WILLING CONTOURS
Locating Volition in Anthropological Theory
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THERE IS A LONGSTANDING TRADITION in Americanist anthropology to engage in psychologically oriented research in efforts to expand our understanding of the cultural and personal patterning of subjective experience. From dreaming to reasoning, desiring to thinking, motivation to internalization, psychological anthropologists have interrogated the nuanced nature of subjective life as a means for destabilizing many taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to experience the world as social actors. At the core of this enterprise sits a motivated interest to question what psychologists, philosophers, and other human scientists view to be the basic faculties, processes, and contents of subjective life (cf. Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). Somewhat paradoxically, however, when engaging the problem of culture and subjective life, it is still largely the case that psychological anthropology, and the discipline

of anthropology more generally, has often relied (at least tacitly) upon an analytical model, inherited from philosophy, that partitions human behavior into three main categories: cognition (which encompasses knowledge), emotion (which includes feelings, moods, and affects), and volition (including desires, choices, and proclivities to act—cf. D'Andrade 1987).

Also quite perplexing is the fact that although most anthropologists are comfortable discussing the relationship between culture and cognition and culture and emotion (in the various ways these aspects of subjective experience are understood), it seems that we have not yet explicitly and systematically set our sights (or our sites) on how culture and volition are, broadly speaking, interconnected. The impetus for this volume thus stems directly from what we perceive as a need to better foreground and engage a comparatively under-examined aspect of subjective life in cultural context, what we in Anglophone academic traditions label the "will."

To be sure, in highlighting the fact that volition has not yet been singled out for *explicit* and *systematic* discussion by psychological anthropologists does not mean to imply that psychological anthropology, nor anthropology more broadly, has entirely ignored the topic. Perhaps anthropologists and other social scientists have indeed concerned themselves with volition all along—even if only tangentially—describing both the most fundamental and most esoteric qualities of human will, but using a different vocabulary. When psychological anthropologists discuss subjectivity, desire, motivation, action, consciousness, and self; when linguistic anthropologists talk about agency and intentionality; and even in some cases when sociocultural anthropologists discuss embodiment, power, resistance, and struggle, we are all probably indirectly touching upon, or even outright addressing, the act and experience of willing—perhaps without characterizing it as such. Indeed, within the anthropological literature a significant web of inquiry seems to surround the will, its constituents, and its effects that is translucent enough to see something caught inside, but still too opaque to sharply reveal its formal contours.[1]

Most anthropological research that has addressed topics related to volition can fit into one of two broad categories. The first approach can be called "culture as a barrier to volition." According to this perspective, cul-

ture—in the form of cultural models, norms, values, and crucially, language and linguistic structure—is, in a sense, imposed on the free will of individuals, constraining not necessarily the topics they choose to talk about, think about, and care about, but certainly the ways in which those topics are able to infiltrate everyday actions. Just as speakers are largely restricted to expressing themselves via the grammatical structures implicit in a shared language, so too can individuals only act within culturally sanctioned parameters. In other words, like language, culture is impervious to the will of ordinary people—and, it follows, will is always tethered to culture.

The second, more flexible approach, what William James would term "soft determinism," can be called the "culture as a sculptor of volition" perspective. Adherents to this point of view treat culture as *influencing* or *facilitating* how we think about, and more important for the current discussion, how we actually behave toward the world around us. Individuals are not necessarily limited by cultural structures, but instead operate most comfortably within them in a largely taken-for-granted manner. Culture gives us some of the categories with which we make sense of our environments, and we tend to behave primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, according to them.

However, what we offer with this volume is something different. All of the authors have abandoned—or at least bracketed off—exploring volition strictly within such traditional frameworks. Instead, most of the authors have refocused their studies on how culturally specific understandings of will interact with, and are often constituted by, a range of other phenomena that, though they may be universally or near-universally present, all accrue their own culturally relevant elaborations. What has emerged from these studies is an emphasis not on how volition relates broadly to culture (and its general tendency to restrict or otherwise impinge upon courses of action in everyday life), but instead on how volition is inextricably linked to local understandings of such categories as *temporality*, *narrative*, and *responsibility*. Moreover, several cases presented in this volume highlight the significance of will for individuals navigating between the world of everyday social relations and space- and time-shifted states of *irrealis,* such as imagination and dreaming.

Our goals for this volume are modest. We are pushing for a closer examination of the concept of will within a specifically anthropological frame-

work. We urge more explicitness with terminology. Perhaps *agency* and *intentionality* do the work of *will* well enough, and we are squeezing into an already over-crowded field. However, what we are attempting to do here is test whether more rigorous forays into theorizing the will can benefit our anthropological endeavors. The chapters in this volume all approach the will in different ways with very different kinds of data and questions. What emerges from all of them, however, is a series of challenging questions for all of us to consider: Is the will a useful anthropological concept? What forms does it take? Can it be said to be a universal? Where is it located? How is willing experienced? How does it relate to emotion and cognition? How is imagination implicated in acts of willing? What is the connection between morality, virtue, and willing? Can there be specified pathologies of the will?

