

Introduction

Politically Unwilling

Tomas Matza and Kevin Lewis O'Neill

The will sits at the heart of everyday life for billions of people. Religious revival, democratization, and economic restructuring, to name but a few worldwide processes, routinely invoke the will of the people and the will of God while promoting will-full living. Think savings plans, prayer campaigns, monogamy, volunteerism, and kicking the habit—be it cigarettes, pornography, or simple carbohydrates. Invocations of the will take place in the bourgeois suburbs of North America but also in the streets of Indonesia and India, Russia and Guatemala. Each appeal foregrounds the role of the rational individual and his or her capacity to choose (or not to choose) a particular lifestyle. This foregrounding tends to transform matters of broad concern into a pragmatics of self-control. Yet, given the will's ubiquity and its commonsense character, it becomes easy to lose sight of its invention. This special issue, in response, develops a critical analytic that is “politically unwilling”—that is, committed to disassembling the willful assumptions that condition not just everyday practices but also the affective infrastructures of life itself.

Approaches to the will abound these days. Cognitive psychologists map the will's function.¹ Philosophers and neuroscientists, in search of the will, unpack the inner workings of the brain.² And a strand of anthropology assumes the existence of the will in order to track its cultural variability.³ This special issue of *Social Text* does none of these. More proximate to our concerns is an emerging line of thought that places the will at the heart of political critique. Sara Ahmed's work on the willful subject is an important example of this approach. “To be involved in a protest can mean both to sign up to willfulness,” writes Ahmed, “and to be willing to carry this sign for others.” Embodying the willful subject enacts resistance. “Bodies

in alliance can generate,” she continues, invoking Judith Butler, “a new public.”⁴ The work of Elizabeth Povinelli, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, offers yet another example. “Foucault’s concern,” Povinelli notes, “was always marked by a concern for the future already among us—a future that a kind of curiosity mixed with a kind of willfulness one could pull out of the present.”⁵ While some might interpret such efforts as modes of agency or resistance, Povinelli contends that this “will to be otherwise” is something different. It is an experiment on the self in the world.

Important to this line of thought is a redeployment of the will. Both Ahmed and Povinelli make the will a force for good rather than bad. The will need not merely trap its victim; the will can also incite. Their approach, complemented by other scholars, inspires, if not reconfigures, progressive projects of self- and social transformation. The optimism of it all is as hard-fought as it is palpable. “Willfulness could be understood as a necessary horizon *for* politics,” Ahmed writes, “as what cannot be overcome by the participation *in* politics, even in those forms of participation predicated on a refusal to be part.”⁶ We agree. This collection intervenes in this growing and important literature with a single reminder. The articles in this special issue note that the politics of the will are neither good nor bad (neither a resource nor a rod)⁷ but rather, in the words of Michel Foucault, dangerous—a realization that requires the kind of hyper- and pessimistic activism that we term *politically unwilling*.⁸

Central to the operation of unwilling is a historical, ethnographic approach. Ahmed rightly argues that “to follow willfulness around requires moving out of the history of ideas and into everyday life-worlds.” And so we do: crack cocaine in Guatemala (O’Neill), psychotherapy among children in postcommunist Russia (Matza), gastric bypass surgery in India (Solomon), charter schools across the United States (Moreton), the factory floors of Indonesia (Rudnyckyj), and nineteenth-century urinals (Modern). Each article disassembles the will in its sites of constitution and enactment. Each embeds inside of its analysis a commitment to being politically unwilling, noting that it is the will, or at least invocations of the will, that makes compatible projects of capitalist accumulation, religious revival, and democratic reform. The will connects. It facilitates. It assembles. Such an operation is vital, this special issue argues, to a politics of the will reconceived.

