

We can't control what we try to do

'Come with a clean conscience, and let them say what they will; for you might as well try to to put doors to an open field as to tie up the tongues of slander.'

Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

'If there's no meaning in it,' said the King, 'that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any.'

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

– History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

'Not much hope, my lad, really none at all, I suppose. Of course, we'll try everything that's good and costs money.'

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*

images of trying?

Can there be many more graphic illustrations of cessation of trying than a hawser-veined weightlifter suddenly throwing in the towel? Bang. And does this strike us as a freely willed intentional action following conscious premeditation? Or rather more like a rubber band snapping?

Or a light bulb going ping?

Of course we can nominate other metaphors for cessation of trying. A desperate housewife 'trying to save my marriage' might picture herself rather more like the web-spinning spider

said to have inspired Robert the Bruce in the cave fable:

‘If at first you don’t succeed, try and try and try again.’

That’s a yarn that was spun for me many times by my mother, who was an excellent bedtime storyteller. In the final version I recall, the doggedly Vassar spider eventually succeeds in spinning her web across the mouth of the cave, the English baddies when they came looking for the Bruce don’t bother to check in the cave, because it appears so obvious to the dunderhead Sassenachs that if a fugitive Jock had barged into a cave there couldn’t be a perfectly formed spider’s web over its mouth, and the rest is Bannockburn.

I suspect now, though, that my mother herself first cottoned on to the bones of that improving tale in her own childhood/nursery days, and that its origins had less to do with the moral fibre of Robert the Bruce personally than with Victorian propaganda (cf lessons) on the moral value of effort. The ‘Try, try again’ riff comes from, or is most frequently attributed to, William Edward Hickson (1803–70):

’Tis a lesson you should heed,

Try, try again.

If at first you don’t succeed,

Try, try again.#

Light Brigade stuff, as England expects . . .

But the reality is that nobody tries for ever. Life is so short that inability to heed futility hints is genetically counter-productive. Why does the leopard give up so quickly when she judges her chase to be a lost cause, if not because she can’t afford to squander precious energy? With people, as the suspicion grows, as it frequently does, that we have already given it . . . ‘our best shot’, and are now ‘flogging a dead horse’, or ‘peeing into the wind’, or ‘banging our heads’ against a wall of structural whin, as we feel ourselves ‘losing heart’, ‘running out of steam’, ‘burning out’, or whatever, then our residual attempts, while they persist, may come to

appear rather as weakening waves as the tide goes out – until a moment comes when it is fully out; lowest ebb reached.

Trying snuffed.

Of course it is true that in our experience the tide always turns and comes in again, but logically that need not happen, and it would not happen if the moon were suddenly removed by a gulping black hole. It is the moon that drives the waves, we might say; not the waves autonomously. So, as things are, there is nothing freely willed (either by themselves or by the sea at large) about the waves of the incoming tide. In our housewife metaphor, are her incoming waves: (i) of 'renewed' hope (that trying to save the old marriage may yet be successful) or (ii) of a wholly new hope: to try to make a go of a fresh start with a preferable partner? Either way, what she finds herself hoping (in her 'heart of hearts') is entirely beyond her control, and likewise what she may be said to try to do.

In a further metaphor the hoping/trying might be likened to the energy (cf Newton's second law in relation to rotary motion) manifest in a still-spinning top. While sufficient energy remains, the top continues upright. But below a certain catastrophic threshold the top gives up the ghost. It topples sideways; and stops. Nor can the toppled top decide that it will, of its own free will, try to scrape up enough energy to start spinning again. That energy, the impetus associated with 'trying', must come, if it comes, from some other source.

And sometimes it does.

And sometimes it doesn't.

In more general terms:

trying is not a mental act

Rather is trying just another 'mental' concept which, when put to the unflinching question, soon reveals itself to be more shallow and empty than is commonly supposed. Given our previous findings it is in any case easy to show that it is never true to say that we can control what we try to do. For example:

1 We can't be said to try to \emptyset if it isn't the case that we want to \emptyset . More precisely, if we judge that 'He does not want to \emptyset at any level or in any sense' is true, then we will withhold our assent from 'He is trying to \emptyset '. Because? We will have had no option but to consider that claim to be false. Of course it may be true that, for reasons best known to himself, or strongly suspected by us, it suits him to be thought to be trying to \emptyset . 'I am trying like billy-o to find a job!' he may proclaim. But then, when we investigate, we discover that both his apprenticeship and all his years of work experience, before he was laid off (due to the new-build slump caused by the credit crunch caused by corruption in banking . . .), have been in bricklaying.

