

Weakness of Will

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Weakness of will is generally taken to involve a conflict between practical thought and action (*see* ACTION), such as when we have another glass of wine even though we judge that it would be better to refrain, all things considered. Failures of this kind often lead to imprudence (*see* PRUDENCE) and blameworthiness (*see* BLAME); and they are commonly taken to be paradigmatically irrational (*see* RATIONALITY). One interest in weakness of will is practical. Moral philosophy focuses on the nature and causes of the moral failure that is often involved in weakness of will, and examines ways to restore self-control. Another interest comes from moral psychology (*see* MORAL PSYCHOLOGY). A better understanding of the nature of weakness of will promises to shed light on practical thought and its relation to motivation (*see* MORAL MOTIVATION) and action. In fact, weakness of will is often used as a test case for theories of action and theories of moral reasoning (*see* MORAL REASONING).

The debate about weakness of will can be traced back to antiquity, and more particularly to Socrates (*see* SOCRATES), Plato (*see* PLATO) and Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE). Two points stand out in this history. First, weakness of will has moved from being considered deeply puzzling if not impossible to being thought of as a common human experience. Following Socrates, philosophers previously questioned the commonsense view that weakness of will, understood as free intentional action opposed to better judgment, is possible, a view which is now largely accepted. Second, weakness of will was initially conceived of as a moral problem, while it is now more broadly seen as a failure of practical rationality. Thus, weakness of will used to be discussed in moral philosophy, the allocation of blame and responsibility (*see* RESPONSIBILITY) being a central question, while it is now mainly considered as a problem in moral psychology and more generally in the philosophy of action.

One difficulty in understanding recent debates is that not only have many terms been used to refer to weakness of will – “akrasia” and “incontinence” have often been used as synonyms of “weakness of will” – but quite different phenomena have been discussed in the literature. This is why the present entry starts with taxonomic considerations. The second section turns to the question of whether it is possible to freely and intentionally act against one’s better judgment.

Varieties of practical failures

Ancient philosophers were concerned with the moral state they called “akrasia”, which literally means lack of mastery, and is often translated as “incontinence”, following the Latin translation “incontinentia”. Aristotle claims that as a result of passion the akratic agent fails to follow reason, in the sense that he knows that what he does is bad (*see* Aristotle, NE VII, 1145b10-15). *Akrasia*, like its opposite *enkrateia*, or “continence”, characterizes agents, but it goes hand in hand with the conception of a kind of action. According to Aristotle, *akratic* action is voluntary action performed in spite of knowing

that what is done is bad or at least falls short of the best. The possibility of such a conflict is what Aristotle takes Socrates to have denied: “(...) no one (...) acts against what he believes best – people act so only by reason of ignorance” (NE VII, 1145b25-30). In a similar way, when Aquinas discusses the incontinence involved in what he calls the “sins from weakness”, which are sins caused by passions, he focuses on acts that are contrary to *right reason*; while both the continent and the incontinent agent have right reason, only the will of the former follows reason (ST II, q. 155, art. 3). According to Plato, however, Socrates’ verdict is more general for it refers to belief as well as to knowledge; what is thought impossible is to act against what an agent *knows* or *believes* to be better: “No one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course.” (*Protagoras* 358b-c)

Thus, we can distinguish two kinds of *akratic* action: one involving a conflict between voluntary action and knowledge and one involving a conflict between voluntary action and belief. In the latter case, the belief against which the agent acts can be false. There is thus room for cases of so-called “inverse” akrasia (Arpaly and Schroeder 1999), which involve “right-doing” instead of wrong-doing, a possibility which Aristotle appears to have in mind when he reports the sophistic argument from which it follows that folly coupled with incontinence is excellence (NE, 1146a25-30).

Most contemporary philosophers have been interested in a conflict that is close to the one involving belief, *i.e.* that between action and judgment. Thus, what R. M. Hare (*see* HARE, R. M.) denies when he considers akrasia is that we can freely act against our moral judgment. Given his conception of moral judgment, “it becomes analytic to say that everyone always does what he thinks he ought to”, provided he is physically and psychologically able to do so (1952, p. 169). In contrast with beliefs, judgments are more naturally taken to be occurrent, non-dispositional states. Moreover, judgments are not necessarily taken to be cognitive (*see* NON-COGNITIVISM).

