The Concept of Trying

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1. The Ubiquity Thesis

‘When I raise my arm’, Wittgenstein says in § 622 of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), ‘I do not usually *try* to raise it.’ It is widely held today that in this Wittgenstein is wrong. Every intentional action, it is said, is (or involves) an event of *trying* to act. This view – I call it the *ubiquity thesis* – was perhaps first defended in 1967 by Paul Grice (1989, pp. 6ff.). More detailed arguments for it are offered by Brian O’Shaughnessy (1973; 1980, vol.2, esp. p. 94) and Jennifer Hornsby (1980, pp. 33ff.). Today defenders of the ubiquity thesis tend to refer one back to those discussions.1 In this paper I shall first examine the main arguments advanced by O’Shaughnessy and Hornsby, then discuss Grice’s contributions to the debate, and finally put forward an alternative account of the concept of trying.

2. O’Shaughnessy’s Argument

This is Brian O’Shaughnessy’s *Argument from Possible Intimidation* (as I call it):

The argument runs thus. A man who knows that his right arm is normal is asked to move it; and knows and is certain that he can and will move it; and does. However, wires had unknown to him been attached to his arm, and a team of experimenters, conjurors, technicians, together with their Philosopher King, heave into view, and with an array of impeccably rational arguments manage finally to shake his belief that he moved his arm. [. . .] Accordingly, he now believes a few minutes after confidently moving his arm that he did not move his arm. But he knows and recollects that he *went beyond* the mere having of a desire and intention to move his arm. He knows and recollects that *something* was as a direct result of those

1. So, for example, Hornsby 1997, pp. 94ff; and Pietroski 1998.
phenomena ushered forth into being: an active something that occurred as the immediate expression of intention and desire. This he properly records in the utterance: ‘I tried’. (O’Shaughnessy 1980, vol. 2, p. 94)

The idea is that after any action one could confuse or intimidate the agent to the point where he is no longer certain whether he really performed the action, so that he retreats to the meek claim that at any rate he tried to perform it. And this is supposed to show that every action involves the agent’s trying to perform it.

The argument is unconvincing for more than one reason. First, it is highly unlikely that it should always be possible to bully an agent in such a way into scepticism.

Secondly, the step from ‘any’ to ‘every’ is invalid. From the fact that any 10 pound note one may come across may be forged it does not follow that all 10 pound notes might be forged.

Thirdly, all the thought experiment demonstrates is that once the success of an action is thrown into doubt the word ‘try’ becomes appropriate. Therefore if it were possible to throw the success of any—or even of every—action into doubt, then in every such case use of the word ‘try’ could thus become appropriate. But that does not mean that it already is appropriate. Similarly, any (or every) glass of water could be put into the freezer so that after a while it might be called ‘frozen’. But from that it does not follow that every glass of water is frozen.

O’Shaughnessy seems to think that the imagined contrivances that prompt an agent to say ‘I tried’ act as a litmus-test: that brings to light what is there independently of whether the test is carried out or not. It does not even occur to him that the result might not be detected but produced by the special circumstances he envisages. The explanation of this oversight is to be found in his overly simplistic philosophy of language. He simply takes it for granted, without argument, that a word like ‘try’ must always stand for the same ‘true sui generis element of animal psychology life’ (1980, p. 55); ‘some single something’ (p. 45) that would occur, like a headache, independently of what people might know or say about an action. The possibility that the concept of trying might not be that of a uniform phenomenon; that one of the word’s functions might be to express the speaker’s attitude towards an action—this possibility O’Shaughnessy dismisses lightly as ‘unacceptable’ (1980, p. 45).
3. Hornsby’s Argument

Here is the *Argument from Divergent Cognitive Attitudes*, as presented by Jennifer Hornsby:2

One can imagine an onlooker who has excellent grounds for thinking that a certain agent has every incentive to do a certain thing, but who also has excellent grounds for thinking that the agent will not succeed. The onlooker knows moreover that the reasons he has for thinking that the agent will not succeed have never been brought to the agent’s attention. In the particular case, his belief that the agent will fail to do what he wants, though justified, is false. In fact the agent straightforwardly does what he had an incentive to do. Then, on the basis of his knowing of the agent’s reasons, and of his knowing that the agent thought there was no obstacle, the onlooker is surely right if he says that he knew the agent would *try* to do it. So the agent did try. (Hornsby 1980, pp. 34f.)