Why then has he taken to concentrating his efforts on 'trying' to get a job as a brain surgeon?

Could this relate to a new-found relish for leisure, and golf, accompanied by wanting not to lose his Unemployment Benefit? Amounting to? Not trying, but *pretending* to try – and all for PR purposes; to massage others' interpretations of our own behaviours . . . ? To persuade them that, as is not true, we are not merely 'going through the motions'?

Anyway, as is now no secret, we can't control what we want. Accordingly, and whatever else may be understood by 'trying', we can't control what we try to do.

2 We can't control commencement of intending. But if 'I am trying to \emptyset ' is true, then 'I intend to \emptyset unless prevented by circumstances beyond my control' must also be true. It follows that the commencement of whatever endeavours I am currently engaged in (hence trying to do) was . . . beyond my control.

3 We can't control cessation of intending. The implication for whatever things I am still trying to do is that the trying is beyond my control: that it has not yet ceased is not a freely

willed choice of mine.

4 We can't control what we intend – at any time; at all. But intending is at the conceptual heart of trying: intending to succeed unless prevented. Accordingly, again, what we try to do is beyond our control.

...

Because 'trying' is associated with sensations of effort, it tends to be cavalierly assumed that the trying itself is an activity; a separate activity. That this is an error is already suggested by the consideration that it is not possible to try in a vacuum. Mnemonically:

Ring-doves may merely coo
And peewits merely cry,
And a cow may merely moo,
But a person can't merely try.

On the contrary:

trying is always aspirational

Accordingly, trying always requires an object. If we look at the matter grammatically, we find that trying comes in two principal flavours:

'try' + infinitive
&
'try' + gerund

The first case is directly aspirational, as in 'I am trying to persuade Felicity to marry me.' The second case is indirectly aspirational. Suppose your elderly computer has developed an infuriating low-level hum accompanied by top-line spasms of unbearable whining and groaning. Having undergone similar ordeals myself, I diagnose probability that the

cheapo Pacific Rim sleeve bearings in the small plastic fan on your motherboard are phukked.

‘Try hitting it with a hammer,’ I brightly prescribe.

The gerund there, ‘hitting’, proposes an experiment. There is no doubt (or, strictly, very little doubt) about your prospects of succeeding in hitting your computer with a hammer, if you are foolish enough to act on my bomb-happy advice. What is in doubt is whether blows with the hammer will solve the problem of the hum. Or rather, will this attempt to terminate the hum succeed without simultaneously terminating the computer?

Seriously scientific experiments (trying to establish or disprove whatever) are supposed to be rational, sensible, etc, at least in the first instance. But it is also true that the more desperate we get the more willing we tend to become to ‘try anything’. Patients in excruciating pain, mainstream medicine having failed them, typically resort to ‘alternative’ medicine, quack nostrums, petitionary prayer; *anything*, in their attempts to achieve relief. In the same vein:

‘Try standing on your head for an hour following intercourse,’ has sometimes been recommended to a woman desperate to get pregnant.

There, again, we had a gerund, but sometimes, substituting for the gerund, find an object noun, Hence it is that Herr Hofrat Behrens assures Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*:

‘Of course we’ll try anything that’s good and costs money.’ The Hofrat is Director of the tubercular sanatorium up the Mountain, and the reference is to Hans Castorp’s poorly cousin, Joachim. So the pledge is to try dosing Joachim with arsenic, try bleeding him with leeches, try lifting his spirits and will-to-live by means of white-hot porno movies – ‘whatever is good and costs money’. The particular point is that the gerund (of experimental trying) is often implied rather than explicitly spelled out.

And our global take-away point is that, in all styles of trying, there is, as saluted by the flurry of short epigraphs at the

head of this chapter, reasonable doubt as to the probability of success. We try first what we consider most likely to be effective: to obtain the desired result. As to strength of probability projections, unquestioning confidence tends to generate intention claims. In the previous chapter it was argued that, the matter being closely considered, intention claims are never legitimate, one main reason being that probabilities are never 100%. Hence my reluctance to say 'My niece intends to graduate with a First in philosophy'. I have no such problem, though, with 'My niece is trying for a First'. She's a clever girl, she's interested in her subject, she's had good marks for her essays, and recently she's been working harder than did her uncle at that stage.

So, all in all, the 'trying' claim is warranted.

But what does it amount to: the 'trying' claim?

