

Review of *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*  
by Richard Holton (Oxford University Press, 2009)  
Reviewed by Joshua May  
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In an all too familiar part of our lives, we are sometimes strongly tempted to do things we think we shouldn't do. Consider the burning desire to eat one of the donuts your coworker brought to work while you are on a diet. Often times we surrender to temptation. But sometimes we fight the urges and refrain—we exhibit will-power. Much of our ordinary thinking involves reference to “the will” in this sort of way. Yet for quite some time many contemporary philosophers have avoided talk of the will in their accounts of human action. This is largely because the will was thought to be a mysterious and superfluous thing—a ghostly cog in psychological theory that serves no explanatory purpose. However, there is a growing trend in philosophy that is bringing back talk of the will. *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* is, refreshingly, part of that trend. Holton develops a unique account of the will and related phenomena that is both empirically informed and philosophically rigorous in a way that is accessible to an interdisciplinary audience.

Holton realizes that our ordinary talk of the will is so varied that we probably shouldn't expect a single account to capture it all. However, there are a number of intimately connected aspects of our mental lives that he thinks can be unified into an account appropriately considered to be about *the will*. Holton breaks his various topics into their own chapters: Intention, Belief, Choice, Weakness of Will, Temptation, Strength of Will, Rationality, and Freedom. The book is largely a synthesis of articles Holton has recently published on these topics. Indeed, most of the chapters are derived from those previously published works, and much of the key ideas are the same; the exceptions are Chapter 1 (Intention) and Chapter 5 (Temptation). However, as Holton promises, there is some significant reworking and extension of the ideas from his previous work.

Holton avoids formulating a specific thesis that covers such a wide range of topics. Instead, he approaches them individually. What results is an account of at least some aspects of the will as a mental faculty or skill that serves what Holton calls an “executive function.” This is roughly a mental ability to control oneself in various ways, and Holton characterizes this capacity as largely independent of one's judgments or beliefs about what course of action is best. The idea seems to be that people can play an active part in controlling themselves by making choices, which result in the formation of intentions to perform certain actions. We are weak-willed (roughly) when we unreasonably fail to stick to an intention to do something in the face of temptation, strong-willed when we succeed. Furthermore, Holton argues that these capacities can be employed rationally and are the key to understanding our experience of free will in a way that is compatible with determinism. Ultimately, having a will on this account seems to be the ability to exercise such executive capacities. While it is a bit unclear how Holton thinks all these varied phenomena relate to one another and to the broader scheme of human action, he doesn't pretend to be developing a complete theory of intentional action. Still, the reader is left wanting a bit more.

While many theorists make room for the idea of self-control, Holton develops a rather novel account. I will focus on two main themes that emerge from the book: what one might call his “anti-intellectualism” and “anti-reductionism.” Holton's *anti-intellectualism* roughly amounts to the idea that many aspects of the will are “independent of judgment” about what is best. In this way, Holton is, though he doesn't explicitly mention it, opposing philosophers such as Gary Watson and Christine Korsgaard and aligning himself more with philosophers such as R. Jay Wallace. Holton's *anti-reductionism*, on the other hand, roughly amounts to a refusal to reduce many aspects of the will to certain mental states—such as beliefs and desires—or the simple operations of them. Here Holton is opposing certain trends in the theory of action and motivation usually labeled “Humean” or “empiricist.” Both of these themes—against intellectualism and reductionism—are crucial for one of the over-arching projects of the book: to develop

an account according to which people have a more active role to play in controlling themselves than many other theorists have allowed.

Much of Holton's anti-intellectualism is developed in his account of temptation (in Ch. 5). Regarding "ordinary temptation" (not involving addiction), he looks to the developmental work of Rachel Karniol and Dale Miller, which concerns children that were tempted to get immediately the sweet they preferred least rather than wait to get the sweet they preferred most. They found that when the two options were judged to be quite close in value, children tended to devalue the option they initially preferred most after being especially tempted to just take immediately the treat they preferred least. Holton interprets the findings as showing that resisting temptation quite often involves what he calls "judgment shift." When judgment shifts occur under temptation, people change their belief about what is best so as to make it in line with giving into temptation. Something like this is certainly a familiar experience. We often eat the tempting donut after thinking: What the heck, it's worth the consequences! Appealing to cognitive dissonance theory, Holton argues that the agent is not "akratic" in such cases of judgment shift—she is doing what she judges best. Among other things, he takes this to show that "judgment is not in control" here. The resulting picture is that, even in cases of addiction, judgment often doesn't play a significant role in resisting temptation; something else is at work. This paves the way for his idea that resisting temptation is much the same for both addiction and more ordinary cases; it involves will-power, which functions independently of one's beliefs and desires.

