

UNITED WISDOM

Will: how an intention becomes action

Freedom and Action

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A04 · EN

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Epigraph

> *our whole personality*

Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, chapter III, p.172, F. L. Pogson's1913 translation. A short fragment concerning an act expressing the person. This is a historical philosophical account of freedom, rather than proof that every movement is free; the RU fragment is our own translation.

What this article is about

The decision has been made, the reasons are clear, and the imagined future matters. Yet a gap remains between intending something and making the next movement. We may fill it with preparation, waiting for the right state of mind, or endlessly refining a plan. Calling this a lack of will is easy. Working out what is missing is harder. Sometimes there is no available way to proceed; sometimes several tasks compete; sometimes we have not decided what would count as beginning.

This article considers will through the transition from an accepted intention to a specific performance. William James's historical discussion of attention, Aristotle's distinction between wishing and choosing, and a Stoic example of acting with allowance for obstacles raise different questions. They do not supply a single scientific mechanism. Our narrower concern is how to describe our participation so that inward agreement does not stand in for action, and a difficulty does not become a verdict on a person.

I. Deciding and beginning are different events

Imagine a fictional musician, Lera. She wants to return to her instrument after a long break and chooses a short piece. On Tuesday evening she listens to several performances, compares editions of the score, and reads about new ways of practising. All these activities concern music. By the end of the evening, however, she has played none of the difficult phrases. Her intention was sincere; describing the evening as a completed rehearsal would be inaccurate. Preparation and performance differ even when both are useful.

There is no need to invent hidden laziness. Perhaps the score really needed clarification. Perhaps Lera spent too long considering the quality of her future performance without choosing a small passage she could attempt. These explanations suggest different next steps. In the first case she needs to finish preparing; in the second she needs to mark where

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searching for a method ends and trying it begins. The word will settles nothing until we identify the task that has remained motionless.

An intention connects the future with a reason: I plan to do this because I consider it important. Beginning changes something in the present. Lera opens the right page, places her hands on the instrument, and slowly plays the first bars. This is not yet a successful rehearsal, but it is a different fact. It can be described without judging her character, promising completion, or telling an impressive story about a new way of life.

The distinction is useful because its claim is modest. It does not deny inward work or imply that everything unobservable is insignificant. It asks how an accepted decision is expressed in this situation. If the answer refers only to a feeling, the intention has not yet acquired an adequate description of its performance. That does not make it false. It leaves it unfinished in a particular respect that can still be clarified.

II. Wanting a goal does not automatically choose a way

In Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes wishing for an end from choosing what a person considers achievable through their own actions. We need only this narrow distinction: valuing an outcome and specifying one's participation are separate tasks. His historical account of virtue is not a modern productivity manual. It does, however, challenge the substitution of an attractive future picture for a chosen deed. Primary text, III.2–3.

Lera enjoys imagining a fluent performance. That picture may sustain her interest without telling her where to begin today. She could work on rhythm, slowly combine the hands, listen to a recording, or ask a teacher to check her fingering. These activities have different immediate objects. Calling all of them practice may allow her to keep choosing the most familiar one and never reach the task she intended. The problem lies in the description, not necessarily in the strength of her desire.

The chosen method need not be uniquely correct. For a small trial, it is enough to connect it with a specific difficulty. If Lera repeatedly misses one transition, she could devote a limited period to that transition. The trial may show that she needs another method. Her intention thereby takes a form that can be examined. What is examined is the action's suitability under these conditions, not her entitlement to consider music important.

Clarification sometimes reveals that today's step is unavailable: the instrument cannot be used, neighbours need quiet, or necessary help has not been arranged. An honest decision may then involve postponement or a different task. An inward command does not manufacture missing conditions. We can nevertheless distinguish an obstacle that actually prevented performance from uncertainty left by a general promise to ourselves. The distinction makes the discussion more precise and reduces unnecessary self-accusation.

III. James's historical question: keeping the object in view

In *Psychology: Briefer Course*, James connects some difficult acts of will with attention to the idea of an action. This is a historical psychological position, not an established explanation of every present case. Its useful question is whether the object of an intention remains sufficiently definite when other attractive possibilities appear. We use selected contexts from Chapter XXVI, without claiming to have read the whole work or verified its physiological explanations. Primary text.

Lera has the score on her table and new recordings on her screen. She may think almost continuously about music while moving from one recording to the next. The general subject remains the same; the object of action changes. Attending to the intended transition does not mean forbidding curiosity. It means returning to the question for which she chose today's trial. She can then see that two useful musical activities answer different intentions.

This does not establish that everyone can hold any object in view for the same length of time. Fatigue, bodily condition, noise, and the nature of the task matter. Philosophical discussion neither measures those conditions nor prescribes treatment. In our scene, we need only notice the particular switch: while Lera compares recordings, her hands are not working through the difficult phrase. The description does not require attributing an attention defect or character deficiency to her.