Actually little more than an aspiration claim. And what's in an aspiration claim? No more than desire and belief. My niece clearly wants to get a First, and the present circumstances are such as to entitle (and cause) her (and me) to believe she will get a First – unless prevented by circumstances beyond her control. Such circumstances might include the misfortune of suffering a breakdown the week before the exams, or a panic attack on the morning of her '17th-century Rationalism' paper, or being marked down vindictively by an examiner (such as the most obnoxious sociologist, Howard Kirk, in Malcolm Bradbury's campus period-piece *The History Man*) whose rancid abuse-of-power advances she had lately repulsed.

The position that trying is always (and only ever) aspirational is specifically supported by the consideration that:

who dares does not always win

The obvious allusion is to the much marketed motto of the SAS:

'Who dares wins.'

That might – indeed, probably does – have some value as

an exhortation, rallying cry, recruitment call . . . but nonetheless it is not a correct statement of the case. In a word, it is false. Not only is it not true, but it could not be true. This is because: if success were guaranteed to whoever dared to dare, then to dare would not be daring. The whole point about daring is that it implies trying in the context of risk. The risk is of failure, with the consequences of failure being serious enough to deter the less daring. Risk of death, or serious injury, or loss of reputation, defamation actions against one, risk of being sacked, expelled from school, or whatever else unleashes cold sweats and nightmares.

As with trying in general, daring comes in two principal flavours. In the first case the outcome of the endeavour itself is in suspenseful doubt. 'Escape from Alcatraz', 'Raid on Entebe', 'Where Eagles Dare', etc. In the second case the activity itself is relatively straightforward, and the risk attaches to the unpredictability of the consequences. If at tonight's cocktail party I dare, say, to pinch the patrician boss's new wife's delectable young bottom? Ever so tenderly, privately and admiringly? Shall the insolent subordinate be shrilly denounced, summarily sacked, and sued even sillier for sexual harassment? Or shall my gallant daring unlock a portal to secret sexual bounties in excess of my fuggiest pipe dreams?

Who dares finds out

but also

Who dares learns the hard way

By contrast, what the SAS motto implies, whether or not disingenuously, is that: anyone who tries to achieve something, even something dangerous, and who keeps trying with sufficient courage and determination, will in the end be successful. That this is not true is proved by the SAS's own selection procedures, which are deliberately and notoriously arduous, and which most candidates fail. Is this because most candidates are insufficiently daring?

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Closer to the truth of the matter would be:

'He who doesn't dare, doesn't win.'

That's because, if it's risky and if he doesn't dare, he doesn't try. And that's no good, since it implies that he doesn't want to (do it) – perhaps because his passion to succeed pales into helpless quaking in the light of his dread of the horrendous potential consequences, such as castration or a messy divorce – and so because he doesn't believe he will.

In which case, he won't.

A more balanced view, then, albeit one less likely to capture the imaginations of adolescents, teenage or otherwise, would be:

Who dares may win

but also

Who dares may fail

The notion of daring, while it still lies exposed before us, may also be exploited to draw attention to a further feature of trying in general. It is that:

the bridge between hoping & trying is doing

This point is obviously true of the style of trying associated with 'daring', but it also applies equally to all other types of trying. The doing in question is not of the contemplated \emptyset -thing, for that is the action or achievement whose success is still in doubt. The requisite doing is rather of certain preparatory things, the non-performance of which is sufficient to guarantee failure to \emptyset . The matter is perhaps again most revealingly approached by way of appraisal of assent criteria. Thus:

Our assent to 'He hopes to \emptyset ' requires that we believe that both 'He wants to \emptyset ' and 'He believes he will \emptyset unless prevented' are true. Then, our assent to 'He is trying to \emptyset ' requires that we believe that both 'He hopes to \emptyset ' and 'He is not

currently neglecting to do preparatory things non-performance of which will ensure his failure to \emptyset are true.

Take my niece once again, if you dare. Judging me to be a tolerably decent sort of avuncular fellow – reasonably honest and honourable, as these things go – your naturally generous inclination is to take me at my word when first you hear me say ‘My niece is trying for a First in philosophy’. But what would happen were it then to come to your attention that actually my niece was not studying philosophy at all, but rather medicine, and that she hadn’t even a clue that Kant was not spelt with a ‘C’? Would you not discover, as involuntarily your lips pursed and your nostrils quivered, that your initial good-hearted assent to my ‘trying’ claim had already been summarily retracted?

