Questions about the will

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose to review Hannah Arendt, H. (1978). The life of the mind. A Harvest Book. Harcourt, Inc perspective on the will and explore her possible contributions for a psychological reflection on this notion. Although willing and other neighbouring concepts such as volition or motivation have occupied many philosophers and other thinkers throughout history (O’Connor, T., & Franklin, C. (2021). Free Will. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), The stanford encyclopedia of philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/freewill/), I focus here on Hanna Arendt’s book The life of mind (Arendt, H. (1978). The life of the mind. A Harvest Book. Harcourt, Inc), where she developed a perspective on willing that has been somewhat unexplored. In order to review her propositions and assess her contributions I proceed in three steps: Firstly, I follow Arendt’s argument and organise it along three questions she explicitly raises: (i) what is the relationship between time and the will? (ii) what affects – or passions – characterise willing?; and (iii) what are the products or results of willing? Secondly, I review psychological and psychoanalytical accounts of the will and I show that Arendt’s questions have been implicitly answered in the different perspectives reviewed. Explicitly, psychologists mainly defined the will in relation to products, such as action and consciousness of will, whilst psychoanalysts focused more explicitly on affects and temporality. Thus, thirdly, in reviewing these propositions, I try to show the value in making explicit three dimensions along which the will can be defined. In this way, from a psychological perspective, willing could be defined not only in relation to freedom, action and consciousness – as many have done – but also to time, affects and products, as Arendt proposed. This might provide a more comprehensive understanding leading us to develop tools for its study in empirical research.

Keywords

willing, affects, Arendt, temporality, products

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Introduction

The problem of the will has occupied many philosophers and thinkers across disciplines (O’Connor & Franklin, 2021). Many neighbouring terms such as volition or motivation have also been used interchangeably to refer to similar phenomena. Authors concerned with willing have mostly written in languages other than English, making the terms used in the translations sometimes overlap and mix. Because of this complexity, throughout the paper I distinguish the uses of the term ‘will’ and the concept to which such a term refers to, which allows me to look at and compare similar terms referring to a particular concept, and cover issues of willing, wanting and wishing – among other neighbouring terms. For example in that sense, already in Aristotle, we may identify a concept of will, as pro-hairesis, the faculty of choice; but as a term, the will has a much more recent birth – St. Augustine (354–430 CE) is considered ‘the fist philosopher of the will’ (Arendt, 1978). And language has much to do in the treatment of this idea: German-speaking scholars have developed much more on willing than English-speaking ones, because of the equivoques into which using the word ‘will’ in English might lead us to. In philosophy then, there is a wide range of propositions on the concept of willing, although psychologists began to explore it much more recently (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2015; O’Connor & Franklin, 2021). Among these, different questions have been unequally raised in the treatment of the will: Are we free to will? To which extent can humans be free to want or desire? Are we determined by external factors, such as the world and our relationship to others? How do we feel when willing? Is willing previous to action? Are we aware of our wishes and wants?

To address these questions, in her book The life of mind (Arendt, 1978), Hanna Arendt proposed that the will can be considered as one of the faculties of mind (Arendt, 1978). And although her ideas on the will are not particularly innovative in philosophical thinking, what is interesting is that she makes explicit three dimensions that can be useful in defining the will as a psychological faculty, allowing her also to answer the previous questions in a particular way. I will not argue for Arendt’s answers and definitions but rather propose that taking the questions and dimensions she makes explicit enrich a psychological perspective on willing.

For this, thus, I proceed in three steps. Firstly, I review Arendt’s (1978) propositions on willing, and argue she explicitly raises three interesting dimensions in defining it: (i) its temporality; (ii) its relationship to affects – or the passions and (iii) its products. Secondly, I review psychological and psychoanalytical accounts of the will and I show that Arendt’s questions have been implicitly answered in each approach. Explicitly, psychologists mainly defined the will in relation to action and consciousness; whilst psychoanalysts focused more clearly on affects and temporality. Finally, thirdly, in reviewing these propositions, I try to show the value in making explicit three dimensions along which the will can be defined. In this way, a psychological perspective on will would be defined not only in relation to freedom, action and consciousness – as many have done- but also to time, affects and products, as Arendt proposed. This might provide a more comprehensive understanding of the will and could in turn lead us to develop tools for its study in empirical research.
Willing in the work of Hannah Arendt

