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Really Trying or Merely Trying

This morning I find myself sitting staring out my office window, watching the wind collect and harry the early Autumn leaves, while trying to think of a way of starting this paper. This is what I am doing: watching the leaves and trying to think of the best opening. And I stand in a position of authority when it comes to answering the question of what I am doing: you could easily, but mistakenly, think I am just staring out the window. In this respect, knowledge of our own actions is similar to knowledge of our own minds: we enjoy an authority over what we are doing just as we have such an authority over what we are thinking and feeling.

How should we characterize this first person knowledge of our actions? I will start to answer this question in section 1, and complete an answer in section 3 after outlining, in section 2, the standard metaphysics of actions. This metaphysics sees *tryings* as a fundamental component of actions. We enjoy first person authority because knowledge of what we are trying to do allows us to know what we are doing. This epistemological explanation is then threatened by actions that are *persistent* and *effortful*. The resolution of this threat, I will argue, requires that the standard metaphysics be abandoned: tryings are not uniform across cases of successful and unsuccessful action; rather, the effortful case may be one of successful action or of merely trying.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next three sections, as noted, I outline the epistemology and metaphysics of action. In section 4, I outline and develop the problematic case. I then state why this case is problematic and propose the solution of changing the metaphysics in section 5. The problematic case is that of running a middle distance race. In offering a full

characterisation of this case, this paper is also an attempt at a piece of philosophy of sport and, in particular, a piece of ‘philosophy of running’.

1. Our First Person Authority

Each of us is particularly well-placed to know what it is that we are individually doing: we know what we are doing simply because it is us that is doing it. Or at least this is true when what we are doing is given a *basic description*. To illustrate this consider the example of trying to hit a distant target in a shooting range. Suppose one is successful and does hit the bull’s-eye. This action – that of hitting the bull’s-eye – is not one that one can know one has done without investigation: what is needed is that one walk up and inspect the target. But the same action of hitting the bull’s-eye could be described as that of aiming and squeezing the trigger. Under this description, the action is *basic* in the terms set out by Lucy O’Brien:

Basic actions are those actions a subject can carry out directly, without having to do anything else; and they are the actions that a subject needs to do in order to do anything else (O’Brien 2007, 163).

Though it might be that the action of hitting the bull’s-eye is one and the same action as that of aiming and squeezing the trigger it is only with respect to the action under the latter basic description that we enjoy a special authority. We then enjoy this authority because a basic action is one that a subject can carry out ‘directly’; that is, merely by deciding to do it. How should this authority be characterized? O’Brien suggests along three dimensions.

First, there is a *first person - third person asymmetry* with respect to the question of what it is that one is doing. Knowing what a third party is doing requires investigation; it requires observing their acts and consequences. And the same is true from the first person perspective if one’s

action is given a non-basic description: I need to walk up to the target to see if I've hit the bull's-eye. But given a basic description, such as aiming and squeezing the trigger, no such investigation is needed. I know I am doing this simply through an awareness of my doing it. This is partly because the first person perspective makes available two new domains of facts. It makes available those facts delivered by proprioceptive awareness; such as my feeling the pressure that accompanies my squeezing the trigger.¹ And it makes available facts about prior practical reasoning, where the answer to the question of what I am doing is, from the first person perspective, as much a practical as a theoretical matter. I know I am aiming and squeezing the trigger in part because this action is the result of a prior decision and, perhaps, prior deliberation.² However, our first person authority should not be reduced to our enjoying access to these further facts since this access does not fully explain our awareness of acting 'from the inside', which is the basis of our first person authority.

Second, and relatedly, our knowledge of our own action is *independent of perception*: I do not need to wait on the proprioceptive feedback to know I am squeezing the trigger, rather I know that this is what I am doing immediately as I do it.³ And third, and again relatedly, knowledge of our actions, when basically described, is *immediately available*; that is, it has the same kind of epistemic availability as knowledge of what we are thinking and feeling. This is partly because of the psychological background: my aiming at the target follows immediately on the decision to do this; while my watching the leaves is an action that is itself mental.⁴ But it is not merely because of this: such non-intentional actions like shifting one's weight in a chair have the same kind of epistemic availability. Proprioceptive awareness is fundamental here, but the knowledge this delivers is not based on an inference from the facts this awareness delivers: the awareness is of shifting in one's chair.

These claims might be bundled together into the following statement. First person awareness that one is ϕ -ing (where the description ' ϕ -ing' is basic for one at the time) makes immediately available knowledge that one is ϕ -ing. Call this italicized claim our first-person authority over what we are doing.⁵ In section 3, I develop a theoretical interpretation of this first person authority over what we are doing. But first consider the standard metaphysics of action.

