**Let me go and try[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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This paper argues for a deflationary account of trying according to which ‘*x* tried to φ’ abbreviates ‘*x* did something with the intention of φ-ing’ where ‘did something’ is treated as a schematic verb rather than an instance of objectual quantification. On this account, there is no such thing as trying. Tryings are not a distinctive sort of episode present in some or all cases of acting. The function of ‘*x* tried to φ’ is simply to relate some doing of *x*’s to a further aim *x* had, which may or may not have been achieved. Consequently, the analysis of ‘*x* tried to φ’ adds nothing to our basic understanding of the nature of action or agency. The account handles examples of naked trying, trying without acting—for example, trying but failing to move when paralyzed—by construing ‘did something’ as a schematic verb for doings which cover a broader class of purposive events than actions, subsuming inter alia the formation of intentions-in-action. It gives a technical sense to ‘doing with the intention of φ-ing’ so that it includes any doing that can be construed as for the purpose of executing the intention of φ-ing. This subsumes as a limiting case the formation of an intention-in-action to φ, which is for the purpose of executing that very intention.

Keywords: trying, naked trying, ubiquity thesis, ontology of trying, will, volition, intention-in-action

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Elliot, “Little Gidding”

## Introduction

What is it to try to do something? ‘Try’ looks like an action verb in some respects. What did you do? I *built* a house. I *tried* to start my car. Just as I can *intend to build* a house and do it and have done it intentionally, so I can *intend to try* to start my car, and try as a result, and do it intentionally, whether or not I start my car. But ‘try’ also differs from other verbs of agency. I

can become skilled in building, but not in trying.[[2]](#endnote-2) I can try start my car, but I cannot try to try, or succeed in simply trying, as I can in starting my car (Hunter 1987). ‘Try’ requires completion. I have to try to do *something*. I can say: Let me go and try. But the context must supply a completion for me to have said anything definite.

The completion gives the goal of the trying, typically using an action verb. Anything I can do, I can try to do (in some circumstances).[[3]](#endnote-3) Trying is topic neutral. Trying seems to intercede, or interpose itself, between the agent and what the agent does. It seems as if “trying marks a place where … the mental and the physical meet” (Hornsby 1995, 525). The trying remains even if what the agent aims at in trying does not come off. Correspondingly, to say you will try to do something expresses a certain modesty. We say we will try when we are not willing to say flat out that we will do it, though it is a question whether we can try if we think there is no possibility of success. What does this tell us about trying?

Views about trying divide into inflationary and deflationary views. On the inflationary view, trying is a thing, and our job is to say what sort of thing it is. It may be a distinctive type of thing or a thing that can be described in other terms. But it is present whenever someone tries to do something. Thus, to ask what trying *is* is to ask an *ontological* question. Typically, inflationary views endorse the Ubiquity Thesis, that all intentional actions involve trying. Even to move a finger you must try to do so, though it be effortless. Some treat trying as a distinctive transitional event between intention and the movements of our bodies or intentional changes in our thoughts. Some identify trying as itself an action by which we do whatever else we do. Brian O’Shaughnessy, in this vein, called trying the mental pineal gland (1980, 598ff.). In an early paper, he identified trying with willing, and willing with an action; other actions such as raising your arm include trying as a component (1973).[[4]](#endnote-4) Others have identified all actions as tryings, and tryings as mental events (Pietroski 2000). On this view, to vary a phrase of Davidson’s ([1971] 2001, p. 59), we never do more than try: the rest is up to nature (Grünbaum 2008). Other views see trying as a process that sometimes reaches out to the body’s peripheral movements and perhaps beyond the body, and sometimes not, and when successful it is identical with the action it aims at (Adams and Mele 1992). On the inflationary view, the analysis of trying is seen as revealing something important about the structure of agency.

On the deflationary view, there is no such *thing* as trying. “(T)he innocent-sounding question ‘What is trying?’ arises from a misunderstanding of the peculiar function of the word ‘try’. We take it to be an action-recording word, and this generates the problem of *which* action it records: but our assumption here being incorrect, the question it raises does not properly arise” (Hunter 1987, 401). While people try to do things all the time and sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, trying is not a distinctive episode, event, or process present in all these cases. The idea of *trying* is, rather, schematic. In any particular case when we try, there is something we do (in some sense), but it is different in different cases, even perhaps in category. The function of ‘try’ is not to identify something distinctive about these things but to convey something about them in relation to other things. Our job is not to say what tryings *are* but to say what the *function* of talk of trying is.

One way of spelling this out is the neo-Wittgensteinian view that the function of talk of trying is to place an action in a context so as to illuminate something about it—see, e.g., (Heath 1971; Hunter 1987; Jones 1983). This view takes seriously the idea that trying is appropriate only when there is a (more or less serious) question of not succeeding.[[5]](#endnote-5) We say someone is trying in order to indicate that something undertaken with a certain ambition faces uncertain chances, or some obstacle, or requires extra effort that might be difficult to reach or sustain. Let’s call this the doubt-or-difficulty condition on trying (Jones 1983, p. 383). A contrasting deflationary view, which endorses the Ubiquity Thesis, holds that ‘*x* tried to φ’ means ‘*were x* to have the same pro attitudes and an appropriate level of skill, and there were no blockers or preventers, *x* *would* φ intentionally’ (Ruben 2016; 2018, ch. 3).[[6]](#endnote-6) Another traditional deflationary view, when taken a certain way, is that to try to φ is to *do something* with the intention of φ-ing.[[7]](#endnote-7) This is deflationary if ‘to try to φ’ is treated as abbreviating ‘to *do something* with the intention of φ-ing’. For then talk of trying adds nothing to the description of the world in other terms.