In her book *The life of mind*, Arendt (1978) dedicates the second volume to a discussion on will as a faculty of mind. She traces its emergence and definition historically in different traditions. Across these, she discusses will in relation to various philosophical problems, such as freedom and determinism, necessity and contingency. She also defines willing along three dimensions. Firstly, as connected to time, stating that the will is ‘our organ for the future’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 13): willing in this sense is concerned ‘with things, visibles and invisibles, that have never existed at all’ (Arendt, 1978 p. 13). Secondly, she claims that will is characterized by the particular form of affect it raises: it raises tension and not tranquillity in the soul. And thirdly, she defines it in relation to the products of will, which are projects and not objects. Let us look at these ideas in the context of Arendt’s thought.

The first thing that Arendt argues in her volume on willing is that it is difficult to define the will. Methodologically, the material on which her own and other philosophical reflections have been based on for its definition is what she calls ‘subjective experiences’ of either the willing or the thinking ego. We can experience ourselves willing or thinking about will. And it is by thinking about these experiences that philosophers have tried to define what it means to will. But if we try to define the will through thinking, Arendt argues, we create a contradiction. Trying to base the reflections on a faculty, on experiences from another, she argues, would lead to a refutation of such faculty: we cannot grasp what willing is by thinking about it. Although she does not present a solution to this contradiction, she proposes instead to focus on the difficulties in defining will that thinkers have encountered across history and thus begins a historical tracing of the concept of will. Chronologically then, she starts her revision with what she calls the ‘discovery’ of the will (Arendt, 1978, p. 5) and reviews propositions across post-classical and pre-modern literature, by showing the difficulties in defining willing across thinkers. But beyond the historical tracing that Arendt proposes, and mixed within her discussions of other philosophers, are her own views and propositions on willing. And although it is difficult at times to distinguish Arendt’s views from other authors she discusses, I argue we can see that she explicitly discusses three aspects in a definition of willing, which although may not be new or original in themselves, have the merit of being explicitly defined as dimensions for an approach to willing: (i) its temporality; (ii) its relationship to affects – or the passions and (iii) its products. Let us now define them, as they appear to emerge across the volume.

Firstly, Arendt defines willing in relation to temporality. For this, she discusses Aristotle’s ideas, in particular that of *prohairesis*, which, she defines as a forerunner of the will (Arendt, 1978, p. 5). *Prohairesis* is, in a way, close to a concept of will, although the term was not used as such; it is for Aristotle a faculty of choice, which allows analyzing our judgements and ideas (Arendt, 1978). Yet, Arendt argues that the Greek view on time did not allow for a reflection on the will per se. She states that their circular model of time eliminated the possibility of an uncertain future, and events were understood as succeeding where one another, repeating themselves in cycles. This view did not allow for a reflection on something, which could be considered as the will, because, as Aristotle
claimed, ‘coming into being necessarily implies the pre-existence of something which is potentially but is not actually’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 16), or that ‘everything real must be preceded by potentiality as one of this causes implicitly denies the future as an authentic tense’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 15). This pre-existence or precedence of anything that might exist, eliminates the possibility to think willing or wanting in time, the projection of a wish into the future which is for Arendt, a central aspect of will.

The circular conception on time evolves, through other thinkers, into a linear model. The way in which time and the causes of things are thought of changes and with it appears the possibility for an emphasis on the future. Linearity implies that events move in a certain direction and cannot be repeated as were. There is a possibility for newness and change in what was. And this change in the way of understanding temporality allowed philosophers to consider and reflect on will. Nevertheless, the strong weight of religious faith in ‘an all-powerful and omniscient God’ is difficultly reconciled with claims on free will – a problem Arendt argues remained in different ways into the modern age (Arendt, 1978, p. 3). With the Christian era, there is a common belief that all is created by God or can be explained by logical causes and thus philosophers are lead to understand will as a subjective illusion, as choices would either come from God or from objective logical causes. This view replaces the Greek’s pre-existence of events in a circular model of time, with the figure of God in a linear one. In both cases we find that it makes it difficult to define willing as something other than determined or pre-determined.

