



The Self and Self-Knowledge

Annalisa Coliva

Print publication date: 2012

Print ISBN-13: 9780199590650

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2012

DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590650.001.0001

Knowledge of Actions and Tryings 1

Lucy O'Brien

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590650.003.0008

Abstract and Keywords

This paper is concerned with the extent to which an appeal to trying is helpful in explaining our knowledge of our actions. It considers two models for knowing our actions that centre on tryings, and argues that, if we allow that there are mental actions, there are problems with both models. So, if we hope to give an account of our knowledge of our actions which is uniform across mental and physical cases, we have reason to avoid appealing to tryings in our attempt to do so.

Keywords: knowledge of action, tryings, mental actions, Peacocke, O'Shaughnessy, action awareness, disjunctivism

1. Introduction

A background motivation to this chapter is to try to understand what philosophers who believe in them, and their ubiquity, believe that tryings are, and how they understand what explanatory role they are supposed to have. I am skeptical that there are tryings, understood as personal level mental kinds involved in all actions. My suspicion is that tryings understood in that way are philosophical creations designed to soak up the problems we do not know how to solve, picking up the explanatory burden that more familiar mental phenomenon are supposed not to be able to bear.

However, my immediate concern, and the one that this chapter will be focused on, is the question of the extent to which an appeal to trying is helpful in our attempts to explain our knowledge of our actions. To this end I will consider two models for knowing our actions that centre on tryings. I will argue that if we

allow that there are mental actions, there are problems with both models. If we think there are mental actions, we are, I argue, going to have to give an account of our knowledge of them that does not appeal to trying. So, if we hope to give an account of our knowledge of our actions which is uniform across mental and physical cases, we have reason to avoid appealing to tryings in our attempt to do so.

So, what are the two models? The first aims to account for our knowledge of our actions via our knowledge of our tryings.² The second is Peacocke's recent account, (p.165) which aims to account for our knowledge of our actions in terms of a form of awareness of our actions, where tryings are taken to be the joint cause of the action and the awareness of the action. My knowledge of my actions on the two models can be set out roughly as follows:

Model 1. I try to act. My trying causes an action. I know what I tried to do. I know that my tryings cause my actions. Therefore, I know that and how I acted.

Model 2. I tried to act. My trying causes my action. My trying causes action awareness. I know that, and how I acted, in virtue of my action awareness.

2. Knowing our actions in virtue of knowing our tryings

I do not think that Model 1 can be right. The argument will go via a consideration of what account to give of our knowledge of our mental actions. I argue that the account embodied in Model 1 does not work for our knowledge of our mental actions and, if we want an account of our knowledge of our actions that is uniform across mental and physical actions then we must give up the claim that we know our actions by knowing our tryings.

At first blush, the hypothesis that there are tryings which are the causal antecedents of the movements of our bodies when we act, seems to serve two useful functions in our epistemology of actions. It can explain both our knowledge of our action and our failures of knowledge:

1. We can know that our bodies moved in a certain way, by knowing that we tried to move our bodies in that way, and that we are entitled to take our bodies as functioning normally.
2. When we think we have acted in a certain way, but have in fact failed to, our thought can be explained by the fact that we tried to act in that way.

More precisely, we can make the following two claims:

Claim 1. If ϕ -ing is an action and A knows that she ϕ -ed, she knows by knowing that she tried to ϕ .

Claim 2. If A thinks that she φ -ed, but due to some failure did not φ , her thought is usually explained by her knowing that she tried to φ .

(p.166) 2.1 The regress problem

It is not difficult to show that a regress problem emerges from a consideration of Claim 1 if we allow that there are mental actions. It follows from Claim 1 that if φ -ing is an action and if A knows that she is φ -ing, then A knows that she tried to φ . If on a given occasion φ -ing is a mental action and A knows that she is φ -ing, then on the reasonable assumption that trying to φ must be something we do and as such also a mental action, we are able to get a regress.

We can set out the argument like this:

1. For all x, if x is an action, and A knows that she x's, then A knows that she tried to x. (A)
2. φ -ing is a mental action. (A)
3. A knows that she is φ -ing. (A)
4. For all x, such that x is an action, trying to x is a mental action. (A)
5. A knows that she tried to φ . (from 1, 2, and 3)
6. Trying to φ is a mental action. (from 2 and 4)
7. A knows that she tried to try to φ . (from 1, 5, and 6)
8. Trying to try to φ is a mental action. (4, 6)
9. A knows that she tried to try to try to φ . (from 1, 7, and 8)

and so on...