When we think about trying directed at changes we bring about by basic actions (actions which are not done by doing anything else), the view that ‘he is trying to φ’ means *he is doing something with the intention of φ-ing* seems extraordinarily apt, and it requires no special ontology of trying or even, as I’ll argue, *any* ontology of trying. But when we consider cases of so-called naked trying in which someone tries to do something (such as raise his arm) but seems to perform no action at all, this simple account can seem untenable. I will defend a deflationary account of the sort just sketched, starting with trying directed at changes beyond the body, where arguably talk of trying gets its initial grip. I then offer an interpretation of our formula that resolves the problem presented by naked trying without appeal to internal acts of will. Next, I respond to some concerns this raises in turn, and the briefly sketch some unresolved issues, which do not, however, affect the basic picture.

## An explanation of the intensionality of ‘try’ sentences

‘Try’ has a number of different meanings. The two most common are illustrated in (1) and (2).

1. I tried swimming, smoking, figs, marriage, a new diet, …

Roughly: sample, examine, test, explore, experiment

‘try’ + NP

1. I tried to open the door, to run a marathon, to stop smoking, to lose weight, …

‘try’ + infinitive (typically an action or event verb)

When philosophers write about trying, if they mention the first usage, they do so to set it aside. My target is also the use exhibited in (2). I think that there are some conceptual connections between the two, but I will not be able to develop the theme in this paper.[[8]](#endnote-8)

‘Try’ in the second sense takes infinitive complements, often action verbs, though not invariably. We can try to remember and try to forget. We can try to grow up strong and healthy. We can try to lose weight, to laugh, smile or cry. In these cases, however, it is also acceptable to say that we intend the same. We can intend to remember and intend to forget. We can intend to grow up strong and healthy. And so on. In cases where φ is not an action verb, we understand the infinitive ‘to φ’ to abbreviate ‘to do something to bring it about that I φ’.

The context following ‘try’, in contrast to verbs of agency that do not take an infinitival complement, is intensional. Though (3) and (4) are true, (5) is not.

1. James Crowley was trying to intimidate the man talking back to him.
2. The man talking back to him was the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard.
3. James Crowley was trying to intimidate the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard.

These features are explained by what appear to be some standard entailments of ‘try’-sentences. (6) does not entail (7) or (8).[[9]](#endnote-9)

1. I tried to open the door.
2. I opened the door.
3. I didn’t open the door.

But it does prima facie entail (9) and (10).[[10]](#endnote-10)

1. I did something.
2. I intended to open the door.

If (6) entails (10), then we have an explanation for the range of verbs that can be complements of ‘try’ and also for the fact that the context after ‘try’ is intensional, since the position of the complement in (10) is intensional. But (6) entails more than (9) and (10). It also entails that there is a connection between (10) and (9), namely, to put it in a very general way, (11).

1. The first (the something I did) was done in pursuit of the goal expressed in the second (my opening the door).

As a first pass, we might express (9)-(11) as in (12).

1. I did something with the intention of opening the door.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The hypothesis we are entertaining is that something like (12), or some interpretation of (12), is what we mean by (6). The justification will be that it gives a minimalist account of what goes on when we try that accommodates the totality of the evidence. But we will need to refine the proposal as we go along in response to objections. We will return to the question whether the prepositional phrase in (12) is the best expression of the connection between (9) and (10) when we consider trying to perform basic actions. We’ll leave one or two loose ends: whether there is an objective connection condition between trying and its object, and whether to accept a doubt-or-difficulty condition. I will suggest though, that when we return to these questions, resolving these loose ends looks less urgent. I’ll call the generalization of the proposal, expressed in (QA), the Quantificational Account (henceforth ‘QA’).

(QA) ‘*x* tried to φ’ means ‘*x* did something with the intention of φ-ing’

I leave open for now whether the quantification is objectual, substitutional, or what I’ll later call placeholder quantification.

The entailment from (6) to (12) provides insight into the function of talk of trying. One can try to φ without φ-ing. Identifying someone as trying to φ tells us that what he is doing is aimed at φ-ing, without the implication that he has φ-ed or will φ. It picks out something between not having undertaken anything at all and final success. Thus, to know what someone is trying to do is valuable. It tells us what further aim someone is working toward when he may not succeed. This is useful both for evaluating him and what he is doing and for offering aid or advice in his projects if you are sympathetic, or hindering them if you are not. Similarly, saying someone was trying to do something tells us something about the point of a past action without the implication that he accomplished it. It places something he did in relation to a goal he had in doing it.

## Three arguments against the entailment

I am aware of three arguments against the entailment from ‘I tried to φ’ to ‘I did something with the intention of φ-ing’.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The first is that you can rationally try to do something that you believe to be impossible. For example, you can rationally try to lift a stone that you are convinced you cannot lift in order to demonstrate that you cannot lift it. But you cannot rationally intend to do something that you believe to be impossible because the only rational point of intending to do something is to raise the probability that it will occur. Therefore, you can try to do something without intending to do it. I adapt this from (Hornsby 2010, 23); Hornsby’s line with this is more similar to the second argument but it is easily adapted to exploit a minimal belief requirement on rationally intending.