With Spinoza appears a middle-step in the problem of the determinism by God: between God and willing, there is consciousness, and it is consciousness which gives the will its subjective freedom. Arendt tells us Spinoza compares men to a stone rolling set in motion by some external force, believing itself to be free because of its own wish, merely because it is unaware of what set it in motion (Arendt, 1978, p. 23). This position denies objective freedom, defining man as subjectively free but objectively defined (Arendt, 1978, p. 17). This position is interesting because, although it negates will as anything other than a subjective experience, it introduces the role of consciousness in its definition – something that, as we will see, we find in most psychological versions of the will.

With secularization came, in Arendt’s view, a new emphasis on the future and on progress, and the possibility for something novel to appear in the world. Arendt treats Nietzsche and Heidegger’s ideas and their ‘repudiation of the willing faculty’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 5). Nietzsche calls ‘the entire doctrine of the Will the most fateful falsification in psychology’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 4), refuting and abandoning it in turn, because it could only be considered as an illusion. She argues he confined it to a ‘land of thought (Kant) where their own specifically modern preoccupations – with the future, with the Will as the mental organ for it, and with freedom as a problem – had been non-existent, where, in other words, there was no notion of a mental faculty that might correspond to freedom as the faculty of thinking corresponded to truth’ (Arendt, 1978, pp. 22–23).

But in her perspective, she considers the will ‘our mental organ for the future’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 13). This has two different implications: one is to bring forward more generally the need to consider temporality in relation to the will – which will be done differently by psychoanalysts; and the other, is to tie it specifically to the future. She states that ‘will deals not merely with things that are absent from the sense and need to be made present
through the mind’s power of re-presentation, but with things, visible and invisibles, that have never existed at all’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 13). It has the power to deal with invisibles and ascribes to willing the possibility of making present what has never been and might never be at all. Will thus looks forward, is related to the future, allows formulating projects and invest that which is to come.

After explaining different authors’ refutations of the will in relation to time, in the section where she discusses ‘The discovery of the Inner-man’, Arendt is concerned with the relationship between will and the soul, or the passions it arises. In this section, Arendt starts more clearly introducing her own ideas. The experience of willing comes for her with a certain tonality, that accompanies the work of all faculties. In her view, faculties of the mind arise passions or affects in the soul. And as such, in terms of tonality, the will arises tension and disquiet. The normal mood of the willing ego is impatience, disquiet, whilst that of thinking is serenity. Aristotle is one of the philosophers she discusses in relation to the passions, as he distinguished between reason and desire. For him, it was practical reason that enabled us to concretize what we desire. In other moments, desire and reason are opposed and it is prohairesis, the faculty of choice, that allows a preference to appear. But as I have said, choice does not account for the problem of freedom: as it is predetermined, preference remains as a rational choice between options. Differently from Aristotle, Arendt will claim that desire depends on appetite, and only will is free seeming not to have an external cause (Arendt, 1978, p. 89).

Thus, secondly, with regards to the passions, Arendt states that

“Speaking in terms of tonality –that is in terms of the way the mind affects the soul and produces its moods, regardless of outside events, thus creating a kind of life of the mind- the predominant mood of the thinking ego is serenity, the mere enjoyment of an activity that never has to overcome the resistance of matter (…) The predominant mood of the will is tenseness, which brings ruin to the “mind’s tranquillity”’” (Arendt, 1978, p. 38).

As I mentioned, she distinguishes the affective characters of willing and thinking. Thinking is serene, and furthermore, enjoyable, which means that the affective dynamics are at a halt, there is no thrive to achieve, no movement towards action or discharge, as the mind is serene. Whereas willing is characterised by tension, by a movement towards something other, a transformation of such affective dynamics. To will implies to move towards, to expect and that is why she believes tension characterises, as it strives for the realisation of wishes or desires. Here again, the definition of willing in relation to tenseness has two different implications: the first, more general, is to ask the question of what is its relationship to affects – not remaining solely in the realm of cognitive control; the second, it defines a particular form of affect: tension.