Assembling the Will

The will is not a substance as such. It is not a thing. It is an assemblage.⁹ When the American Psychological Association, for example, announces that a lack of willpower is the number-one reason that Americans do not achieve their goals, it is important to question the association’s choice of

word: *lack*.¹⁰ In classic Foucauldian terms, the will is not something that one has (or does not have) but rather what one makes. An almost commonsense critique by now, this kind of observation throws into strange relief other popular invocations of the will, where efforts at self-knowledge and self-control make the will into a thing that can be known, controlled, and even redeployed. In a particular procedure of what Ian Hacking called “making up people,” the will-as-assemblage pieces together bodily function, desire, affects, discipline, and technologies of self into a single frame—volition—that is then posited as a lever on human experience.¹¹ This view departs from those that assume the will’s essential qualities. Two such schools are worth noting, as they seem to organize much of the literature today. One sees “culture as a barrier to volition.”¹² Norms, values, and language impede the free will of individuals. Another sees culture as a sculptor of the will. This is what the American philosopher William James calls “soft determination.”¹³ Here, culture influences but does not determine how people behave toward the world around them. Both of these approaches understand the experience of willing through a relationship between shared culture and individual psychology. Both approaches assume the will. The citizen chooses (or does not choose) to vote. The fallen answers (or does not answer) God’s calling. The consumer buys (or does not buy) yet another iPhone. Yet a too-narrow emphasis on psychology, yoked to a conversation about determination, obscures both the will’s invention and how broader social forces prompt individuals to wrestle with themselves.

Taking the will as an assemblage also enables a genealogical approach to its production. People in their everyday lives as well as academics in their more specialized capacities assemble the will together, which may ultimately explain its capacious quality and ubiquity—why, for example, Ahmed can assemble an everyday archive of the will (beginning with a Grimm fairy tale) while Povinelli can rearticulate the will by way of William James and Michel Foucault. In this vital respect, the will is both an etic and an emic category: both anthropologist and informant wrestle over its definition, historian and archive struggle over its signification, the scholar of religion and the faithful debate its boundaries and binding.

Scholars have assembled the will for centuries, participating in a robust conversation—one entirely too large to detail here, but whose general contours suggest its stature. One might trace the beginnings of this discussion to Paul of Tarsus, in whose writings first emerged a vision of the human will as an autonomous executive faculty different from Aristotle’s rational appetite (*proairesis*).¹⁴ Paul penned his frustrations in Romans 7:15: “I do the very thing I hate.” The (failing) will appears here, through being torn between what one wants to do and what one should do. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fourth century, narrated Paul’s frustrations.

He was among the first to speak about the will not just as a faculty but as a constitutive dimension of the human condition. Writing of his deeply committed faith, Augustine nonetheless finds his will bounded by sin. “I was utterly certain,” he confesses, “yet I had not the strength to enjoy You.”¹⁵ His notion of the bounded will would find full expression in the work of Jonathan Edwards and Immanuel Kant, who charted the terrain on which Calvinist determination had to be squared with a commitment to freedom and moral responsibility.¹⁶ It is this entangled experience of freedom and bondage, Hannah Arendt notes in her Gifford Lectures, that makes possible a phenomenology of internal moral conflict not just for Christians but also for ostensibly secular social actors committed to Western notions of order, progress, freedom, and responsibility.¹⁷ The prison and the asylum, to name just two modern examples, stand as monuments to the will and to those who do the very things that they hate.¹⁸

Beyond its genealogy, to which we can only gesture, it is important to note that the will as a recognizable and researched human faculty disappeared just as many of the humanities and the social sciences became formal disciplines. While legal, medical, and religious accounts of the will in the nineteenth century shaped a notion of the default moral person, the rise of medical science in the twentieth century ultimately divided the human between problems of the body (the regime of biomedicine) and problems of the mind (the regime of psychology).¹⁹ The will quickly became irrelevant. Doctors, psychologists, and philosophers dismissed it as a metaphysical notion. Historians and social scientists, in search of their own positivism, also snubbed the will. In its place came a Cartesian story interested in either the mind or the body.²⁰ This may partly explain why historical and ethnographic approaches to the will remain not just unwritten but also somewhat unthinkable.

While the will seems to have faded into obscurity, at least as an object of study, this special issue suggests that it has retained its power as the linchpin of a wide range of governing projects. For this reason, the will has reappeared as an object of inquiry but in an altered form—as a political problematic. Our contributors follow the will through various therapeutics, and from their respective vantage points it is apparent that the will is impressively mobile, shifting in scale (between individual and collective), site (between analytic enterprise, pedagogy, and practice), and embodied location (between intra- and intersubjective). This mobility and polysemy raise important concerns about the will’s own stability and the politics of its invention, as well as any concerted effort to creatively and constructively redeploy it.