There is a tendency in action theory that appeals to tryings, not to worry much about regress problems. I suspect that this is partly because they will so obviously arise: after all if we require tryings for all actions, and tryings are themselves actions, then they must themselves require tryings, and so on. So, appealing to tryings as things we do when we act was always going to require treating them as a special case if we were not to face a regress. Similarly, if we are going to appeal to knowledge of tryings to explain knowledge of action, and hold tryings to be actions, then it looks like we are going to have to treat knowledge of tryings as a special case. However, the familiarity and clear recognition of a problem does not in itself make the problem go away. We need either to be shown that the problem can be dispensed with, or need some developed explanation of what it is about tryings that means we are entitled to take them, and in particular our knowledge of them, as a special case.

Faced with the regress, the theorist who appeals to our knowledge of our tryings to explain knowledge of our actions must choose between the following four options:

- (i) Accept the regress.
- (ii) Deny that there are any mental actions.

(iii) Deny that tryings are mental actions.

(iv) Revise Claim 1.

The first option, accepting the regress, seems pretty much out of the question in this case. The option involves accepting not just that there is an infinity of knowledge states (**p.167**) which may be open to a dispositional construal, making it acceptable.³ Rather, it involves accepting an infinity of mental actions—tryings—the postulation of each one being required to explain our knowledge of the one before. Since, I take it, we think of mental actions as temporally located and extended events, requiring the efforts of a finite agent, we would be hard put to explain how a subject could carry out an infinite number of tryings in a limited time. It seems clear that in this case the cost of accepting the regress is far greater than the cost of revising our account of our knowledge of our mental actions.

The second option, denying that there are mental actions, seems unattractive, primarily because there seem to be relatively unproblematic examples of mental action. Consider my imagining that I am now raising my arm, or my supposing that tryings are mental actions. However, if we want to give a uniform account of our knowledge of our actions, and face a problem in extending our account to mental actions, then one possibility is indeed to deny that there are, contrary to how it seems, any mental actions to worry about. But note that the account of our knowledge of our actions invokes tryings as the basis of our knowledge of our physical actions. It, therefore, owes us a construal of tryings on which they *do not* come out as mental actions, but on which they *are* nevertheless a plausible basis as causes of, and sources of our knowledge of, our actions. It is hard to see how they can serve as the active source of our physical actions without being actions themselves—and accessible actions at that. If this is right then the third option, which involves giving up the narrower claim that tryings are mental actions is equally problematic.

Although I do not accept that we know our actions by knowing our tryings, such attraction the view does have must surely lie in the fact that we tend to see tryings as the accessible aspect, or component, of the action known. If we deny that tryings are actions in themselves, the knowledge of which requires an account, then I do not see that they will plausibly be seen as the basis of our physical actions, and so as the basis of our knowledge of our physical actions. I, in fact, deny that there are tryings whenever there are actions. Thus there is a class of putatively basic mental action that I would be sympathetic to viewing as small, if not empty. So, to that extent, I am sympathetic to the move of blocking the argument by denying that there are mental actions in the problematic class. However, obviously, that is not a move that the defender of the view that we know our actions by knowing our tryings can hold.

Our fourth option is to give up Claim 1. We can do this in two ways. One, we can keep the basic schema for knowledge of some actions, but give up the ambition of providing a uniform account of our knowledge of all our actions. Or two, we can give up the idea that we know our actions by knowing our tryings.

(p.168) If we choose the first option we can do it either by making our knowledge of tryings a special case, or by holding that Claim 1 should apply only to physical actions—and that mental actions will require a different account.

The latter might seem a desirable move. Our physical actions—it might be said—involves the movements of our bodies, which themselves depend upon the proper workings of our motor systems which are independent of our capacity to try to act. Our mental actions are, in contrast, internal events that are autonomous in relation to the movements of our bodies. Given this we should expect, indeed seek, a different account of our knowledge of our mental and physical actions.

However, this description misconstrues things slightly. As will emerge later in the paper there do indeed seem to be mental actions for which the model applied to the standard case of physical actions seems quite wrong. However, this is not because the operations of the mind are not dependent upon the proper working of our physical hardware. The causal routes may be shorter and more secure in the case of mental actions, but we do not have a reason just on the basis of them being mental to think that there might to be failures between initiation and execution. I may decide to look out for my friend at a party and fail due to some visual disturbance to spot him. I may set about working out the sum of $25 + 33 + 47$, and through some kind of misfiring come up with 62. If there are successful mental actions that required some event as their successful completion, then they also depend on the physical hardware functioning normally.

This suggests that we ought to consider the option of treating knowledge of tryings as a special case—that while knowledge of other mental actions depends upon my knowledge of what I am trying to do, that knowledge needs to be explained in quite another way. However, what is that way to be? If there is no way given, we are left with a mystery. And if there is a successful explanation of how we know our tryings that does not appeal to knowledge of prior tryings, we ought to wonder why such a model doesn't apply to our explanation of our knowledge of actions, or at least knowledge of our mental actions, quite generally.