Another point Arendt (1978) discusses is that of the products of will: what is it that is produced by its activity? The will always wants to do something and thus holds thinking in contempt, whose whole activity depends on doing nothing. In relation to thinking and willing, Arendt says that the result of willing is the formation of volitions. And thus, when we form a volition, when we focus our attention on some future project, we are withdrawn
from the world of appearances, and we do the same when we follow a train of thought. Thinking and willing both make present to mind what is absent, but thinking draws into its enduring present what is or has been whilst willing stretches out into the future. Every volition, although a mental activity, relates to the world of appearances in which its project is to be realized. In contrast to thinking, no willing is ever done for its own sake or finds its fulfilment in the act itself. Volition not only concerns particulars but also looks forward to its own end.

In this sense, thirdly, Arendt opposed thinking and willing in relation to their products. Thinking has no products or outcomes: it is an activity in and for itself. Whereas in willing, the moment we turn our minds to the future ‘we are no longer concerned with objects but with projects’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 14). Willing leads to formulating volitions and projects – what we want to do, where we want to go; which can then turn into actions or feelings. Again, what is interesting here is the criteria which allows her to differentiate willing from other mental faculties: what is it that is produced by its activity?

This short discussion of Arendt’s claims on the will shows that there are three interesting aspects she makes explicit in dealing with willing: its temporality, its relationship to affects and its products. Within psychology, authors have also defined will in relation to these aspects, although they have not done so explicitly. I will now review some of the more prominent propositions in the psychology of will and motivation and show how they have sometimes addressed these dimensions implicitly.

**Willing in psychology**

Within psychology, a large number of studies addressed the concept of will, although as many of the authors did not write originally in English, their translations have often used the term motivation interchangeably with that of will (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2015). Authors studying the will or motivation from a psychological perspective developed a large corpus of empirical investigation, to find which were the different categories making up something like ‘the will’. What is interesting here is that the propositions in the psychological line are strongly tainted of intellectualism, that is they consider the role of cognitive, conscious or control mechanisms for something to be defined willing or motivation. These studies explicitly defined will in relation to action, to motives and needs, and to goals, control and self-regulation, but as I will argue, these notions constitute different ways to implicitly address Arendt’s dimensions.

Many of the scholars within psychology who have studied the will based their claims on James’ (1890) ideas. James had defined willing in relation to self-regulation processes. He posited that there are behaviors which can be desired or unwanted, and that willing comprises the self-regulation of weak or strong tendencies to perform such behaviors (James, 1890). We may want to be a good friend in a certain situation (a desired behaviour) but feel angry at that person for another reason (a weak tendency to perform a behaviour). There, willing would comprise the self-regulation of such a weak tendency to perform the desired behaviour – such as telling yourself acting in such a way would be for the best in the long term. Here, willing appears as related to temporality and more particularly, to the future, as it is through self-regulation, a temporal process, that behaviors can be thought of and planned for the person. Willing also deals with desires and
weak or strong tendencies, an affective aspect of our psychological life. In this way, where there is willing, there is a certain form of affectivity that accompanies its functioning – strong desires, weak tendencies. Finally, we can also see that James defines the will in relation to its products, as it is through self-regulation that different forms of prospective behaviors and actual actions emerge in time. Thus, although we find Arendt’s three dimensions implicitly defined in James’ positions, as with other psychological propositions, the ideas on the will are strongly based on conscious dynamics: the person tells herself that something would be good for her, or stops herself from wanting something which has hurt her in the past.

Another exponent of psychological ideas on the will, from this conscious-based approach, is Ach (1905). He defined willing as resulting from an assessment of the probable link between an anticipated situation and a concrete behaviour. This created what he called a determination, and if the anticipated situation was encountered, then the person would move to action. Ach (1905) further argued that, within the will, there is a threshold of desire that distinguishes motivation from volition: when desire lies below this threshold, it is motivation, and when it crosses over, it becomes volition. He conceptualized motivation and volition as separate aspects of the will: ‘Of the two sides of the problem of the will, the present discourse shall be limited to only one, namely the determination arising from an intention or decision’ (Ach, 1905; Heckhausen, 1991). In this sense, Ach also understands willing implicitly through Arendt’s dimensions. Firstly, he defines willing as extended in time, as what allows projecting possible situations and behaviors and assessing their probability and people’s possibilities for action. Secondly, there are for him, different aspects of the will depending on affects: the threshold of desire distinguishes between motivation and volition. And finally, the will is for him defined in relation to its products: it allows to form volitions.