The second is that you can have a reason to try to do something, e.g., a reason to try to run a mile in under five minutes, without having a reason to run a mile in under five minutes. For example, if I promise to pay you a million euros if you try to run a mile in under five minutes, you have a very good reason to try to run a mile in under five minutes. But if I will pay whether or not you succeed, as long as you try, you do not have a reason to run a mile in under five minutes. Since reasons for intending to do something are the reasons for doing it, you can have reasons for trying to run a mile in under five minutes without reason to intend to do so. Thus, you can try to run a mile in under five minutes without intending to do so. This is adapted from an argument to show you can try to do something without wanting to do it (Mele 1990).

The third is Bratman’s (1984) case of the ambidextrous game player who is playing a game in which the goal is to guide a “missile” into a target. She is playing one such game with each hand. The games are linked so that it is impossible to hit the targets in each game simultaneously, and if either target is hit, the other game shuts down. She intends to hit one of the targets. She is, Bratman argues, also “trying to hit each of the two targets” because “each of the two targets separately guides [her] attempt to hit it” (p. 117). Bratman argues that the player can rationally try to hit target 1 *and* try to hit target 2, but that it would not be rational for her to intend to hit target 1 *and* intend to hit target 2. From this it follows that her trying to hit target 1 (or 2) does not entail she intends to do so. Why is it irrational for her both to intend to hit target 1 and to intend to it target 2? Bratman appeals to two points. The first is the agglomeration principle: if you can rationally intend to A and rationally intend to B, you can rationally intend to A and B. The second is that it is irrational to intend to A and B when you know that one excludes the other.

Against the first argument, it might be doubted that someone is genuinely *trying* to lift the boulder as opposed to lifting with all her might to show that it cannot be lifted (Adams 1995). However, I think in principle you can try to do something that you think it is not possible for you to do. But I deny the auxiliary premise that you cannot rationally intend to do something you think it is not possible for you to do. You can provided that there is a point in intending beyond success (Ludwig 1992). If trying to lift a boulder, as seems prima facie true, entails intending to lift it, then if you want to show someone you can’t lift it even if you try, you have a reason to intend to lift it too, because that is required by trying (cf. the toxin puzzle (Kavka 1983)). So if it is rational to try, as it is, and that requires intending, it is rational to intend as well. This answers the second argument as well, for it shows that, though reasons for doing something are reasons for intending to do it, there can be other reasons for intending as well.

It might be objected that we would not *say* that we *intend* to do something when we think we can’t do it even if we are willing to (and say we will) *try* to do it. The explanation is that we do not typically *say* we intend to do something if we think chances of success are lower than what might be expected, for this will generate a misleading conversational implicature. Since typically we don’t intend to do something unless we think there is some chance of success, to assert you intend to do something when you think it is impossible will imply falsely that you think there is some chance of success.

Against the third argument, I make two observations. First, *guiding* a missile with one hand toward target 1 and *guiding* a missile with another hand toward target 2 does not require trying to hit target 1 and trying to hit target 2. For that may be what the player does if she wants to try *to hit one or the other* but not both, and she knows that the chances of success are greater if she guides missiles independently toward two targets with each hand. To see that guiding and trying are different, think about trying to hit *both* knowing the chances are not good, where hitting one or the other, but not both, is a losing condition. The player still guides independently, using each hand, a missile toward target 1 and toward target 2. But she is not trying to hit target 1 and trying to hit target 2, but only trying to hit target 1 and target 2 *together*. For if she hits target 1 but not target 2 (or vice versa), nothing she was trying to do was successful. Hitting target 1 but not target 2 was not a partial success. Second, the same reason it is irrational for someone to intend to A and to intend to B when she knows that A-ing and B-ing are not co-realizable applies to trying to A and trying to B when she knows that A and B are not co-realizable. It is not rational to intend both because a global constraint on the rationality of intending is that she aim at a consistent world. The same point applies to trying, for like intention, trying aims to change the world to conform to its content. So what the ambidextrous game player is doing is not best described as trying to hit target 1 and trying to hit target 2.[[13]](#endnote-13)

## Intending to try and trying to try

In addition to intending to open the door, I can intend to try to open the door. If QA, then (13) should entail (14) and (15).

1. I intend to try to open the door.
2. I intend to open the door.
3. I intend to do something with the intention of opening the door.

This seems prima facie correct, confirming QA. And we have just dealt with the main arguments that might be urged against it.

Asserting (14), given the nature of door openings, would standardly imply that you thought that there was a high likelihood of success. Since trying may fall short of its internal object, (13) is more modest than (14) and would be appropriate if someone wanted to signal more doubt than usual about her chances of success. Otherwise, (13) is otiose, and the pattern of usage follows this. (13) would not be asserted except when the speaker thought there was less chance of success than would be standardly assumed by her audience.

Furthermore, if QA is on the right track, it should sound odd to assert (16) and (17) because these commit the speaker to (18) and (19) respectively. It is odd to assert (16) and (17).

1. I am trying to try to open the door
2. I intend to try to try to open the door
3. I am doing something with the intention of *doing something with the intention of opening the door*.
4. I intend to do something with the intention of *doing something with the intention of opening the door*.

The oddness about (18) is that doing something [with the intention of *doing something with the intention of opening the door*] involves taking the first steps. But the first steps toward *doing something with the intention of opening the door* are just the first steps toward *opening the door with the intention of doing so*. (18) therefore doesn’t isolate anything distinct from what is intended (to do something with the intention of opening the door) that could fall short of that. That explains what is odd about (19) as well. QA then explains what is odd about (16) and (17).[[14]](#endnote-14)

## The ontology of trying

If QA is right, what does this tell us about the ontology of trying? In particular, is there any place for talk about tryings as things? If (12) captures the ontological commitments of (6),

(6) I tried to open the door.

