HE WANTS TO TRY

By Alfred R. Mele

Is it a conceptual requirement on wanting to try to do something, A — or on an agent’s acting on such a want — that the agent want to A? The cases with which I am familiar allegedly supporting a negative answer are, for a reason that I shall sketch, unconvincing. However, a negative answer is defensible, and partly by appeal to cases.

Consider the following suggestions. (1) Little Johnny might try to throw a ball over his father’s head simply as a means of getting the ball to his father, without wanting at all to throw the ball beyond his father. (2) Sally might try to shatter her prized shatterproof widget in order to prove to a friend that the widget is shatterproof, while not being at all desirous of shattering it. Both agents, it may be alleged, want to try to perform the actions in question, in which case they want to try to do something, A, and act on that want, even though it is false that they want to A.

Given the agents’ respective purposes, however, one may justifiably be reluctant to grant that Johnny and Sally are trying to do the deeds mentioned. Rather, it seems, Johnny, in an attempt to get the ball to his father, is behaving as he would behave if he were trying to throw it over his father’s head, and Sally is acting as she would (or might) act if she were trying to shatter the widget. Arguably, what they are trying to do is precisely what they want to do — to get the ball to father and to prove that the widget is shatterproof — and their efforts incorporate their acting as though they were trying to throw the ball over father’s head and to shatter the item (cf. H. McCann, ‘Rationality and the Range of Intention’, Midwest Studies in Philosophy 10, 1986, n. 20). And, of course, if they are not trying to perform the latter deeds, there is no reason to suppose that they want to try to perform them.

Hugh McCann has committed himself to the view that ‘S intends to try to A’ entails ‘S intends to A’. The commitment rests partly on the contention that, because trying is not itself a species of action, the intention to try to A is ‘totally vacuous’ unless it is ‘supplemented by a more substantive intention’ (op. cit. p. 203). ‘Trying’, for McCann (p. 201), ‘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’. One might take essentially the same line about wanting: Because trying itself is not a kind of action, one can want to try to A only if one has a want that can give substance or determinate content to the want to try; and, for the same reason, an agent’s acting upon a want to try to A requires that he have a supplementary want.

Even if this line is correct, however, must the supplementing
want be a want to $A$? More importantly, granting that trying is not a species of action, is the claim about substance or content true?

Suppose that Brett promises to pay Belton fifty dollars if Belton tries to solve a certain chess problem within five minutes. It is a mate-in-two problem, a kind of problem that Belton has found very difficult; and Belton thinks it very unlikely that he will solve it. Brett assures Belton that he need not actually solve the problem, but he insists that Belton must try to solve it (in five minutes time), and not just pretend to be trying. To forestall the objection that Belton will want to solve the problem, because only his discovering the solution can guarantee that Brett will deem him to have tried, let us suppose that Belton is convinced that Brett is psychic (or omniscient) and can tell whether he has tried, independently of Belton’s succeeding. Now, if and when Belton does try to solve the problem, there is a sense in which his mental activity is directed toward discovering the solution, the way to achieve checkmate in two moves. Belton’s consideration of various possible moves must be guided by the thought of bringing a piece into a mating position. His consideration of chess moves will be organized around mating the king. In some sense, then, mating the king — which is solving the puzzle (provided it is accomplished in two moves) — is a goal in Belton’s thinking about chess moves when he is trying to solve the problem. Still, I see no need to suppose that this goal must be desired (or wanted: I make no distinction) by Belton. Perhaps he is wholly indifferent to his actually mating the king. Nevertheless, wanting the fifty dollars, he wants to try to solve the puzzle; and he may act on that want.

What does Belton’s trying to solve the puzzle amount to? Following McCann, we can say that it is ‘the business of going about’ solving the puzzle, where that is distinguishable from succeeding in solving it. Typically, when we engage in such business we want actually to perform the action, and in the absence of such a want we would devote our energies to other enterprises. But Belton has a reason for trying that is not also a reason for succeeding. He is convinced that he will be rewarded for engaging in the business of going about solving the puzzle (as we might say) quite independently of whether that enterprise issues in a solution. In such cases, an agent’s trying to $A$ does not depend upon his wanting to $A$.

Now, a desire to try simpliciter would be vacuous. Try what? But Belton’s desire is a desire to try to solve the puzzle. The content of his desire approximates that of a desire to solve the puzzle; but it is such that the desire (not necessarily Belton) would be satisfied by an attempt — successful or not — to solve the puzzle, whereas the satisfaction of a hypothetical desire to solve the puzzle would require the agent’s actually solving it.

It might be objected that desires to try to $A$ — genuinely to try and not just to pretend to try — are functionally indistinguishable
from desires to $A$ and, consequently, that there can be no mere desires to try to $A$. But, setting the inference aside, the *premiss* is disputable. Arguably, a functional feature of a range of desires is that, partly in virtue of a particular desire’s presence, the agent is disposed to experience satisfaction when the desire itself is satisfied (i.e. when what is desired is achieved). Desires to try to $A$ can fill this role in situations in which desires to $A$ would not. The example of Belton is a case in point, if he fails to solve the problem.\footnote{I am grateful to John Heil, Hugh McCann, and Peter Smith for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.}

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**CONSEQUENTIALISM AND THE UNFORESEEABLE FUTURE**

*By Alastair Norcross*

If consequentialism is understood as claiming, at least, that the moral character of an action depends only on the consequences of the action, it might be thought that the difficulty of knowing what all the consequences of any action will be poses a problem for consequentialism. J. J. C. Smart writes that in most cases:

> We do not... need to consider very remote consequences, as these in the end approximate rapidly to zero like the furthermost ripples on a pond after a stone has been dropped into it... The necessity for the ‘ripples in the pond’ postulate comes from the fact that usually we do not know whether remote consequences will be good or bad. Therefore we cannot know what to do unless we can assume that remote consequences can be left out of account... If [such a postulate] is not accepted, not only utilitarianism, but also deontological systems like that of Sir David Ross, who at least admits beneficence as one *prima facie* duty among others, will be fatally affected. ([1], pp. 33–34)

Smart’s claim seems to be that we needn’t worry too much about the unforeseeable future, because most of our choices make very little difference to the state of the universe beyond what we can reasonably foresee. I do not see any good reason to believe Smart’s ‘ripples in the pond’ postulate, but I also do not think that consequentialism needs such a postulate.

Smart’s worry seems to be that our ignorance of remote consequences will strip us of the ability to make rational choices on consequentialist grounds. After all, if my choice now will go on making a difference in the world far beyond what I can foresee,