From a somewhat different perspective, but also within psychology, Lewin (1926) defined an approach to willing which emphasized the role of tension in willing, moving somewhat away from this emphasis in control and consciousness: the organism strives to reduce the tension that appears, by different means, and in that sense our goals can be flexible. Willing is the movement towards the reduction of tension, which is achieved through the attainment of goals. Lewin (1926) argued that motivation and volition are one and the same because they emerge from affective dynamics – from quasi needs. In this sense, Lewin also defines willing through three implicit dimensions: it is a movement in time, towards the reduction of tension. This defines it in relation to temporality and affects. And finally, he states that goals, as flexible products of the will, allow such a tension reduction through their attainment.

In line with Lewin’s ideas (1926) within psychology, another scholar proposed an unfinished perspective on willing (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 137). Vygostky, in defining thinking and speech, spoke about the relationship between the will and consciousness. His claims brought forward the importance of consciousness in the definition of will: ‘The advantage of speech for thinking is that (1) in making thinking an external activity, it makes it possible to master thinking, and (2) most importantly, by creating external mechanisms subordinated to the will, it makes them grow into consciousness and converts them into internal mechanisms’ (Zavershneva & van der Veer,
For him, consciousness and the will appeared jointly: it is by the possibility to think and speak that Vygotsky defines the appearance of a conscious will. He further stated that ‘volition is an Ego affect’ (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 504); it is ‘a concept that has become an affect; a strong-willed person is a person who decides what to do and how to live on the basis of an Ego affect’ (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 504). This defines the will along two steps: as people make meaning, form concepts on the world and others, these meanings can be invested. Secondly, through their investment, if they are not just affects but also ‘Ego’ affects, that is affects mediated by consciousness, then they define the activity of volition or the will. In this sense, Vygotsky makes explicit the relationship between willing and affects, as well as to its products – the affects mediated by consciousness. He implicitly defines willing in relation to time, as it is on the basis of these Ego affects that people decide to act and to live in different ways, projecting themselves into the future.

Later on, in empirical studies on will and motivation, which were less concerned in proposing a reflection on willing than in providing empirical data, authors defined motivation as one of the many causes of behaviour (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2015). In this way, some focused on the affective aspects of motivation, on what drives action, its facilitation or energization (Hull, 1943; Spence, 1956), thus referring to Arendt’s affective dimension; whilst others, such as Atkinson (1957) defined the role of cognitive control for action in motivation – that is of consciousness. Atkinson (1957) was one of the first to integrate cognitive aspects of motivation in its definition. He defined motivation as the result of both the cognitive assessment of the probability of succeeding in doing a task, and the resulting affect (higher if the task is hard), addressing the temporality and products of willing. After Atkinson, other scholars built on these ideas and proposed that it was also necessary to consider expectations and control belief in understanding motivations (Bandura et al., 1999). All these authors within psychology have thus taken into account the process through which something such as motivation or willing emerges. In this sense, they have more explicitly defined willing and motivation through its affective aspect (a drive, a need or a desire), although not particularly explored in research; and the relationship between willing and its products: through the cognitive functioning (control, assessment, analysis) the person produces goals, volitions, etc., which has been the centre of the analyses. These perspectives then, in light of Arendt’s propositions, consider explicitly the role of consciousness, products and affects. As I tried to argue, they implicitly define willing in relation to time, as it is by willing that people think of themselves and their possibilities in the present and in the future. This temporal dimension of willing was a core issue in psychoanalytic accounts of willing, which I will now consider.

The will in psychoanalysis

Within psychoanalysis, authors after Freud defined the notion of will and inscribed it within explicit and systematic models of the mind. These approaches have the advantage of defining will in relation to other faculties, instances and unconscious dynamics (Meissner, 2009). In so doing, some explicitly raise specifically the issues defined by Arendt (1978). The problem of temporality and affects is primarily addressed within these
perspectives, whilst the products of will, and its conscious regulation processes are either implicit or secondary in most cases.