2. The Standard Metaphysics of Actions

Some propositions have the property of being *incorrigible* or such that if someone believes them, then it logically follows that the person's belief is true.⁶ Famously, Descartes argued 'I am thinking' is such a proposition. Some action descriptions have a comparable property: if someone attempts the action described, it logically follows that the person acts in the way described. For example, 'imagining raising one's arm' or 'entertaining the proposition that p' or 'trying to remember someone's name' (respectively O'Shaughnessy 2009, 170; O'Brien 2012, 172; O'Shaughnessy 1997, 59). One might fail to try to imagine raising one's arm through being distracted say, but if one does try to imagine raising one's arm, it follows that one imagines just this. There is no possibility of trying and failing. Similarly, an attempt to entertain the proposition that p or to try to remember someone's name is an entertaining of the proposition that p or a trying to remember that person's name. Of course, not all mental actions are 'incorrigible' in this way and indeed most allow for a possibility of failure, or the possibility of trying to ϕ and failing to ϕ ; try and calculate, in your head, 63 by 337 for instance. Moreover, under any non-basic description a physical action can fail to be a success: I can try to hit and yet miss the bull's-eye, for instance. And most importantly there can be failed basic physical actions, even though these are the class of actions that can be done 'directly'. Raising one's arm is basic: it is something one can do simply by

deciding to. And yet it is still possible to imagine cases of failure. Here is O'Shaughnessy.

Then consider the case of a man who believes but is not quite certain that his arm is paralysed; suppose him asked at a signal to try and raise his arm. At the given signal he tries, and to his surprise the arm moves; but a moment later he tries again and thinks he has succeeded, only to discover on looking down that he has failed (O'Shaughnessy 1997, 59).⁷

The possibility of two such cases allows an *argument from illusion*, which explains the subject's surprise – his finding the two cases the same – in terms of their being the same internally: in both cases the subject tries to raise his arm. The difference is then an external matter: only in the first case does this act of trying cause the subject's arm to rise. So successful physical actions are a metaphysical hybrid composed of a trying and a bodily motion, where the trying is the cause of the bodily motion. That is to say:

For some physical action ϕ , a subject S ϕ s if and only if

1. S tries to ϕ
2. S's body moves in a way that is a ϕ -ing
3. 1 causes 2 in that way characteristic of ϕ -ing.

A number of comments are needed on this definition. First, a trying to ϕ is also an action – a mental action – but it is an action of the 'incurable' sort: "it possesses the peculiar property of being an action that one cannot try to perform" (O'Shaughnessy 1997, 60).⁸ Second, the trying is the common internal denominator in cases of successful and unsuccessful physical action. In both cases the man *tries to raise his arm*. Third, the clause 'in that way that is characteristic of ϕ -ing' is needed to eliminate deviant causal chains.⁹

As stated, this analysis is one of *physical* action. It could be a general account of action, also covering mental action, if there could be a corollary of

condition 2, such as: ‘S’s mind moves in a way that is a ϕ -ing’. And it might be possible to make the case for such a condition – calculating, imagining etc. do seem to involve distinctive ‘movements’ – however, a simpler strategy for extending this analysis to action generally is to replace condition 2 with 2*.

2*. S succeeds in ϕ -ing.

Given this replacement, the analysis is applicable to both mental and physical action: the act of ϕ -ing could be that of doing some mental arithmetic or raising one’s arm. In the latter case, as with any physical action, some bodily movement would be part of a specification of what is involved in succeeding to ϕ . And this substitution makes it clear that ‘acting’ is a success verb like ‘knowing’: if S ϕ s, then S succeeds in ϕ -ing. However, the replacement of 2 by 2* makes the analysis *non-reductive*: the action of ϕ -ing, which thereby figures in the analysans, is the action that is being analysed. What is thereby claimed is that actions are primitive, but have as an essential constituent an act of trying, which is common to successful and unsuccessful cases.¹⁰

3. Explaining Our First Person Authority

Return now to the epistemology, and suppose that knowledge is a certain standing in ‘the logical space of reasons’, such that a subject knows that p only if the subject has a reason for believing that p.¹¹ It follows from O’Shaughnessy’s description of the good and bad case – that is, from the fact that these cases are subjectively indistinguishable – that any reason the subject takes himself to have in the good case will equally be a reason the subject takes himself to have in the bad case. What thereby provides the subject’s reason, in reasoning about what it is that he is doing, will be that element which is common to good and bad cases, which is the trying. Of course, the reason the trying provides can be supplemented or undermined empirically, so in the bad case O’Shaughnessy imagines the subject *looks*,

where looking is an empirical investigation, “only to discover on looking down that he has failed” to raise his arm (O’Shaughnessy 1997, 59). Nevertheless, it is the subject’s awareness that he is trying to raise his arm that provides, initially, his reason for believing that he has raised his arm. And in the case of basic actions such as these, a trying to ϕ will ordinarily be sufficient for a ϕ -ing. So an awareness that one is trying to ϕ will ordinarily be sufficient for knowing that one is ϕ -ing. The ‘ordinarily’ qualification is needed because, as O’Shaughnessy’s case illustrates, there can be cases of trying to ϕ and failing to ϕ even when ϕ -ing is basic. So the reason provided by an awareness that one is trying to ϕ is a defeasible reason.