It seems that problems faced by this way of appealing to trying in our account of our knowledge of our actions gives us good reason to look for alternatives.

3. Knowing our actions in virtue of action awareness caused by tryings
According to the second model of what role tryings play in our account of our knowledge of our actions, our knowledge is based on my action awareness that is caused by the trying that also causes the action: I try to act. My trying causes my action. My trying causes action awareness. I know how I acted in virtue of my action awareness.

(p.169) Two different versions of this model can be identified depending upon how you cash out the ‘in virtue of’ in the statement of the account.

3.1 The judgement dependent version of Model 2

According to this version of Model 2, our knowledge of our actions is based on action awareness and a judgement that action awareness is most easily, or most likely, explained by there being a corresponding action, given the function of the trying which is their usual joint causes. Although this is not his view, Peacocke occasionally sounds as though he has something like this in mind. He says, for example, “in taking action awareness at face value one is judging that things have come about in what is in fact the easiest way for them to come about...” (Peacocke 2009, 202).

I take it that he means here that when a subject takes action awareness at face value they judge that they have acted thus and so, and acting thus and so is in fact the easiest way for the action awareness to have come about. Although the judgement dependent view is not Peacocke’s view, it seems to me to be worthwhile identifying it, if only to set it aside. The view that in order to know their actions the subject must in some way infer that they have acted from the most likely causes and effects of their action awareness is pretty implausible—we do not, and do not seem to need to, make judgements about the easiest or most probable causes of our action awareness in order to know that we have acted. A subject’s knowledge of their actions seems immediate and not to be dependent upon them making judgements about what is easy or probable, even if it is true that they have the knowledge that they do in virtue of what is the easiest or most probable explanation of their having the awareness that they have.

3.2 Peacocke’s immediate entitlement version of Model 2

According to Peacocke ‘the distinctive way in which a subject comes to know of his own mental actions is by taking an apparent actions awareness at face value’ (Peacocke 2009, 193). He holds that we have an immediate entitlement to take such awareness at face value, and that we know our actions by so taking it. Further, our account of our knowledge of mental and physical actions is *uniform*. We know our actions (both mental and physical) by taking apparent action awareness at face value. Apparent action awareness for Peacocke is:

- (i) belief independent,
- (ii) not perceptual awareness,

- (iii) independent of any perception of the action of which it is action awareness of
- (iv) such that actions are independent of it,
- (v) and can occur independently of an action.

For Peacocke, taking apparent action awareness (real or merely apparent) at face value gives us knowledge of our actions because it is caused by an initial trying. The initial trying causes the action of which, when it is real, the action awareness is awareness of. **(p.170)** It is in virtue of the fact that the action and action awareness are joint effects of the trying that taking the action awareness at face value gives you the knowledge you have acted.⁴

The first thing to note about Peacocke's account is that it does not run into the problem faced by the appeal to knowledge of tryings in order to explain knowledge of actions. That is, it is not left with a choice of accepting a regress of known tryings, each explaining knowledge of that which they caused, or accepting that there must be an account of our knowledge of our trying that cannot be adapted to give an account of our knowledge of our other mental actions. Peacocke makes no claim that the trying needs to be known in order that it play the role it plays in the account of the knowledge of the trying. All that is needed is that action awareness be taken at face value and:

Action awareness is...to be sharply distinguished from judgements that one is performing a certain action; and is also to be distinguished from awareness merely of trying to perform the action. (Peacocke 2009, 202-3)

Further:

Even if there is an argument that tryings must, at least in central cases, involve awareness of those tryings, the trying and the awareness of trying is distinct from action awareness. The relation between some constitutive components of the action and the action awareness of the action is causal. (Peacocke 2009, 204)

Peacocke does not need to appeal to knowledge or awareness of our tryings in order to account for knowledge of our actions, and so avoids the threat of regress of known mental actions. However, he does allow that we can be aware of, and so come to know, our tryings. Further, if tryings are themselves mental actions, then on his account of our model of our mental actions, such awareness must be a joint upshot—with the trying itself—of a prior trying to try. Thinking about Peacocke's account in relation to our knowledge of our tryings does I think lead us towards a problem for the account. The essence of the problem is that there seem to be mental actions for which it is implausible to think that there is a separation of trying from action, and for which it is hard to make sense of the possibility of failure that Peacocke's account must allow for—the

possibility of trying causing the action awareness while failing to cause the action itself.