(12) I did something with the intention of opening the door.

then trying is not a thing, and it is a confusion to look for things, events, or processes that are our tryings. There are things that happen when we try, but these aren’t tryings because the function of verb ‘to try’ is not to identify a type of thing but to relate some doing to an intended goal.

There is a tendency to think that since there is a quantifier in the picture, the trying should be the value the variable that makes true the sentence. That’s what the trying is! But, first, even if we suppose we are dealing with objectual quantification, it doesn’t follow. If ‘to try to φ’ is the lexicalization of ‘to do something with the intention of φ-ing’, it is a mere abbreviatory device.[[15]](#endnote-15) To ask what *tryings* are then would be to ask what *doing somethings* are, and that is not a sensible question. You do something when you try. But that doesn’t mean that trying is the thing you do when you try. For you do something when you do something, and that doesn’t mean that *doing something* is the thing you do when you do something.

And, second, there is grammatical evidence that ‘trying’ is not used to form referring terms (Ruben 2016, 2018), that is, as a noun that can be used in a nominal to form definite or indefinite descriptions. Thus, (20) is a definite description.

1. His opening of the door
2. His trying to open the door

But (21) appears to be a sentence nominalization rather than a description. We can insert ‘not’ into (21), as in (23), but not into (20), as in (22) (‘\*’ indicates the sentence is infelicitous).

1. \*His not opening of the door
2. His not trying to open the door

We can modify the gerund in (20) with an adjective, as in (24), but not the gerund in (21), as in (25).

1. His violent opening of the door
2. \*His violent trying to open the door

We can modify the gerund in (21) with an adverb, as in (27), but not the gerund in (20), as in (26).

1. \*His happily opening of the door
2. His happily trying to open the door

‘opening’ can be pluralized in (20), as in (28), but ‘trying’ cannot be pluralized in (21), as in (29).

1. His openings of the door
2. \*His tryings to open the door

We can replace ‘trying’ in (21) with tensed forms, as in (31), but not ‘opening’ in (20), as in (30).

1. \*His having opened of the door
2. His having tried to open the door

If ‘to try to φ’ abbreviates ‘to do something with the intention of φ-ing’, then we have an explanation of these data, for on this assumption ‘trying’ does not express an event type, of which we could then count instances.

Finally, there is the question how to understand the import of ‘something’ in (12). Not every appearance of a quantifier signifies objectual quantification. In (32)(c) ‘something’ is a placeholder for a common complement.

1. (a) Donald Trump always thinks he is the smartest man in the room.

(b) Ted Cruz always thinks he is the smartest man in the room.

(c) There is something that Trump and Cruz both believe.

It is natural (for philosophers) to say (32)(c) involves substitutional quantification: there is some ϕ such that ‘Trump and Cruz both believed’⌢ϕ is true. But it is doubtful that in practice people think about quotation and the concept of truth in asserting (32)(c) or intend merely to mention rather than *use* ‘Trump and Cruz both believe’. Rather, in a use of ‘There is something that Trump and Cruz both believe’, the speaker intends to commit to asserting something whose content is given by ‘Trump and Cruz both believe …’ with ‘...’ filled in by some expression. I’ll call this *placeholder quantification*.

What about ‘She did something’? Plausibly ‘something’ can function objectually in this context. When it does, ‘did’ expresses an agency relation. ‘She did something’ says that there is an event *e* of which she is an agent. But sometimes our interests are not answered by hearing that there is something of which she is an agent. When we ask, ‘What did she do?’, we want a sentence, ‘she ɸ-ed’, in response (or enough information to constructure a sentence), not a noun phrase. ‘What did she do?’ derives from ‘she did what’, where ‘did what’ functions as a placeholder for an action or event verb. In ‘She did something, what was it?’ we do *not* want to be told that she did *that*. We want a complete action sentence whose predicate informs us about an aspect under which she did something pertinent to the context. So sometimes ‘did something’ has a placeholder function.

I propose that ‘tried’ has a placeholder function. ‘I tried to open the door’ is understood as a schema, roughly: I ψ-ed with the intention of opening the door. From this (12) can be inferred when we give ‘did something’ the role of a placeholder (Hornsby [1980, p. 3] calls ‘do something’ a schematic verb). If this is right, it doesn’t lessen the utility of the device, but it does not make place for the metaphysics, or even a concept, of trying. The general form of the schema is given in (TS).

(TS) I tried to ɸ

 I ψ-ed with the intention of ɸ-ing

The objectual construal has a similar utility profile.[[16]](#endnote-16) But it is unclear any considerations favor it over the minimalist account. As a general rule, we should accept the simplest semantic proposals for natural language devices consistent with the evidence.

## Naked Trying and a Problem for the Quantificational Account

Davidson once wrote:

… it may seem a difficulty that primitive actions do not accommodate the concept of trying, for primitive actions are ones we just do—nothing can stand in the way, so to speak. But surely, the critic will say, there are some things we must strive to do (like hit the bull's eye). Once more the same sort of answer serves. Trying to do one thing may be simply doing another. I try to turn on the light by flicking the switch, but I simply flick the switch. Or perhaps even that is, on occasion, an attempt. Still, the attempt consists of something I can do without trying; just move my hand, perhaps. ([1971] 2001, p. 60)

The first thought here is that some things we do without trying, like moving your hand. Davidson thought this could not count as trying because ‘nothing can stand in the way’. The second thought, which this suggests, is that trying comes into view only when something can stand in the way. I focus on the first here.