Given the standard metaphysics of action, that our first person authority over what we are doing is then captured by the following epistemological principle.

- (A) Where ϕ -ing is a basic action, one is entitled, other things being equal, to believe that one is ϕ -ing given awareness that one is trying to ϕ .

Christopher Peacocke proposes an entitlement of this form.

[W]hen a thinker has a distinctive awareness from the inside of trying to ϕ , where ϕ -ing is basic for him, he is entitled to judge that he is ϕ -ing. In this way, experiences of agency from the inside can, in suitable circumstances, lead to knowledge (Peacocke 2003, 107).

That a “trying to ϕ ” is an “experience of agency from the inside” is an important point I will return to shortly, but first consider Peacocke’s argument for this entitlement, which is (A).

Even though, in the case of basic actions, a trying to ϕ reliably causes a ϕ -ing, Peacocke rejects the strategy of grounding (A) on reliability considerations since these “cannot capture the element of rationality that entitlement involves” (106). Rather, he offers an argument from analogy: there

is an entitlement parallel to (A) in the epistemology of perception and the considerations that support this entitlement have parallels in the epistemology of action. Thus, we are entitled to believe that p given the perceptual appearance that p because “in the basic case in which the thinker is properly embedded in the world, the occurrence of perceptions with these spatial and temporal contents will be explained by the very spatial and temporal conditions they represent as holding” (107). That is, because in the fundamental case the perceptual appearance that p is explained by its being true that p . And, similarly, we are entitled to believe that we are ϕ -ing given that we are trying to ϕ because “what, for instance, makes something a trying to move one’s hand is that it is an event of a kind which, when the subject’s states are properly embedded in his body and the world, causes his hand to move” (107).¹²

Drawing this parallel with perception, I think, shows what is misleading about conceptualising our first-person authority over what we are doing in terms of entitlement (A). Our knowledge that we are ϕ -ing is not merely receptive, as is the case with perceptual knowledge, rather it is active: it follows from our trying to ϕ , where this ordinarily follows a decision itself embedded in practical reasoning. Thus the causal-explanatory relations that Peacocke draws attention to flow in different directions. It is the truth of p , which we are entitled to believe, that explains, in the basic case, the perceptual appearance that p , which is our grounds for belief. But it is *not* our ϕ -ing, which we are entitled to believe, that explains our trying to ϕ , which is our grounds for belief. Rather, it is the other way round: in the basic case, it is our trying to ϕ that explains our ϕ -ing. Moreover, it is because the causal-explanation runs in this direction that a trying to ϕ is, as Peacocke says, “an experience of agency from the inside”. This experience of agency is one of *ownership* – “[i]t seems to be an awareness of trying that is common to all awareness of actions, bodily and mental, *as one’s own*” (98, my emphasis) –

and one of *control*. One experiences an action as one's own in part because it is the causal consequence of one's trying. Suppose one accidentally knocks an ornament off a mantelpiece and sees it shatter on the stone hearth below; and contrast this with the act of deliberately knocking off the ornament in a fit of pique. It may be that the same bodily movement was executed in both cases, but only in this latter case when this movement was directed by a trying would one be held accountable. And this is because only here does one stand behind the act as an agent. Our trying to ϕ is then an "experience of agency from the inside" in part because it is through trying that we have control of what we do. And we have this control, in the case of basic action, just because trying to ϕ is ordinarily sufficient for ϕ -ing. This is to say that for the case of basic action ϕ , in ordinary circumstances, *we have the capacity to ϕ merely by trying to do so*.

