and an arm rising must be false. Thus, one must distinguish between "the willing of" (raising of arm) and "the willed event" (arm rise).

This *reductio* based on psychological essentialism in support of the distinction is however problematic. It is not clear that all the essentialist principles necessary to this argument can be made plausible. Psychological essentialism says that an event that falls under a psychological description in this world and is active in this world must be active in any possible world in which it occurs. "Trying" is a psychological term which designates a psychological kind that is *de re* essentially active. Thus, a phenomenon that is a trying in this world must be an active phenomenon in any possible world in which it occurs regardless of its description. Of course, many normal acts of arm raising are going to be identical with some tryings. So the phenomena which are those arm raisings must be phenomena that are necessarily active. The question arises: could such phenomena be identical to certain arm rises, that is, to phenomena that fall under the description "arm rise" in the actual world? O'Shaughnessy answers in the negative, but one of his essentialist assumptions seems entirely without motivation—except the motivation to derive the already desired conclusion. He is worried about a phenomenon, which has a *de re* essential property, coming to have that property only by *de dicto* necessity. If arm raisings are arm rises, he asks, "Then how amidst physical actions are we to sort out the *de dicto* sheep from the *de re* goats?" (*Will*, 1, p 7). By this, he must mean at least that if arm raisings were arm rises, then arm raisings would not have the *de re* essential property of being active. But this is true only if one assumes (07) must be true. This assumption seems too hasty. Suppose b is an act phenomenon that falls under the description ⌜trying to ϕ⌝ in the actual world. Thus, b in any possible world is an active phenomenon. From this it does not follow that the token b of the type *active* cannot be identical to a token a

of the type *arm rise*. Simply because the "type" *arm rise* does not extend to only active phenomena does not mean that some tokens of the "type" arm rise are not active, and are even *de re* essentially so, as tokens. Of course, by (07) arm rising can never be *de re* essentially active.

However, if (07) is to be held consistently with the remaining principles of psychological essentialism, then O'Shaughnessy must also admit that an arm rising can never be active at all. For assume that an arm rising occurred that was active. Since it is active, by (03), it is necessarily active; but, (07) says it could never be necessarily active. Therefore, (03) and (07) imply that an arm rising can never happen to be active. But, as I have said, it seems quite plausible that some arm risings are active events. Any assumption, like (07), to the contrary must be supported by more than a desire to establish the existence of willing events. Without this dubious assumption, it is quite reasonable that the token *a* of the type *arm rise*, if it is identical to the token *b* of the type *trying*, is necessarily active, that is, active in any possible world in which it occurs.[5] None of the remaining principles of O'Shaughnessy's "psychological essentialism" rule this out. Psychological essentialism is a thesis about psychological kinds and terms. "Arm rise" is not a psychological term for a psychological kind. Therefore, the "type" *arm rise*, if there is such a "type," does not have to include phenomena which have only the one essential property "being active," or as the case may be, "being inactive." Surely, this result is what one should expect of arm rises. Some tokens of the type *arm rise* will be necessarily active, namely those tokens that are token-identical with arm raisings. On the other hand, some tokens of the type *arm rise* will be necessarily inactive, namely those tokens not token-identical to any tokens of the type *active*. All this is quite consistent with O'Shaughnessy's essentialism minus the dubious assumption (07). This means simply that the act of arm raising may well be identical to the intentional physical movement of the agent's arm. The distinction between "the willing of" and "the willed event" is only a conceptual one, but this conceptual distinction by itself need not imply a distinction between actions and certain bodily movements. The willing of arm rise may well be identical to a movement of the arm performed and controlled by the agent. A reasonable psychological essentialism does not eliminate this possibility.

Another possible way O'Shaughnessy could reject the identification of some arm raisings with some arm rises within this essentialist framework would be to claim that all

phenomena are necessarily active or necessarily inactive based on their types. Thus, "all tokens of the type *arm rise* are necessarily inactive":

(08) (*e*) (Arm rising (*e*) → □ Inactive (*e*)).

With this principle, O'Shaughnessy would again have a valid argument for his distinction. Simply replace premise 3 of the previous formulation with (08) and derive the contradiction: □ Active (*b*) & □ Inactive (*b*). However, such a strong essentialist claim is indefensible. Accepting such a principle as (08) would simply be an *ad hoc* way of maintaining an already accepted conclusion. At times, it seems O'Shaughnessy wants to make such a move. He says that this essentialism holds "both within the mind and elsewhere" (*Will*, 1, p. 9), and this claim seems to entail more than psychological essentialism. Yet he consistently backs off and maintains an essentialism of the active/inactive applied to only psychological kinds. Broadening the essentialism of active/inactive based on types to include non-psychological kinds is completely implausible. The type *arm rise* is a good example. *Prima facie* this is a non-psychological type included in which are both active and inactive tokens. Some other argument is needed if this intuition is to be shaken. Surely to reject it simply in order for the volitionist argument to succeed is not adequate philosophical motivation.

Moreover, other examples come to mind that argue against broadening the essentialism of active/inactive to all types. For instance, the non-psychological type *breathing* surely has tokens, some of which rate as active and some which are inactive. Normally, breathing is inactive, that is, not an action the agent is intentionally performing. Nevertheless, one can breathe at will, for example, when a doctor asks a patient to take a deep breath. Surely this point suggests that phenomena do not fall under the type *breathing* because of their activeness or inactiveness. Hence, to extend the essentialism of the active/inactive to all types, psychological and non-psychological, is not a reasonable maneuver. Therefore, it is quite possible to suggest that basic physical actions are simply a certain class of the body's physical movements. Thus, I maintain the view that the action, "the willing event," may be identical to what he calls "the willed event."[6] Despite any similarities between natural kind terms and basic descriptions of actions, volitionism as a metaphysical thesis concerning physical action remains as dubious as it is ambitious.[7]

214

NOTES

[1] Brian O'Shaughnessy, *The Will*, 2 Vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1980). All further references to *The Will* in this paper will be cited in the text as *Will*, followed by the volume number and page number.

[2] In order to avoid misunderstanding my claim so as to make it absurd, one must realize that O'Shaughnessy thinks of willing as a special kind of event which only takes bodily movements as its object. That is, willing of ϕ can occur only when ϕ refers to a bodily movement, or in other words when $\ulcorner\phi\urcorner$ is a "basic action" description. So, one cannot simply point out that the distinction is obvious because "willing a man's death" is a different event from "a man's dying." In this case one is using the term "willing" in a much broader and looser sense than the strict technical sense O'Shaughnessy employs.

[3] For his commitment to this degree of essentialism, see *Will*, 1, pp. 19-21.

[4] Here, and throughout, '$\square$' will be interpreted as the necessity operator and 'e' will be a variable ranging over events.

[5] This possibility would be ensured by the principle:

(e) (Arm rising (e) → ($\square$ Active (e) v $\square$ Inactive (e))). However, O'Shaughnessy's *reductio* cannot be validly construed using this principle. The same is true for the even more plausible principle:

∼ (e) (Arm Rising (e) → $\square$ Active (e)).

[6] I take my position to be of a piece with the view suggested by Wittgenstein where he says:

"The act of the will is not the cause of the action but is the action itself" (p. 86),

and

"The fact that I will an action consists in my performing the action, not in my doing something else which causes the action" (p. 87).

Notebooks 1914-1916, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961).

[7] I would like to thank George Wilson and Bill Taschek for their help on an earlier version of this paper.