Of particular importance is the fact that the will is both an object of discursive incitement and a capacity that actors seek to conjure in their own lives. Our interest therefore is not just in greater attention to the

experience of willing amid, for example, new forms of global capitalism, but also in how these new forms make possible the experience of willing. Again, the consumer decides to buy (or not buy) yet another iPhone. In this conception, the will is not just a cognitive faculty; individuals experience the process of willing, but their experience emerges through various kinds of political and social incitement. The articles collected here argue that it is the will that sutures people to worldwide processes at everyday levels. The will also conceals its own sociopolitical invention.

Politically Unwilling

To “politically un-will” something is to disassemble, or perhaps problematize, the willful assumptions that undergird politics today. This is a deconstructive project. Ethnographic and archival work that foregrounds the will as an object of study can better understand the will’s centrality to both everyday life and structural political processes. At the same time, the project of “politically unwilling” also documents a set of political or, rather, antipolitical effects.²¹ To find something politically unwilling in this sense is to highlight the ways that, as a technology of self, certain configurations of the will are themselves unwilling to be understood as political. Depression and maladjustment are problems of the will, it could be said. Addiction is a problem of the will. Obesity, unemployment, and HIV/AIDS are all problems of the will. Such statements erase the possibility of building coalitions, seeking redress, advancing collective claims, and so forth. Without appealing to a normative liberal theory of political action, invocations of the will generate a wedge between the political and the moral. The consumer files for bankruptcy; the fallen Christian sins; the voters elect the despot.

These two registers of political unwilling—the deconstructive and the antipolitical—organize this special issue. They also clear enough space to ask, what other kinds of havoc do incitements of the will wreak on us? One place to start is with the will’s mobility, mentioned briefly above. Biopolitical projects routinely seek a material existence for the will, most often through a shifting assemblage of musculature, psychology, and mental process. As a target worthy of deconstruction, the will is slippery and would seem to distribute our capacity to exercise self-control across numerous locations. One could say, in Lauren Berlant’s terms, that the will is primarily concerned with attachment, mediating the desire that draws us into relational contact with the world.²² Yet as a leverage on attachment, the will can be either strong or (undesirably) weak: a strong will is the capacity that prepares you for the coming storm of passions or bad conscience; a weak will marks a state of being overwhelmed by substance or concept. Important examples already exist. Mariana Valverde’s work on the alco-

holic's reckless will unearths addiction's relationship to governmentality.²³ Kevin Lewis O'Neill elsewhere poses similar questions about security and prison gangs in postwar Guatemala.²⁴ João Biehl's ethnography of the will to live explores AIDS therapies in Brazil and their relationship to the country's supposedly noncompliant or untreatable poor.²⁵ Andrew Lakoff studies the adaptive will that pharmaceutical companies cultivate.²⁶ Tania Li outlines the will to improve that international development projects promote.²⁷ Barbara Cruikshank focuses on the will to empower through self-esteem that neoliberal welfare reformers deploy in the United States.²⁸ Each analysis signals the will's movement and flexibility.

Such mobility can drive a person crazy. As Eve Sedgwick has observed, "epidemics of the will" always leave the subject strung up between two impossible absolutes. Sedgwick points out that, regardless of the addictive substance, the will is given a similar structure: on one side, the *purely healthy free will*; on the other, *pure compulsion*. Under these terms (underwritten by the common sense of late capitalism), everything is a potential addiction, everything a game with no exit. "The powers of our free will are always already vitiated by the 'truth' of compulsion, while the powers attaching to an acknowledged compulsion are always already vitiated by the 'truth' of our free will."²⁹ Put in the terms of the addict, the will is itself the addiction. One becomes addicted to this fruitless divide between volition and compulsion. How else can one explain the will's cultural proliferation, not to mention its accompanying figures and forms? Natural desires (needs) are distinguished from artificial ones (addictions); health is defined against pathology; freedom is the opposite of determination or submission. The bitter irony of such binaries is that what is good and healthful can just as easily become a menace, as with the exercise addict. As Valverde observes, "Freedom-seeking projects [of the sort promoted by self-help programs] can suddenly turn into their opposite and come to be experienced as yet another slavery, another addiction; 'as each assertion of will has made voluntariness itself appear problematical in a new area, the assertion of the will itself has come to appear addictive.'"³⁰ Where to turn?