In recent debates, the judgment against which the agent acts is not taken to be concerned only with moral considerations, but rather with practical considerations more generally. Thus, the judgment against which the agent goes has been taken to bear on what we ought to do, on what we have sufficient reason to do, or on what is the best or better action, all things considered. A judgment of that kind is often called the agent’s “best” or “better judgment”, in the sense that it is based, or at least believed by the agent to be based, on all relevant considerations known to the agent. Thus, Donald Davidson’s landmark 1970 essay defines weakness of will as a conflict between action and better judgment:

In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does *x* intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*. (Davidson 1970, p. 22)

Another feature of Davidson’s definition is that the incontinent action is defined as intentional and taken by the agent to be open to him. Often, what is required is even

stronger: the action needs to be both intentional and free. Its being free is taken to distinguish it from actions that are intentional, but compelled. Moreover, to exclude cases in which the agent merely changes his mind, it is understood that the action and the better judgment are contemporaneous. Free intentional action conflicting with a contemporaneous better judgment of the agent has been called “strict akratic action” (Mele 1987). This leaves room for other kinds of akratic action.

As Amelie Rorty (1980) underlines, there are many places at which the “akratic break” can occur. A first point is that akrasia does not only concern actions, but also things such as beliefs, perceptions, and emotions, at least in so far as they are voluntary. In addition, there is a variety of failures that threaten reasoning agents. Rorty presupposes an Aristotelian conception of practical reasoning, according to which such reasoning consists in assent to a general claim, or “major premise”, about what ought to be done, and a “minor premise” which affirms that particular circumstances fall under the general claim. As Rorty points out, the agent may go wrong at every juncture: the agent can commit himself to a major premise that violates his general ends, the minor premise can be malformed, such as when a situation is not correctly interpreted, and there might be flaws in the inference, such as when an agent fails to draw the correct conclusion from his premises or when he fails to act according to a correct conclusion (Rorty 1980, p. 334). It should be noted that only failures of the last kind count as strict akratic action. However, the concept of strict akratic action is broader than the one Rorty has in mind, because strict akratic actions can involve a better judgment that is not based on reasoning.

On some accounts, there are yet other kinds of akrasia. According to some philosophers, akrasia need not be free and intentional. Thus, Gary Watson (1977) rejects the traditional conception of weakness of will and argues that the weak person is not able to resist his desires. In this the weak agent is not different from the compulsive agent. The difference between the two comes from the kind of self-control which would have been necessary to resist the recalcitrant desire. The weak agent has failed to develop and maintain normal capacities of self-control which would have enabled him to resist his desire. By contrast, compulsive desires cannot be resisted by way of normal capacities. This is why the weak, but not the compulsive agent, is blameworthy and responsible. An agent is blameworthy for his weak behavior in so far as he could and should have developed and maintained those capacities of self-control.

The contemporaneity requirement has also been questioned. What is stressed instead is an irrational change of heart. Thus, Frank Jackson (1984) argues that weakness of will involves an irrational reversal in the agent’s desires, which is caused by appetite and bodily feelings; acting contrary to better judgment would be neither sufficient nor necessary for weak-willed action. In a similar way, Richard Holton (1999) is interested in cases which involve irrational intention reconsideration. An agent manifests weakness of will if he revises an intention which he at least in part formed in an attempt to overcome contrary desires he expects to have, and which he should not have revised. According to this account, weakness of will is a kind of irresoluteness, as is caprice.

In sum, it appears that in addition to strict akratic action, various phenomena count as akratic in some broader sense. The question that arises is whether there is a common core to all these failures. Leaving aside akrasia with respect to belief, perception or emotion, one might suggest that these failures all involve a conflict between action and a practical stance, a conflict that gives rise to irrationality. This suggestion is not altogether satisfactory. A first problem for this suggestion is that it is not clear that changes of heart, however irrational, can be described in terms of a conflict between action and a practical stance. A second problem is that the common assumption that akrasia or weakness of will involves irrationality can be questioned. Thus, Robert Audi (1990) argues that even though the incontinence of an action counts to some degree against its rationality, an incontinent action might be rational on balance. This is so when the better judgment against which the agent acts does not appropriately reflect his reasons, in the sense that it is out of line with his beliefs and wants, while the action is determined by those beliefs and wants. As Alison McIntyre (1990) underlines, the agent's sensitivity to reasons can outstrip his more intellectual ability to recognize the reasons he has.