Hornsby stresses that ‘the kind of doubt or denial that in the ordinary way makes it appropriate to speak of trying need not impinge upon the agent himself, and thus need not affect whether it is true that he tried’ (1980, p. 35). Therefore, she concludes, even if there had been no doubt or denial on anybody’s side, ‘the agent would still have tried’ (p. 35).

Here is a step-by-step account of the argument, using the abbreviation ‘A is T’ for ‘Action A is or involves the agent’s trying to perform it’:

1. For most actions A, we can imagine an onlooker N whose circumstances C would make it appropriate for him to say: ‘A is T’.

Therefore:

2. Most actions are T.

3. Those circumstances C that make it appropriate to say that A is T do not impinge on the agent or the action A itself.

Therefore:

4. Those circumstances C do not affect whether it is true that A is T.

2. She is here in fact developing an argument given by O’Shaughnessy, 1973.
Therefore:

(5) Even without those circumstances C it would still have been true that A is T.

Therefore:

(6) All actions are T; even those with respect to which it is impossible to imagine someone being in the set of circumstances C.

The argument is fallacious, as becomes obvious if one substitutes for ‘T’ a predicate that is context-relative, as, for example: ‘forbidden by the law’ — from the fact that for almost any action we can imagine some zealot who with respect to the laws of his religion might truly say: ‘This action (say, my raising my arm on a Wednesday) is forbidden by the law’, – from this it does not follow that raising my arm on a Wednesday is forbidden by the law; let alone, that all actions are forbidden by the law. I.e., it does not follow that others than adherents to such an outlandish religion could truly and without any qualifications say: ‘This is forbidden by the law’. For it is not forbidden by any generally accepted law. – Again, for almost any action we can imagine someone for whom it would be unexpected or surprising. Take my eating an apple, and imagine an onlooker from a distant land where people believe apples to be poisonous. From this onlooker’s point of view it would be quite correct to say that my action was surprising. But – in spite of line (2) of Hornsby’s argument – it does not follow that my eating an apple really was surprising, irrespective of that imagined onlooker’s surprise. For calling something surprising tout court, without indicating anybody in particular who would be surprised, means that people like you and me would find the action surprising under the circumstances. Which is hardly true of my eating an apple, and certainly not true of every action; – in spite of the final conclusion of Hornsby’s argument.

And it is no good replying that the predicate in question, namely: ‘involves the agent’s trying to perform the action’, is not of this context-relative kind. For that would be begging the very question at issue. O’Shaughnessy and Hornsby are setting out to show (against so called ‘linguistic philosophers’) that the (positive) answer to the question whether an agent tried to do what he did is independent of the context (of whether someone doubted or denied the agent’s success). So, clearly, they are not entitled to presuppose this contentious point.
4. Grice’s Analysis

Grice doesn’t advance any specific argument in support of the ubiquity thesis, but his theory of ‘conversational implicature’ promises to provide an effective reply to Wittgenstein’s observation that in a straightforward case of, say, raising one’s arm, where the agent’s ability to do so is not in question, we wouldn’t say that the agent tried to raise his arm (1953, §622). True, Grice responds, but that is not because it would be false to say so, but because it would be misleading – though nonetheless (trivially) true (Grice 1989, chs. 1–3).

In other words, it is agreed that the use of the word ‘try’ is appropriate only where the possibility of failure is taken into consideration. But according to Grice, this restriction should not be seen as part of the meaning of the word ‘try’. The incongruity of describing an unquestionably successful action in terms of ‘trying’ should not be explained as due to a semantic presupposition, but as a matter of pragmatic insinuation. Only under certain conditions would its application be of any interest, and not just trivially true. Hence its use in a given situation tends to suggest that those conditions are fulfilled. E.g., the entry in the log ‘Today the captain was sober’ insinuates, but doesn’t imply, that normally the captain is drunk. If the captain isn’t a drunkard, the entry is extremely misleading – but nonetheless true. Again, if I had ten pounds, would it be true (even if perhaps misleading) to say that I had five pounds? Of course; if you own a certain sum, then you own any part of that sum. Contrast that with a case of semantic presupposition: If I know for certain that it’s raining, then it would be incorrect (and not merely misleading) for me to say that I conjecture that it’s raining. For ‘I conjecture that …’ means that the following statement is not an expression of knowledge.