The articles in this issue offer an answer. Through an attention to politically unwilling, they call for a partial retreat from the will as the engine of progressive politics in order to retain a focus on the will's occlusions, disciplinary forms, and regressive projects. Doing so, we argue, may not mean an abandonment of willing as a political category or experience but, rather, a call to note how the socialities, political engagements, and affections that are vital to progressive projects can too easily drop from view under a politics of the will. This suggestion emerges from these articles, which range widely in terms of geographic location, disciplinary orientation, and animating questions, yet together, through juxtaposition,

illustrate the mobility of the will across various political programs and historical moments. They also demonstrate the will's construction and its potential for deconstruction. To these ends, a few themes organize the articles: addiction and escape; the relationships between neoliberal privatization, individualization, and the will; the will and the body; the will and social inequality; the will as (im)mutable. What appears most resonant on a reading of these contributions together is an abiding tension within the politics of the will. On the one hand, invocations of the will appear absolutely central to the various projects of rule found across the world today. On the other hand, as a fixture of daily life, will-as-volition resists easy dismissal, as do its cultural patterning and historical contingency.

Speaking first of dangers, Kevin Lewis O'Neill's article casts light on the rise of extrajudicial centers of captivity for drug users in postwar Guatemala City. Only by accepting Jesus into their hearts can these users escape. O'Neill's article charts this will to escape in terms of an addictive logic of the will, where the (weak) will is both the source of addiction and, through the intercession of God's will, the solution. Privatization and the will also intersect in the privileged North, structuring class and social inequality in significant ways. Bethany Moreton ruminates on the famous 1968 "marshmallow test" of Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel, in which children were told that resisting a tantalizing sugary treat for fifteen minutes would yield a second one as reward. She argues convincingly that the marshmallow test is part of the prehistory of American neoliberal austerity, one that extends even to education reform.

Tomas Matza traces the incitement of will among psychotherapists working among Russia's children. Describing a process of re-willing under changing political winds, he traces how the perceived presence or absence of a controlling will not only disciplines and subjectivates children but also divides them along class lines, directing each toward different kinds of expectations about what life could be. In a similar vein, Harris Solomon discusses the rise of gastric bypass surgery in India, a procedure that seeks to surgically transform the metabolism by shrinking the stomach and literally creating a bypass around significant parts of the digestive system. Solomon shows how the will-as-problematic-appetite is, via the surgery, shifted from the metabolism to the surgeon and, finally, to the metabolic person.

As should be apparent so far, a political tension underwrites these approaches to the will. On the one hand, invocations of the will enact disciplinary technologies, often wrought under neoliberal conditions, that render subjects cognitively and/or morally responsible for the unequal situations in which they find themselves. On the other hand, the will itself can become a social form, capacitating a story that is related to others, a form of collective goodwill, a procedure that opens up possibilities for new

attachments. To this end, John Lardas Modern theorizes excess as both a production of and internal to what he calls “the will to systematize.” Through a discussion of the famous anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s seminal defining of the culture concept, his family business of private urinals, and the engineering fantasies of Charles Babbage, Modern points to the routine attempts to systematize the human. Daromir Rudnyckyj explores the mechanics of this fantasy in a different familiar zone: not the water closet but human-resource worker training. Following the spread of Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* into Indonesia’s post-Suharto, neoliberalized steel factories, Rudnyckyj shows how the will to work moves in globalization.

The overall sense that this special issue gives may be, in the end, a condemnation not of the will but of the particular forms of volition that force upon us a limiting individuality. The issue as a whole calls for critical attention to the complex roles that the will plays in the forms of submission and possibility that exist in our present moment. Again, thinking with Foucault, it may be less that the will is bad than that it is dangerous.³¹ How, then, might one proceed? One answer, this special issue proposes, is to be politically unwilling.