That being so, and given your unswerving allegiance to Occam, you are now well on the way to appreciating, if you had not previously, that trying is not the issue of especially recondite mental acts, or elusive cerebral secretions, or even of effusions of the human spirit, but rather a function of epistemology in tandem with ontology: a matter of belief or disbelief in the truth of elementary propositions. As often, the dynamics of the situation are thrown into possibly the starkest relief by the falsification criteria. According to these, ‘He is trying to \emptyset ’ will be judged false if any of the following is judged to be false:

1. ‘He wants to \emptyset .’
2. ‘He believes he will \emptyset unless prevented.’
3. ‘He is not failing to make basic preparations to \emptyset .’

By contrast, albeit possibly erring a little on the side of trustfulness, if we have no reason to doubt that all three of those propositions are true, then we tend also assent to the truth of ‘He is trying to \emptyset ’. Provisionally, at least.

The above analysis of trying, in truth-value terms, is closely complemented by the further finding that:

trying is a matter of interpretation

This is true both of the fact of trying, or the denial of any such fact. Also of the value ascribed to the trying – or withheld from it. In the case of daring: well, *was* this an instance of ‘great daring’, or was it more of a ‘rash and foolish undertaking’, ‘criminally foolhardy’, even? When someone really does try and try and try again, is this an expression, a bulldog flowering, of ‘indomitable resolution’? Or is it rather an indulgence in ill-judged ‘belligerent obstinacy’? The description given is a function of the perceptions, agendas and rooting orientations of the commentator. In a tussle billed as ‘Resolution’ v. ‘Obstinacy’, the commentator’s choice of gloss may have much to do with his or her opinion as to the probability of success. *He* may consider that success is assured because it is *himself* making the attempt. By contrast, *we* may consider that failure is assured because *he* is a blithering idiot. More will be said in Chapter ?? about the importance of descriptions. As to derring-do daring, or not, the democratically competing claims of ‘dare-devil pluck’ and ‘suicidal stupidity’ confirm that the daring itself (if that’s what it is judged to have been) was not some special, interior mental act or process.

No more than any other style of trying is or implies a special, interior mental act or process.

Even with common-or-garden trying, when the consequences of failure appear less traumatic in the short term, is it true that ‘I’m doing my *darnedest!*’?

‘Well, trying do *what?*’

To make sense of Chapter II of Volume I of F.H. Bradley’s *The Principles of Logic*, to take a notorious SAS-level challenge for any novice philosopher, or to roll another huge boulder up a different high mountain?

Or was my venerable professor’s scepticism justified? When he suggested:

‘I feel you are not making the effort, Mr Steele. Do try harder.’

Please note that the positive effect of ‘Try harder!’, if there is such an effect, is not to cause (!) a freely willed opening of motivational floodgates in a ghostly soul located in my pineal gland. It is rather to fan my earthly desires (to impress my teacher, not to fail my exams and so become a dustman, or whatever) or/and to modulate my probability beliefs. If my professor causes me to believe that he believes that I am a person potentially capable of cracking the Brazil nuts of Bradley, that may have the effects of increasing (a) my desire to succeed in this vein-hawsering enterprise, (b) my confidence as to possible success, and (c) mutually reinforcing feedback between (a) and (b). And those effects are upon me, evidently, but they are in no way freely willed by me.

In general:

What constitutes trying (or failure to try), according to the present view, is never any more than an interpretation of what seem (or don’t seem) to be sincere desires and beliefs, all in the context of a certain configuration of behaviours. We can’t control what we desire and believe, and consequently we can’t control what we try (or may be said to try) to do. The phenomenon and phenomenology of intensity of effort need little more than strength of desire to explain themselves. To amplify that ‘little more’ we will now allocate a few pages to consideration of:

Bergson’s flailing try-on, re sensations of effort

And we begin with the observation that intense desires invariably express and reveal themselves in physiological symptoms and agitations. This was well recognized by Darwin in his late work *The Expression of the Emotions*. Of rage he writes:

The action of the heart is much accelerated . . . The face reddens or may turn deadly pale. The respiration is laboured, the chest heaves, and the dilated nostrils quiver. The whole body often trembles. The voice is affected. The teeth are

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clenched or ground together and the muscular system is commonly stimulated to violent, almost frantic action. The gestures . . . represent more or less plainly the act of striking or fighting with an enemy.#

Darwin's contribution was, perhaps surprisingly, conscientiously acknowledged by Henri Bergson (1859–1941) in *Time and Free Will*. That might sound like a sexy title, but suitors should be warned that here is a work which they may find every inch as stoutly impenetrable as Odysseus's wily wife, Penelope. Regarding Bergson's interpretation of 'time', even Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, confesses:

Mathematical time, according to Bergson, is really a form of space; the time which is of the essence of life is what he calls *duration*. The conception of duration is fundamental in his philosophy . . . and it is necessary to understand it if we are to have any comprehension of his system. It is, however, a very difficult conception. I do not fully understand it myself, and therefore I cannot hope to explain it with all the lucidity which it doubtless deserves.#

A suspicion may already have formed in the present reader's mind that what Russell is hinting at is that Bergson's notion of duration is codswallop. If so, the present author is unable to dissent. Russell, in my opinion, was never a first-division philosopher, not least because he had little talent for focusing upon and understanding the world itself; a failing which resulted in constant and infuriating vacillations of his views; for example, on the matter of causality.# On the brighter side, Russell was a tiptop logician and exceptionally good at apprehending and analysing arguments – including arguments about the world.

Russell was also well armed to pinpoint and deflate Bergson's mathematical pretensions, and this may explain why

Chapter XXVIII, 'Bergson', of the *History of Western Philosophy*, first published in 1946, had the advantage of being mainly a reprint of an article published in *The Monist* in 1912, when Russell (born 1878) was still at the height of his powers (and not yet distracted by urgencies to cut corners to churn out potboilers for the sake of ingathering shekels).

Our point is to suggest that part of Russell's early zeal to put paid to Bergson was born of outrage at his mathematical fatuities. In any case 'Bergson' is one of the finest chapters in Russell's *History*, and in that capacity it serves to save the present narrative the bother of a lengthy digression dedicated to the carving up of Bergson. By contrast, for perspective, and as an example of a corner-cutting lamentable chapter, perhaps try Russell on 'Schopenhauer'.

Meanwhile what we will suggest here, as Russell does not, is that in the person of Bergson we meet with yet another French philosopher, *soi-disant*, who just isn't much good at philosophy. I hasten to add that the previous sentence is not intended in the spirit of racism, as I myself am proud to declare as a passionate Francophile who on two occasions has celebrated French history in hefty novels set in France, so justifying additional time and other resources to be expended in that wonderful country for the sake of undertaking locale-colour wine-tastings, gourmet dinners, and other indispensable research.

No. I mean that the slur is not so much on *French* philosophers as on *Catholic* philosophers. Philosophy and religion are always non-compossible, and philosophy and Catholicism are exceptionally non-compossible. Hence it is that 'Catholic philosopher' is as self-contradictory as 'square circle', 'virginal harlot', or whatever. While and whereas the philosopher is committed to questioning and reviewing everything, the Catholic has already committed to embracing *dogma* as a matter of *faith*. France is a Catholic country, and so are Italy and Spain. Is it a 'mere coincidence' that none of these Catholic nations has ever produced a truly great philosopher?

I think not.

Against this position it will no doubt be objected that Descartes was a great philosopher, and was also French. In my opinion that is 50% incorrect. Descartes was a clever man, an innovative mathematician, and he was of importance in the history of philosophy rather as Avignon was once of geographical importance as a staging post between Paris, Italy and Spain.

But Descartes was also a dogma man.

He knew what results he (because the Church) required before he set about obtaining them. Authentic philosophers do not proceed in that manner. Witness Locke & Hume, in Britain, and Kant & Schopenhauer in Europe. And let us please note, while we're at it, that the suggestion is not being made that Protestantism is superior to Catholicism. What may be true (and can be investigated on another occasion, and preferably by another author) is that a Protestant upbringing may be less impossible (perhaps because less fun) to slough off in later years than is a Catholic upbringing. Once a Catholic always a Catholic, so they say. And it is true after all, is it not, that many more Christian defections are from Protestantism to Catholicism than vice versa?

Anyway that's not our problem.

What is our problem, right now, is Bergson. And this is because Bergson too, in the tradition of Descartes, was systemically much a dogma man. Nor will it do to object that Bergson was 'born of Angle-Jewish' parents. That doesn't detract from his essential Frenchness. Parisian Frenchness, indeed. Bergson was born in Paris, educated in Paris, went to university in Paris, thought and wrote in French, and so forth. Much the same clinging residue of fuzzy Gallic Catholicism might also be discovered in Sartre, in the event that anyone were still to presume to identify anything approaching philosophy (as opposed to caffeinated vision) in that author's writings.

(*La Mort dans l'Ame*, no less, all along *Les Chemins de la Liberté . . .* #)

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Anyway let us always give credit where it is due and so rejoice that (with the notable exception of cricket) the French down the centuries have excelled from time to time at almost everything else. Maths & science, literature, music, painting, cinema; even pornography. But not philosophy. It has never been their forté, and it probably (*sic*) never will be, and for that they have their Romish heritage to thank.