It is false that you can’t try to do things that count as basic (=primitive) actions. There are the standard cases repeatedly discussed by philosophers of action,

* I can try to raise my arm when someone is holding it down.
* I can try to raise my arm after a dose of curare, administered with or without my knowledge, and fail, and try again after it has worn off and succeed.

as well as cases of injury or disease or dysfunction,

* Alice tries to make a fist after an accident and succeeds after some difficulty or fails entirely.
* Suffering from Parkinson’s, John tries to still his hands’ trembling.
* Ben lost his left leg but occasionally forgets and tries to move it. (Hume: “A man, suddenly struck with a palsy in the leg or arm, or who had newly lost those members, frequently endeavours, at first, to move them, and employ them in their usual offices” (2007, 89)).
* Finger agnosia: Sue tries to move her left index finger, but the left pinky moves instead.

Everyday cases are a dime a dozen.

* In the hand reversal illusion, you interlace your fingers while cross folding your hands; when someone points to a finger, in trying to move it, you move the corresponding finger on the other hand, or sometimes a different finger on the same hand. (This and finger agnosia are interesting cases because it appears that the agent does something but there is no description under which it is intentional.)
* I see you wiggle your ears. I try to wiggle my ears and succeed or fail.
* I try to smile when depressed.
* I try to relax while lying in bed to facilitate falling asleep.
* I try not to fidget/cough/smile/frown/look/move.

Similarly you can try to perform basic mental actions.

* Try to imagine a dragon in detail.
* Try to remember the face of your best friend in fourth grade.
* Try not to think about elephants.

But now isn’t there a problem for QA?

(QA) ‘*x* tried to φ’ means ‘*x* did something with the intention of φ-ing’

For what is the *something x* does with the intention of φ-ing when φ-ing is a *basic action*?

Start with a case of success. I try to make a fist after getting a cast off my right arm. I succeed. According to QA,

 I did something with the intention of making a fist.

What did I do? We might say: the thing I did with the intention of making a fist was to contract the forearm muscles. But I need not have any idea of the mechanisms by which I make a fist. Performing an action with the intention of doing something else entails that I intended to do the latter by way of doing the former (under some description). If I need know nothing about the mechanism, then contracting my forearm muscles cannot (invariably) be an action I perform with the intention of making a fist when I do so. We seem left with the option of saying that the ‘something I did’ was just ‘making of a fist’, for I did make a fist with the intention of doing so. But then how does trying to make a fist leave room for failure, as it must?

Switch to a case in which I try to raise my arm but fail because someone holds it down while it is anesthetized, so that I don’t know that it is held down, and I think I have been successful (Hornsby 1980). Applying QA we get (33).

1. I did something with the intention of raising my arm.

I did not raise my arm. What did I do? We might appeal to the contraction of back, arm, chest, and shoulder muscles involved in raising your arm. If I am aware that someone is holding my arm down, this may be what I concentrate on doing, though it may be conceptualized as pushing against the pressure. If my arm is anesthetized, and I am unaware that it is held down, I won’t concentrate on pushing against resistance. All the same, maybe I am pushing against the resistance. Suppose, however, I am injected, without my knowledge, with succinylcholine, a muscle relaxant which blocks nerve impulses to the skeletal muscles and induces paralysis. I decide to raise my arm. I set to do it, but it doesn’t go up. It seems that I tried to raise my arm though I was unsuccessful. But there is no muscle movement.

One might object that if you are paralyzed, you can’t really try to do anything (aside from purely mental activity)? [[17]](#endnote-17) Yet we seem to have no hesitation in saying in ordinary cases that we are trying to move some part of our bodies even without any relevant muscle contractions. I try to wiggle my ears as I have seen someone else do. “Did they wiggle?,” I ask. “Not a bit,” you say. Applying QA we get (34).

1. I did something with the intention of wiggling my ears.

I may have actuated no muscle contractions (other than those incidental to what I was trying to do, like breathing, or frowning). I have no idea what it is that I am trying to do except in terms of what counts as success. I don’t know what muscles are involved, I don’t know what it feels like, if anything. I experiment blindly.

These sorts of cases have given philosophers the most headache. They drive some philosophers to conclude that all tryings are internal and identical with mental events, perhaps acts of will or volitions (Armstrong 1968; Annas 1977-78; O'Shaughnessy 1980; Hornsby 1980; Smith 1988; Ginet 1990; Lorini and Herzig 2008). Together with the thesis that tryings are actions and actions are basic actions we can conclude all actions are mental events (Pietroski 2000).[[18]](#endnote-18)

If acts of willing were precursors to bodily movements, the extension of the deflationary theory to bodily movements would be easy. You perform an act of will with the intention of moving your body in a particular way. The act of will can occur without the movement and that is what trying but failing comes to. Thus, saying that I tried to wiggle my ears conveys that I willed my ears to wiggle with the intention of my wiggling my ears.

This move is not open to me because I do not think that there are acts of will. Sometimes we make conscious decisions about what to do. These issue in intentions, or perhaps just are the forming of intentions. The act of will is supposed to occur subsequently, and if it is a solution to our puzzle, *it is something that is itself intended*. I do not find in myself intentions to perform acts of will,[[19]](#endnote-19) and since they would be acts that could be performed without prior acts of will, it is unclear why they should be needed for us to move our bodies. For if we can perform acts without prior acts, why should not the act be in the first instance the movement of, for example, an arm. Why do we need a middleman? If we are simply built so that the formation of an intention-in-action, the physical infrastructure being in place, initiates and guides bodily movements in accordance with its content in the light of perceptual, sensory, and proprioceptive feedback, with no intervening acts of will, then we are still agents. The thesis that there are acts of will, then, must be an empirical one. But the theory makes a false prediction. We should therefore reject it.