Now, in general, how are we to decide how the inappropriateness of an utterance is to be construed? Given that p, it is found inappropriate to say that q. How are we to settle whether this is a matter of (A) semantic presupposition (that the meaning of ‘q’ makes it false to say so if q), or whether it’s merely a matter of (B) pragmatic insinuation?

For one thing, in (B)-type cases the utterance in question would not be inappropriate under all circumstances. E.g., if the question is

'Who of the crew is sober at the moment?', then saying ‘The captain is sober &c.’ would carry no suggestion that this was an exceptional occurrence. Again, if the question is ‘That book costs five pounds. Have you got that amount on you?’, then one can answer ‘I have five pounds on me’, without insinuation that that is all one has. But it’s impossible to think of a context in which one’s utterance ‘I conjecture that p’ would not imply that one didn’t know for certain that p? For that is a case of semantic presupposition.

Then what about ‘Sam tried to empty the glass’—could there be a situation in which this utterance would not be taken to indicate the possibility (or acknowledge the actuality) of failure? I think not. Grice would probably urge that this suggestion could be ‘cancelled’ by a disclaimer: ‘Sam tried to empty the glass. But by that I don’t mean to bring up or acknowledge the possibility of failure.’ The effect is slightly comical—as with: ‘You’re a silly fool. But I don’t mean to be disrespectful’. For in either case, if we were to take the disclaimer seriously, we could no longer make sense of the initial utterance. The fact is that if you don’t want to bring up or acknowledge the possibility of failure, you don’t qualify your statement by putting in the word ‘tried’ (nor a word like ‘perhaps’).

For another thing, if Grice’s construal, and the ubiquity thesis, were correct, the answer to the question whether Sam’s emptying his glass involved trying, should be a confident ‘Of course!’, backed up, if necessary, by a trivially analytic statement: ‘If you’ve done something, then you’ve tried to do it.’ But that’s exactly where the analogy fails: this latter statement isn’t analytic, let alone trivially analytic. It’s a controversial philosophical thesis. Accordingly, an ordinary competent speaker will not at all give a confidently affirmative answer. He will be puzzled by the question, that is: unsure what to say (and not only, as in a case of conversational implicature, surprised at being asked to say what’s perfectly obvious). Otherwise, if it were clear on reflection to any competent speaker that acting involves trying, O’Shaughnessy and Hornsby would hardly have felt called upon to establish that by sophisticated philosophical arguments.

5. When it is correct to use the word ‘to try’

Unsurprisingly, I am now going to defend a position roughly of the kind Grice is attacking. The way I would like to put it is that the word ‘try’ is governed by a simple principle:

(T) By speaking of someone’s *trying* to φ the speaker leaves room for failure or the possibility of failure.\(^6\)

The crucial point is that the applicability of the word depends not only on the intrinsic character of the action – whether it contains some sort of conative element called ‘trying’ –, but above all on the speaker’s epistemic stance: whether he regards the action as a *success* or a *failure*, or whether he takes the *outcome to be undecided*. Only in the two latter cases, where an action is either regarded as a failure or its result is left open, a description of the action as a ‘try’ is warranted.\(^7\)

Note that principle (T) says: ‘the speaker *leaves room* for failure’, not: ‘the speaker *believes* that failure is (at least) possible’. The point is that people may know more than they care to say; or even pretend to know less than they do. Grice makes an analogous observation in the case of disjunction.\(^8\) One of his examples is:

(1) The next conference will be either in Geneva or in New York.

And he rightly rejects the view that it is only correct to utter this sentence if one does not know in which city the conference will take place. One may know that it will be in Geneva, but for some reason choose not to say. Perhaps for the fun of a guessing-game:

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6. Note that in (T) and the following discussion possibility is always considered relative to what is acknowledged to be known. This must not be confused with concepts of counterfactual possibility. If I know the Prime Minister to be in Westminster today, it’s impossible that he be in Bombay now. But of course in a different sense his being in Bombay today is not an impossibility: he might well have *been* in Bombay today.

7. Typically, past tense uses of ‘try’ go with the acknowledgement of failure, while the present continuous and future tense are used where the outcome is left open. But that correlation is not without exceptions, e.g.: ‘He tried the front door – it was locked; he tried the back door – also locked; he tried one of the French windows – and eventually managed to get out.’ – ‘Later she will try to use the car, only to find that she forgot to take the keys.’

The next conference will be either in Geneva or in New York. Guess where!