Returning can be ordinary: close one recording and look again at the selected bars. It need not involve an intense feeling. Sometimes action begins before confidence appears; sometimes beginning reveals that stopping would be better today. The historical account helps name the object of effort without guaranteeing an outcome. The person undertaking the trial can describe what happens accurately, including the limits of their own participation.

IV. Effort does not always resemble an inward battle

Stories about will readily adopt the image of a battle: one part of a person commands while another resists. The metaphor can be expressive without explaining the event. It may even conceal a simpler problem. Lera is not necessarily fighting herself. She may need to separate a settled choice from renewed discussion and stop changing the object every few minutes. A clear beginning may sometimes serve that purpose better than additional pressure.

An intense experience and a substantial change in circumstances also differ. Someone may feel strained for a long time at the threshold of a task and then calmly take a small step. The reverse is possible too: an easy beginning may lead to an unexpected difficulty. Feeling cannot therefore be treated as a dependable measure of what has been done. Here this distinction describes the example; it is not presented as a measured result or a universal behavioural law.

This leaves room for skill. A familiar sequence may be performed without deliberating over each movement. A new task may require pauses, prompts, and learning. It would be strange to read that difference as proof of the experienced performer's greater moral strength. Lera's break may have changed the availability of familiar movements. The relevant question concerns what she currently knows and what she needs to examine, rather than how determined she looks to an observer.

In everyday speech, will can refer to choice, persistence, restraint, or independence. Those meanings should not be added together as one invisible quantity. In moving from intention to action, it helps to ask which meaning is relevant now. Beginning a phrase, continuing after a mistake, and abandoning an unsuitable method are different actions. Each may express fidelity to the reason behind a decision, although they look different from outside.

V. Preparation needs a completion of its own

Preparation matters because it changes what action is possible. It can supply material, clarify conditions, assemble tools, or arrange participation. Without a defined end, however, it may occupy all the time intended for performance. This does not make preparatory activities unnecessary. It asks us to identify the uncertainty they remove. Is Lera finding fingering for one transition, or trying to eliminate every future mistake in advance? Only the first question has a sufficiently clear boundary.

Consider two possible endings. Lera finds a comfortable fingering and tries it; if it proves awkward, she changes it after several attempts. Alternatively, she keeps seeking confirmation that her edition is better than all the others. In the second case, each new opinion reopens the comparison. Performance is postponed because the selected method has not yet been allowed to encounter the material, rather than because there is no choice at all. Its quality cannot be fully known at a distance.

Ending the search now does not prohibit further investigation. It marks the point at which a question requires another kind of evidence. Brief playing gives Lera information about a particular movement that listening to someone else's performance could not provide. If it reveals a difficulty in reading the score, renewed preparation will have a basis in a new observation. The sequence involves clarification and trial, rather than a ceremonial passage from doubt to absolute confidence.

For some tasks, preparation occupies most of the work, and demanding immediate outward action would be a mistake. Research, negotiation, and waiting for agreement can themselves be the necessary activity. No universal timetable determines the boundary. The reason for choosing the activity determines it. What matters is avoiding a claim that a later stage is

complete when only an earlier one has been completed. Accurate names protect inward work and the people relying on its outcome.

Preparation can have another result: it may reveal that the project was described too broadly. Lera planned to recover her former sound, but cannot say which features she would compare. Instead of making another promise, she chooses a specific question: can she carry the melody through one point without stopping? This does not assess the artistic value of the whole piece. It lets her hear a particular passage and decide whether different work is needed. The larger project may remain, but today's object becomes clearer. Finishing preparation therefore need not mean having every answer. It can mean identifying a question to which the chosen action can provide a limited answer. If Lera only wants to listen today, she need not rename listening to justify it. She can choose it as a separate activity and honestly change her intention. Precision leaves room for a free decision rather than turning every evening into an obligation to perform an earlier plan.

VI. An obstacle changes the situation without rewriting the past

Lera begins working on the phrase, but a neighbour asks for quiet because his child is asleep. Continuing in the same way has now become inappropriate. She closes the instrument and plans to return in the morning. This does not erase the fact that rehearsal began. It changes the conditions of further participation. She can acknowledge both the step she performed and the unfinished intention. The two statements need not compete or become an excuse.

In section 4 of the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus suggests allowing for ordinary obstacles when describing an intended action. His Stoic example belongs to a particular ethical discipline and does not promise control over external events. Our comparison is limited: an intention may include an attitude towards a likely obstacle while distinguishing one's participation from an expected outcome. The primary section read.