Our first-person authority over what we are doing, in the case of basic actions and in the fundamental case, rests on the fact that we have control over what we do. This, I think, is what is correct in Peacocke's argument for (A) which takes the stated entitlement to hold because of the causal relations that hold between agent and act. However, if this is so, formulating our first-person authority in terms of defeasible entitlement (A) mischaracterises things in two directions. First, we might have a mistaken belief about what we have the capacity to do. A subject has, Lucy O'Brien notes, a "practical grasp, via her body image, of what bodily movements are possible ones for her. They are presented to the subject as a range of ways she might act, without doing anything else" (O'Brien 2007, 138). And it might be that a subject is quite mistaken about what movements are possible for her, and so what actions she has the capacity to do. Second, if we do have the capacity to ϕ – raise one's arm, say – then the act of trying to ϕ will be sufficient for an ϕ -ing, and so for our knowing that this is what we are doing in states "of psychophysical normality" (O'Shaughnessy 1997, 65). This is to say that the idea that an

awareness of trying to ϕ provides a defeasible reason is both too strong (if we don't have the capacity, it gives us no reason) and too weak (if we do have the capacity, it puts us in a position to know). There can be cases of trying to ϕ and failing to do so, or cases of unsuccessful action, but what needs emphasis, if we are to appreciate the sense of control that we have over our actions, is that *when the capacity to act is in place, cases of failure are extra-ordinary and are cases where circumstances temporarily or permanently stop this capacity from functioning*. Such as the case, for instance, where unbeknownst to one, one's arm is paralysed. Thus, I propose, that (A) should be replaced by:

(B) Insofar as one has the capacity to ϕ , where ϕ -ing is a basic action, and this capacity is not undermined in the circumstance of action, an awareness that one is trying to ϕ allows one to know that one is ϕ -ing.

This epistemological principle straightforwardly captures our first-person authority over what it is that we are doing. And it is, I think, is essentially correct. However, in the next section I will develop a case incompatible with (B).

4. The Difficult Case of Running a Race

The difficult case I want to consider is that of running a middle or long distance race where one is trying to achieve a certain time goal that one knows will be very hard for one to achieve. For example, and here the numbers are obviously unimportant, one might be trying to break twenty minutes for a five-kilometre road race. Four things, I think, are true of this situation.

First, in order to achieve this time goal one must run at a certain average pace. To run five kilometres in less than twenty minutes one's average pace must be below 4:00 minutes per kilometre or 6:26 minutes per mile.

However, whether or not one is running at a pace that fits this description is not something one can know from the inside. That is to say, running at 6:26 pace is not a basic action but is rather like hitting a target in that one needs further empirical information to know whether or not one is doing, or has done, it. In this case the information is that provided by a watch and the road-side markers, a GPS device, or finish gantry clock.

Second, training then provides two things. It enables one to judge the effort level required in order to run at one's goal pace. And it gives one knowledge of what one is capable of doing, where this then allows one to form the intention to run at this goal pace. However there is a difficulty here: racing is a way of extending one's knowledge of what one is capable of. One might, for instance, be uncertain as to whether one can break twenty minutes for five kilometres. And suppose that one never succeeds in breaking twenty minutes; does one's training nevertheless allow one to know that one is yet capable of it? The answer to this question is unclear, I think, because 'is capable of ϕ -ing' is equivocal between 'is able to ϕ ' and ' ϕ -ing is possible for one', where the modal scope of the former only takes in the actual world whereas the modal scope of the latter includes close possible worlds. It is this possibility reading that is relevant here because what training allows one to know is what might be reasonably attempted. However, this still leaves the question of how broadly possibility should be construed. O'Shaughnessy suggests that all that is needed for a trying is that one conceives of what one tries to do "as at least a *remote possibility*" (O'Shaughnessy 1997, 63, my emphasis). Suppose that this is *constitutively correct*; there still would be something quite wrong with me – a middle-aged non-elite runner – attempting to break four minutes for the mile. This is not a possibility for me; and were I to try to do this, I would be like O'Shaughnessy's madman who pointed a gun at the sun and said, "I am trying to hit the sun" (63). Thus Holton suggests that it is a *normative requirement* on intentions that one "regard success as a *real*

possibility” (Holton 2009, 49, my emphasis).¹³ And this is what training provides: knowledge of what is a real possibility for one.

Third, while running at a specific pace – 6:26 per mile in our example – is a non-basic action, running at a certain effort level is basic. That is, it is an action that a subject can carry out ‘directly’, without having to do anything else. Or, in terms of the metaphysical account just outlined, all one needs to do in order to run at a certain effort level is to try to do just this. This is because running at a certain effort level is identified in phenomenological terms: effort level is by definition *perceived* effort level; or, to give it its proper name – *rate of perceived exertion* (RPE).¹⁴ So running at a race-level effort is running at a RPE that one judges appropriate for one’s race goals. Of course, one might be wrong in one’s judgement of whether a certain RPE corresponds to a certain pace, but one cannot be wrong about one’s RPE. It then follows from epistemological principle (B) that an awareness that one is trying to run at a certain effort level puts one in a position to know that one is running at this effort level.