Before we proceed in attempting to answer these questions, however, we would like to take some time to explore more thoroughly the ways in which social science—and anthropology specifically—has teased out the "culture as barrier to" and "culture as sculptor of" positions on volition. However, what follows in this introduction is not intended to be an exhaustive archaeology of all the work that has gone into analyzing the form, function, and overall nature of the will or volition in anthropology or the social sciences more generally. It is more moderately intended to open a generative space for future dialogue about the will from an anthropological frame. That said, any dialogue concerning the development of an anthropology of the will cannot be properly undertaken without some shared understanding of the historical and contextual basis for current discussions of will in the social sciences and elsewhere. It is thus toward this goal that we will first turn.

Our first step is to lay out a brief analysis of the etymology of the English term *will* as a way to highlight possible sedimented assumptions about its meaning in English-speaking North American and European academic communities. Following this we highlight briefly two basic philosophical approaches to the will before examining the will in early modern social theory. We then shift to anthropology proper to explore what we regard to be two of the most generative approaches to willing in contemporary culture theory, namely, practice theoretical and psychocultural variants of anthropology. This chapter then concludes by discussing the contributors' chapters in terms of four recurring themes that are raised throughout the volume.

ACTION AND VOLITION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Semantic View of Will

The concept of the will is implicated in topics that run the gamut from explorations of subjective experience, desire, and choice to the examination of power, social structure, and resistance. This broad topical range is at least partially attributable to the term's concomitant range of diverse denotative and connotative associations. It may not be too much of a stretch to think that the various everyday definitional associations of *will* in the English language can be at least partially credited for diluting the development of a concerted focus upon the phenomenon of willing by anthropologists writing and working in English-speaking European and North American contexts.[2]

The noun form of the English word *will* traces back to at least the Old English form *willa*, and means, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a "desire, wish, longing; liking, inclination, [or] disposition (to do something)," with the additional sense of an "action of willing or choosing to do something; the movement or attitude of the mind which is directed with conscious intention to (and, normally, issues immediately in) some action, physical or mental." A long list representing graded shades of this general definition is also attached to the noun *will*, but it seems simple enough to acknowledge that the boundaries of its semantic domain are clear, if perforated.

The verb form, however, is more complicated. While the modern English verb "to will" means to "desire, wish for, have a mind to, 'want' (something)," its more common usage is as a simple auxiliary verb used to express the future tense. In both senses there is a certain directedness toward the future, either as a directedness toward acquiring some thing or state of affairs or as an explicit grammatical marker of the future tense. The related Old English verb form is *wille*, and the tendency for *will* to serve syntactically as an auxiliary verb (though not necessarily always marking future tense) has been around at least since Anglo-Saxon times and persists in other Germanic languages, such as modern Swedish and German. The difference, however, is the degree to which these languages typically encode "desire" and futurity in the word. Swedish *vilja*, for example (expressed as *vill* in the present tense) and German *wollen* (expressed as an inflected *will* in the present tense)

both have a meaning of "to want" that is more strictly bounded than in English. Much like English, however, these forms have migrated to auxiliary verb status. Although in Swedish and German the semantics of these terms retains an element of directedness in the intentionality inherent in the act of desiring something, in English the unmarked form of *will* has come to mark mere futurity.

In these other languages, and less commonly in English, future tense is encoded with a different auxiliary verb, variants of the English *shall* (Old English *sceal*). Unlike *will*, which has historically implied an individual's inborn desire to act in the world, *shall*, until relatively recently, has signaled almost the complete opposite, a sense of assurance that some set of events will take place beyond the control of the speaker. This sense remains in Swedish, for instance, where a future tense shaded in certainty is expressed with *skall* (*ska* in everyday speech), and the simple future is generally expressed with the present tense (the same is common in German as well). Note that while this is still possible with the present progressive aspect in English (e.g., "I'm playing baseball tomorrow afternoon"), the strict division of the future tense into different degrees of certainty and control over the outcomes of action was once a much more common element of the language.

Two last points. In other Germanic languages *will* is related to words for choosing and choice, for instance *välja*, "to choose" in modern Swedish, and *wählen*, "to choose" in modern German. Additionally, *will* also most likely shares a common root with the English "well" (*väl* in modern Swedish), whose earliest meanings implied a sense of morally correct behavior (cf. Good, Garro, this volume).