Similarly, I may leave it open whether an action succeeded or failed although I know the outcome perfectly well:

– This morning John tried to beat David at chess.
– And, did he?
– I’m not supposed to tell you. Ask him yourself.

Saying less than one knows by describing as ‘trying to \( \phi \)’ what one knows to be a straightforward case of \( \phi \)-ing (or failing to \( \phi \)) is a common story-teller’s device. For the sake of a dramatic representation, the speaker takes his audience back in time to the moment when the action was just about to begin and its success appeared (or is made to appear) still problematic.\(^9\) Only at the end of the story or episode it will be disclosed whether the hero did or did not achieve what he tried to achieve.

However, although it is possible thus to describe even a trivial action (like raising one’s arm) as ‘trying to \( \phi \)’, it should be emphasized that this must always be done from a perspective of partial ignorance – real, assumed or rhetorical. Once the facts are fully known and taken into consideration, there is no more room for a sincere expression of uncertainty about them. Consider the following two successive statements:\(^{10}\)

\[
\text{(3) Mrs Smith cashed a cheque this morning.}
\]
\[
\text{Mrs Smith tried to cash a cheque this morning.}
\]

Their juxtaposition in one utterance is incongruous. The first one gives a piece of information which the second one withholds. But such a combination of speech-acts is logically impossible. You cannot withhold what you have already given. Consider:

\[
\text{(4) He is 47 years old.}
\]
\[
\text{But I cannot tell you his age.}
\]

Or, again, take Grice’s example of a disjunction, now followed by one of its disjuncts:

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9. The narrator might also take the perspective of the agent at the time; what in literary criticism is called style indirect libre.
10. Another example from Grice, 1989, p. 17.
(5) The next conference will be either in Geneva or in New York.
    The next conference will be in Geneva.

I agree with Grice that the first statement is compatible with the speaker’s *knowing* where exactly the next conference will be held. But it is incompatible with the speaker’s *saying* where exactly it will be held. For you cannot have it both ways: you cannot *leave it open* whether it will be in Geneva or in New York, and also *specify* that it will be in Geneva. Therefore, the second statement amounts to a *withdrawal and replacement* of the first. Similarly, if they occur in converse order:

(6) The next conference will be in Geneva.
    The next conference will be either in Geneva or in New York.

Outside a logic class, the speaker will not be understood as giving an idle argument of the form ‘*p, therefore p v q*’. Rather, the speaker will be understood as replacing one statement by another, more cautious one; thus withdrawing the first. For, again, it is impossible to withhold a piece of information one has already given. So if the withholding is to be the last word, the giving must be regarded as cancelled. And so in the case of (3): the latter, more guarded report cancels and replaces the preceding one. Or, if it is the other way round, the more guarded statement can be replaced by a subsequent more informative one:

(7) Mrs Smith tried to cash a cheque this morning.
    Mrs Smith did cash a cheque this morning.

The first statement allows for the possibility of failure, but this allowance is retracted by the second.

To forestall a possible misunderstanding: I am not denying that any proposition *p* entails the disjunction *p v q*, and that *a fortiori* any such two propositions are consistent. However, linguistic utterances (as opposed to sentences or propositions) can be found defective in other ways than those studied in formal logic. They can be self-defeating in ways that could not be brought out by logical formalization. Thus, the proposition ‘I am not speaking English’ does not contain a contradiction; it could be true or false. Still it is impossible for an *utterance* of this sentence to be true. Or consider
Moore’s Paradox: the two propositions ‘It is raining’ and ‘I don’t believe that it is raining’ are perfectly compatible; yet their utterance in conjunction does not make sense.11 And so in the cases above: consistency, or even entailment, on the level of propositions, as studied in standard logic, is perfectly compatible with inconsistency on the level of speech-acts.

But do we not frequently use ‘a fortiori’ arguments, from a stronger to a weaker statement, just as in ‘p therefore p v q’? One might for example argue:

(8) Nigel lives in England.
So a fortiori he lives in Great Britain.

And since ‘lives in Great Britain’ means ‘lives in England, in Scotland, or in Wales’, (8) is virtually of the form ‘p therefore p v q v r’. – No, it is not. It is of the form ‘p therefore q’. That ‘Great Britain’ can be paraphrased as ‘England, Scotland or Wales’ does not mean that in (8) we are in fact dealing with that paraphrase. Otherwise, we might say that ‘Jim is a bachelor, hence Jim is an unmarried man’ was of the form ‘p therefore p’. But it is not. And that is why it can be worth stating, unlike ‘Jim is a bachelor, therefore Jim is a bachelor’.