To start with, consider the supposition that I can know my tryings by taking at face value action awareness caused by my trying to try. There do seem to be cases in which it is natural to talk about trying to try to do something. Suppose I know that I have not done something difficult for a long time—like thread a needle with a small eye—and **(p.171)** doubt whether I still have the ability. I may wonder if I am still able to do it and may decide to test out whether the ability has remained. In so far as my goal is to try to thread the needle, rather than simply to thread the needle, I may perhaps be naturally described as trying to try to move my arm. However, it seems that in the usual case, trying is something we do not think of my needing to try to do. I can try just like that—there seems to be no gap to be found between my trying to try and my trying. Suppose I know how to move my arm and all is functioning normally. What would it be in such a case to try to try to move my arm—what could it be other than simply trying to move my arm? Now it is possible—indeed necessary—for the theorist who appeals to tryings to claim that tryings are a special case. That you can indeed try just like that: as the explanatory primitives in the account they are accorded the privilege of being actions that need not be caused by tryings. Further, it is possible for Peacocke to claim that you know your tryings only in those cases where your trying is caused by a trying to try, that itself causes the action awareness of trying that you take at face value.

3.3 Acting without trying

The real problem for Peacocke's account, however, is that there seem to be a significant number of mental actions for which there is no possibility of a gap between trying to act and acting. They are carried out just like that—leaving no gap between attempt and success. For some such mental actions it is not just that there is no possibility of failure—given the trying, the action will inevitably follow—it is rather that it seems incoherent to think of the trying as distinct from the act. To have tried in a certain way will be to have already carried out the relevant mental action. Further, they seem to be mental actions we know easily and well. So it is not plausible to claim in their case that the lack of a prior trying means a lack of a way to know them.

In a recent paper, O'Shaughnessy distinguishes between what he terms productive and non-productive actions. Productive actions have the form 'A did X' where X is an event of which the action is 'the active bringing about'. Productive actions have a product the occurrence of which constitutes the goal and success of the action. The possibility of failure, argues O'Shaughnessy, rests in the possibility that there is only an attempt but no product. O'Shaughnessy argues that there are some mental actions which are non-productive—there is no event done which is the doing—and argues that therefore such actions do not involve tryings. The lack of a trying is evidenced for O'Shaughnessy by the

impossibility of a certain kind of failure. Given these non-productive mental actions, we must give up the thesis of the omnipresence of trying.

O'Shaughnessy gives two main examples of non-productive actions: talking to oneself and imagining raising one's arm. He argues that when one talks to oneself there is no resulting product which the act of talking to oneself actively brings about. And in imagining raising my arm there is no rising of an arm that takes place in imagination, and which is the event which the action of imagining raising one's arm is the active bringing about. In both cases, there is no event that constitutes the product of the action in such a way that the action could be attempted but fail, because it failed to **(p.172)** produce a product.

O'Shaughnessy is surely right when he suggests that we cannot try and fail to talk to our selves or try and fail to imagine moving one's body. To the extent that these are processes extended in time we could get distracted and cease to act—cut off from talking to oneself or imagining raising one's arm. However, to the extent that we continue to try to act we continue to succeed, because in such case to will is to succeed.

It might be thought that what is distinctive about O'Shaughnessy's cases is that the candidate products of the actions—some kind of internal speech or an act of arm rising in the imagination—are hard to make sense of. They would be ghostly, insubstantial, productions if they existed at all. According to O'Shaughnessy what is going on when one is talking out loud is that there is an event *x*, a talking, which is brought about by the agent in an event of 'actively bringing about *x*'. In such a case there is, he says:

a non-identity of the movement of the will' and the *x*-event which the action is the active generation of. (O'Shaughnessy 2009, 165)

If we were to construe talking to oneself on the model of talking out loud we would need to be able to identify the *x* event which the action was the active bringing about and which was non-identical to the talking to oneself. But, what would such a silent, ethereal production be? However, although ghostly mental products to mirror our loud physical ones would be unwelcome, this is not the core reason to deny this structure in this case—the real explanation seems to lie in features of acts of mind. The mind as a manipulator of content seems to accord us a kind of spontaneous freedom, in that to intend or try to conjure up one content or other in mind will already have been so to conjure it—the world does not need to be waited on. The problem with O'Shaughnessy's actions for the believer in independent tryings is that they seem to be actions that are completed in the attempt: 'the seeming act of raising one's arm [in imagination] is one and the same thing as the act of imagining the doing of such a bodily deed' (O'Shaughnessy 2009, 170).