While the general idea seems rather convincing, there are several worries one might have. First, Karniol and Miller only found devaluation of the initially preferred treat, not a full change in the order of subjects' preferences or their absolute evaluations. Holton seems to acknowledge this and says that full judgment shift will "typically" occur by "the time agents succumb." But that doesn't follow from the findings directly. More would need to be done to substantiate experimentally Holton's claim that in succumbing to temptation "we tend to judge that that is the best thing to do." But even if this is true, there's a second worry, one concerning Holton's main claim that judgment is not in control in cases of temptation. Obviously, there is one sense in which judgment *is* in control: assuming temptation does often lead to full judgment shift, one is then acting in accordance with one's judgment about what is best. But Holton's idea is clearly that judgment is in control only if the *initial* judgment—the one formed free from the influence of temptation—is in control. Temptation, Holton thinks, corrupts one's judgment. But even granting this, it's unclear why we should conclude that judgment isn't in control. Perhaps Holton simply means that *good* judgment is not in control. But that's hardly a surprising thesis, and it doesn't establish the more controversial anti-intellectualist claim that Holton seems to be advertising.

Holton's anti-reductionism arises primarily in his accounts of intention (Ch. 1), choice (Ch. 3), and strength of will (Ch. 6). Regarding intentions, Holton follows Michael Bratman in holding that intentions are a kind of mental state distinct from beliefs and desires. While he endorses Bratman's arguments here, he also provides his own critiques of so-called "Humean" views that reduce intentions to beliefs or desires. He attacks both desire-based reductions, such as Michael Ridge's view, and belief-based reductions, such as David Velleman's. His critique of Ridge is fairly quick (and thus a bit wanting), but his response to Velleman is more extended, relying much on views Holton develops in the second chapter of the book.

However, without going into the details of these arguments, either sort of reductionist might worry about Holton's narrow use of the term "desire" here. Unlike many philosophers, Holton doesn't tend to use the term broadly to denote just *any* goal-directed mental state or "pro-attitude." Rather, as he makes explicit in Chapter 5, he uses it more narrowly to only apply to motivational mental states that the agent especially feels the pull of (such as urges, cravings, and inclinations). One might object, then, that intentions are just a specific kind of desire in the broader sense and that Holton's narrow

conception of desire isn't warranted. While I imagine many would be tempted toward this line of thought, I think the more narrow use of the term is quite appropriate given that Holton is explicitly opposing Humean accounts. Humean accounts in moral psychology are traditionally marked by reducing all motivation (or the determination of intentional action more broadly) to what Hume called "the passions." And Humeans (I leave open the issue of interpreting Hume himself) seem to call them "passions" precisely because they are a *specific* kind of motivational state—something like a state that people at least typically feel pulling them toward something. Perhaps even the more distinctively Humean conception, which Holton doesn't quite make explicit, is one of a motivational state that is at least characteristically not governed by or the product of reason (or reasoning). Insofar as intentions are supposed to be reduced to a Humean sort of mental state, then, they must be construed as a passion in the relevant sort of way. Yet intentions in Holton's sense are not typically like this. They are motivational states that are quite unlike urges, cravings, or inclinations.

In his account of strength of will (Ch. 6), Holton even more starkly opposes reduction. He first argues that strength of will is reasonably sticking to what one has resolved to do in the face of contrary desires (that is, in the face of temptation). Holton then contends that this involves more than the mere operation of beliefs, desires, or *intentions*. Admitting intentions into the mix while retaining the same old "Humean mechanism" is what Holton calls the "Augmented Humean Account." According to this view (roughly), human actions are determined by the relative motivational strength of the person's conative states, which includes desires and intentions. In opposition to this, Holton advances what he calls the "Will-Power Account." On this view, people's actions needn't be determined only by one's beliefs, desires, intentions and their motivational strengths alone. Consider a case. Suppose Omar and Kima both have the same relevant states with respect to smoking: they desire to smoke, intend to quit smoking, and have the normal beliefs associated with how to quit and so on. Furthermore, suppose that the motivational strengths of the relevant desires and intentions are the same for each person. On the augmented account, Omar and Kima will do the same thing: if the desire to smoke is stronger, they will both smoke; if the intention to quit is stronger, they will both quit. In contrast, Holton's account allows for Omar and Kima to do different things, so long as one has more will-power than the other, where this is taken to be the exercising of a capacity that plays a motivational role in addition to that of one's beliefs, desires, and intentions.

Holton's arguments in favor of the Will-Power Account draw largely on recent empirical literature (especially the work of Walter Mischel and Roy Baumeister). I leave it to the reader to consult Holton's delightful discussion. However, I will register one worry here. Holton's qualms with the augmented account often appear to be misplaced. They seem to be undergirded by the assumption that we are merely passive with respect to our actions if they're determined solely by states of our minds (such as our beliefs, desires, and intentions). But it's unclear why one should think this. Many philosophers have moved to an "Augmented Humean Account" precisely because intentions seem to allow for such active self-determination. Indeed, presumably intentions have the special features that Bratman and others have pointed out (stability, control, etc.) largely because they in some sense stem from oneself (i.e. are more directly under one's control). Even if intentions alone can't secure active self-determination, the reader is left wondering why exactly Holton thinks only the kind of executive capacity he describes will suffice, rather than any mental states of the agent.

I have touched on two of the main themes in *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, but there are many more. A wide range of people could benefit from exploring Holton's book in its entirety. It should certainly be high on the reading list for philosophers working in action theory, moral psychology, free will, and related fields. However, it should also be of great relevance to those (especially psychologists)

interested in topics such as ego-depletion, self-control, choice, will-power, temptation, and free will. If such a readership takes, this book could help engender the kind of interdisciplinary work that is beginning to be widely recognized as a key path to progress in the psychology and philosophy of human action.

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