Fourth, one’s ability to run a good race can be undermined by situational factors. Things like the weather, one’s diet and general health on the day can all alter what it is possible for one to do. These external facts can undermine one’s capacity to race in a couple of ways. They can alter what pace is achievable on the day (through raising the RPE for a given pace) and they can alter what RPE is achievable on the day (through limiting what pace is achievable).¹⁵ Given that external factors can have this latter effect, there can be situations where one can try to achieve and sustain a high RPE and fail to do so – so a trying is not sufficient for an acting – even though running at a given RPE is basic. However, these cases of failure are unproblematic insofar as these are simply cases where one’s capacity to act is undermined. They are comparable to O’Shaughnessy’s case of trying to raise one’s arm, which is something one can ordinarily do merely by trying, only to find one’s arm is

paralysed. What is then problematic about racing – or effortful action more generally – is that it can illustrate another source of action failure, to wit: *an undermining not of capacity but of resolve*.

Running at the effort level required by a middle or long distance race is hard. Sustaining this effort level is then harder. It requires that one overcome the temptation of reducing the effort one is putting in. Suppose, then, that one is at the start of a 5K road race and has the goal of breaking 20:00 – again the actual numbers are obviously unimportant, what is important is that one knows both that the achievement of this goal is a real possibility and that its achievement will require substantial effort. With this knowledge one will not merely intend to run at a certain effort level – namely that effort level which one’s training allows one to judge is needed for a pace of 6:26 minutes per mile – one will further need to *resolve* to run at this effort level. A resolution is a conjunctive intention: it is the intention to do something coupled with the intention not to be deflected from this intention.¹⁶ One forms resolutions when one knows one will face temptation. Thus, and for instance, one might resolve not to eat cake or smoke when meeting a friend in a café, and one resolves to push oneself sufficiently when at the start line of a race.

Resolutions are intentions that are held specifically to combat temptation, and temptations come in two varieties. First, there are *ordinary temptations*, such as the temptation to eat cake. Ordinary temptation “works not simply by *overcoming* one’s better judgement, but by *corrupting* one’s judgement. It involves ... *judgement shift*” (Holton 2009, 97). This is to say that temptation causes one to lower one’s evaluation of what is to be gained by resisting relative to what is gained by succumbing. Succumbing comes to seem to be not so bad, and then the right thing to do. Conversely, one’s initial resolve now appears misguided. Second, there are *addictive temptations*, such as the temptation to smoke. Addictive temptation works by decoupling judgement and desire: the addict “need not like the substances to which they

are addicted: they need take no pleasure in getting them, nor in the prospect of getting them” (104). So in being tempted to have a cigarette, one might nevertheless judge that the cigarette will make one feel poor, and feel gloomy at the prospect that will be overcome by the desire once seating in the café.

Maintaining a resolution in the face of temptation, on Holton’s account, is then not merely a case of following the greatest desire or doing what one judges best, rather it is an exercise of *willpower*. This, he rightly thinks, fits with the phenomenology: sticking with a resolution requires effort. In the case of ordinary temptation, effort is required not to reconsider one’s resolution because if one does reconsider and returns to one’s reasons for forming the original intention, the judgement shift caused by the temptation will potentially result in one’s revising this intention and so abandoning one’s resolve. In Holton’s terms willpower is then needed to resist the shift from *rehearsal* to *reconsideration*, where rehearsal is the mere affirmation of a resolution without a return to the reasons for the underlying intention. And in the case of addictive temptations, willpower is needed to resist those desires that are resistant to one’s judgements.

Return now to our 5K race. In resolving to run at the RPE one judges necessary for one’s race goals, one confronts both ordinary and addictive temptations to abandon this resolution. With respect to ordinary temptation, it is common mid-race to suddenly cease to care about one’s goal time. This is true even if this goal has structured one’s training for months. This change in valuation is a judgement shift caused by the temptation to put in less effort and so slow down. What is then needed is the willpower to merely rehearse one’s resolution and push on. What is needed is the willpower to resist reconsidering one’s resolve and opening, again, the question of why one wants to achieve this goal. With respect to addictive temptation, even if one is non-responsive to any judgement shift, one will experience the desire to slow down. This desire, which is entirely independent of one’s judgement about

whether or not slowing down is good, is a consequence of the fact that fatigue generates the desire to slow down.

The problem is then the phenomenon known as *ego-depletion*. Here I quote Holton.