There is another class of mental actions which also seem not to admit of failure of the kind suggested by the distinction between tryings and actions. In these cases there is no danger in thinking that the problem has anything to do with the nature of the product, it is clear that the impossibility of a kind of failure lies in the relevant action being such as to be completed once it has been tried. Consider when I actively entertain the thought that *P*, or suppose that *P*, or consider whether *P*. It seems that to do those things is to bring the proposition into mind in a certain way—simply to bring to mind, bring to mind with a supposition of truth, bring to mind with a question of its truth. But to try to bring to mind, will in itself be an act of bringing to mind. And to try to bring to mind with a supposition of truth, or with a question, will in itself be an act of bringing to mind with a supposition of truth or with a question (cf. Gibbon 2009, 74–82).⁵ The action and the **(p.173)** trying are inseparable. The problem of imagining a gap between the trying and the action in these cases rests not on the fact that the causal link between any trying and subsequent action would be short and secure meaning that there was less room for error than in the standard case. It is rather that the supposed trying would not be independent of the action and so could not do any explanatory work that the action itself could not do.

Peacocke holds judgements and denials—acts of assertion, as Frege calls them—also to be mental actions. It is more contentious but I think a similar point seems to apply to such cases: what would it be to complete the act of mind of trying to judge that *p*, or trying to deny *P*, without having thereby judged or denied *P*? The explanation in these cases might seem to be a bit different. This is partly because talk of trying in the case of judgement is problematic talk in the first place—it is accepted by both those who hold judgements to be actions and those who do not, that we cannot simply will to judge. Given that it is natural to use trying as an indicator of the voluntary—of cases in which we can will—it is odd to think of a subject trying to judge. However, Peacocke can eschew this association and hold that trying is an indicator of the active only, and that the active outstrips the voluntary. The explanation of the impossibility of a certain kind of failure in these cases does not lie in any unrestrained freedom voluntarily to manipulate our minds. As in the above cases it lies in a difficulty in making sense of the act of trying being non-identical to the act of assertion produced. If a trying is to be the immediate cause of a successful *judgement* it cannot be a voluntary act of the will—for then we could simply will to judge. Rather, like the judgement itself, it must be a non-voluntary, reason-led mental action. So, for a subject to try to judge that *P*, she must presumably already be resolved on the rightness of judging *P* and so have been led by her reasons to accept the truth of *P*—but what more does she need to do to judge that *P*? Her judgement seems already completed with the trying.

Of course, if we understand tryings to judge as something other than non-voluntary reason led actions that immediately cause judgements, then we might be able to understand talk of trying to judge in a way that leaves room for a

failure of judgement. And there do seem to be cases in which we might talk about someone trying to judge that P. Suppose a subject strongly desires that P, or suppose a subject has been informed that good consequences will come from judging that P. Might a subject declare: “I am trying to judge that the doctor’s diagnosis is wrong: it would be so painful to accept it” or “I am trying to judge that the doctor’s diagnosis is wrong: I have evidence that I am marginally more likely to recover if I do”? It seems possible, but how are we to understand what is going on in these cases? What would the subject do to realize her aim? Perhaps the subject might keep trying to think that the doctor’s diagnosis is wrong, or she could keep repeating “she is wrong, she is wrong” to herself in inner speech. But that is not directly to try to *judge* that the diagnosis is wrong. It may be to try to put herself in a position that will make her more susceptible to judging in the future, but it cannot be to try to judge then and there. Perhaps, she will try to seek out evidence for the diagnosis being wrong, or the doctor being unreliable, but that is to try **(p.174)** to find grounds for the diagnosis being wrong, not to try to judge in the light of current evidence that it is.

It is true that it can be very difficult to get a subject to judge that P, or to adopt a certain belief despite the evidence being overwhelming. And that might seem to suggest that a subject could try to judge P, but fail. However, it seems to me that in fact there are two possibilities here, neither of which amounts to a case of a subject trying directly to judge and failing. One possibility is that the subject judges P, but the judgement does not ‘take’: the dispositions to act that would be conditions of believing P are dispositions the subject does not have, and perhaps could not have. The second possibility is that the subject has excellent reason to accept P, decides to make up her mind whether P, but is unable to commit to P being the case. But this does not seem to be a case in which she tries to judge P—what she tries if she tries anything is to not judge P, to not make up her mind.

Perhaps it will be said that we do not need the trying to be a trying to judge that P, rather we can settle with the trying being a trying to judge *whether* P? Trying to judge *whether* P is non-identical to the judgement that P itself, and it may be that judgements are proceeded, and indeed caused, by prior tryings to judge whether P. This, however, will not help Peacocke. Peacocke needs the action awareness caused by the trying to *match* and be as content specific as the action of which it gives knowledge. Trying to judge whether P will precede both a judgement that P, and a denial that P, but will, in having the same nature and content in both cases, produce action awareness of the same character in both cases. It will therefore be unable to ground the subject’s knowledge that she is judging P rather than denying P.