What emerges from this constellation of features drawn from the linguistic biography of the word *will* is a tumultuous path—largely unreckoned by contemporary speakers—of semantic and syntactic shifts that obscure potentially helpful facts that might aid us in understanding the utility of "the will" as a philosophical and anthropological concept. Historically the lexical form *will* implies choice, it implies an inborn ability to act in the world—as opposed to the lexical form *shall*, which implies external influences on action—and early on it may also have encoded a feeling that one's voluntary actions are morally weighted. Embedded in these various meanings are notions of futurity, desire, obligation, morality, control, and differ-

ing degrees of certainty regarding one's ability to engage in and accomplish a particular act.

This rich semantic field thus includes connotations ranging from inner subjective life to external social dictates. Such various definitions and uses of *will* in English are certainly suggestive of why the term has proven to hold such a precarious place in contemporary culture theory. That said, even despite this conceptual complexity, there is one dimension of willing suggested in this etymological examination that has proven to captivate the imaginations of anthropologists and other social scientists, namely, past and ongoing debates over personal choice and external determinacy in human action.

The Argument from Philosophy

The development of modern social scientific approaches to subjectivity that touch upon some concept of willing follow a similar trajectory to what philosophers have been debating for centuries. In general terms, philosophers have understood the will to refer to the "faculty, or set of abilities, that yields the mental events involved in volition," where volition is understood to be "a mental event involved with the initiation of action" (Brand 1995, 843). As a faculty responsible for generating mental events embedded in the initiation of action, philosophical accounts of willing have often focused on examining processes that potentially impact the translation of such subjective states into expressive forms.

To this end, philosophers have traditionally distinguished between two main points of view on willing that pivot precisely on the relative freedom or determinacy of human action, namely *compatibilism* and *incompatibilism* (see Tomberlin 2001). Those who subscribe to *incompatibilism*—the philosopher's equivalent to culture as a barrier to volition—believe that determinism, whether stemming from divine, biological, or social sources, and free will cannot work together. For instance, if all human action is stimulated by prior events in the world, then truly free will cannot exist (cf. Van Inwagen 1983). Incompatiblism can thus lead to hard determinist claims that, for example, even such seemingly trivial behaviors as scratching my nose or winking my eye (or, for that matter, sending a conspiratorial signal to a friend) are not performed because I *choose* to, but rather because the series of events in which I have found myself over time have left these actions as the only pos-

sible ones I can take. Note, however, that supporters of hard determinism and radical free will are both considered to be incompatibilists since, despite their having diametrically opposing views on the efficacy and ontological status of the will, they both equally share in the view that determinism and free will are mutually exclusive existential possibilities.

Compatibilists, on the other hand, argue that notions of free will and determinism are not necessarily irreconcilable and that there is possibility for both constraint and flexibility in human action (cf. Ricoeur 1966). They argue that behavior must be at least partially determined, for if it were not, and total free will prevailed, we would all, analysts and our informants alike, lose the power to gauge and understand with some degree of certainty the actions of those around us. Similarly, this position maintains that there must be some modicum of free will in the midst of determining conditions. Otherwise all human behavior would be completely predictable given adequate access to the causal circumstances surrounding it. As a means of compromise, compatibilists argue that individuals are presented with a finite number of predetermined alternatives from which they have the ability to choose a next course of action.

Both positions concern issues of reason and causation. Incompatibilism situates causation either completely within or completely beyond the power of the individual. Depending on whether or not an individual supports a notion of radical free will or hard determinism, the role of rational thought becomes rendered either a definitive human capacity or little more than a byproduct of how social life is structured. Compatibilism, however, actually requires some understanding, however mitigated, of rational human beings. Without the capacity to think about the justifications for and consequences of a decided-upon course of action, compatibilists argue that there would be no reason to postulate something more than determining circumstances. Therefore willing as such would not need to exist.

Hard distinctions between compatibilist and incompatibilist positions are not always fully representative of a particular philosopher's approaches to willing, however. For instance while both Karl Marx (1990) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1984) can be viewed as supporting their own version of compatibilist philosophies that take individuals to be simultaneously determined and

determining social actors, there are particular aspects of their respective positions that at times reveal incompatibilist hues. For instance, Marxian *false consciousness* highlights the extent to which perceived willful action is instead determined by social dictates. In contrast, Sartrean *bad faith* takes the opposite tack in emphasizing the degree to which social actors misrecognize the freedom and efficacy of their will in light of putatively determining social contexts. Both thinkers thus situate incompatiblist claims in the midst of a historically dynamic understanding of human action.

The same argument holds true in the social sciences, where scholars have long debated the extent and degree to which social structure impinges on the actions of individuals. While anthropological discussions, like their philosophical counterparts, tend to hinge on the tension between freedom and determinacy, they are seldom couched within the rhetorical calculus used in philosophy. Instead, this dichotomy subsists within broader discourses fundamental to anthropological endeavors. For instance, those concerning the role of the individual in society, culture and the patterning of thought and action, and even those attempting to parse out what is "natural" from what is "cultural" in human behavior. Despite these numerous discussions of the relative freedom and determinacy of human action, however, and countless others, *willing as an experience of acting subjects* has yet to emerge as an explicit target of investigation for many anthropologists.