For arguments from a stronger to a weaker claim to make any sense, this weaker claim must in some way be more suitable than the stronger claim. The conclusion of (8), for example, may be more suitable than its premise when it has just been mentioned that only those resident in Great Britain are entitled to some kind of benefit. The loss in content in the conclusion is compensated by an additional piece of pertinent information, viz. that Jim can also be described as a resident of Great Britain. The conclusion does not just say less, it says something different. If it merely said less (as ‘p v q’ after ‘p’), it could only be understood as an illustration of a rule of the propositional calculus. But without any indication that it was meant as a formal inference (like ‘therefore’), the utterance of the second statement would be taken as a retraction of the first.

Coming back to the case of trying, the following objection might be raised: ‘The two propositions in Moore’s Paradox cannot be asserted in conjunction; still, they can both be true. Similarly, even if one cannot say that an action is both unquestionably successful and involves trying, could it not still be true? Once again it would appear

that the inappropriateness of talk of trying in particular cases is no obstacle to the truth of the ubiquity thesis.’

The reply is twofold. For one thing, the kind of unassertability one encounters in Moore’s Paradox is quite sufficient to make it impossible to hold the ubiquity thesis – unless one is prepared to deny the occurrence of any successful action. For anyone holding the ubiquity thesis, while admitting that some actions are successful, would be committed to an inconsistency. ‘Every action involves trying’ means: ‘For all we (acknowledge to) know, every action is possibly a failure.’ Applied to some action admitted to be successful: ‘For all we (acknowledge to) know, even this successful action is possibly a failure.’ But that is a contradiction in terms. You cannot acknowledge that you know a given action to be a success and at the same time insist that you don’t know whether it’s a success.

For another thing, if (T) is correct, then considered in itself a successful action can never be a case of trying, just as in itself it cannot be unexpected. It can be so only relative to somebody’s cognitive stance. Hence the ubiquity thesis (if it is not to be restricted to an individual’s perspective) amounts to a general claim about people’s cognitive stance towards actions. It must be read:

(9) From every possible point of view any action is correctly describable as involving the agent’s trying to perform it.

And that in turn can be paraphrased:

(10) Nobody is ever in a position to rule out that an action was, is or will be a failure.

Which is patently false. Everybody knows of countless actions that succeeded and were never likely to fail.

6. Can Trying be Succeeding?

If I say of someone who has just left the room: ‘He’s trying to ring his solicitor’, does the word ‘trying’ denote some part of his behaviour? No, it simply indicates that success is not certain. I might equally well say: ‘He’s ringing his solicitor, if he can get through.’ Now, the question what, in this case, the trying consists in, is as misguided as the question which part of the agent’s behaviour is designated by the words ‘if he can get through’. – But suppose we learn after a while...
that the man who went out to ring his solicitor was successful. Why not say then that his trying to ring his solicitor was after all identical with his ringing his solicitor? That is Jennifer Hornsby’s position: ‘if ever we try to φ and succeed in φ-ing, then our trying is our succeeding’ (Hornsby 1980, p. 39).

Consider the adverb ‘possibly’. Someone asks: ‘Why did he suddenly leave the room?’, and gets the reply: ‘He’s possibly ringing his solicitor.’ The surmise proves correct. Shall we then say that the man’s possibly ringing his solicitor was identical with his ringing his solicitor? Of course not. Nor would one seriously say that if in fact he rang his girlfriend his possibly ringing his solicitor was in fact identical with his ringing his girlfriend. For unlike many other adverbs (such as ‘hurriedly’ or ‘cheerfully’) the word ‘possibly’ does not serve to give a further characterization of an action. Hence it is awry to ask if the action thus described is identical with an action differently described. Rather, the word’s function is to allow the speaker to leave it open whether the action did actually take place. Similarly, the word ‘try’ can be used without any descriptive function but merely playing the role of a caveat: ‘for all I know (or care to say) things may go (or have gone) wrong’. And if a speaker adds such a caveat to his description of an action he does not thereby give a different description of an action, of which one might meaningfully ask whether or not it designates the same action.