There is a third class of problematic cases that have a slightly different structure. They are mental activities rather than discrete mental actions, but they also seem to be non-productive in that they lack an event non-identical to the attempt which constitutes the satisfaction of the goal they are aimed at.

Consider the activity of watching or listening to something one is seeing or hearing. There is not an event of hearing or seeing, say, or picking up some information rather than another, which constitutes the event of successfully watching or looking. Rather they seem to be aimed at the maintenance of perceptual contact with that being watched or listened to.⁶ On the other hand despite not having an end point in this way, we can say that we can try and fail to watch a bird in the garden, or try and fail to listen to a piece of music. However, the kind of failure that is possible here does seem distinct from the kind of failure that is possible when the subject is non-distractedly focussed on her action, but where the conditions required for the completion of the action fail to be met. Rather the possibility of trying and failing in these cases seems to be the possibility of failing to keep acting, to keep focussed on maintaining perceptual contact with the object or scene. If perceptual contact with the object or scene were not available one could not **(p.175)** even start to try to watch or listen. Thus, there does seem to be a kind of failure that is impossible in these cases. One cannot be trying to watch or listen while having an uninterrupted visual or auditory contact with the object in question and not succeed. But such contact is not sufficient for watching or listening. I can have had an extended and uninterrupted visual contact with my computer screen without having watched it. And given such an uninterrupted contact even if we are watching we might find it hard to keep trying, because we are distracted or tired, but if we are continuously trying there seems to be no further event that is required to constitute our succeeding.

Let me try to sum up in relatively broad terms the features that have come out of the cases we have considered:

Pre-figuring the specific nature or content of one's actions. In physical actions, for the most part, the act of mind that causes the action can determine, or pre-figure, in detail the content or nature of the action it is to bring about, but still fail. In some mental actions, to so pre-figure the action will already have brought the action about. This will be because the act of pre-figuring will constitute the act being brought about.

Non-productive actions. As O'Shaughnessy argued, not all actions can be naturally construed as the active bringing about of some event distinct from a trying. In the case of physical action cases, even if one is suspicious of the claimed ubiquity of tryings, one can make some sense of what event it is that is missing when someone has tried to raise her arm, but due to a neurological failure of some kind, has failed. There was no arm rising which would have been the satisfaction of the supposed trying. However, how are we to understand the failure in the judgement or denial case: there was no judgement made even though there was an act of mind that constituted the trying to make it? It is difficult to see what

impediment there could be to the judgement made that was not *ipso facto* an impediment to the trying to judge. *Antecedent vs Consequent possibilities for failure.* The possibilities of failure present in some cases of mental action seem only to be *antecedent* rather than *consequent*. For many physical actions it seems possible for the action to fail after the agent has played her part. The subject can try to move her arm but the neurological system can fail, or the arm be held down. However, for some mental actions the only possibilities for failure seem to be antecedent to the subject's part. An envisaged or desirable action may fail to occur because the initial conditions are such that it could not even be attempted. And were it possible to attempt it, it would be successful. Suppose A cannot entertain, suppose, consider, judge, deny the thought that P. Perhaps A does not have the concepts required, or is insufficiently sophisticated to be led by reasons, or her reasons make it irrational. All such causes of a failure to be able to act in the envisaged ways are antecedent causes which will equally bedevil any trying or attempting on A's part.

As O'Shaughnessy puts it, we seem to have discovered "that the concept of trying has a strangely circumscribed application in the mind" (O'Shaughnessy 2009, 166). **(p.176)** And if we are right to think that there is a significantly sized class of mental actions for which it makes little sense to think of there being trying or tryings independent of the action or activity, then Peacocke's account will be worryingly incomplete. One of Peacocke's avowed aims is to give a *unified* account of our knowledge of mental and physical actions. If it turns out that a significant number of mental actions, and if mental actions from significant types, prove inconsistent with his basic model, it must put pressure on his account.

Peacocke could and indeed does respond to this by accepting that in those cases for which there is no distinction between trying and action, the trying just is the action.

But we do then have a question: given that action awareness is caused by the trying, we then have input of a non-conceptual phenomenal character from the event that is the object of our knowledge. Why does this not amount to a perceptual model of our knowledge of our mental actions? And if we can get the case for judgement to stick, since for Peacocke our knowledge of our beliefs in general depends on our knowledge of our judgements, why don't we in effect have a perceptual model of introspection? Now that, in itself, is not a criticism—it is just an observation.