In the particular (and nigh limiting) case of Bergson, it would not even prejudice our equation (French = Catholic) if Bergson had been a Huguenot. This is because even French Protestants (tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed, such as we might find ourselves drinking with in a bar in La Rochelle the evening preceding a rugby fixture) are immensely more Catholic than are Protestants in Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland. The crowning exemplification of this phenomenon was France's greatest king, Henri IV, whose Protestantism was so elastic that, in order to stabilize the bigger national boat, he converted to Catholicism only four years after becoming King of France as well as Navarre (following the hard-earned assassination of Henri III in 1589). A historic religious conversion, which, according to Britannica, was 'an act of political wisdom, since it brought about the collapse of all opposition'.

'God doesn't care,' after all.#

So . . .

Frenchmen are Catholics, Catholics are dogmatists, and crucial to Catholic dogmatics are 'God', 'free will' and 'the soul'. God, Freedom & Immortality riding out together again . . . as though recycled by Dennis Wheatley.

Is it then so astonishing that Bergson started from 'free will' (as per his title) and 'the soul' as non-negotiable mainstays, and that all his desperate endeavours, fantastical convolutions and epicycles, were geared to try (!) to ensure that those mainstays were shored up? How else to account for the nonsense spewed upon the theme of *duration*, in which, Bergson would have it, we are not even allowed such rudimentary analysands,

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fundamental to our capacities for experience and memory, as 'before', 'during', and 'after'?

Let alone quantifiable nanoseconds.

As history bares witnesses:

Before our session of sweet silent congress we drank a bottle of supermarket cava together.

then

During our session of sweet silent congress Mildred thrice shrieked so piercingly as to waken our neighbours.

then

After congress we shared a soothing spliff.

And thirty years on down the proverbial one-way pike it is the distinct and successive nature of our experiences, and the causal links between them, that enable us to remember them. Thus, we did not drink any more cut-price bubbly after congress. Why not? Because the bottle had already been drained and was now being rolled round our mattress by an adolescent cat named Fritzie. Mildred, we know, shrieked thrice, and not just twice, (a) because that's how we recall it, and (b) because the neighbours tape-recorded the second and third shriek, against a backdrop of the Speaking Clock on their telephone in Hands Free mode, all the better to enviously time-stamp our exertions and apply to the county court for a restraining order against us first thing on Monday morning.

Memories are made of those.

And in global terms:

It is in the nature of experience that it is made up of distinct and successive experiences. If this were not so, we could not remember our experiences, we could not learn from our experiences (and so would be helpless and ineffectual, hardly likely to become a dominant species on any planet), and even worse: we would not be able to have any experiences in the first place. But we do have experiences, we can remember some of them, and we also learn from some of them. None

of this would be possible if Bergson's woolly chimera named *duration* were well founded. The conclusion therefore is that Bergson's *duration* is not well founded. The question then naturally arises (psychologically even more than philosophically):

Why should such a hopeless chimera ever have been sent to market in the first place?

Now, insofar as it may be fairly alleged that elements of war are being waged in the present pages, it is commensurately undeniable that the corporate enemy is libertarianism. This focused hostility is partly a narrative device imported from fiction (where plots work better with baddies in them), but also because I personally believe (sincerely, so far as I am aware) that our world (and your future) would be a better place (with better prospects) if there were less libertarianism in it. The strategy is accordingly comparable to that of Arthur Koestler in his lively essay *The Ghost in the Machine*, where his corporate enemy, to be stalked, harried, ridiculed, harassed and intellectually kneecapped at every opportunity, was behaviourism. Particularly personifying the badness of behaviourism, in Koestler's coverage, were J.B. Watson & B.F. Skinner. John Broadus Watson & Frederic Burrhus Skinner. Even the names have a conveniently ugly, black-bogey ring to them, do they not? More will be said about Koestler in Chapter ?? Meanwhile his present role is to preface our presentation of Henri Bergson as a particular personification, *par excellence*, of libertarianism. Having no need to resort to smear tactics, we proceed straightway to pay out to Bergson sufficient fluffy rope to hang himself.