In addition to these problems with the suggestion that there is a common core to all failures that have, at one point or another, been counted as akrasia, incontinence or weakness of will, there is another complication. Many of the debates have concerned the question of how to conceive what is taken to be the same phenomenon, not the enumeration of different kinds of failures. Thus, one central question is whether akrasia consists in free intentional action that is contrary to better judgment or in action that is not under the agent's control. Moreover, some of those who distinguish between different failures do not always conceive of them as being species of the same kind. It has thus been suggested that *weakness of will* is better understood in terms of irresoluteness, and that *akrasia*, i.e., action contrary to better judgment, consists in a different kind of failure (Holton 1999).

However, there is agreement on one important point. If there is a philosophical puzzle, it is related to strict akratic action. Nobody doubts that we sometimes unreasonably fail to stick to our resolutions, that we undergo irrational desire changes, that we are unable to control recalcitrant desires, or that we make all sorts of reasoning errors. What appears deeply problematic is that we freely and intentionally act against our better judgment.

The possibility of strict akratic action

Consider this example, which is from Michael Bratman (1979): it's late at night and Sam is sitting by a bottle of wine. Sam knows that having a glass would be pleasant and would make him feel better. He also knows that if he has another glass of wine he will have a bad headache, and that he should go to sleep if he is to be rested for the

important task he has to perform the next day. Weighing these considerations, Sam judges that it would be better, all things considered, to abstain. Is it possible that Sam pours the wine into a glass and proceeds to freely and intentionally drink it? One might think that if this is what Sam does, he is not really convinced that abstaining is the better course of action. If Sam really thought he had sufficient reason not to drink the wine, he surely would abstain. If he fails to do so, this must be because he cannot do otherwise, maybe because he is overcome by some urge he cannot control. Or it must be because his drinking fails to be intentional. That might be so if it is an unintentional movement of his, like his tripping over a doorstep, or if Sam is so confused as to not realize that what he is doing amounts to drinking wine – maybe he takes himself to be drinking a glass of milk, say. But how could he judge that, all things considered, it would be better to abstain while at the same time freely and intentionally drinking the wine? It appears difficult to accept that strict akratic action is even a possibility.

The puzzle arises because, as everyone in the debate would agree, in spite of the reasoning rehearsed above, strict akratic action seems perfectly possible. Common experience appears to confirm that we sometimes freely and intentionally act against our better judgment. Moreover, the simple fact that one can formulate a definition of strict akratic action without, on the face of it, uttering any contradiction suggests that such actions are possible. Indeed, it seems easy enough to imagine cases satisfying the definition. Finally, a further reason to accept the possibility of strict akratic actions comes from the fact that we consider agents to be responsible for their akratic actions. This suggests that we consider the actions to be free, for it is plausible to assume that actions for which we hold someone morally responsible are free actions. It would appear unfair to consider someone responsible for an action caused by an urge the agent cannot resist, say. At most, we could consider him responsible for not having developed the required self-control capacities, but that appears to be a distinct failure.

The puzzle, then, is that strict akratic actions appear both hardly conceivable, if not impossible, and yet perfectly common. This is the puzzle Davidson (1970), following in the steps of Aristotle, sets out to solve. Davidson locates the source of the problem in an account of intentional action and practical reasoning which appears self-evident, but which seems to rule out strict akratic actions. According to this account, intentional action aims at the good (*see* GUISE OF THE GOOD). An agent who intentionally acts sets a positive value on some end, and given his belief that an action of the kind he can perform will realize the valued end, he acts. Given this, Davidson proposed the following thesis: “if an agent judges that it would be better for him to do x than to do y, and he believes himself to be free to do either x or y, then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally.” (1970, p. 23) As Davidson notes, this thesis counts as a version of “internalism” (*see* INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL); it postulates an internal relation between practical judgment and action. The problem, of course, is that this thesis appears to directly contradict the claim that it is possible to freely and intentionally act against one’s better judgment.