3.4 Apparent action awareness

Finally, I want to look at how we are to understand the nature of apparent action awareness—that which we take at face value when we know our actions—particularly if we think of apparent action awareness as caused by tryings. Peacocke wants to leave open a disjunctivist approach to action awareness, and to what grounds a knowledge self-ascription. Thus, he wants to allow that apparent action awareness could come in two types, real and apparent, and that the explanation of why we know when we know be that we had factive awareness of the action.

First let me note that there is a slight inconsistency in the way that Peacocke uses ‘apparent action awareness’. In introducing his account we saw that apparent action awareness is that which one takes at face value in knowing one’s actions (“the distinctive way in which a subject comes to know of his own mental actions is by taking an apparent actions awareness at face value” (Peacocke 2009, 193)) and saw that it allowed of two types: real and merely apparent. For example, he says “when an apparent action awareness that you are ϕ -ing stands in the right complex of relations to your ϕ -ing, the apparent action awareness is genuine action awareness” (Peacocke 2009, 199). However, he also talks later of a distinction between real and apparent action awareness: “the real or apparent action awareness lies on a different causal pathway from the action itself (Peacocke 2009, 204). We can take it that what is intended is the former use: apparent action is what we take at face value, it can be real or merely apparent, and whether it is real or merely apparent depends upon the relations in which it stands to one’s acting, or not.

I want now to consider whether Peacocke can in fact leave open, as he wants to, the question as to whether real action awareness and apparent action awareness are distinct kinds. If they are allowed to be distinct kinds, then the account of our knowledge of **(p.177)** our actions would be available to the epistemologist who holds that the grounds of a *knowledgeable* belief cannot be such that they are available in both good and bad cases: cases in which the belief is true and cases in which it is false. If real action awareness and apparent action awareness are subjectively indistinguishable, but epistemologically distinct kinds, then a knowledgeable self-ascription based on real action awareness will be based on distinct grounds from the mistaken self-ascription based on merely apparent action awareness. I am not suggesting that Peacocke *needs* to adopt such an epistemology. However, he declares a desire that his account be compatible with such a ‘McDowellian approach’ (Peacocke 2009, 199–200). Further, in being so compatible it would increase the marketability of his view of our knowledge of our actions.

The first stage in an objection to treating real action awareness as fundamentally different in kind from merely apparent action awareness comes from the thought: how can real action awareness and merely apparent action

awareness be distinct if they are both caused, as they are on Peacocke's account, by a trying which is of the same type of event in both the cases in which it is successful and which it is not? There may be a contrast here to the disjunctivist about perception who holds that the kind of awareness involved in real perception is distinct from that involved in merely apparent perception. In the case of the disjunctivist about perception, at least the distal *causes* of the distinct kinds of awareness are different, but in the case of the disjunctivist about apparent action awareness when such awareness may be understood as caused by tryings, the causes of the distinct kinds of action awareness (real and merely apparent) may be the same all down the line.⁷

One could easily keep a disjunction between real and merely apparent action awareness if one thought that the action itself, or whatever happens when the action fails, caused the action awareness. However, if tryings of the same type give rise to both, the task is harder. The obvious next possibility is to allow for the matching of distinct effects with distinct causes by leaving open the possibility of being a disjunctivist, not only about apparent action awareness, but about tryings also. The story would be that the successful trying (which gives rise to real action awareness that enables us to know that we are acting) is distinct in kind from the mere trying (which gives rise to merely apparent action awareness and is what make it seem that we are acting when we are not).

However, this move, while it responds to the problem about apparent action awareness coming in distinct types, leaves the explanation of our knowledge of our actions oddly positioned. We now have distinct types of trying, distinct types of action awareness, and finally distinct types of effect of the trying (an action, and no action) in the successful and unsuccessful cases.

The natural question to ask now is: given that the trying in the successful case is distinct from the trying in the unsuccessful case, is the *trying* in the successful case also **(p.178)** distinct from the *action* in the successful case? If it is distinct from and independent of the action, then it is puzzling why it is not also invoked to play an explanatory role in the unsuccessful case. When tryings are seen as operating across the successful and unsuccessful cases, explaining what is missing and what is left in the unsuccessful, it is clearer what function they might be thought to be playing. Postulating a trying which is common across the successful and failed action cases enables us to explain why it is that it can seem to one that one is acting, but failing to. But if they are not common across the cases they start to look quite redundant in the success case. Indeed they look slightly worse than redundant, they look costly—there is a standing problem for those who hold that we act by trying to act, to the effect that we thereby act twice, or that we are in some way displaced from our actions by the prior intermediate tryings. These costs may be necessary and got around—but if the trying is doing no obvious work, then it is a puzzle as to why one should try to accommodate them in the account. Of course, we do not have a problem if what

we are calling the trying in the successful case *just is* the action. But if the trying just is the action, is not distinct from the action, then given that apparent action awareness is caused by the trying which *just is* the action, then we are really explaining our knowledge of our successful actions as based on action awareness caused by the action itself. And then it is not clear what useful role the appeal to tryings to explain our actions has played.