Notes

“Politically Unwilling” began as a workshop at the University of Toronto, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The participants drove the conversation. Many thanks to Peter Benson, Jon Bialecki, Jodie Boyer, Naisargi Dave, Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela, Pamela Klassen, Tania Li, Kathryn Lofton, Tomas Matza, John Modern, Bethany Moreton, Andrea Muehlebach, Kevin Lewis O’Neill, Laurence Ralph, Daromir Rudnyckyj, and Mariana Valverde. Graduate students Rebecca Bartel and Basit Kareem Iqbal took diligent notes, with Basit ultimately copy editing every draft of each of these articles. Micki McGee took an early and excited interest in this special issue, for which we are forever grateful, and Brian Larkin added his enthusiasm and expertise at just the right moment. All the while, managing editor Alex Pittman proved unflappable in what was then a brand new role. Equal praise goes to the *Social Text* Collective, for their thoughtful reviews, as well as the journal editors: Anna McCarthy, Tavia Nyong’o, and Neferti X. M. Tadiar.

1. Kelly McGonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It* (New York: Penguin, 2012). See also Don Ross, David Spurrett, Harold Kincaid, and G. Lynn Stephens, eds., *Distributed Cognition and the Will: Individual Volition and Social Context* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

2. Heidi Ravven, *The Self beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will* (New York: New Press, 2013).

3. See Keith M. Murphy and C. Jason Throop, “Willing Contours: Locating Volition in Anthropological Theory,” in *Toward an Anthropology of the Will*, ed. Keith M. Murphy and C. Jason Throop (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2.

4. Sara Ahmed, "A Willfulness Archive," *Theory and Event* 15, no. 3 (2012).
5. Elizabeth Povinelli, "The Will to Be Otherwise/The Effort of Endurance," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 3 (2012): 453.
6. Ahmed, "Willfulness Archive."
7. Ibid. Ahmed writes, "But we will need, we still need, to proceed with caution: willfulness is not a ground upon which we tread. When willfulness becomes a ground, translating a wrong into a right or even into righteousness (to be righteous is to be morally upright), then arms can become rods, coming up only to straighten things out."
8. Foucault writes, "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger." "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231–32.
9. By "assemblage," we draw on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–4: "In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds constitutes an *assemblage*." More germane to our empirical needs, we also follow Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong, who describe an assemblage as "the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. . . . It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. . . . [It is] heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated." See their "Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems," in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 12.
10. McGonigal, *Willpower Instinct*, 1.
11. Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 161–71.
12. See Murphy and Throop, "Willing Contours," 2.
13. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Dover, 1890), cited in Murphy and Throop, "Willing Contours," 3.
14. Hannah Arendt, *Willing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1978), 63–71. See also a much thicker, more complete genealogy of the will in Jodie Boyer, "Sin and Sanity in Nineteenth-Century America" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013). Her stunning work organizes much of this cascading review. One might also turn to Michael Frede's *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), which argues that Augustine derived most of his thinking about free will from the Stoicism developed by Epictetus.
15. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 135.
16. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of Will* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1754); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck (Upper

Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1788). Cf. Mariana Valverde, *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14–15.

17. Arendt, *Willing*.

18. David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002).

19. Valverde, *Diseases of the Will*. See also Boyer, “Sin and Sanity.”

20. G. E. Berrios and M. Gili, “The Will and Its Disorders,” *History of Psychiatry* 6 (1995): 87–104; Vernon Bourke, *Will in Western Thought* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964).

21. James Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

22. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

23. Valverde, *Diseases of the Will*.

24. Kevin Lewis O’Neill, “The Reckless Will: Prison Chaplaincy and the Problem of Mara Salvatrucha,” *Public Culture* 22, no. 1 (2010): 67–88.

25. João Biehl, *Will to Live: AIDS Therapies and the Politics of Survival* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

26. Andrew Lakoff, “Adaptive Will: The Evolution of Attention Deficit Disorder,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 36, no. 2 (2000): 149–69.

27. Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

28. Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

29. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 140.

30. Valverde, *Diseases of the Will*, 4, quoting Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” 133.

31. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 231–32.