



HOW TO USE THE WILL

The will—your ability to take conscious, voluntary, and deliberate action—is one of the most powerful elements of the human psyche. It's one of those things that everyone kind of understands but doesn't really. It's simple enough to conceptualize and goes by many names: will, willpower, determination, effort, exertion, striving, grit, self-control, self-mastery, self-discipline...Anytime you force yourself to do something that you don't want to do, you know exactly what the will is and what it's capable of. But, like all great forces, it's not so simple.

There's a long-running debate about just what the will is and how it works. It's such an important concept that it has made its way around philosophy, psychology and even popular culture. Most people are familiar, for example, with Nietzsche's idea of the "will to power" as the prime motivating forces of the human condition. The boldest, and perhaps most true, articulation of the meaning of the will comes from Schopenhauer. For him, the entire world was essentially one complex, never-ending manifestation of the will. And as complex as Schopenhauer's thought is, there's a certain kind of simple logic and rationality to it. What does the world look like if there's no will?

For our purposes, we can leave the philosophical discussions aside, for here in these pages we are focused on the more

practical art of effective action. Understanding how to use the will is one of the great challenges of psychological mastery. Quite literally, the course of your life turns on your ability to access and channel the will. Figure it out, then dreams and goals can become reality. If you don't, well... You are in for something.

Popular collective understanding mischaracterizes the will as a rather simple and blunt kind of energy. We all know the familiar phrases: "Just do it." "Discipline equals freedom." "Embrace the suck." "Grin and bear it." "Relentlessly continuously improving..." Here it seems like using the will comes down to just learning how to do things you don't want to do over and over. But the use of the will is a much more subtle problem than this.

First of all, when it comes to using the will there's this preliminary inquiry that you have to do that turns out to be rather important. You have to figure out just what you are going to use your will for. What are you going to do or not? Just where are you going to apply yourself? What are you going to aim for? And why? It turns out it's not always so obvious how to answer these questions. You can make big mistakes in life by choosing wrong here.

Secondly, we all know that the will is not some inexhaustible energy. It's something we can use but only occasionally. For whatever reason, there's a naturally occurring limit to it and a real physiological cost to using it. To be sure, great feats of will are possible—think of Shackleton's story—but there's only so far you can push yourself. This phenomenon is well-documented by behavioral scientists.

Thirdly, to make matters worse, for some reason, the will does not seem to discriminate between good and evil. The will is, in a sense, willing to be used for anything and that makes its power both dangerous and serious. Think about historical figures like Hitler, Stalin, Mao or Genghis Khan. Their stories show so clearly how the will can be used for improper, wrong, and evil ends. This is one of the most difficult things to understand about the human condition. Why did the will evolve so as to be agnostic as to morality and truth? Why is it even possible to use the will for evil? These are some of the most important questions of life. Though they remain unanswered, they highlight the desperate need for the cultivation of character and the inculcation of morality in education!

Finally, the other serious problem with the will is that it's not all that easy to use. We all know what it feels like to know absolutely what should be done and yet still not be able to bring ourselves to do it. Our relationship with the will is this constant, never-ending battle, an internal negotiation of sorts between our disparate psychological selves. Sure, you can train yourself to be better at accessing your will power. Just look at popular figures like Jocko Willink and David Goggins, who've inspired a whole generation with their teachings on this. But getting good at accessing the will is just one component of the challenge.

To use the will for right action, you have to get good at a sort of mental gymnastics. What we've learned about the will is that it needs something very concrete, something it can grab onto and form itself around, to be used most effectively. In other words, it needs a goal and the more vivid, the clearer, and the more concrete, the easier it is for you to call upon your will. This is what 20th century self-help pioneers like Napoleon Hill figured out.

But here's the problem: once you start putting yourself in the world of goals and desires, you risk making spiritual mistakes. Spiritual traditions around the world teach us that we are supposed to be able to live beyond desire. But what in the world does that mean? For the longest time I really struggled with this. Does it mean that I should renounce and reject all desire? What about the desire to do good? Or to stay alive? Or to fight evil? After a while I figured out that what the teaching really means is that it's

not a matter of not desiring—there are clearly somethings worth going after—it's a matter of learning how to stop identifying with those desires.

So, the move of mental gymnastics looks like this: to energize, activate and motivate your will you have to form some sort of goal or desire (and the clearer, the better). This goal or desire has to be good—in other words, consistent with morality and spiritual wisdom. But as you allow this desire to take shape in your mind, you cannot in any way, shape or form identify with it. Even though you've dreamed it up in such vivid detail and activated your will to action, you must remain completely and totally detached from it. You have to take the perspective almost of that of an observer, like you are watching

someone else pursue this dream.

If you cannot perform this trick of mental gymnastics what you risk is just another takeover of the co-opting infection of the ego. And once the ego enters the picture at all, it's not long before it will effectuate a complete takeover of your will and you are back where you started. The Michael Jordan meme from "The Last Dance" illustrates the point so clearly. Remember the phrase Jordan kept repeating? As he was remembering and describing each of his many impressive athletic accomplishments, his motivation always came down to something unexpected. Rather than noble dreams of achievement it was "...and I took that personally." Jordan may have developed an incredible and inspiring capacity to access his will but clearly he never figured out this trickier and all-important second step. □

