

Rational Capacities, Resolve, and Weakness of Will

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Abstract. In this paper we present an account of practical rationality and weakness of will in terms of rational capacities. We show how our account rectifies various shortcomings in Michael Smith's related theory. In particular, our account is capable of accommodating cases of weak-willed behaviour that are not *akratic*, or otherwise contrary to the agent's better judgment. Our account differs from Smith's primarily by incorporating *resolve*: a third rational capacity for resolute maintenance of one's intentions. We discuss further two ways to explain the importance of resolve to practical rationality: one based on Richard Holton's recent work, and an alternative, non-consequentialist account.

1. Introduction

There are a variety of reasons why individuals fail to act in accordance with reason; that is, why they fail to act as they ought to act. Our evaluative response to such failures varies greatly depending upon what we believe to be the circumstances of those failures. An agent can fail to do what she has most reason to do because she fails to judge correctly what she ought to do, and then acts on that erroneous judgment. Alternatively, an agent may make an appropriate judgment as to what she ought to do, but nonetheless fail to act on that judgment. These observations suggest an initial, very coarse-grained, division of ways in which an agent can fail to act as she ought: by a failure of *judgment* and by a failure to *act* on one's better judgment.

In order to conform with the dictates of reason, then, at least two things need to

occur. We need to judge rightly, and then we need to bring ourselves to act on that judgment. Corresponding to each of these stages in right action, Michael Smith (2003) has suggested there is a *rational capacity*: one capacity to form a judgment supported by the evidence, and one capacity to form the desire or intention to do what one judges to be right. Using these two capacities, Smith claims to be able to explain a variety of moral psychological phenomena. Most importantly, he claims that he can distinguish between agents who are, and those who are not, morally responsible for their actions. Moreover he also claims to be able to distinguish between different varieties of practical irrationality. The rational agent, for instance, will typically exercise both rational capacities. An agent will act *recklessly* if she fails to exercise the first capacity, and consequently makes unreasonable judgments about what is right. An agent will succumb to *weakness of will* if she fails to exercise the second capacity, and thus forms the intention to do something contrary to her better judgment. Agents who completely lack either one of these capacities are not morally responsible at all. For instance, an agent lacking the second capacity might be subject to an overriding *compulsion*, and thereby relieved of moral responsibility for her action. An agent lacking the first capacity would – in typical cases at least – qualify as mentally incompetent, and would consequently not be a fit subject for praise or blame.¹

While we are broadly sympathetic to the project of developing a moral psychology in terms of rational capacities, we will argue that agents may act irrationally without failing to exercise either of Smith's rational capacities. To remedy this, we suggest our moral psychology needs to accommodate a third rational capacity, missing in Smith's account.

2. *Weakness of will*

As understood by Smith, for an agent to manifest weakness of will, on a given occasion, the agent must fail to do what she judges best, and this must be

¹ In premising responsibility on the capacities for judgement and action, Smith is drawing on a more-or-less standard view. See, for instance, Fischer and Ravizza (1998: 41) who distinguish *receptivity*, the capacity to recognise reasons, and *reactivity*, the capacity to choose in light of one's beliefs about reasons. While Fischer and Ravizza don't talk explicitly of agents' *capacities*, their account of 'moderate reasons-responsiveness' (1998: ch. 3) is very similar to Smith's account of rational capacities.

because she has failed to exercise her second rational capacity. It is a common feature of many accounts of weakness of will that it involves, as an essential feature, acting against one's better judgment. Frank Jackson (1984), however, has challenged the assumption that weakness of will necessarily involves acting against one's better judgment. Jackson's challenge is motivated by the following type of example:

Rosemary's case. Rosemary accidentally falls pregnant. While she does not want to have the baby, she judges, in light of her religious and moral convictions, that she should not have an abortion, all things considered. However, for various reasons, Rosemary is tempted to have an abortion and decides, against her better judgement, to obtain one. She makes an appointment and presents to the clinic. But at the last moment she has a loss of nerve, due largely to her fear of pain from the operation. She revises her intention, and thereby ends up acting in accordance with her better judgement.

Our aim, in this paper, is to vindicate the intuition that Rosemary is weak-willed in revising her intentions, despite the fact that she ends up acting in accordance with her better judgement. We first head off the suggestion that Rosemary exhibits strength of will simply because she acts in accordance with her best judgement. We then go on to develop a moral psychology that is more fine-grained than Smith's two-capacity model. Departing from Smith's overtly Humean framework, we suggest that there is a third rational capacity required for moral agency: a capacity for *maintaining one's resolve*. A failure in either Smith's second capacity or in the capacity to maintain one's resolve can constitute weakness of will. As a consequence, we are able to vindicate Jackson's claim that weakness does not necessarily involve acting against one's better judgment. Our discussion draws heavily on Richard Holton's account, both of the mechanism, and of the rationality of maintaining one's resolve (1999; 2004). However, we suggest some revisions to Holton's account, so as to better describe the role of resolve relative to the other rational capacities. We conclude by offering an alternative, non-consequentialist rationale for being resolute.

3. *Capacities and Dispositions*

Rosemary appears to be weak-willed. Even though she ends up doing what is in accordance with her better judgment, it seems that she is doing so “for the wrong reasons”. To make this quite clear, suppose that, when in the clinic, she is not motivated by a guilt-ridden thought that she is doing the wrong thing. Rather, she is simply unable to steel herself to go through with an unpleasant procedure.

What, precisely, is going on here, and what makes it an instance of weakness of will? We will try to analyse what has occurred in terms of Smith’s rational capacities, but first we need to modify the description of these capacities so as to avoid some unwanted connotations.

Smith’s capacities, to stick to his own formulations, are (1) a “capacity to form the correct belief in response to the evidence available” (2003: 30), and (2) a “capacity to desire in accordance with [one’s] belief” (ibid.: 36).

The first capacity we shall call the capacity for *evaluation*. In our preferred formulation, it is the ability *to make a correct judgment, relative to available evidence, as to what is rationally required*. Unsurprisingly for a moral cognitivist, Smith takes all such judgments to be beliefs. We eschew Smith’s commitment to cognitivism, and shall simply use the term “judgment”, without thereby implying whether or not a judgment is a belief.

The second capacity is a capacity for *decision*. Our preferred formulation is to say it is the capacity *to form the intention to act in accordance with one’s better judgment*. Smith’s description of this capacity reflects his preference for a Humean belief–desire psychology, wherein deciding on a course of action is simply the formation of a desire. We prefer to suggest that decision involves forming an intention, and leave the relation between intentions and desires unspecified.

(Note that by talking of the “first” and “second” capacities, we do not mean to imply that the capacities are always operative in that order. It might be the case that their operation is roughly simultaneous. Or it might be that the first

capacity operates largely unconsciously.²⁾

This fine-tuning done, how can we deploy the concepts of a capacity for evaluation and a capacity for decision in analysing Rosemary's case? In the first place, Rosemary has exercised her capacity to make an evaluation as to what is best. Suppose, that is, that she has successfully made a judgment supported by the evidence. She has not, for instance, ignored relevant reasons and thereby judged *recklessly*. Rosemary then appears to fail to exercise her second rational capacity. She forms an intention to do something other than what she judges best, all things considered. So she is clearly on the path to acting weakly, according to Smith's account. What happens next, however? On the cusp of the operation, Rosemary revises her intention. She now intends *not to have the abortion*. Therefore she now intends to do what she judges best.

One might be tempted, then, to say that: given she is *now intending* to do what she judges is best, she does indeed exercise the second capacity – the capacity to form the intention to do what she judges is best. This thought would obviously be supported by the following over-simple analysis of what it is to exercise a capacity.³

C1. Agent A *exercises* the capacity to alpha in C if and only if:

- i. A has the capacity to alpha in C, and
- ii. A is in C, and does alpha.

Grant that Rosemary has the capacity, in circumstances like these, to form the intention to do what she judges best. Given that Rosemary ends up intending not to have the abortion, she seems, by C1, to be *manifesting* this capacity.

We think – and presumably Smith would agree – that this conclusion would be

² See Holton 2004: 518–9 for an instructive discussion of how these capacities might be deployed.

³ We make no distinction between exercising a capacity and manifesting it. Our thinking about what it is to manifest a capacity has benefited from recent work by Michael Fara (2008).

a mistake, because C1 is false.⁴

Suppose I practice for many years, such that I acquire the capacity to recite pi to 167 decimal places. On the day of a big tournament, however, in which I am hoping to manifest this capacity to win a prize, my benefactor worries that I might fail, and implants a device in my brain that will allow the benefactor to manipulate my vocal chords at his behest. When I am asked to recite the digits, I am in appropriate circumstances and I do indeed recite pi to the correct number of digits: but this is not because of my efforts. My efforts to recite pi are pre-empted by the benefactor's remote control of my vocal chords. He causes me to recite the correct numbers, but this is not a manifestation of my capacity. C1, therefore, is false. Whatever the correct analysis of manifesting a capacity is, it will presumably make some reference to the causal process by which the outcome comes about. It must be caused, in the right way, by the capacity of the agent, to be a genuine manifestation of that capacity.⁵

Returning to Rosemary, then, simply because she is now intending to act in accordance with her better judgment does not entail that she is *manifesting the capacity* to form an intention to act in accordance with her better judgment. Because she is primarily motivated by her fear of pain, it seems that she is coming to form her intention in *the wrong way*. Just as, in the tournament, I am reciting pi to the 167th place in the wrong fashion for it to be a manifestation of my capacities, Rosemary is forming an intention in accordance with her better judgment in the wrong fashion for it to be a manifestation of the relevant capacity to form such intentions.

What would it take to form an intention in the right fashion for it to be a manifestation of the capacity for decision? We suggest a necessary condition of it being a manifestation of that capacity is that the formation of the intention be *causally dependent* upon the agent's having the judgment. This condition will not be sufficient, because there will no doubt be puzzle cases where an intention

⁴ For related discussion of what it is to *have* a capacity, see Smith 2003: 21–9.

⁵ The idea that the manifestation of a disposition requires that the manifestation event come about by a particular type of process is briefly mentioned by Molnar (2003: 91) and developed at greater length by Handfield (forthcoming). Fischer and Ravizza also suggest a similar requirement for the proper manifestation of a reasons-responsive mechanism (1998: 63–4).

causally depends upon a judgment in a non-standard, deviant fashion. But, at a minimum, we can expect that there must be causal dependence for the capacity to be manifest and, in Rosemary's case, it is plausible that this causal dependence is lacking. Because she is motivated by fear, it is causally irrelevant what her better judgment is at the time when she abandons her intention to have the abortion. Rosemary, therefore, is not manifesting her capacity for decision.

Rational capacities and responding to reasons

An agent might fail to exercise one of Smith's rational capacities – either the capacity for judgment or the capacity for decision. But does it follow that the agent is therefore irrational? Couldn't it be the case that an agent has other psychological mechanisms by which she responds to reasons? Provided she is still responding to reasons, we might be uncomfortable saying that the agent is irrational.

Nomy Arpaly's (2000: 504–5) well-known case of Emily supports this train of thought. Emily judges, incorrectly, that she ought to remain in graduate school. But eventually she quits, in spite of her judgment, due to feelings of sadness and restlessness. Emily appears to fail in the exercise of her capacities both for judgment and decision. Nevertheless, Arpaly argues, Emily is rational because (a) her effective intentions are *consistent* with the judgment that she would have formed had she successfully exercised her capacity for judgment, and (b) her emotions are a *reliable guide* to the judgment that she would have formed if her judging had been successful.

Perhaps this puts pressure on our claim that Rosemary is practically irrational. What if her fear is subconsciously caused by her judgment that she ought not to have the abortion? In that case, her fear is helping her to respond to reasons.

We are sympathetic to the thought that it is *possible* to be rational, employing psychological mechanisms other than Smith's rational capacities – such as emotions. More broadly, we are tempted by *non-intellectualist* models of practical rationality: models which take it to be an empirical matter whether or

not rationality requires us to act on our all-things-considered judgment.⁶ However, significant controversy remains over the implications of such a view, and whether we can coherently conceive as ourselves as rational agents, while also blithely acting in response to emotions which we judge to be irrational (Jones 2003: 193–8). Consequently, we will remain uncommitted on these potentially controversial variations of Rosemary’s case. For our purposes, we can focus on cases where the contrary inclinations to which agents are subject are, *ex hypothesi*, not reason-tracking. Accordingly, we will continue to speak – as Smith appears to⁷ – as though it is *necessary* to exercise the rational capacities in order to be practically rational. This can be regarded as a helpful idealisation which highlights what is necessary for practical rationality, *in the absence of other reason-tracking mechanisms*.

4. A third rational capacity

So, even though Rosemary decides to do what she judges is best, we think she is not manifesting her capacity for decision – which we described as the capacity to form the intention to do what one judges best. That said, we might be uncomfortable saying that she has *failed* to manifest that capacity – at least on this occasion. This seems like a strange thing to say because she does not seem to be in the right *circumstances*. Certainly there is room for argument over how to delimit the circumstances of the capacity for decision, but one way to interpret it is as a capacity to form an intention in circumstances where one is currently *undecided* what to do. Rosemary, however, has already formed an intention. What she is doing now is *revising* her intention. And Smith’s second rational capacity – on at least one plausible construal – is a capacity to form an intention in circumstances of indecision – not a capacity to revise intentions after a decision has been made.

Not only does it seem pragmatically odd to say that Rosemary has “failed” to exercise her capacity for decision (because we might think that the

⁶ See, e.g. Jones 2003: 187–8 for a discussion of the key commitments of a non-intellectualist approach to practical rationality.

⁷ For instance, Smith suggests that in cases like that of Emily, even if we grant that Emily is “globally rational” in abandoning her Ph.D., she does so at cost of “local irrationality”, presumably because she does not properly exercise all of her rational capacities. See Smith 2004: 190.

circumstances for decision have long since passed), there is a more pressing reason why we should resist the thought that Rosemary's failing is a failure to exercise her second capacity. That is: her rational failing is different in kind from the failing she first manifested, when she decided she would have the abortion. At that time, she had a justified belief about what she ought to do, and she nonetheless formed the intention to do otherwise. Her failure of practical rationality was somehow grounded in this failure to match her judgment and her will. At this later time, however, her judgment is far less salient in explaining her rational failing. Rather, what seems salient now is that she has formed a specific intention to go through with an unpleasant action. She was in a position to know that the action would be unpleasant and difficult to go through with, but she nonetheless resolved to do it. Yet, despite that resolution, she failed to bring her action into accord with it. This, we suggest, is the crucial failing that she manifests at the later time.

We suggest that, to analyse correctly what is happening here, we need to postulate a third capacity involved in rational agency: a capacity to *maintain one's resolve*, in circumstances where one has already decided what to do. It is this capacity which Rosemary is failing to exercise, and is therefore responsible for her weakness of will.

The capacities required for practical rationality then – for strong-willed action in particular – can be glossed as follows⁸:

Evaluation: a capacity to judge what is best, based on the available evidence.

Decision: a capacity to form the intention to do what one judges best, in circumstances where one is not yet decided.

Resolve: a capacity to maintain one's intention, in circumstances where one has already decided what to do.

The capacities for decision and resolve are obviously closely linked, and there

⁸ Note, this claim is subject to the idealisation described at the end of the previous section: that other reason-tracking mechanisms are absent.

may be cases where we have difficulty separating their function, because sometimes it may be indeterminate whether or not an agent is “decided”. But we think in many cases it is plausible that they are distinct and, moreover, it seems that we understand weakness of will better if we understand the ways in which both capacities are required for practical rationality.⁹

To illustrate, consider a case inspired by a discussion of Jeanette Kennett’s (2001: 59): in a restaurant, I am having great difficulty determining what I should order. This is because I find it hard to exercise my capacity for evaluation where there are numerous good options. (I am driven to optimise, and not happy merely to satisfice.) Eventually, I make my decision; I decide it would be best to have salmon. I then exercise my capacity for decision, resolving to have the salmon. I place my order accordingly. But I know that in between ordering and receiving my meal, I will probably see other delicious dishes being delivered to other tables. In the face of this evidence, I will be strongly tempted to revise my judgment as to what is best. But that revised judgment, like my first one, will be defeasible. Moreover, changing my mind and adjusting my order will likely entail fuss and embarrassment. A further potential cost is that, by prolonging the number of alternatives considered and the period of time in which I am contemplating alternatives, I increase the perceived opportunity costs associated with my eventual choice. That is, the more I am aware of things that I have foregone by choosing salmon, the more likely I am to be less satisfied with having the salmon.¹⁰

In order to avoid these hazards, what I need to do is to maintain my intention, *in spite of the potential for wavering judgments about what is best*. For this, I need to exercise the third capacity, otherwise I will be driven to the embarrassing lengths of recalling the waiter and attempting to revise my order. If I am unable to do this, I seem to suffer from a form of weakness of will that might be described as *inconstancy* of my will.¹¹

⁹ Below, when we discuss the mechanism by which resolve operates, we note a further complication in trying to separate decision and resolve.

¹⁰ There is some empirical evidence for this phenomenon. See especially Iyengar and Lepper 2000: 1003–4. For an accessible discussion of this and related research, see Schwartz 2004.

¹¹ An anonymous referee has suggested that we might try to explain this failure of rationality in terms of

Inconstancy is the form of weakness from which Rosemary is suffering when she leaves the clinic. She is unable to maintain her initial intention. What makes Rosemary's case especially unusual is that she has manifested two different species of weakness of will, and on two separate occasions. First, she failed to manifest the second capacity, and formed the intention to do something other than what she thought was best. This is a traditional case of weakness-as-*akrasia*. Secondly, however, she failed to maintain that intention, because she was not able to maintain it in anticipation of pain and discomfort. So the two occasions of weakness effectively cancelled each other out, and she ended up intending to do precisely that which she had originally judged to be best. But because she came to this intention in the wrong way, it was not a manifestation of either her second or third capacities.

As we have seen, Smith could – by appealing to our causal requirement for the manifestation of a capacity, and at the cost of some pragmatic awkwardness – locate a certain form of irrationality in Rosemary on this later occasion: she is irrational because she fails, for a second time, to exercise her capacity for decision, because her judgment is not causing her intention in the right way. The preceding discussion should make clear that this is not enough to make good sense of the case. Rosemary manifests *two distinct* forms of practical irrationality. Not only is she irrational in forming an intention contrary to her better judgment. She is irrational, again, when she fails to maintain this (irrationally formed) intention, failing to exercise her capacity for resolve. It is for this reason, ultimately, that Smith's two-capacity model fails to offer a satisfactory moral psychology.

5. The irrationality of changing one's mind

The third rational capacity, suggested above, is very similar to an ability or tendency which Richard Holton (1999, 2003, 2004) has identified as crucial for

a reckless judgment, and thus avoid the need for a third rational capacity. Perhaps I have irrationally judged that I ought, all things considered, to reconsider my order. The better judgment would have been that I ought not to reconsider. While we admire the ingenuity of the thought, we have trouble believing it is a serious alternative. It clearly invites a dangerous regress of judgments: ought I to be reconsidering whether or not to reconsider? Ought I to be considering that question? And even if this regress could be stopped, we fear that there may be cases of incommensurable choices that produce either paralysis or sub-optimal results if we allow reconsideration of any sort. See n. 27 below.

avoiding weakness of will: the tendency to resist reconsidering our intentions, or simply *will-power*. For Holton, the central paradigm of strength of will does not involve actively reconsidering and weighing one's current temptations against an earlier decision. Rather, it involves resisting – or downright avoiding – the very process of reconsideration. So Holton claims that the mechanism by which the capacity of resolve operates is – at least in central cases – simply a capacity to *resist reconsideration*.

We agree with Holton that this is a very promising account of the mechanism by which resolve works. Apart from its empirical plausibility, it has the benefit of showing how the fact that we have resolved to do something can appear to furnish us with extra reason to do that thing, while avoiding the objection that this would allow us to bootstrap ourselves into justifications for arbitrary actions (Holton 2004: 514–6).

Having endorsed Holton's understanding of the mechanism, however, requires us to revisit the characterisation of the rational capacities. Our earlier characterisation suggested that resolve operates solely to aid the person who has already decided what to do. But sometimes, where the reasons are finely balanced for and against an action, it might be necessary to halt reconsideration and simply plump for one option or the other. Consider someone who appears to be incapable of forming an intention to act, because of ceaseless dithering and reconsideration of the relevant reasons. It seems that a person like this is manifesting much the same defect as a person who forms an intention but abandons it too readily, due to an excessive habit of reconsideration. It is seemingly a more grave defect in the latter case; but a crucial causal factor in both cases is a habit of engaging in more deliberation than is healthy.

So our initial characterisation of resolve, as a capacity *to maintain one's intention*, is incorrect. Rather, resolve is probably better understood as a capacity *to cease or suppress deliberation* – regardless of whether or not an intention has been formed. Sometimes we need to manifest this capacity in order to form an intention.¹² Sometimes we need to manifest it in order to maintain our

¹² We note that it is not entirely natural sounding to describe an agent as being resolute when they are first forming an intention – but we think that the introduction of this tension with natural language is required to give an elegant account of the psychology.

intentions.

This might lead the reader to wonder: if we need to manifest resolve even where we are *undecided*, what role is left for the capacity of decision? Wasn't decision the capacity to form an intention? Our claim, however, is just that being resolute is sometimes a causally necessary condition for the formation of an intention. That does not show that resolve is itself the capacity for decision. (Compare: the cook's exercising her capacity to not get distracted by her emails may be a causally necessary step in preparing a delicious meal; but that does not show that the capacity to prepare a delicious meal is identical to the former capacity.) The picture we are suggesting here is that we have one capacity, *judgement*, which enables us to form judgments that track the available reasons. *Decision* is a capacity which enables us to form intentions that track the available reasons.¹³ And *resolve* is a capacity that puts the brakes on deliberation. This hinders the exercise of our judgment – we may become temporarily blinded to some of the reasons at the level of reflective thought. But in so doing, we improve our situation by ensuring that our intentions are more stable.¹⁴ The stability of intentions can in turn serve to ensure that our *actions* better track the available reasons. The vacillating restaurant patron might have impeccable judgment, but as a practical agent is a rational failure.

This book-keeping done, we need to turn to the rational status of resolve. As Holton rightly points out: it is sometimes rational to reconsider one's earlier intentions; and sometimes it is rational to change one's mind. The rational capacity to resist reconsideration is surely not the capacity to doggedly stick to one's intentions *in any circumstance*. So we need to specify the scope of the capacity; we need to say why and when it makes sense to reconsider and change one's mind.

In order to specify the scope of the capacity for resolve, as it ought to function, we need an account of the underlying rationale of the capacity. Why, that is, do

¹³ See Holton 2006 for an instructive discussion of the way in which this capacity might need to operate somewhat independently of the capacity for judgment: it might be that we do our best reason-tracking when we form intentions without any judgment.

¹⁴ See Holton 2003 for a detailed attempt to describe how the stability of intentions may be undermined by deliberation.

rational agents need such a capacity? Drawing on Michael Bratman's (1987: 64) "two tier" justification of intentions, Holton defends the capacity for resolve by appealing to certain *substantive* benefits that the capacity might promote. According to Bratman, whether it is rational for an agent to maintain an intention or, rather, to abandon it is determined by whether it is beneficial for the agent to possess the *propensity* to maintain or abandon intentions in the circumstances. We implicitly endorsed this view, earlier on, in the case of the fickle restaurant patron. Revising one's intended order seems irrational precisely because having the disposition to reconsider seems harmful. To mention just one consideration (emphasised on Bratman's account), such a disposition would be disadvantageous because it would likely hinder both intra- and inter-personal coordination.

But of course, neither we nor Holton want to suggest that reconsideration, and subsequent revision, of one's intentions is always irrational. There are three crucial aspects of Holton's view which serve to block the implication that changing one's mind is always irrational.

First, some intentions contain their own let-out clauses (Holton 1999: 250). Intentions arising from appetites seem to be excellent examples of this: we intend to drink some water, provided we are still thirsty by the time we reach the tap. So revising one's intention once such a let-out clause is triggered is surely not a failure of one's rational capacities.

Second, Holton is especially concerned with a special sub-class of intentions that are designed to overcome contrary inclinations in future. Call these *resolutions*. Reconsidering our resolutions, leading to abandonment of the intention, is paradigmatic of weakness of will. Revising ordinary intentions (such as my order at the restaurant) may also be unreasonable, but is merely *capricious*, rather than weak-willed. Holton suggests, then, that there is a genus of unreasonable behaviour – irresoluteness – and that caprice and weakness of will are its two species (Holton 1999: 250–1).¹⁵

¹⁵ See also McIntyre (2006: 297), who claims that a failure to be resolute can never take us completely by surprise, because resolution always involves anticipation of contrary inclinations. We are not entirely convinced on this point. We think it possible that agents can sometimes be weak-willed because they *should* have anticipated contrary inclinations, and failed to make an appropriate resolution. But we do

Third, Holton suggests that the tendency to reconsider one's intentions – and conversely the tendency to resist reconsidering – may both be reasonable, provided they operate in appropriate circumstances. He sketches the following general principles specifying those circumstances (2004: 526; see also his 1999: 249):

1. It is rational to have a tendency not to reconsider:
 - a. if one is faced with the very temptations that the resolution was designed to overcome; or
 - b. if one's judgment will be worse than it was when the resolution was formed.

2. It is rational to have a tendency to reconsider:
 - a. if the reasons for forming the resolution no longer obtain;
 - b. if circumstances turn out to be importantly different from those anticipated; or
 - c. if one made an important mistake in the reasoning that led to the resolution.

The act of reconsidering, or maintaining, a resolution is rational, for Holton, if it is a manifestation of a tendency which it is rational to have, by the above conditions. (Though it should be noted that Holton puts forward these conditions only provisionally, and as likely to be incomplete.)

As Holton realises, the various conditions in which it might be rational to have a tendency either to reconsider or resist reconsidering, are not mutually exclusive. He writes:

The obvious difficulty comes in the tension between the two sets of conditions. Cases of judgment shift will be cases where the first two rules

not pursue this difference of opinion here.

will recommend non-reconsideration, but where the agent will believe, if he reflects on the matter, that one or more of the final three rules will recommend reconsideration. Moreover, in many cases such beliefs would be warranted. Circumstances do change; acquaintance with temptation provides new information; mistaken reasoning does come to light.

When I say this is a difficulty, I do not mean that it is a difficulty in the account I am offering. Rather I think that the account reflects a difficulty that we have in deciding when reconsideration is in fact rational. Agents will have to learn when to put weight on the principles that favour non-reconsideration, and when to put weight on those favouring reconsideration. This will be driven by knowledge of what works best; knowledge that will be different for different sorts of resolution... Moreover, things will be different for different people. Those prone to self-deception will have reason to put more weight on the principles governing non-reconsideration than those who are not. (2004: 526)

Much of what Holton says here seems right. It is true that we would recommend that agents acquire specific habits of reconsideration and non-reconsideration, customised for the particular sorts of intention involved, and for the peculiar psychology of the agent.¹⁶ However, Holton seems not to have grasped the full implications of his view here. It follows straightforwardly from a set of conditions like Holton's suggested ones that there will be circumstances in which the triggering conditions for two opposing tendencies are met.

For example, Rosemary is likely to be less reliable in any judgment she forms on the doorstep of the clinic than in the comfort of her own home. So she is – very likely – in circumstances where it is beneficial to have a tendency to resist reconsidering. However, it might also be argued that she has acquired new information: she has learned that she fears pain more than she realised. It is beneficial to have a tendency to reconsider when one acquires new information. So if Rosemary acts on the tendency to reconsider in light of new information, she will be acting on a beneficial tendency, and thereby be acting rationally. On

¹⁶ Though this point requires some qualification, as will become evident below.

the other hand, if Rosemary manifests a resistance to reconsidering in light of being in worse circumstances for judgment, she will also be acting on a beneficial tendency, and thereby be acting rationally. Rational action is in danger of becoming *too easy*, on Holton's account.

Rather, in cases like Rosemary's we think practical rationality is extremely *hard*; it may even be impossible. If she revises her original intention, she seems to be weak-willed. But if she maintains her resolve, she is going to be committed to concluding a plan which is against her better judgment. Depending upon one's views about the nature of practical rationality, this could be a dilemma, whereby she behaves irrationally no matter what she does.

Putting the particular complications and difficulties peculiar to Rosemary's case to one side, the same argument – that rational action is too easy – could apply to *anyone* on the cusp of undergoing a painful medical procedure. Notice that it will not suffice to remedy this by specifying ever more fine-grained conditions that demarcate when the tendencies in question are beneficial. If we seriously wished to take that path, we may as well eliminate the dispositional aspect of the story altogether, and simply say that an agent acts rationally if what she does benefits her. And that is precisely the conclusion that the two-tier account is designed to circumvent.¹⁷

What has gone wrong? In our view, the difficulty here is not merely incidental. Rather, it reflects a perennial difficulty that afflicts various attempts to give a substantive specification of the nature of the virtues. That is: we suspect that resolve is a virtue¹⁸ – or something very much like it – and by trying to give a *substantive* specification of what that virtue consists in, Holton finds himself faced with a particular instance of a general problem that seems to face any virtue theorist.

The general problem is this: Suppose someone asks why a given trait, X, is a

¹⁷ This parallels David Lyons' (1965) well-known argument that rule-utilitarianism collapses into act-utilitarianism.

¹⁸ Perhaps another reason to think that resolve is a virtue is that it seems to be called for in different degrees in different roles. Military and political leaders, in particular, seem to require a high degree of resolve. Thanks to the Editor for bringing this point to our attention.

virtue. One sort of answer would be broadly consequentialist. “Agents who have X tend to promote some sort of value, so it is a good trait to have.” While that might be a good answer for why we should tend to cultivate X in ourselves or others, it seems to have reduced the virtue claim to a merely consequentialist claim – and that might seem objectionable. In particular, it seems to give rise to various puzzles about right action that the virtue theorist had intended to avoid. “Why, on this occasion, should I manifest X, given that better consequences could be achieved by acting from a different trait, incompatible with X (or by simply suppressing the manifestation of trait X)?” Insistence that I should manifest X smacks of ‘trait-worship’, analogous to the allegation of ‘rule-worship’ that seemingly afflicts rule utilitarians (Smart 1967).

Entangled with this issue is a question as to how X is specified. If X is given a substantive specification, independent of causal consequences, then it seems to be a contingent matter whether or not X will satisfy the consequentialist rationale for deeming it a virtue. But if we simply specify X as ‘that trait which has optimal consequences’, then we have made the trait an idle wheel in the explanation of right action. Right action is seemingly explained in straightforwardly act-consequentialist terms.

Returning to the first question – why is X a virtue? – the alternative answer would be resolutely non-consequentialist. In virtue theory, for instance, we might claim that X is a virtue not because of its causal consequences, but because possession of X is partly *constitutive* of the value we ought to promote. This style of answer seemingly avoids the question that embarrassed the consequentialist account. But it does so at cost of incurring two liabilities: such an account must (i) make substantive claims about the nature of X, and must also (ii) posit an internal relation between X and the relevant value.

Holton’s account of the rationality of resolve is straightforwardly in the consequentialist camp. So even though we might acknowledge that agents *generally* benefit by being resolute in circumstances of the sort we are in, we can still ask whether it is rational, on *this* occasion, to be resolute, given that we can bring about better outcomes by reconsidering our resolutions. It is difficult, while remaining consistent with the consequentialist flavour of the original rationale, to maintain that an agent should nonetheless resolutely forgo optimal

outcomes, simply because the *habit* of being resolute in circumstances like this is one that is beneficial. True enough, but perhaps an imperfect habit, or a different habit, could be even more beneficial.¹⁹

So one option would be to try to develop an account of resolve which makes it partly constitutive of practical rationality, rather than something which earns a place in the arsenal of a rational agent by virtue of its contingent benefits.²⁰ To be plausible, however, any such account would have to offer a substantive characterisation of resolve that is not susceptible to the sort of incompleteness that Holton's rules of thumb possess. Moreover, it would need to have some sort of account of the nature of practical rationality which explicated why resolve, so characterised, is a necessary condition of being practically rational.

We are not confident that we can conclusively defend any such account. At best, we think we can illustrate a plausible-sounding view of this second sort. So, in that spirit, below we sketch a non-consequentialist account of the role of resolve in practical rationality.

6. A non-consequentialist account of resolve

The two-tier account of resolve mistakenly privileges *benefit* over the essential requirements of *agency*. Sometimes, to be an agent, you need certain dispositions, even where those dispositions are not beneficial. It costs something to be an agent, and this cost is non-negotiable. Resolution is one of the dispositions required for agency. The reason for this is to do with the essentially temporally extended nature of our agency. We are the sorts of creatures who are typically subject to highly variable temptations over time. Our processes of reasoning and judging cannot take effect instantaneously, and are frequently much less salient than those temptations, once we are in the

¹⁹ Bratman's account of the stability of intentions is similarly consequentialist. When discussing the sort of problem we are posing here, he suggests a restriction on the two-tier rationale, such that if it is *obvious* to a reflective agent that it is worth reconsidering, then to do so is rational – even if that breaks a habit that is otherwise beneficial (1992: 10). This saves the agent from being required to *consciously and obviously* engage in habit-worship, but since it seems possible to be involved in *non-obvious* habit-worship, we suspect that he does not entirely avoid the objection.

²⁰ Bratman (1992: 11) adverts to this possibility – see his “View #6”.

wilds of practical action. So we need some mechanism to give our processes of judgment persistent force in determining our behaviour, in spite of contrary temptations. This is precisely what resolution does for us. It is a faculty that enables us to blinker our sights to temptation, and plough on with an intention arrived at by an earlier process of decision.

This suggests that agency itself *requires* habitual exercise of resolve. Without the habitual tendency to suppress deliberation, agents are susceptible to a pernicious and disabling instability. Consider an extreme case:

... I am crushed with tedium. After all, the direct, immediate, legitimate fruit of heightened consciousness is inertia, that is, the deliberate refusal to do anything. ... I repeat, and repeat emphatically: all spontaneous people, men of action, are active *because* they are stupid and limited. How is this to be explained? Like this: in consequence of their limitations, they take immediate, but secondary, causes for primary ones, and thus they are more quickly and easily convinced than other people that they have found indisputable grounds for their action, and they are easy in their minds; and this, you know, is the main thing. After all, in order to act, one must be absolutely sure of oneself, no doubts must remain anywhere. But how am I, for example, to be sure of myself? Where are the primary causes on which I can take my stand, where are my foundations? ... I practice thinking, and consequently each of my primary causes pulls along another, even more primary, in its wake, and so on *ad infinitum*. That is really the essence of all thinking and self-awareness. ... Oh, gentlemen, perhaps the only reason I consider myself a clever man is that I have never in all my life been able to either begin or finish anything.²¹

Dostoevsky's 'man from the underground' is no doubt exaggerating, and he is irrational for reasons that are not solely related to resolve; elsewhere he describes committing other rational vices, such as reckless failures of judgment.²² But at least in this instance, it sounds like a profound case of an

²¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, translated by Jessie Coulson. London: Penguin, 1972, pp. 26–7.

²² "I think there is something wrong with my liver. But I don't understand the least thing about my

excessive tendency to engage in deliberation; or in other words, a lack of resolve.

Applying the two-tier account, Holton argues that resolve is rationally required in cases such as these because the tendency to vacillate is pragmatically unreasonable, i.e. detrimental to an agent's interests (1999: 252–3; 2004: 524–5). This might, of course, be plausible in the circumstances: Dostoevsky's hero does not seem to be flourishing! But our thought is that these pragmatic considerations, while important, fail to get to the root of the pertinent defect of practical rationality. Even if the underground man were to suffer *no* ill-effects from vacillating, we suggest that he is nevertheless suffering from a kind of break-down of agency. He is so inconstant in his behavioural orientation that his processes of reasoning, evaluation, and judgment are no longer causally connected to his acting. Agency requires that our reasons move us to *act*, so his very agency is being undermined.

Normally, of course, we are dealing with failures of lesser severity. A normal failure of resolve is simply – as in Rosemary's case – a limited instance where a temptation or fear overcomes one's prior intention. Under what circumstances does such a failure constitute practical irrationality? We will try to answer this question more precisely below, but for now we wish to stress that the question is not simply whether it is beneficial for the agent to have a habit of reconsideration or non-reconsideration in the particular type of circumstances at hand. Rather, in every case where we fail to maintain a resolution, other things being equal, something is occurring that is *contrary to the habits that constitute practical agency*. This is so, even if the agent is manifesting a disposition which it is beneficial for her to have.

There is perhaps some indirect linguistic evidence of resolve's constitutive role in agency. Recall that, on Smith's analysis of rational agency, an agent who is *incapable* of judging what is best, or an agent who is *incapable* of forming the intention to do what is best, is pathologically afflicted. In the first case, we would perhaps say that someone is mentally incompetent (or criminally

illness, and I don't know for certain what part of me is affected. I am not having any treatment for it, although I have a great respect for medicine and doctors. I am besides extremely superstitious, if only in having such respect for medicine. (I am well educated enough not to be superstitious, but superstitious I am.)" (Ibid., p. 15).

insane), and in the second we would say that someone is suffering from a pathological compulsion. In both cases, we would excuse the agent of moral responsibility for her actions. But is there such a thing as pathological inconstancy of the will? We do have terms to describe various degrees of inconstancy, such as “fickle” or “capricious”, but we do not seem to have a ready category for the person who is relieved of moral responsibility on account of this deficiency. Perhaps this is because any such condition would be so totally disabling as to make complex voluntary actions near-impossible: the agent would suffer a sort of rational paralysis, like that which the underground man seems to describe.

If this sort of link between agency and resolve seems plausible, then we have discharged the second liability mentioned above: we have described the internal link between agency and resolve. But it remains to discharge the first liability: to give a substantive account of what the trait consists in.

Rationally changing one’s mind

Note that, in claiming that the exercise of resolve is a constitutive habit of agency, we are not saying that being resolute is a necessary condition of practical rationality in every instance of our behaviour. If the capacity for resolve is akin to a virtue, it is surely possible to be overly resolute, or stubborn.²³ We are merely, in the process of offering a non-consequentialist account of resolve, registering that every instance of *irresolute* behaviour – behaviour where resolve is called for, but not manifested – is contrary to a *habit* which is essential to agency, and thus to rationality.

That said, we need to make sure that our non-consequentialist account doesn’t recommend obstinately sticking to one’s original intention in every case. Sometimes, obviously, it is rational to change one’s mind, and this is not to be settled solely on the basis of whether or not one makes a habit of changing one’s mind. Here we agree with Holton that questions of benefit are relevant, but we draw a distinction between benefits for a particular individual and benefits for a *typical* individual. It is the latter which is crucial for analysing

²³ See also Holton 1999: 247–8.

weakness, we contend.²⁴

There are three salient types of occasion when one might wish to change one's mind. These are occasions where one's judgments are: (i) temporally variable, (ii) rationally mandated, or (iii) rationally underdetermined.

- i. Temporally variable judgments occur where we have made a prior resolution on the basis of a reasonable judgment, but our changing temporal perspective has changed our judgment of what it is best to do. This pattern is typical of temptation cases, where we wish to derive a long-term benefit at a short-term cost. A would-be jogger who judges that he should start jogging tomorrow need not be irrational if he revises that judgment tomorrow. He can still derive many of the benefits of jogging by starting some other day, and there are no doubt other immediate benefits to gain by putting it off till tomorrow. So it was rational to judge on the first day: "I ought to jog tomorrow", but by the following day it is rational to deny that judgment.²⁵
- ii. Rationally mandated judgments involve cases where the reasons for a judgment really do change, and for reasons other than a mere shift in temporal perspective. Our would-be jogger, for instance, might undergo a radical conversion of values such that he no longer values physical fitness at all. Or he might discover some new evidence indicating that the health benefits of physical exercise have been grossly exaggerated. In such cases, for reasons that are not merely due to a change in temporal perspective, his judgment of what is best has changed.
- iii. Finally, rationally underdetermined judgments involve cases where, at the time of action, there is no compelling reason to perform the particular

²⁴ By invoking a "typical" individual in our account, we intend to remain agnostic between various ways this concept could be analysed. One could endorse an evolutionary-historical sense of the term, whereby the typical individual is one who is exposed to a sort of "average" environment, relative to the various selection pressures that have occurred in the history of the relevant population. Alternatively, one could intend a more obviously normative or teleological sense of the term, whereby the typical individual is characterised by having "proper goals and ends" or manifests certain "normal" properties.

²⁵ Holton 2004: 508-9. See also the puzzle of the self-torturer (Quinn 1990), which – we suggest – could readily be resolved by an account of practical rationality such as ours.

action which the agent has resolved to undertake. This could be due to a Buridan's ass-type situation, or due to incommensurable considerations favouring each of the possible alternatives.²⁶ The faculty of judgment alone is unable, in such cases, to conclusively determine that any particular course of action is required, and the agent has had to "plump" for one option so as to avoid doing nothing. A would-be jogger might be very confident, for instance, that he should jog at least four days a week, but have no compelling reason to jog on any particular day of the week. At risk of doing nothing, however, he had better plump for some particular days to jog.

These categories need not be mutually exclusive, and are no doubt somewhat vague. The key point is that it is in cases like (i) and (iii) that we see paradigm instances of weakness if an agent changes her mind. We suggest this is because, for *typical* creatures like us, the capacity of resolve will – if manifested – tend to deliver benefits in these cases. Changes in temporal perspective are a pervasive feature of human life, and if we were subject to changes of behavioural orientation every time our current reasons changed, we would be crippled from achieving our longer term goals. Resolve prevents this from happening. Similarly, life often involves cases of rationally underdetermined choice, and resolve is crucial in getting us through such situations without endless reconsideration and dithering.

The second class of cases, however, where what is rationally required of us has changed, are less congenial to the capacity of resolve. These are the cases where, other things being equal, we would hope that reason can overcome resolve, lest we end up acting for the worse.

²⁶ John Broome (2001) discusses a case of incommensurate goods that has strong echoes of Rosemary's case. He asks us to suppose that Abraham's choice whether to obey God by sacrificing his son or to be a good father by refusing God was a choice between incommensurate goods: neither is better than the other. Suppose he chooses to sacrifice Isaac, and sets out to do so. Halfway there, Isaac is deeply suspicious, and father-son trust has been betrayed. Abraham reconsiders, and turns back. The choice he makes is still between incommensurate goods, so in some sense it is rational for him to choose to turn back and refuse God. But if we compare the option of turning back *now* with the option of refusing *from the outset*, Abraham would clearly prefer refusing God at the outset, for that way he would not have compromised Isaac's trust in him. So by turning back now, although he is responding to the relevant reasons in a permissible way, he makes a choice that is, from a more temporally extended perspective, suboptimal. What agents need to do, to avoid falling into such dangers, is to *resist reconsideration* in cases of choices between incommensurate goods. See also Holton 1999: 251.

However, even here, we may be inclined to condemn an agent as weak-willed if the reconsideration they undertake occurs *for the wrong reasons*. If the jogger, having read fresh evidence casting doubt on the benefits of jogging, seizes upon this as a convenient excuse to give up his intentions, when he actually is motivated by laziness, we may rightly condemn this behaviour as weak-willed.²⁷

(There are also cases – like that of Rosemary – in which one’s judgment has not *shifted* at all. Suppose a recovering alcoholic judges that he ought not to drink any alcohol today. This is entailed by a policy intention that he not drink alcohol for the rest of his life. However, against his better judgment, he succumbs to temptation, and sets out for the bottle shop. On the threshold, he pauses, reconsiders, and is able to bring his intention back in line with his judgment. He turns around and goes home.

Crucially, the intention he formed to drink alcohol today was not a resolution – the sort of intention that is designed to defeat contrary inclinations – so we are much less inclined to deem the agent weak-willed. We might, in some circumstances, call the agent capricious or inconstant – the sort of vacillation he is manifesting is a minor variety of practical irrationality. But most plausibly, we believe that cases like this are akin to abandoning an appetite-based intention. The alcoholic intended to buy a drink because, *and only for so long as*, he very much wanted the drink. If his wanting is diminished in the face of guilt or self-admonition, then there is manifestly less reason to preserve the intention, and there is no irrationality in the change of mind.²⁸)

By saying that resolve benefits typical agents in cases of temporally variable and rationally underdetermined judgments, we are not saying that it will be beneficial for all agents to maintain their resolve in such cases. We can surely conceive of an agent that is in a special environment such that she receives freakish benefits for changing her intentions in cases like (i) and (iii). For that agent, then, it is beneficial to have tendencies that lead to change of intentions. On an account that privileges those dispositions that are beneficial to *an*

²⁷ Holton is alive to this distinction (1999: 249-250).

²⁸ Thanks to Robert Sparrow for raising this case.

individual, therefore, the agent is not practically irrational.²⁹ We disagree. The tendency to resist reconsidering in these cases is essential to practical rationality for *creatures like us*. Therefore, regardless of individual benefit, the agent is irresolute – either capricious or weak-willed, depending upon what sort of intentions are at stake.

Conversely, we can conceive of an agent who has tendencies stubbornly to resist reconsidering in cases of rationally mandated judgment-shift. It is conceivable that these tendencies will prove extremely beneficial. Again, while this is surely not the case for most of us, it could be the case for a fortunate individual. Again, on an account that examines the matter in terms of individuals, these stubborn tendencies are beneficial, and the agent is practically rational. But because this agent is atypical, we suggest that this agent has employed the capacity for resolve outside its proper scope, and has thereby corrupted her practical rationality.

To conclude: Practical rationality involves the manifestation of certain rational capacities. These capacities can be described as: first, a capacity to form justified judgments; second, a capacity to form intentions to do what we judge best; and third, a capacity to resist reconsidering our intentions. For all three of the rational capacities, however, it is crucial, not only that the relevant type of manifestation event occurs, but that it occurs *in the right way*. In cases like Rosemary's, an agent can end up doing what he or she judges best, but because the process by which that happens is deviant, the agent is not practically rational. Practical rationality, then, is somewhat like knowledge. Rosemary is reminiscent of an agent in a Gettier case. She did the right thing (akin to a true belief), and she had good reasons to believe it was the right thing (akin to a justified belief), but she got there by a "lucky" route. And doing the right thing by luck, it seems, is incompatible with practical rationality.

Bringing out the relationship between luck and practical rationality also highlights the role, in our account, of benefit in justifying the rational capacity for resolution. The capacity to cease or suppress deliberation is rational, not merely because it is frequently beneficial. Rather – we are tempted to argue – it

²⁹ It is not clear how Holton stands on this matter. His crucial discussion of toxin cases (2004: 527–9) remains ambiguous between individual benefit versus other construals, such as ours.

is essential to agency in agents like us. But of course that is compatible with there being unlucky agents who manifest the capacity but fail to derive benefits. And it is also compatible with there being lucky agents who fail to manifest the capacity but reap atypical dividends.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Richard Holton, Neil Levy, and the Editor of MIND for helpful comments on earlier drafts. Two anonymous referees for MIND also provided useful advice. The authors also acknowledge the very helpful discussion of this paper with audiences at Charles Sturt University and at Monash University. Toby Handfield gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Research Council.

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