For Lera, that might mean choosing a quiet activity in advance if the instrument cannot be used. But an alternative is not always available and need not count as equivalent to the original task. Reading rhythm differs from playing with both hands. If she chooses it, naming the change directly helps preserve the direction of her intention without reporting another activity as the intended musical result. Flexibility requires precision here, rather than an attractive general slogan.

Some obstacles call for stopping, rather than adapting at any price. Threats, coercion, unsafe conditions, and another person's refusal are not invitations to display more persistence. A philosophy of will does not replace assistance or safety rules. Even in an ordinary peaceful task, someone may decide that today's cost no longer fits the reason they chose it. Stopping

then expresses a revised decision that can be described separately, without discrediting every earlier intention.

VII. Another person's participation is outside one's own command

Some intentions involve someone else. Lera wants to play a duet and expects her friend to send her part that evening. Without an agreement, Lera's desire does not create an obligation for her friend. Even with an agreement, delay, a change of plans, or withdrawal remains possible. Lera's decision does not turn these events into movements she controls. Otherwise will begins to mean a right to demand other people's performance merely because her plan requires it.

She can distinguish a request, an agreed share of work, and what remains unknown. Lera asks whether the deadline is convenient and receives an answer. That is a step towards carrying out her intention, but it is not the received part and does not guarantee future performance. Polite confidence is not evidence of delivery. If her friend cannot participate, Lera must choose another way or give up the duet. The refusal changes the available path while preserving the friend's independence.

Persistence may sometimes involve waiting for a reply rather than issuing repeated reminders. It may involve acknowledging that a shared project has not yet been agreed. This makes will less heroic and more human. Participants are not functions of a single intention. Each has reasons and limitations that the other may know only partly. Those considerations belong in the original description of the action, rather than being introduced only after conflict arises.

This sets a boundary for our practical discussion. We may examine how clearly someone expresses their own share of an intention. We cannot infer how willing everyone else ought to be to help. Carrying out a decision involves real relationships and agreements. Where an action affects another person's time, space, or work, clarifying those conditions is part of it. The intensity of a personal wish neither replaces that conversation nor makes it a needless formality.

VIII. A lasting intention contains different decisions

Returning to music cannot be exhausted in one evening. Lera may play the first bars and still be unsure whether her chosen practice schedule suits her. A lasting intention continues through new decisions made after experience. This does not require her to prove music's value again every day. Fidelity to a general reason nevertheless differs from preserving every initial condition. Changing a practice time or method can sometimes make more sense than retaining a plan merely because it was the original one.

One successful trial should not be given excessive significance. It shows that a certain step was performed under certain conditions. It does not establish a habit or predict the next month. Equally, one missed evening does not describe someone's whole capacity to act. We need the sequence of known events: what was chosen, what began, what difficulty appeared, and what decision followed it. A broad judgment of character often conceals that information.

Continuing may require a smaller project. Lera notices that attempting the entire page makes her rush, so she returns to one transition. This need not be a concession to unwillingness. It may preserve the original reason: hearing and understanding the music, rather than merely recording a quantity completed. If that reason no longer matters, acknowledging the change is useful. Acting solely to protect an earlier promise to oneself is another decision that can be discussed.

Duration makes the possibility of revision particularly important. It does not guarantee ease or cancel agreed obligations to others. It does allow someone to remain a participant in their own undertaking rather than an executor of a command issued in a different situation. They can clarify a promise, discuss a postponement, or acknowledge withdrawal. Will then appears in naming a reason for change as well as in repetition, without inventing a story of complete self-control.

IX. Examine participation rather than an image of strength

Lera can tell two different stories about the evening. One centres on identity: today I was strong enough, or I let myself down again. The other describes events: I chose four bars, played them slowly, stopped because of noise, and will try another time tomorrow. The second account need not be dry. Feelings and the activity's importance remain in it. It separates them from facts of performance instead of making each trial a vote on human worth.

This language also helps recognise actual assistance. If the session began after Lera placed the right page beside her instrument, that arrangement can be acknowledged as a useful condition of today's trial. A single case cannot establish a universal way of strengthening will. The next task may differ. A limited result remains useful precisely when it is not overloaded with a promise to explain every future deed and everyone else's difficulties.

Examination can reveal the limits of this discussion. When someone faces a lasting inability to perform familiar activities, describing one scene does not explain the causes. Other information, support, or professional assistance within its own field may be needed. This article establishes no diagnosis and does not propose replacing assistance with exercises. It helps distinguish intention from performance where someone voluntarily considers a sufficiently safe, understandable, limited undertaking.

An image of the strong person is troublesome largely because it is undefined. It may demand continuing after meaning has been lost, concealing difficulties, or never asking for help. Specific participation allows the reverse: clarify something unknown, agree conditions, begin an available step, and stop with a clear explanation. These actions do not create an impressive scale of strength. They let someone be precise about what has actually been done and what cannot yet be promised.