Although Freud did not propose a conceptual approach to will, he employed the term primarily to refer to a function of the Ego (Freud, 1932; Meissner, 2009). The Ego is an instance of the psyche primarily characterised by consciousness. Will appears in his work as a form of psychic force exerted on impulses and by the striving person (O’shaughnessy, 1980). The transition from desire to will and to action in Freud is understood as initiated by an impulse, a force quantitatively variable, leading sometimes to a willed act (Meissner, 2009). Freud thus assumed a concept of will that can be understood as the capacity for choosing among possible alternatives, thus falling within ‘the province of the conscious ego’ (Meissner, 2009, p. 1127). In this sense, will is explicitly defined through a temporal and an affective dimension, whilst its products, the emergence of a willed act, is only treated in passing.

After Freud, most psychoanalysts who developed views on will can be considered within the tradition of Ego psychology; a discipline which has over-emphasised the importance role of consciousness in the psyche. Rank (1936) developed one of the first attempts at defining will in therapy and understood that the possibility to move from dependence to separation in a child’s life, and to begin the process of individuation, becoming a unique separate being, required an act of will. Will is for him a function of mind, of the ego, that allows the separation or the cut from the other in order to become a separate person. He tended to believe in a non-deterministic functioning of the will, where its functioning would allow independence and freedom. Thus, the child’s separation from the mother would be possible by an act of will from the child: the child can be free by employing a faculty which meant he was already free. As such, it is difficult to reconcile, as in many philosophers discussed by Arendt, how the achievement of freedom is a result of an already pre-supposed free will. Rank thus defines willing implicitly in relation to time and to its products: the child can become in the future a separate entity by producing a separation through the willed act. And in this way, the former are the products of the will. The affective dynamics in willing are also implicit in Rank’s model: he argued that the libido, that is the affective energy of the psyche, produces the need to form a willed act – as there was too much tension in the organism- and is then reorganized as a result of the willed act.

Fromm (1947) was another psychoanalyst who developed a systematic perspective on will. For him, a person’s character is shaped in the early years by forces over which the individual has little control. Yet, he postulated that reason enables us to understand such determining forces and choose amongst available alternatives. For him choices of the will are intellectual and emotional, and emerge from opposing or conflicting desires and wishes. In this sense, he re-edits some of the Spinozian ideas of the subjective freedom of will, within objective determination. In terms of Arendt’s dimensions, Fromm defines the will explicitly in relation to affects and products: choices emerge from conflicting desires; and implicitly in its temporal dimension: the person can project and see herself in different ways in the future as a result of willing.

For its part, the French psychoanalytic tradition has not particularly addressed or explicitly defined the will. In this tradition, and following Freud, the will was considered it
a function of the ego or occurring at the imaginary level of people’s relations to one another, and thus touching nothing as to unconscious or affective dynamics that they were trying to address (Wheelis, 1956). In particular, Lacan (1957) understood that the possibilities for the ego for self-determination were a mere illusion. This did not imply a denying freedom for the subject, but limited the will to a function of the ego, that is a conscious or Ego re-transcription of unconscious desires, making it uninteresting to study or define in his perspective. It is interesting that Vygotsky’s definition of volitions as an ‘Ego affect’ (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018) echoes these claims.

Within French psychoanalysis, Aulagnier (1984) did not speak of will per se but proposed an outlook on desire which can be considered to comprise ideas on willing. She defined, as Arendt, three central issues that in her case specified an unnamed psychological activity. Aulagnier (1984) proposed first, to understand desire in relationship to historization. She takes the example of adolescence to think about the first projects a person constructs. What she says is that teenagers may think and plan what they will do, they can want things in the future, but this is only possible if the person has constructed a relationship to her past; that is engaged in historization. If there is no investment of the past, she says, the person cannot see herself in the future. So, in this idea, historization is fundamental for something as willing, much more so than control and consciousness.