Volition in Early Modern Social Theory

The position of volition in modern social theory has largely pivoted on a struggle to articulate the place of individual subjectivity in relation to broader social, economic, and political forces. One of the most influential accounts of willing in this regard, an account that was deeply influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's (1958) philosophy of the will and of representation, is found in Sigmund Freud's attempts to de-center the subject of experience. Freud (1989) accomplishes such a decentering of the subject, and thus of the will, through his development of a metapsychology that postulates an always antagonistic relationship between individual and society. More specifically, Freud argues that there exist multiple forms of subjection and violence that are brought to bear in the formation of a subject who becomes internally di-

vided against him- or herself. In this view, cultural life is held to be a form of social suffering that emplaces the individual between the dangers of nature, sickness, and death on the one hand, and the dangers of an individual's "situation among his fellow men," on the other (Ricoeur 1970, 250; Freud 1989). In Freud's theories of subjectivity, desire, and the unconscious, what we are incapable of saying, of knowing about ourselves, is ironically most intimately tied to what drives our actions. That which we can say, what we do know of ourselves, is most distant from it.

The interplay between the various psychic structures postulated in Freud's metapsychology is further implicated in problematizing the act of willing (Freud 1960, 2000). Anything that might otherwise be recognized as an observable volitional act on the part of a given social actor is realized in the midst of a complex and ambivalent set of negotiations, Freud argues. This includes negotiations and conflicts between the ego in its role as representative of the external world; the id as motivated by desire, narcissism, and pleasure; and the internalizing of the social surround through the moral imperatives of the superego. It is, accordingly, the experience of being internally divided according to multiple registers of experience, one of signification, one of moral imperatives, and one of desire, that Freud most potently displaces possibilities for conscious volitional acts.

Similarly influenced by Schopenhaur's philosophy, Emile Durkheim's (1979, 1984) early work on collective representations, collective consciousness, and social facts set out to establish both the analytic autonomy and constitutive impact of social forms on individual consciousness. Durkheim subsequently shifted attention in his later writings to the potential complexities entailed in such articulations by arguing that human beings are fundamentally constituted as *Homo duplex*, or "double" (1995, 15–16). Simply put, Durkheim suggested that the individual consists of two parts: (1) an impersonal (social, moral) principle that is collectively shared and tied to the functioning of the intellect as mediated through collective representations; and (2) an individuating principle tied to the immediate experiences of the senses, the emotions, and the body (cf. Freud 1989). While he never explicitly examined how such a duality of consciousness may directly impact social action and the individual's will, he did admit that social forms are always mediated through "bodies . . . [that are] distinct and occupy a specific posi-

tion in time/space—each is a special milieu in which the collective representations are gradually refracted and colored differently" (Durkheim 1995, 273), a strong note in support of an early, body-based concept of the will.

The complexities inherent in Freud's and Durkheim's social theories are, as noted above, also evident in Marx (1990). On the one hand, Marx's discussion of false consciousness holds that individual actors are fundamentally blind to the ways in which their putatively willful action is in fact the result of broader social and economic forces. On the other hand, his emancipatory and utopian views of the resolution and effacement of class conflict attempts to establish a correspondence between individual will and social will. For Marx, the rise of class consciousness—made possible through the inequities inherent in capitalist modes of production—leads to the potential revolutionary processes ideally returning efficacy to concrete embodied social actors who are no longer falsely alienating their own will to abstract political ends.

In dialogue with both Durkheimian and Marxist accounts of social action, Max Weber approached the question of willing in his account of the role of choice in relationship to rational action (cf. Schutz 1967; Throop, Chapter 2). For Weber, individual motivation to engage in a particular course of action is necessarily rooted in a complex of subjective meanings "which seem to the actor himself or to an observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question" (Weber 1978, 11). What exactly is entailed in choosing to engage in a particular act is thus rooted for Weber in cultural meanings and values that are subjectively taken up by actors as resources for interpreting their given social situation and the possible actions that are afforded by them. In distinguishing between four ideal types of social action, Weber proceeds to point out the differing ways that the will may be oriented to specific courses of action. In *instrumental rational action*, an actor's will is determined by expectations concerning the appropriate means and conditions for attaining "the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends" (1978, 24). *Value-rational action*, in contrast, is structured such that the will is oriented to a value "for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success" (1978, 25). Finally, in *affective action* and *traditional action*, the will is determined by an actor's feeling states and "ingrained habits" respectively (1978, 25).