## Not all doings are actions

Our puzzle is this. When I try to wiggle my ears and fail, I do nothing—in the sense that I perform no *actions*. I formed an intention to wiggle my ears, I tried, but nothing relevant happened as a result. QA entails I did something with the intention of wiggling my ears. It seems we must choose between (a) I performed a mental action or (b) QA is wrong. If we embraced (b), we could still advocate a disjunctive account of trying: QA is right for trying when its object is not a primitive action; however, when trying is directed at primitive actions it is a matter of forming an intention-in-action directed at performing a primitive action. That is, trying is *either* doing something with the intention of doing something else *or* forming an intention-in-action directed at performing a primitive action. This might be motivated by noting that talk of trying was most plausibly introduced in the context of bringing about changes in the world beyond our bodies. Once we have a device for describing a doing in terms of its intended goal which may not be achieved, it will be natural to apply it to cases of failing to perform intended basic actions, when we form an intention-in-action. In some cases of failing to perform an intended basic action, there might be *something* I do with the intention of moving my body in a certain way. I might try to make a fist and close it halfway. But in trying to wiggle my ears, I only form an intention to do so and direct my attention at … I know not what. When trying to raise my arm, when I am unaware it is paralyzed, I need not even direct my attention at anything. So in these cases, we could say that trying to raise your arm is simply forming an intention-in-action to do so.

But I think that we do not need a disjunctive account, and the minimalist thesis about the function of ‘try’ talk helps us to see why. I introduce the idea with a criticism of an argument by Pietroski that tryings are actions. Pietroski says that “Trying to ɸ is doing something, even if it is not ɸ-ing” (2000, 43). Therefore, tryings are actions. Of course, if what I’ve been arguing for is right, even if in trying to ɸ you are doing something, it is confused to infer that trying is a doing. But I want to focus on the casual assumption that *doing something* is invariably performing an action in the target sense in the theory of action. ‘Doing’ is a helping verb. We use it in connection with many things that are not actions. What were you doing? I was sleeping, snoring, laughing, crying, falling down, breathing, getting sunburned, deciding what to do, and so on. If ‘doing something’ serves as a placeholder for a class of verbs, it is larger than the class of action verbs. Similarly then for ‘tried’. So the solution to the puzzle turns out to be simple. In (TS), we represented ‘I tried to ɸ’ as standing in for a schema.

I ψ-ed with the intention of ɸ-ing,

We allow ‘ψ-ed’ to be replaced by a predicate that expresses the execution of an intention-in-action. Perhaps one of the conveniences of talk of trying to move your body when you are not able to is that we do not have a convenient way of expressing precisely what you are doing (now using ‘doing’ in the generic sense). Thus, if I try to raise my arm when it is paralyzed, what makes it true that I tried is that I initiated the execution of an intention-in-action directed at raising my arm, where ‘to initiate’ is not an action verb but expresses the sort of process that occurs when I have an intention directed at acting at a time and I recognize now is the time. There is then a sense in which the initiation is itself guided by the content of the intention. (It is not enough to form the intention, for that is not yet to set it into motion, or, at least, it is not enough if there is the possibility of a gap between formation and execution.) Thus, we have a unified account of the main function of discourse about trying without an ontology of tryings or having to treat tryings as things.

“Wait a minute! What does it mean to initiate the execution of an intention-in-action *with the intention of raising your arm*? We’ve solved one problem only to raise another.” What we want is the right interpretation of ‘with’ in our formula, one that covers both the case of turning the knob and pushing the door with the intention of opening it and initiating the execution of an intention-in-action to raise your arm with the intention of raising your arm. There may not be a way to express it precisely in natural language, but what we want is something in the ballpark of ‘done under the guidance of and for the purpose of executing’.

To refine this, I address another objection to (TS): ‘with’ is not too strict but rather too generous. I buy a can of paint with the intention of painting my house, but I am not thereby trying to paint my house (Heuer 2010, 241). What we need is a distinction between preparation for doing something and attempts to do it. Buying the paint is stage setting, preparation for an attempt, rather than the attempt, like flying to Kathmandu in preparation for an attempt at summitting Everest.

We are already giving ‘with’ a semi-technical reading, so whether or not ‘with’ as it is ordinarily used allows preparation for an attempt to be done with the intention of doing the thing to be attempted, we can exclude it. We want to do it in a way that does not use the word ‘attempt’, however. I suggest that we read ‘for the purpose of executing’ as focusing on the content of the intention itself.[[20]](#endnote-20) Thus, the intention to paint the house cannot be executed unless paint is on hand and so requires further planning to secure supplies. The intention to paint the house itself focuses the process of applying paint to the house. It subsumes transfer of paint from cans to the house but not the transfer of the cans to the house. Steps conceived as internal to the house painting process are done for the purpose of executing the intention to paint the house. In the case of the intention to wiggle my ears, it is internal to the content of the intention that the intention itself bring it about that its content is realized, and so initiating its execution is also for the purpose of wiggling my ears.