7. Trying hard and trying successfully

An analysis of the meaning of a verb in sentences of the form ‘A φs’ does not necessarily apply to sentences in which the same verb is qualified by an adverbial expression. What is true about the sentence ‘You threatened Rupert’ will not be totally applicable to the sentences ‘You threatened Rupert in your dream / in jest / allegedly.’ Similarly, the above analysis of the word ‘to try’ is not meant to cover the expressions ‘to try hard’ and ‘to try successfully’. I shall comment briefly on each of them.

The main difference between ‘trying’ and ‘trying hard’ is that the latter expression is straightforwardly descriptive. It designates a feature of an agent’s behaviour – his putting a particular effort into his action – that can be ascribed independently of what the action’s outcome is and whether it is known to the speaker. Therefore, one
can always ask whether an agent *tried hard* to do something, whereas once success is acknowledged it is incongruous to ask whether the agent *tried* to do what he did (unless there is doubt about the action’s being intentional). Again, as a descriptive expression ‘trying hard’ functions roughly dichotomistically: Where the question whether an agent tried hard meets a negative reply, it is correct – borderline cases apart – to say that the agent did *not* try hard. *Tertium non datur.* ‘Trying’ simple, by contrast, does not function in such a dichotomistic way. Both ‘I tried to φ’ and ‘I did not try to φ’ may be inapplicable. For example, in an ordinary case of arm-raising: ‘I tried to raise my arm’ would falsely imply that either I failed or that it was an open question whether I succeeded; ‘I did not try to raise my arm’, however, would imply equally incorrectly that the raising of my arm was unintentional or even involuntary. And this is why Wittgenstein’s dictum, quoted at the beginning, although correctly opposing the ubiquity thesis, is not quite satisfactory either: ‘When I raise my arm I do not usually try to raise it.’ That would be appropriate as an excuse of someone suffering from uncontrollable arm movements. As a clumsy person might say apologetically: ‘Believe me, when I knocked down that vase I did not try to knock it down. It was an accident.’

This feature of the word ‘try’ – that where an action cannot be described as a try, it might be equally inappropriate to say that the agent does not or did not try, – this feature the word ‘try’ shares with its counterpart, the word ‘succeed’. As a rule, talk of trying and talk of succeeding or not succeeding go together in terms of appropriateness or inappropriateness. Where it is out of place to speak of trying, as in an ordinary case of arm-raising, it is almost equally incongruous to say:

(11) He succeeded in raising his arm.

For the implication is that, at least for a moment, failure was on the cards. And this is not normally what one wants to say about an ordinary arm-raising action. But it is obvious that this inappropriateness of (11) should not be expressed by calling (11) false and maintaining its negation:

(12) He did not succeed in raising his arm.

Let alone:
When I raise my arm, I do not usually succeed in raising my arm.

When conjoined with the adverb ‘successfully’ the word ‘to try’ can obviously not fulfil the function of leaving it open whether the action in question succeeded. What then is the meaning of this expression? What is the difference in meaning between, say, ‘Alice caught the ball’ and ‘Alice tried successfully to catch the ball’? – As in the cases discussed above, the word ‘try’ introduces a perspective from which the outcome of the action appears uncertain; only here that perspective is not the one ultimately adopted by the speaker. The speaker regards the action as a success but he intimates that there were circumstances that made the outcome appear less than certain at the time. In other words, ‘Alice tried successfully to catch the ball’ can be paraphrased as ‘Alice caught the ball, but there had been (or might have been) some uncertainty as to whether she would be able to do so.’

8. Conclusion

‘Does every action involve trying?’ This question amounts to the following: ‘Is every action either a failure or a possible failure?’ It is debatable whether with respect to every action one can take a perspective that makes failure appear at least possible; but it is clear that with respect to all successful actions one can (regarding them as such) take a perspective from which both the reality and the possibility of failure are logically excluded, and therefore the word ‘try’ incongruous; – even if it is still possible to apply the expression ‘tried successfully’. Hence one cannot under all circumstances say something true by describing an action as ‘trying to φ’ (without any adverbial qualification). Furthermore, whether an action is either a failure or possibly a failure does of course depend not only on its outcome, but also on how much one knows about it. Hence the question whether an action in itself does or does not involve trying (i.e., is or is not a failure or possibly a failure) – is as misguided as the question whether a certain event is intrinsically unexpected, shocking or interesting. It can well be unexpected, shocking and interesting to

12. Possible: in the light of what is acknowledged to be known.
some people and not at all unexpected, shocking or interesting to others. And it may be correct for some to describe an action as ‘an attempt to φ’, but incorrect for others.\textsuperscript{13}

References

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