X. Will as a connection between a reason and a deed

After several evenings, Lera knows more about her undertaking. She has not acquired a final formula for managing herself. She can now distinguish searching for a method from playing, a selected passage from a general wish, an obstacle from a new decision, and her share of a duet from her friend's participation. These distinctions change a particular conversation about her life rather than her whole life. Her intention becomes less ceremonial and more definite: it can be connected to a deed without receiving unlimited power.

The historical sources remain different. Aristotle separates a valued goal from chosen participation. James asks about the object of attention in a difficult decision. Epictetus includes obstacles within an ethical discipline. Similar questions do not establish a common mechanism or make today's practice arrangement a continuation of all three teachings. Our conclusion is narrower: different descriptions help us avoid confusing what a person wants, what they choose, and what they actually perform.

The connection between a reason and a deed is not always strong, and strengthening it is not always what is needed. Sometimes the reason requires reconsideration. Sometimes the deed is unavailable in its original form. Sometimes a completed trial shows that further participation no longer fits. These are not exceptions to hide for the sake of an attractive account of will. They are part of answering for a decision accurately: understanding its direction and the limits of one's knowledge and power.

We can therefore move the question from a broad assessment of character to the next participation. What exactly do I intend to do? Why do I consider it suitable? What fact would count as beginning? Which conditions would require change or stopping? Answers do not guarantee performance. They make an intention available for an honest encounter with reality. That encounter may be a completed step, an acknowledged impossibility, or a reasoned withdrawal. Clarity helps preserve a person's authorship of the decision in each case.

What this means in practice

If this trial suits you, choose one small, safe task that you already consider worthwhile. Avoid beginning with a major life decision or a promise to someone else. Name your reason for wanting to do it and one specific action that would actually constitute a beginning. Arranging materials, reading a first page, and writing a reply are different beginnings; choose one that fits today's task.

Check the conditions separately: are the materials available, can you use the space, and is someone else's agreement required? If something is missing, you can limit the trial to clarification or postpone it. Decide how much time you wish to give it and what would make you stop. This is not a test of obedience to your own command. Stop in the presence of threats, coercion, pain, or unsafe conditions, and seek suitable assistance if needed.

Afterwards, write a few ordinary sentences about what you intended, what you actually began, what changed, and what remains unfinished. Separate preparation from performance where that distinction mattered. Do not turn the account into a judgment on your whole character. If you stopped or changed the method, name the reason you know while leaving unknown matters unknown.

The limited result is a more accurate description of one transition from intention to action. It may suggest a next step or a need for revision. It does not establish stronger will, predict future success, or oblige you to repeat the trial. You may decline it; the distinction remains meaningful without an exercise.

Key quotation

> *the mark of our personality*

Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, chapter III, p.173. A fragment from a conditional definition of a free act, translated by us in RU. The author connects it with action springing from the person alone; agreeing to that definition does not replace examining causes and circumstances separately.

Connections between traditions

Aristotle's distinction between wishing and choosing belongs to an ethics of action and virtue. James considers attention in historical psychology. Epictetus's Stoic example concerns obstacles within a specific account of a worthy life. The shared question concerns one's own participation; their objects, assumptions, and aims differ. These texts do not yield a unified technique for carrying out intentions or an obligation always to overcome obstacles. The contemporary music scene is an editorial illustration, not evidence of agreement between traditions.

In the selected chapter III context, Bergson disputes a picture of an unchanging person pressed by equally unchanging motives. Both the person and the meaning of experience change during deliberation. His qualitative criterion for a free act differs from James's analysis of attention: this is a dispute about freedom's meaning, rather than another step in performing a musical task. The brief quotations preserve that boundary.

Sources

• William James. *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892), Chapter XXVI, pp.415 and446–451; Project Gutenberg, fixed HTML. Selected contexts concerning movement's preliminaries and volitional attention were read. This is a historical position, not current physiological evidence.

• Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.2–3, translated by W.D.Ross; Internet Classics Archive. The sections concerning wishing, choice, and deliberation over means were read; the use is limited to distinguishing an end from chosen participation.

• Epictetus. *Enchiridion*, §4, translated by Elizabeth Carter; Internet Classics Archive. The whole fourth section and adjacent context were read. Its example allows for ordinary obstacles, without adopting promises of invulnerability.

• Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will*, translated by F.L.Pogson, George Allen1913, chapter III, selected context pp.161–183, especially172–173; Project Gutenberg56852. Selected paragraphs about the changing person and a qualitative account of freedom were read; complete chapter or book reading is not claimed.

Tags

will, intention, action, performance, choice, wish, attention, William James, Aristotle, Epictetus, philosophy of action, psychology, history of ideas, practice, preparation, beginning, obstacles, conditions, independence, responsibility, revision, agreement, skills, music, effort, persistence, boundaries, describing action, limited trial, United Wisdom

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