It appears that willpower comes in limited amounts that can be used up: controlling oneself to eat radishes rather than the available chocolates in one experiment makes one less likely to persist in trying to solve puzzles in the next; suppressing one's emotional responses to a film makes one less likely to persist, later on, in maintaining a squeezed hold on a handgrip exerciser (128).¹⁷

In short, if one is attempting two tasks, X and Y say, where both require effort, effort expended on task X detracts from one's capacity to do task Y. However, this is exactly the situation one finds oneself in when racing. Running at a racing RPE requires one to do at least two things.¹⁸ It requires that one try to run at the RPE appropriate to the race, where, since this is a basic action, running at this RPE is something that one can do, other things being equal, merely by trying. But it also requires that one *persist* running at this RPE when faced with the mid-race temptations not to do so, where it is the effortfulness of this RPE that generates this temptation to ease off. Resisting this temptation and continuing with the racing effort then both require willpower. Putting in the necessary racing effort does so because it is effortful; and not reconsidering one's resolution to put in this effort requires willpower given the mid-race temptation is to do just this. But one only has so much willpower. So effort expended in resisting the temptation to ease off will detract from one's ability to put persist at the given RPE.

There is a vague domain here. Running at the required RPE is compatible with rehearsing one's resolution to put in this degree of effort; indeed, it is compatible, up to a point, with reconsidering this resolution –

though it is obviously not compatible with revising it for then one would stop trying. However, if too much effort is expended either resisting the desire to reconsider things or actually reconsidering things and weighing again the reasons for the resolution one made on the start line, one will no longer be able to put in the effort that one has resolved to put in. One will have eased off without having decided to do this. Nevertheless, short of revising one's resolution to put in this racing effort *it will remain true throughout that one is trying to put in this effort*. But then there can be a point in racing when one is trying to run at a RPE – namely that effort level one judges is needed – and yet one is failing to run at this RPE. That is to say, there is a point at which the effort of maintaining one's resolve to put in a racing RPE can be such that even though it is true that one is still trying to put in this RPE, this act of trying no longer suffices for one putting in this RPE.

This point might be put in terms of a good and bad race – similar to O'Shaughnessy's two cases of the man trying to move his arm, except in these two cases the capacity to act is the same in both cases. That is, there is no difference in weather etc. in the two imagined races, and all the external physical variables are constant across the cases. Then to simplify the presentation let running at the RPE one judges appropriate to the race be an act of ϕ -ing, where in the example used this is the effort judged to be needed for a sub-20 minute 5K. In the good case – race – one resolves to ϕ , so when gun goes one tries to ϕ and this is sufficient for one ϕ -ing. Mid-race, one needs to rehearse one's resolve to ϕ , but one does this, continues to try to ϕ and thereby continues ϕ -ing. In the bad case – race – one resolves to ϕ , so when gun goes one tries to ϕ and this is sufficient for one ϕ -ing. Mid-race, one needs to rehearse one's resolve to ϕ but this time rehearsal slides into reconsideration. One never revises one's resolution, so one continues trying to ϕ throughout, but the effort spent in resisting the temptation to revise one's pre-race resolution is such that this trying to ϕ is no longer sufficient for one

φ -ing; overtime, one's trying to φ ceases to be successful. This bad case of trying and failing then poses a problem for epistemological principle (B).

5. The Epistemological Problem and a Metaphysical Solution

We enjoy a first person authority over what it is that we are doing such that knowledge of what we are doing is immediately available to us. Or this is at least true for those actions that are basic, or which can be done 'directly'. This authority, I suggested, is captured by epistemological principle (B): *insofar as one has the capacity to φ , where φ -ing is a basic action, and this capacity is not undermined in the circumstance of action, an awareness that one is trying to φ allows one to know that one is φ -ing*. The problem is then that the case described in the last section – the case of running a middle or long distance race – can falsify this principle.

Suppose that φ -ing is the action of putting in a race level effort, where this is phenomenologically defined; it is running at a certain RPE, namely that RPE one judges to be needed for the race distance. One's capacity to run at such a race level RPE can be circumstantially undermined, as can one's capacity to raise one's arm. But suppose a case where it is not and one has the capacity to put in such a RPE; that is suppose a case where one has the capacity to φ . In this case, φ -ing is a basic action, or action that one can carry out directly. Otherwise put, all one need to do in order to φ is to try to φ . Thus, it would follow from principle (B) that an awareness of trying to φ would put one in a position to know that one was φ -ing. However, this is not the case when things go badly. In the bad case or bad race described in the last section, one possesses the capacity to put in a race level effort and nothing interferes with one's capacity to do this and yet despite trying to run at this level of effort, one fails to do so. Putting in a race level of effort, that is φ -ing, remains basic: all one needs to achieve this is to try. However, in the bad race, one's

trying to ϕ does not suffice for one's ϕ -ing. So it cannot be the case that one's awareness of one's trying to ϕ puts one in a position to know that one is ϕ -ing: one cannot know one is ϕ -ing for the simple reason that one is not. Rather, in the bad case, one's trying to ϕ is depleted by the effort involved in maintaining one's resolution to continue with this trying to ϕ . So principle (B) seems to be false.