The following is from Chapter III of *Time and Free Will*:

Therefore, it is only an inaccurate psychology, misled by language, which will show us the soul determined by sympathy, aversion, or hate as though by so many forces pressing upon it. These feelings, provided that they go deep enough, each make up the whole soul, since the whole content of the soul

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is reflected in each of them. To say that the soul is determined under the influence of any one of these feelings is thus to recognize that it is self-determined. The associationist reduces the self to an aggregate of conscious states: sensations, feelings, and ideas. But if he sees in these various states no more than is expressed in their name, if he retains only their impersonal aspect, he may set them side by side for ever without getting anything but a phantom self, the shadow of the ego projecting itself into space. If, on the contrary, he takes these psychic states with the particular colouring which they assume in the case of a definite person, and which comes to each of them by reflection from all the others, then there is no need to associate a number of conscious states in order to rebuild the person, for the whole personality is in a single one of them, provided that we know how to choose it. And the outward manifestation of this inner state will be just what is called a free act, since the self alone will have been the author of it, and since it will express the whole of the self . . . #

&c, &c. On, and on, and *on*.

Inanity piled upon inanity.

However, and recalling that what brought us to Bergson was the issue of sensations of effort associated with 'trying', we note now that in this area he concludes:

Yet, between the idea and the action, some hardly perceptible intermediate processes come in, the whole mass of which takes for us a form *sui generis*, which is called the feeling of effort, And from the idea to the effort, from the effort to the act, the progress has been so continuous that we cannot say where the idea and the effort end, and where the act begins. Hence we see that in a certain sense we may still say here that the future was prefigured in the present, but it must be added that this prefiguring is very imperfect, since the future action of which we have the present idea is conceived as realizable but not as realized, and since, when we plan the

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effort necessary to accomplish it, we feel that there is still time to stop.#

Here again, and as usual, the libertarian attempts to hoard his cakes at the same time as gracelessly he gobbles them down. Thus, Bergson's effort is somehow between the idea (or intention) and the act, and yet it isn't between them: since 'the progress has been so continuous'. This is a further manifestation of Bergson's 'conception' of *duration*, in which there is no succession but only 'flowing'. Here we have his principal ruse to attempt to evade the consequences of causality: if there is no succession there can be no cause-effect relations, since effects come after and so succeed causes. Once it is appreciated that, how and why Bergson's *duration* is unsustainable candyfloss (and Russell, despite his coy affectation of incapacity to comprehend, is well worth reading on this matter), it should also be clear why his story concerning effort cuts no ice either. Meanwhile we note that, while seeking to represent that the issue of causality is of no relevance to free will, Bergson remains happy to talk about the agent (as self = soul) being the 'author' of his 'free act', always with the power (necessarily in advance, let us note flowingly) to 'stop' while 'there is still time', presumably 'provided that we know how to choose' to do so. Or rather, to not do so.

But how might such stopping (or aborting) of the contemplated (and previously intended) action be possible if *duration* were in no way successive, but rather a unitary continuous 'flowing'?

What it all amounts to, sadly, is hopelessly flailing vacuity.

Accordingly, that particular and personifying libertarian having flailed us, we are still left with the question of sensations of effort to attend to. Taking our cue from Darwin, as Bergson could have done, but failed to do, we might reasonably predict that sensations of effort will be found, on sufficiently close examination, to be a subset of the sensations associated with emotions generally and desires specifically. But here again: just

as we can't control what we want, neither can we control how much we want it; how *badly* we want it. Nor should it now surprise us, as the self-flattering sort of apes which we candidly confess ourselves to be, to discover:

(a) that our strong-to-overpowering desire to \emptyset has already resulted in sensations and agitations such as Darwin described above, (b) that the said agitations include behaviours which may be interpreted by others if not ourselves as basic preparations to \emptyset , (c) that the preparatory behaviours themselves will be accompanied by identifiable sensations and sometimes discomforts, and (d) that we may have a tendency to interpret the complex of sensations, agitations, stresses, discomforts, etc, which commonly precede an act of \emptyset ing (and continue to accompany it, if the \emptyset ing is protracted) as constituting a prior and intermediate act (or series of acts) of trying-to- \emptyset , and (e) that we may be suspected of accepting with alacrity any credit available for the putative prior, intermediate and separate act(s) of trying, whether or not our present attempt (to accomplish the \emptyset ing) is deemed to have been successful.

That way, even if we failed to scoop maximum brownie points, we might still go home with the lesser humiliation of some cheering consolation back-pats.