## Three loose ends

## *Are all tryings after all mental events?*

Does this make all tryings mental events? For whenever we 𝜙, we initiate an intention to do something, and this is doing something with the intention 𝜙-ing. This is mistaken on three counts. First, if we accept that in (TS)

(TS) I tried to ɸ

 I ψ-ed with the intention of ɸ-ing

the first sentence abbreviates the second, and in the second ‘ψ’ functions as a schematic letter, then it is a mistake to treat ‘trying’ as an ordinary count noun, as this suggestion assumes. Second, since (TS) is a schema, any verb of action can be substituted for ‘ψ’. That will subsume ordinary actions like turning the knob and pushing the door to open it. Third, it is not at all clear that every ψ-ing for some purpose that is involved in one’s ɸ-ing intentionally counts as a trying to ɸ. Initiating an intention to move my finger counts as trying to move it. Moving my finger counts, in the right circumstances, as trying to flip the switch. Flipping the switch counts, in appropriate circumstances, as trying to turn on the light, which counts as trying to illuminate the room, if that is my guiding intention. But initiating an intention to move my finger is not an attempt per se to illuminate the room, nor even to flip the switch.[[21]](#endnote-21) This point is reinforced by the observations that follow.

## *Are you trying to ɸ if you think you are?[[22]](#endnote-22)*

Turning the knob and pushing the door is a way of opening the door. If the door is stuck, I can still try to open it. It makes sense as a try because the plan is of a type that is generally suited to opening doors. But suppose I saw someone stand in front of the door yesterday and flap his arms up and down, and the door opened. In fact, its opening was unrelated to the flapping. I stand in front of the door and flap my arms up and down. I have no further plan. Since it worked for someone else, I think it should work for me. Am I trying to open the door?

On the one hand, if you ask me, what are you doing? I can answer, sincerely, that I am trying to open the door. And you may respond by asking why I think flapping my arms up and down is going to open the door. On the other hand, someone observing may well think that though I *think* I am trying to open the door, what I am doing has no relation to an attempt to open the door. This is not a matter of whether the attempt has a possibility of succeeding. I can try to prove that Goldbach’s conjecture is false even if it is true. But there is something I can do that makes sense as an attempt to do that even if it must fail.

The idea that there must be an objective connection (however understood) between what someone does with the intention of doing something else and it counting as trying may help explain a contrast noted by Sharvit (2003) between ‘try’-sentences and verbs of attitude that take an infinitival complement. (35) is unexceptionable, (36) is puzzling, yet (37) is not.

1. Jack wanted/intended to start a car, but there was no car to start.
2. \*Jack tried to start a car, but there was no car to start.
3. Jack tried to find the Fountain of Youth, but there was no Fountain of Youth to be found.

There being objective requirements on doing something that counts as trying to do something else would explain this. Anything that counts as starting a car requires there to be a car for the attempt to take place. Even if I think pushing a button starts a car remotely, if it no longer exists, neither that nor anything else can count as trying to start it. In contrast, something can count as trying to find the Fountain of Youth, even if there isn't one: researching records, traveling to the New World, questioning natives, following up on tips, and so on.

I leave this unresolved. If an additional objective connection of some sort is needed, we can add it as a constraint on the connection between substitutions for ‘𝜓’ and ‘𝜙’ in (TS).

## *The Ubiquity Thesis*

The Ubiquity Thesis holds that whenever (38) is true for some substitution for ‘𝜙’, then (39) is true for some substitution for ‘𝜓’.

1. *x* 𝜙-ed intentionally
2. *x* tried to 𝜓

Typically we do not say we are trying *unless* there is some reason to be concerned about success. Is this a requirement on trying? O’Shaughnessy notes that an observer (a separator agent, as O’Shaughnessy puts it) may think there is an obstacle to an agent’s succeeding in doing something even when there is not. He can, it seems, report faultlessly that, though he does not know whether the agent will succeed, he does know that she will at least try. Since there is always the possibility of a separator agent, O’Shaughnessy argues that it is always appropriate to say, whenever do something we intended, we were trying to do it. The resistance to saying someone is trying when there is no obstacle is explained by Grice’s principles governing cooperative conversation (Grice 1989, 6-7, 17, 26ff.). Asserting that someone is trying to do something when we know he will succeed violates the maxim of quantity (say no less and no more than is needed) by saying less than we know. It generates a false implicature that there is some unexpected obstacle to success.

I would be happy to rest there except that the matter seems to me still unsettled. That a separator agent can say faultlessly that he knows that so and so is trying to do something still falls short of saying he is speaking truly. Suppose on Saturday morning I decide to lie in bed an extra half hour. I believe most competent speakers would not say that I was trying to lie in bed an extra half hour, provided that I do not suffer from some compulsion which I must struggle to overcome. But suppose someone thinks I am suffering from a compulsion to get up and work by eight each morning. She says, faultlessly, ‘He is trying to lie in bed an extra half hour’. Does she know that I am trying to lie in bed an extra half hour? To my ear this sounds very strange.

We could distinguish two ways ‘try’ might be used, one more and one less restrictive. The more restricted use is governed by a doubt-or-difficulty condition, the less restrictive is not. There is nothing of interest, from the point of view of action theory, in the question whether ordinary usage conforms to the one or the other: for it does not alter our understanding of human agency.