The solution to this epistemological problem, I propose, is to recognise that acts of trying are not uniform: there are tryings and there are tryings. This is to propose a *disjunctive* view of actions in opposition to the *conjunctive* view outlined in section 2, where this conjunctive view is supported by consideration of cases of action failure. To recap, for any basic physical action ϕ , there can be a circumstance where the subject tries to ϕ but fails to do so; one tries to raise one's arm but finds it paralysed, for instance. The conjunctive view of action draws the conclusion that successful action must involve more than trying: it must be a trying to ϕ that successfully causes a ϕ -ing (in the right way). So physical action must be a conjunction of an internal element (an act of trying to ϕ) with an external element (a bodily movement, which visibly appears as an ϕ -ing). The disjunctive view then accepts the starting premise but draws a contrary conclusion: not all acts of trying to ϕ are equal since only some amount to a ϕ -ing. This is to deny that there is a common internal element – a state of trying to ϕ – that unites cases of successfully ϕ -ing and unsuccessfully ϕ -ing. It is true that there is an act of trying to ϕ in both cases, but these are different trying acts. Putting this in terms of the racing case: there is the trying to run at a race effort level that persists when one's resolve to try to do this is no more than rehearsed; and there is the trying to run at a race effort level that exists when one's resolve to try to do just this is undermined by reconsideration.

One might say of these two cases that one is a case of *really trying* and the other a case of *merely trying*. For some basic physical action ϕ , the act of

really trying to ϕ then suffices for a ϕ -ing. That is to say, all that one needs to do in order to ϕ is to really try to do just this. As such, there is something misleading about describing a case of ϕ -ing as one of really trying to ϕ since this trying act just becomes the act of ϕ -ing. For instance, when one successfully raises one's arm, the act of really trying to raise one's arm just is the act of raising one's arm. Similarly in a good race one does not so much as try to run at a certain RPE as simply run at this RPE. The action of ϕ -ing is then not a conjunction of two separate elements – an internal trying and an external bodily movement – it is just the act of ϕ -ing. So the correct description of the two cases that inform the conjunctive view is that a case is *either* one of ϕ -ing *or* it is one of a mere trying to ϕ .¹⁹ What follows is that there is no common element that unites cases of successful and unsuccessful action. Successfully ϕ -ing has as an essential constituent the act of really trying to ϕ . But this is not a constituent of unsuccessfully ϕ -ing, which in turn is not actually a case of ϕ -ing at all, since no ϕ -ing takes place, but is rather a mere trying to ϕ .

Given this metaphysical account, principle (B) can be saved: the awareness of trying to ϕ that is referred to by the principle is an awareness of really trying not an awareness of merely trying. And when one is really trying to ϕ and aware of the fact that one is doing so, what one is thereby aware of is just the fact that one is ϕ -ing. So insofar as one takes principle (B) to be correct – or offer an adequate characterisation of the first person authority we enjoy with respect to the question of what it is that we are doing – the case of effortful action, and in particular the case of running a middle distance race, provides an argument for a disjunctive metaphysics of physical actions. For any basic action ϕ , an awareness that one is trying to ϕ is either an awareness of one's ϕ -ing or an awareness of one's merely trying to ϕ . In the former case, this awareness puts one in a position to know one is ϕ -ing, and does so through providing more than a defeasible reason in that the awareness one

enjoys is not consistent with one not- ϕ -ing. Hence the truth of principle (B). In the latter case, the most that can be said is that one might be excused for thinking that one is ϕ -ing even though one is not.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to two epistemological consequences of this metaphysical disjunctivism and case of effortful action. First, *knowledge of trying is fallible*. Second, *knowledge of acting can require one be non-reflective*.

First, on the conjunctive metaphysics of action, one enjoys an infallible first person authority over whether or not one is trying to ϕ . While one can go wrong over whether or not one is ϕ -ing, even when ϕ -ing is basic, one cannot go wrong over whether or not one is trying to ϕ . However, this is no longer the case given a disjunctive metaphysics. There is no act of trying to ϕ that is common to successful and unsuccessful acts of ϕ -ing. Rather, what a subject is aware of in being aware of trying to ϕ is either their really trying to ϕ or their merely trying to ϕ . These two distinct acts of trying can be subjectively indistinguishable, but there is nothing they have in common other than that fact. Fallibility with respect to the question of whether or not one is ϕ -ing, then carries over to give fallibility with respect to the question of whether or not one is really trying to ϕ . Thus one no longer enjoys an infallible authority over the identity of one's trying to ϕ . This fallibility is clearly illustrated in the effortful case of racing. The shift between trying and succeeding to put in a racing effort and merely trying to do this happens given a sufficient weakening of one's resolve, but when this occurs can be difficult to tell. At a certain point, one has one thought too many.