Another point she brings forward is that there are opposite tendencies in the emerging wishes in the life of a person. Desire is composed for her of a desire to desire, and a desire not to desire: something moving the person towards the attainment of something, of reaching a goal in cognitive psychological terms – going somewhere, meeting someone--; and something moving her towards peace and quiet – to stop wanting, to be tranquil, as the void or the need can bring discomfort. When considering wishes, people formulate projects, want to travel to the other side of the world, or wish for the quiet, the calm it brings them to sit under a tree a watch the ants work. Distinguishing between the different tendencies of desire brings another level of complexity to understanding affective dynamics in people’s wishes. It is interesting that Aulagnier’s (1984) propositions on desires, resemble some of Arendt’s (1978) claims on will: Aulagnier also situates the relationship to time – although in a different way, through the process of historization–, the products – here, the projects-, and the complex affective dynamics that accompany it – the opposite tendencies of desire. But they also invite a reflection of what may be different types of willing: more conscious or strong projects, such as buying a house or taking a trip; more diffuse or tending towards tranquillity such as longing for the calm of spending Sunday afternoons under a tree.

In all, the psychoanalytic propositions on willing showed the importance of distinguishing conscious and unconscious dynamics in willing and wishing. They bring forward the importance of affective dynamics of the will, less so of its products. But what is most important, they have shown explicitly the importance of considering the temporality of willing, an underexplored dimension of the will within psychology.
Three dimensions for a study of will

I have so far tried to show the value for re-reading Arendt’s (1978) propositions on willing. I aimed to discuss and problematize the notion of will, and to propose that a certain reading of philosophical propositions may enrich psychological research. Many of Arendt’s ideas are present in other authors but not always explicitly articulated. I thus first defined three questions which I claimed Arendt explicitly raises for defining will and which have unequally defined in psychological accounts: What is the relationship between willing and time? How do affects play a role for the will? And what are the products of the will? In identifying these questions, I reviewed literature in psychology and psychoanalysis on willing and neighbouring terms and tried to show that they all define willing in relation to these three questions, although they do so more or less explicitly. In this sense, then, I proposed that Arendt’s questions could be defined as dimensions along which definitions of willing may be presented and contrasted.

The first dimension refers to the issue of the will as something that takes place in the present and always requires investing a future, although we might also need to consider the investment of the past for defining a will, as Aulagnier argued (1984). Aulagnier’s view, differently from Arendt’s, would imply that what can be wanted, thought of or planned, not only comes from our history and what we may have lived or wanted in the past, but also that our construction of a past is the condition for us to be able to want. People think about their lives, long for what is lost and rejoice in some of the changes they have made. Starting from Arendt’s dimension, and considering will in relation to temporality, we may be lead to define it also in relation to the history of our lives, in considering Aulagnier: it is not merely ‘an organ for the future’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 3) as Arendt stated, it is deployed in a continuum with our past and our present.

The second dimension, if discussed in the light of psychological literature, might demand to consider also the role of consciousness alongside affects. As I have said, psychological research on willing has had a primarily intellectualising tendency, defining willing as mostly mediated by rationality and consciousness. In this way, if we consider this claim, but also Aulagnier’s idea that desire manifests opposite tendencies, we could distinguish will from desire in the sense that will is not merely ‘the spring of action’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 5), but the formation of a volition through a mediation of consciousness. To be able to speak of will and not only of desire I would tend to consider the mediation of an ego or a consciousness as Freud (1932) and Vygotsky (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018) suggested. The affects then, would operate beyond the realm of consciousness and have effects beyond our awareness. As an example, I may think and claim I would like to grow old and take care of my grandchildren, whilst at the same time plan dangerous sport trips which risk to cut my life short. There, a longer-term product of the will, to grow old, and the shorter term ones, such as to plan certain sport trips, would be a product of the will, a conscious product. Whilst, beyond consciousness might operate another tendency, or a desire not to desire, putting these different wishes in contradiction.

As for the third question, products of the will and of desires can have various forms: they can, firstly, be fully formed projects or plans. People can imagine and think about their next holiday destination, organise the steps to buy a house or dream about the day in
which their child might be born. But people can also have more diffuse products: the wish to find again the warmth of one’s childhood home, or the search for the sense of security felt sitting on the lap of a grandmother. What is important for a possible definition of the will may be that, in order to be considered part of the realm of the will, wishes or desires would be mediated by some form of consciousness, whether fully formed or somewhat diffused, whilst they can remain silent as desires yet to will. Arendt may thus have invited us to make explicit different dimensions and discuss them explicitly in theories, something a psychological perspective on will may benefit from.

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