In fact, Peacocke himself seems to be committed to taking tryings to be common across the successful and unsuccessful cases. His explanation of the content of merely apparent action awareness—as apparent awareness of clenching one’s fist, say—is that it is caused by a trying, which causes the action—of clenching one’s fist—when all is functionally normally:

What makes an apparent action awareness one of clenching one’s fist, or raising one’s arm, or judging or deciding some particular thing, is that when these and the subject’s other mental states are properly connected to the world, they are caused by events (tryings) that cause a clenching of the fist, a raising of the arm, or a judging or deciding of some particular content. (Peacocke 2009, 201)

This explanation requires the trying to be held fixed across the cases of normal and abnormal function: the trying that causes the apparent action awareness of clenching one’s fist must be, when the subject is properly connected to the world, what causes the action of clenching one’s fist. So apparent action awareness has the content it has by being caused by tryings that cause actions when things are connected up properly. If the tryings were not common across the cases in which they cause merely apparent action awareness, and cause a clenching of the fist etc, then this explanation of the content of apparent action awareness would not be available.

It seems that Peacocke is either going to have to give up this account of the way in which the content of apparent action awareness gets fixed, or give up neutrality with respect to the claim that there is a fundamental disjunction between real and merely apparent action awareness.

(p.179) Let me conclude by noting two things. One, that if we are attracted by the view of tryings on which the successful trying *is just the action*—then tryings cannot play the explanatory role in our account of our knowledge of our actions that Peacocke would have them play. However, some kind of action awareness might still play that role.

Two, if tryings are to play a role in explaining our knowledge of our actions, it is hard to see how they are to do so unless something like Peacocke’s account is right. However, if his account is right we must either give up the assumption that we can give a uniform explanation across mental and physical actions, or accept that in the case of those mental actions for which there is no distinction

between the trying and the action, we know the action in virtue of an action awareness *caused* by it. To accept that looks very much like accepting a perceptual account of our knowledge of some of our mental actions. If such awareness is not perceptual we need an explanation as to why it is not.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Many thanks to Annalisa Coliva and Gianfranco Soldati for organizing and inspiring the ongoing Self-knowledge and Self project out of which this volume grew. I have learnt a tremendous amount from Annalisa and Gianfranco, as well as Dorit Bar-On, Akeel Bilgrami, John Campbell, Fabian Dorsch, Chris Peacocke, Jim Pryor, Carol Rovane, Paul Snowdon, Martine Nida-Ruemelin, Barry Smith, and Crispin Wright. This chapter was started a long time before it was finished; but before finishing it I ran a graduate class at UCL on 'Mental Actions'. Thanks are due to the terrific students who helped me to get clearer about these issues. Particular thanks also to Matt Soteriou for talk about these matters over a period, and also to Chris Peacocke for comments on this chapter.

⁽²⁾ Who subscribes to the first model? Perhaps nobody accepts it in quite this simple form. However, theorists like J. Hornsby (1980) and B. O'Shaughnessy (1980) who appeal to tryings are committed to something like it. In particular, both need to hold that our knowledge that we acted is dependent on our knowledge that we tried. Given that O'Shaughnessy has a metaphysical view on

which tryings extend to include what they cause, it is slightly deceptive to say only that he takes tryings to cause actions—they cause the action they become. Hornsby's view that the action *just* is the trying which causes a movement of the body means she does not hold, as Model 1 does, that the trying causes the action—rather it causes a movement of the body. Nevertheless, knowledge that I raised my arm, does on her view rest on knowledge that I tried to raise my arm in a context in which I have reason to hold that my arm thereby rose.

(³) I have in mind the kind of construals one sees in accounts of the infinite hierarchies hypothesized in discussions of common knowledge.

(⁴) Peacocke does sometimes talk of 'tryings or some initiating event'. I am going to assume that he is committed to an account in terms of tryings. It is the appeal to psychological kinds other than the actions that concerns me. If by initiating event Peacocke means something sub-personal then we have a very different kind of account which would, I think, need to be evaluated separately from an account in virtue of tryings.

(⁵) Gibbons makes this point in relation to intention.

(⁶) This is argued by T. Crowther (2010).

(⁷) If we bracket distal causes and look at the proximal causes of the perceptual experience in veridical and non-veridical cases, there is a parallel problem for the disjunctivist about perception.

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