Second, what is needed to run a good race is to resist the temptation to put in less effort. The best strategy for resisting temptation appears to be not

to engage with it. Consider an experiment conducted by Walter Mischel on children's ability to delay gratification for greater reward. In the experiment the children had the choice of ringing a bell at anytime in order to receive the cookie there in front of them, or waiting until the experimenter came back with two cookies.²⁰ With respect to this experiment, Mischel observed that the best delayers engaged in "self-distraction".

Instead of fixing their attention and thoughts on the rewards, as initially theorizing has predicted, they seemed to avoid thinking about them entirely. Some put their hands over their eyes, rested their heads on their arms, and invented other similar techniques for averting their gaze most of the time, occasionally seeming to remind themselves with a quick glance. Some talked quietly to themselves or even sang ("This is such a pretty day, hooray"); others made faces, picked their noses, made up games with their hands and feet, and even tried to doze off while continuing to wait (Mischel 1996, 202).²¹

So in a race situation although one needs to monitor one's RPE – to ensure one is running at the RPE one judges necessary – one should not in anyway dwell on this effort for this would be to dwell on the temptation to ease off. However, insofar as effort is a salient feature of racing, and there is no option of simply dozing off to push this fact out of one's awareness, it would seem to be impossible to keep the thoughts provoked by this temptation to ease off from one's mind. What would seem to be required is that one somehow block thought from one's mind. And this is the experience of successful racing: one does not think about the effort involved in what one is doing. Thought might be filled with concentration on technique and daydream (Heinrich 2001, ch.20), or one might get into what sports psychologists call "being in the zone" (Young and Pain 1999). In this state, one knows one is running at a certain RPE because this is what one is trying to do. But one knows this only because and insofar as one does not reflect on this knowledge. And this conclusion

then mirrors the claim made by contextualists that the mere raising of doubt is sufficient to undermine knowledge that is non-reflectively possessed.^{22 23}

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¹ By ‘proprioceptive awareness’ I simply mean awareness of the body from the inside; this awareness is constituted by various proprioceptive systems – skin receptors, the vestibular system in the inner ear, receptors in the joints etc.. See Eilan, Marcel, and Bermúdez (1995).

² See Moran (1988).

³ Thus, it is possible to know what one is doing with a radically reduced proprioceptive awareness, see Cole and Paillard (1995).

⁴ See Crowther (2009).

⁵ To this it could be added: one might judge that in so acting one is thereby ψ -ing, where the description ‘ ψ -ing’ is non-basic, but this judgement combines first person awareness with empirical information or belief.

⁶ Williams (1978, 49).

⁷ For an actual case of basic action failure, see the vibro-tactile experiment described in Marcel (2003).

⁸ This is necessary otherwise there will be a regress of tryings, see O'Brien (2012, 166-8).

⁹ See, for example, Davidson’s climber case (1980, 79).

¹⁰ See O'Brien (2007, ch.2).

¹¹ The famous phrase comes from Sellars (1963).

¹² This parallel, Peacocke suggests, extends to non-basic actions, which do not fall under entitlement (A). Our knowing what we are doing, when this action is non-basically described, can be compared to knowledge acquired by secondary perception. In both cases the acquired epistemic standing rests additionally upon the epistemic standing of the background belief that informs the judgment.

¹³ Holton regards this condition as normative rather than necessary because of a case described by Anscombe: “a man could be as certain as possible that

he will break down under torture, and yet determined not to breakdown” (1957, 94).

¹⁴ See Borg (1970) and Noakes (2003, 280).

¹⁵ Heat has the former effect, cold the latter. See O'Sullivan (1984).

¹⁶ Here I am appealing to Richard Holton's (2009) account of the will.

¹⁷ The two studies Holton cites here are respectively Baumeister et al. (1998) and Muraven, Baumeister, and Tice (1998).

¹⁸ The “at least” flags the fact that this is a simplification; racing also requires, for instance, that one be appropriately responsive to the competitive environment.

¹⁹ This might then be thought of as a “truncated action”, a mere trying O'Brien (2007, 151).

²⁰ Mischel (1996) cited in Holton (2009, 125).

²¹ Quoted in Holton (2009, 126).

²² See Lewis (1996).

²³ Many thanks to Lucy O'Brien, Jon Pike, Mayur Ranchordas, Bob Stern, an anonymous referee, and to the audiences at the two ‘Philosophy of Running’ events put on by the University of Sheffield, the Open University, and the Royal Institute of Philosophy; see <<http://www.philosophyofrunning.co.uk>>.

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