## Conclusion

Trying to ɸ is doing something with the intention of ɸ-ing, where ‘doing something’ functions as a schematic verb of doing. Properly understood, this subsumes cases involving trying to perform basic actions, including mental actions, and negative actions. The linguistic function of ‘try’ is to serve as a placeholder not for a verb of action but for a verb of doing with some purpose, some of which are verbs of action. ‘Trying’ does not pick out a thing. While people try to do things all the time, there is no such thing as trying. The utility of ‘try’ lies primarily in ‘try’-sentences telling us an agent had undertaken something with a certain goal. Thus, an account of trying adds nothing to our basic understanding of human agency. Trying is not the mental pineal gland. It is a device for indicating the place of a doing in the context of a further purpose. Naked trying is the limiting case.

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**Notes**

1. Email: ludwig@indiana.edu [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . A referee suggests you might get better at trying new things. But this is the first sense of ‘try’ discussed in §2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 2. ‘Do’ as used here stands in for action verbs; §7 points out and exploits the fact that it is used to stand in for a larger class of event verbs. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . In (2009), O’Shaughnessy argued that every bodily action is preceded by a trying which is an act of will but argued that some mental acts like talking to oneself involve a movement of the will that is not a trying because there is no distinct product of it. Others (in addition to Pietroski) who treat tryings as mental actions include (Hornsby 1980; Lorini and Herzig 2008; Grano 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Wittgenstein wrote: “When I raise my arm I do not usually *try* to raise it” (1950, §622); see also (1980, §848). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . An important question about Ruben’s theory is whether the form of the subjunctive conditional Ruben supplies explains what trying is or is rather explained by it. The account I give of the semantic function of ‘try’ will ground subjunctive conditionals of the sort that Ruben sketches. So will almost any account of trying. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . O’Shaughnessy says: “Trying consists in doing, intentionally and with just that purpose, whatever one takes to be needed if, the rest of the world suitably co-operating, one is to perform the action” (1973, 56). O’Shaughnessy takes this to be a description of trying rather than, as I will urge, a formulation of what ‘try’-sentences abbreviate. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Jones (1983) argues from the ‘test’ sense of ‘try’ to the conclusion that use of the ‘action’ sense includes an implication of uncertainty of success, and thus that not all actions need involve trying, for not all actions involve uncertainty about success. From this he concludes that trying is not a sui generis event accompanying every action. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . I assume a context relative to which the semantic values of context sensitive terms are fixed and take the author of this paper as its speaker. Talk about entailments between sentences but may be translated into talk of entailments between propositions expressed by them relative to the context. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . For further discussion see (McCann 1975, 431-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Cf. “‘Trying’ is a word that is general in meaning: it signifies the business of going about the performance of the action, and it is used when we have occasion to distinguish this enterprise from that of actually carrying the action off” (McCann 1986, 201). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Harman argues that “one can try as a test to defeat the atomic power plant’s security system … without it being true that one intends to defeat the plant’s security system’’ (Harman 1986, 370). I suggest Harman has confused the test and action senses of ‘try’. One way of testing the system may be to try to defeat it. So you may try (in the test sense) the security system by trying (in the action sense) to defeat it. If you try to defeat it your goal is to defeat it. But you can try (in the test sense) the security system without intending to defeat it. So recognizing the latter and noting that trying to defeat it may be a way of testing it, someone might conclude that trying to defeat it doesn’t entail intending to do so. But this rests on a failure to distinguish the two senses. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . These arguments are elaborated in (Ludwig 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . If opening the door entails trying to do so, does intending to open the door entail intending to try to open it? No, for you don’t intend everything that follows from what you intend. Whenever you paint a room blue, you color it, but intending to paint it blue does not entail you intend to paint it some color (on the narrow scope reading). For if you painted it red by mistake, you satisfied no intention with which you acted, but you painted it some color. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . The same is true under the refinements of §7-8, even if we add a doubt-or-difficulty condition. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . McCann (1975) advocates roughly the objectual QA: “The whole point of talk of trying is to draw attention to the fact of something being done intentionally, but not necessarily all that was hoped, or all that was in fact done” (p. 438). McCann argues that the intentional action in trying to move a paralyzed limb is a *volition*, but in other cases may be another thing. This rejects the view that all actions are basic actions. The value of the ‘trying’ shifts with the context. My approach contrasts both in the semantics of ‘*x* tried to ɸ’ and in the account of trying to move a paralyzed limb—I deny that we do anything intentionally at all. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Grünbaum (2008) questions it and gives a list (note 6) of others who have done so. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Assuming you can’t fail to perform an intended act of will, this entails the impossibility of naked trying. Another option is to identify brain activity that lies downstream from an intention but upstream from the activation of the motor cortex as an action by which the agent aims to raise his arm (Wilson 1989; Cleveland 1997). See (Ruben 2015, §5) for telling objections. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . A referee asks why it is relevant whether we find such intentions. Answer: We generally know what we intend. Exceptions require a special explanation. If we *never* have first person access to a certain type of intention, we should conclude that we don’t have them. Exceptions are exceptions, not the rule. One might postulate a special class of intentions directed at willings that we can’t know about in principle. But this is both mysterious and completely ad hoc. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Heuer’s notion of taking efficient steps is not quite broad enough for our purposes because these are elements in an action plan associated with an intention and initiating an intention-in-action is not an action (Heuer 2010, 241). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . This shows that trying to ɸ by ψ-ing is not transitive; this follows on QA from the fact that intending to ɸ by ψ-ing is not generally transitive. I intend to pull the trigger by moving my finger. I intend to destabilize the Austrian-Hungarian Empire by assassinating the Archduke. But I didn’t (or needn’t) intend to destabilize the Austria-Hungarian Empire by *moving my finger*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . See (Heuer 2010; Ludwig 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)