The analysis just suggested is very consistent with the possibility that sometimes, and perhaps often, when we imagine (and perhaps congratulate ourselves on this account) that we have done something (or commenced to do something) as a result of having formed a conscious intention to do it (. . .), actually we had already done it (or commenced to do it). That there may already be experimental support for such a conjecture is suggested by the following paragraph in a recent issue of the *Guardian* by Michael Brooks, author of *13 Things That Don't Make Sense*:

Neuroscientists are almost convinced that free will is an illusion. Their experiments show that our brains allow us

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to think we are controlling our bodies, but our movements begin before we make a conscious decision to move. Some researchers have already been approached to testify in court that the defendant is not to blame for anything they did. A scary legal future awaits.#

That is very true, in the sense that the legal future is always scary. However, libertarians may derive some comfort from the probability that few judicial systems are likely to revolutionize themselves overnight. In the long-term hope that they may evolve more tortoisively in a desirable direction, let us keep drip-dripping upon them such thoughts as that trying (like intending) is never a metaphysically free mental act but rather an interpretation of a complex of divers phenomena. This is important because:

interpretations confirm: trying is outwith our control

I.e., acceptance that what does or does not qualify as trying is a matter of interpretation is ipso facto acceptance also that we can't control what we try to do. This is because we can't control interpretations. We can't control our own interpretations because, if they are genuine, my interpretations are members of the class of my sincerely held beliefs – and we can't control our beliefs. That we can't control other persons' interpretations is even more obvious, and punctilious Literary Criticism is holding herself in readiness to furnish innumerable empirical confirmations of this athletic position. Meanwhile a further conceptual confirmation is that: whoever fondly imagined he was controlling some other parties' interpretation(s) (of whatever), would, to the extent that he might imagine he was succeeding, be failing. The limiting case would be his (fondly imagined) total control over their interpretation(s). And in that case, the said interpretation(s) would not be *theirs* at all, but rather *his*. And, as already intimated in this very paragraph, we can't control our own interpretations.

We can't control what we try to do

All interpretations being thus safely beyond our control, the conclusion is again, for this further reason, that we can't control what we try to do.

Anyone who maintains that there is excitingly more in the case of trying than we have unpacked above is warmly pressed to trot it out. Meanwhile it is predicted that any such trotters-out as may step forward will be found to be last-wheeze libertarians. Then let the record pre-emptively show that one of the many points at which libertarians go off the rails is in reifying trying into yet another species of mental activity which may be deserving of praise and rewards (in one's own superior case: 'doing' one's 'utmost' to remain chaste and virtuous, despite all the fleshpot temptations) or of condemnation and punishments (for inferior others: who fail in their attempts, or, even worse, who make no attempts). In those terms, the concept of trying (embracing failure to try, or to try hard enough) becomes just one more double-edged instrument of self-congratulation and self-promotion, and, obversely, of other-denigration, stigmatization and manipulation.

If it were logically possible for trying to be an essential and distinct mental activity, and if this were also physiologically and humanly possible, the trying would have to somehow insinuate itself between the commencement of the intention (to act) and the culmination (accomplishment of the act). The trying might then seem hazily reminiscent of the ominous Shadow in T.S. Eliot's artistically consummate albeit incurably Catholicized (and not impossibly Bergsonianized) poem 'The Hollow Men':

. . .
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow . . . #

Alas! That what may sound mystically evocative in smoky scraps of small-hours poesy will not always stand up to pass

muster in the cool bright light of the philosophical morning-after.

And the two brightest-light problems for any left-over blinking libertarians, Catholicized or otherwise, would be:

First, how to account for unsuccessful attempts? *Second*, how to explicate the causal chain? For their contention would then be that in the beginning was the intention, and that the intention caused the trying, and that the trying caused the act. But:

One, if trying is supposed to cause actions, why does it so frequently fail to cause actions? Or again: if trying and doing are distinct, such that trying causes doing on some occasions, but not others, it would follow that the trying would have to be able to occur prior to and independently of the doing. But that is not so. As mnemonically rhymed above, it is not possible to merely try. This is corroborated by the consideration that trying cannot even be credibly reported without an object.

‘I am *trying*, damn it!’

‘Trying to do what?’

If no specification is forthcoming we have no option but to dismiss the trying claim: it doesn’t make sense.

And more fatally:

Two, what caused the initial intention?

What we have called the Scab Model might sketch some sort of story in answer to that question which was at least not out-of-court ludicrous. But the Scab Model is of no avail to the libertarian. His only recourse is to the Magic Model, and that is an infinite-nonsense story.

In the last chapter and the present chapter it has been argued, in various ways and from divers perspectives, that we can’t control what we intend, and, latterly, that we can’t even control what we try to do. It should therefore now come as no total bolt from the total blue, that, simpliciter: