

# Assagioli's Experiments on Training the Will

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Upon agreeing to be the guest editor of this *Psychosynthesis Quarterly* issue with its theme of Awareness and Will, I decided to search for inspiration in [Assagioli's online archives](#). I was lucky enough to find two very interesting manuscripts. And luckier still, both of these were clearly dated, even though the tens of thousands of notes held in Florence rarely are. Rarer still are any manuscripts written before WWII, since most of Assagioli's documents were destroyed in two separate fires during this time.

In April and May of 1929, on two different occasions, Assagioli experimented with training the will. His brief observations of these experiments, which he conducted on himself, are rare insights into, not only his scientific method, but also his character. More than once, he writes about how while meditating on the word 'will' thoughts of "the stupidity of the task" would enter his awareness. With humor, he notes how he lacks "the slightest enthusiasm" for the 10-minute will exercise he has assigned himself, but nevertheless, confirms that he is determined "to carry out my resolution whether it leads to any useful result or not."

Regarding his methodology, first of all, these notes definitively show how Assagioli would practice psychosynthesis techniques on himself, something he stresses that all psychosynthesis guides do. We can also see that he clearly conducts the experiments as a disidentified Observer, using the terms "the mind," "the attention," "the personality" and "the performance" instead the first-person possessive pronoun of "my mind", "my attention," etc. For example, he laments how "the personality will not co-operate" but the next day notes how he "feels quite independent and refuses to be tyrannized by it." Lastly, we might wonder why Assagioli chose to have the notes typed (as opposed to handwritten) and in English (instead of Italian, German or French). Was this too part of his scientific methodology?

To place these unique notes in context, in 1929 Assagioli was 41 years old and living in Rome

with his wife Nella Ciapetti and son Ilario, age 6. Only three years earlier he had founded *Istituto di Cultura e Terapia Psichica* (Institute of Psychic Culture and Therapy), which would eventually become the Institute of Psychosynthesis. (Of particular interest is the fact that the theme of the first conference ever held by the Institute was "How to educate the Will.")<sup>1</sup> In addition, Assagioli's first publication in which he defined his concepts of psychosynthesis, *A New Method of Healing: Psychosynthesis*, had been published in English in 1927.

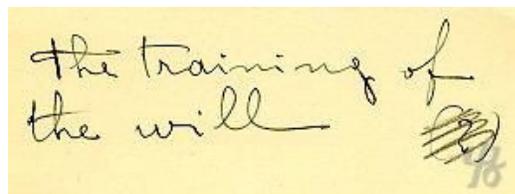
During this same time, Assagioli was active in esoteric studies. He frequented the Arcane School and was forming his relationship with Alice Bailey. In addition, he was the vice president of the Rome Group of the *Lega Teosofica Independente* (Independent Theosophical League). During 1928-1930, the activities of this theosophist group were becoming more concentrated in the home of the Assagiolis; they would often host conferences and celebrations such as Festival of the White Lotus (May 8) and the Festival of Wesak (which coincides with the full moon in May, roughly 21 April to 21 May).<sup>2</sup>

I find it interesting that these will experiments actually took place during the full moon of May. In his article about the Festival of Wesak (under the pseudonym of Considerator), Assagioli explains that because the Sun is in Taurus, it operates with particular intensity on Earth and "each of us receives this influx of intensity."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he was hoping to garner some of that energy while conducting these experiments.

Finally, it is also of interest that the same year Assagioli performed these experiments he wrote an article entitled "The Education of the Will," which was published (in Italian) in the magazine *Ultra*.<sup>4</sup> In this article, Assagioli points out the dangers of man losing control of the technology he has formulated with his outer powers and the indispensable need for the development of his inner powers to ensure "the sanity and indeed the very survival of humanity." These words are

precisely echoed in his “Introduction” to *The Act of Will*, which he would write 45 years later and only after a near-death experience.<sup>5</sup>

And now, without further ado, I offer you the transcripts of Assagioli’s “Experiments on the Will.”<sup>6</sup>



Archivio Assagioli, Firenze © Istituto di Psicossintesi

### 8/4/1929. First Experiment

For several seconds I thought of nothing but the word ‘will’. Then came the name of Mussolini to my mind (probably because I had been reading his autobiography). I dismissed it and tried to feel which part of my anatomy was connected with the ‘will’; and I felt that it originated somewhere in the lower part of the brain (at the back of the head and extending along the spine as far as the shoulders). Then my mind turned to determination and I began to draw the distinction between the significance of the two words, when I realized that I was again wandering from my object. Then I tried to think of will as power – not as a dominating force so much as inherent energy which can be called into action when the need arises and laid aside when relaxation is possible.

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### Second Experiment. 9/4/1929.

I began again by thinking of the word ‘will’ but power persistently attached itself. Then several thoughts tried to intrude themselves – a mental

picture of Mussolini, the stupidity of the task, failure; I banished them all as they came then almost simultaneously with the suggestion of failure came the word ‘achieve’ to my mind. This led to the feeling of power; then the word persistence attached itself and I began to realize that without persistent effort much of the power is wasted, since it requires more energy to recommence a thing if one lets go. Then came the thought that in order to use the will we must have desire for its direction; thus it forms the link between the thought and action. Then I asked myself what did I desire? Self-mastery. For what reason? To help the Masters through service to humanity. It was at this point that I saw the link between the desire (thought) and action.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Experiment. 10/4/1929.

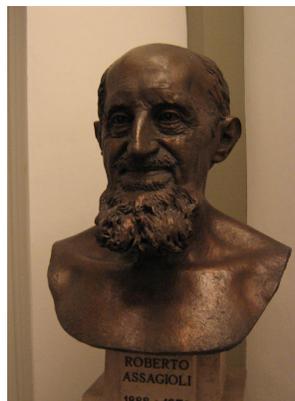
It was more difficult to fix the mind this morning; there was a certain reluctance to commence at first but it quickly vanished when I remembered the previous results. The word persistence came promptly to my mind. Then I turned my thoughts again to the word ‘will’ and its many aspects as represented in resolution – steady – firm – unconquerable – impregnable – determination – perseverance – unflinching – strength – power – forte. I began to feel the power in these words, but there seemed something lacking. It did not represent to me a complete will. Finally I realized that love must be included not to diminish its power but to soften it.

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4th Experiment. 11/4/29.

This was not successful. I got up feeling very tired and could not fix my attention in any direction. I began again with the words 'will power' which seemed meaningless; then came the word enthusiasm and I knew what was lacking. I tried to see the connection between strength and will and the various forms of will; to distinguish Divine Will from personal will, but these speculations led to nothing. I was too much aware of a tired brain.

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will was in harmony with the thought and the desire, thus one feels the full power of the will.

Then I told myself that everything can be achieved in the same way, without driving oneself.

I asked myself if I was that will, and I felt most emphatically that it was not actually me; only a part of me.

One thing has impressed me in these experiments and that is how quickly the time passes.

5th Experiment. 12/4/1929.

I tried a different method this time. It suddenly dawned on me that it is useless to try and understand the nature of will by thinking about it. One must 'feel' one's way to the heart of things. So I just stood still and felt that it was by [my] own will that I was doing it. Then I became aware of a sense of possession, of actual control. There was no emotion and there seemed to be nothing attached to it, therefore, will must be merely a power that can be applied or harnessed to any one part of our being.

1st May, 1929

Experiments on Will Training Contd.

For five minutes, I decided against my inclinations, to make the following exercise for 5 minutes each day for 10 days:

To stand relaxed and raise the arms sideways to the level of the shoulders in decided movements, repeating quietly 'I will do this.'

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6th Experiment. 13/4/1929.

I proceeded as on the previous day by just realizing that I was standing in one place for 10 minutes; that it was "I" who willed it. It gave me a certain feeling of satisfaction especially when I realized how little effort it really entails. The

The task was irksome because I had no inclination for it. The previous task was pleasant since it suited my particular temperament to stand still and just contemplate the meaning of 'will'. As far as I know I gained no benefit from it. At first I commenced slow movements, but that seemed to be out of order with the purpose so I changed to firm and decided movements.

But I had the feeling all the same that it was stupid.

No.2 2/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I finished the exercise this morning with a sense of relief and a certain satisfaction of having kept to my resolution; but it was tedious and I began very reluctantly.

I still have the feeling that it is stupid and not worthwhile (the type of exercise is referred to).

My mind was not centered on the performance; the attention was interrupted by stupid thoughts, but at the end of the five minutes I was suddenly reminded of my meditation on 'filial dutifulness' and I at once saw a connection between the necessary obedience of the personality, (even in small things,) and that of the child in its relationship to parent, as well as in the higher sense – the relationship to God and the necessity of obedience to divine law.

No.3 3/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I began with less reluctance this morning and finished with greater satisfaction. I counted the movements to keep the mind from wandering, (I had forgotten the words that should accompany the exercise.) ending at 150; but I paused to look at the clock.

The tendency to consider some things a bore is becoming noticeably less.

No. 4 4/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

The exercise was accomplished this time very indifferently, owing partly to fatigue. Although I repeated the phrase 'I will do this' I did it more [or] less mechanically. Other thoughts kept interrupting. All the same I was conscious of a certain determination to carry out my resolution whether it leads to any useful result or not.

No. 5 5/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

The time passed quickly and did not seem tedious; but I find it much more difficult to fix the attention on the object of the exercise i.e. the use of the pure will, when movement is introduced. The former exercise was far more effective and pleasant.

But there is no weakening of the resolution.

No. 6 6/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I carried out the exercise this morning rather late and only because I am determined not to fail in my resolution. The results were nil as far as I can judge because I was too tired to think about it, and afterwards I slept heavily for over 2 hours.

No. 7 7/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I repeated the exercise this morning though still mentally tired. There is no weakening of the resolution though I cannot arouse much interest in it. I feel so strongly all the time I would rather be doing something more useful.

No. 8 8/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I repeated the exercise this morning with the same indifference. There is absolutely no cooperation on the part of the personality. It takes no interest whatever in the performance, but it does not actually object. However, I am determined to continue this experiment for a considerable time to see what will result.

No. 9

9/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I felt much more contented this morning with what I was doing, and an inner satisfaction of having carried out my resolution. But I find it much more difficult to concentrate my thoughts while carrying out physical movements.

Much of the value of the exercise is lost, I think, unless the mind is also concentrated on the task.

No. 10

10/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I felt no reluctance whatever this morning, perhaps because I knew subconsciously that it was the last performance of this particular exercise. However, I have decided to return to it later and endeavor to control the thoughts as well as the motion.

No. 11

11/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

This morning I changed the movement slightly – raising the arms forward, then above the head, from the head sideways to the level of the shoulders and then dropping to the normal position; - each movement accompanied by the same phrase ‘I will do this’.

The exercise was less tedious than the previous one, but I cannot pretend to the slightest enthusiasm over it. Nevertheless the resolution to carry on is so strong that I must, perforce, obey! I am usually rewarded by a pleasant feeling of satisfaction, which continues through the day generally.

No. 12

12/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

The exercise was carried out with more spirit and interest this morning. But stupid thoughts insisted on interrupting. – I am still of the opinion that more rapid results might be achieved in some cases by pure contemplation.

No. 13

13/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

The personality will not co-operate. I was a little late in rising and it nearly caused me to forget my task; - and betrayed a decided irritation when it was remembered.

Concentration is almost impossible in these circumstances, but I mean to carry on.

No. 14

14/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I felt rather bored by the exercise this morning and performed the whole thing in a very perfunctory manner.

The personality is trying many subtle ways of dissuading me of pursuing this experiment, but I feel quite independent and refused to be tyrannized by it.

No. 15

15/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I went through the exercise this morning as a matter of course, without feeling or any special interest in it. Deep in the subconscious persists the feeling that this method (for myself) is a waste of time. I find it still difficult to concentrate on the task. The attitude of rebellion has passed, but I ‘sense’ that the personality is only waiting its opportunity.

No. 16

16/5/29.

Exercise on Will Training.

I carried out the exercise this morning with the same disinterestedness, though with better success at concentration. Do what I will, I cannot arouse any more enthusiasm for this method, but I have no intention of giving up the resolution of developing the will.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Esposito W. (2008). *Introduzione*. In Assagioli, R. (2008). *Il mondo interiore [The interior world]* (pp. 35-46). W. Esposito (Ed.). Vicenza, Italy: Edizioni Teosofiche Italiane.
- <sup>3</sup> Assagioli, R., Considerator, (2008). *La Festa del Wesak (Plenilunio di maggio)* [Festival of Wesak (Full moon of May)]. *Il mondo interiore [The interior world]*. (pp. 351-357). W. Esposito (Ed.). Vicenza, Italy: Edizioni Teosofiche Italiane.
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- <sup>5</sup> Rosselli, M. (2012). Roberto Assagioli: A bright star." *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 16(2), 7-19.
- <sup>6</sup> Assagioli, R. (1929). Archivio Assagioli: Florence, Italy, Archivio Studio, 3044 and 3056 [Manuscript note]. Retrieved from [www.achivioassagioli.org](http://www.achivioassagioli.org)
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