To solve the puzzle, Davidson proposes a distinction between two kinds of practical judgment. On the one hand, there is the “unconditional judgment”, such as “It

would be better to do x than to do y”, while on the other hand, there is the “conditional” or “prima facie judgment”, such as “It would be better to do x than y, all things considered”, which is taken by Davidson to be a relational judgment about what is better in the light of all the reasons the agent considers relevant. The unconditional judgment is geared to action; it is this judgment that makes the internalist thesis true. Thus an agent cannot act against his unconditional judgment, that is, against the judgment that x is better to do than y. The conditional judgment, by contrast, is not geared to action. Incontinent action, as Davidson calls it, can thus be defined as action against the conditional judgment. According to Davidson, what happens in incontinent action is that the agent comes to the conclusion that although he has some reason to do y, his reasons overall indicate that doing x is better than doing y – this is his conditional judgment – but he goes on to judge that doing y is better than doing x – this is his unconditional judgment – and so he does y. The agent’s mistake is forming an unconditional judgment which fails to conform to the conditional judgment. As Davidson explains, the two judgments are logically compatible, but incontinence nonetheless involves a failure of rationality. Agents ought to abide by what Davidson calls the “principle of continence”, according to which one ought to “perform the action judged best on the basis of all relevant reasons.” (1970, p. 41)

Robert Audi (1979) and Michael Bratman (1979) argue that Davidson’s proposal does not go far enough: incontinent action as described by Davidson falls short of strict akratic action. This is so because Davidson’s internalism rules out free and intentional action against the agent’s unconditional judgment. Thus, one question at the center of the debates after Davidson is whether or not one has to abandon internalism, or at least the strong form of internalism that goes with Davidson’s conception of intentional action, in order to make room for strict akratic action. A radical way to do so is to deny that intentional action needs to be done in the light of the good. The Davidsonian conception of intentional action has been questioned by David Velleman (1992) who argues that intentional action can aim at the bad. The problem for Velleman’s account is how we could make sense of actions without taking them to aim at something the agent takes to be valuable. Thus, the source of the puzzle appears to remain untouched. The question is how one can preserve the intuition that intentional action is action done in light of the good while also accepting the possibility of strict akratic action. What needs to be explored is whether an action can be done in the light of the good while not being based on an evaluative judgment. One possibility is to suggest that acting on the basis of emotions can, at least in certain conditions, be seen as acting in the light of the good (see Jones 2003)

Although Davidson criticizes Hare, his commitment to the internalist thesis brings him close to Hare’s conception of practical judgment. As we have seen, Hare denies that an agent can freely act against his moral judgment. His motivation to deny this comes from his internalism, but in contrast with Davidson, Hare’s internalism is motivated by his conception of moral judgment rather than by a conception of intentional action. According to Hare’s prescriptivism (*see* PRESCRIPTIVISM), to assent to the judgment that I ought to do x, or at least to assent to the primary and evaluative sense of this judgment, is to assent to the command “Let me do x”, and thus to perform the action,

unless it is not in the agent's power to do so (Hare 1952, chap. 11, esp. 168-172). Hare's prescriptivism is controversial, but it is based on an idea which is highly plausible. This is the claim that moral judgments, or, more generally, practical judgments, are action-guiding. According to Hare, we have to accept prescriptivism, for this is the only way to account for the action-guidingness of moral judgments. It is far from clear that Hare is right about this, but it is difficult to deny that practical judgments are action-guiding, indeed, that this is their very function. As Bratman (1979) underlines, what he calls the "extreme externalist response" (*see* EXTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL), according to which judgments about what it is best to do have no essential relation to desiring and acting, is difficult to accept. On this view, deliberation about what it is best to do would have no closer relation to action than deliberation about what it would be chic to do. Any relation to action would have to be mediated by a desire to do what would be best. Thus, what we have here is a distinct source for being puzzled about strict akratic action, which is located in the conception of practical judgments as action-guiding. The question is how to make room for the action-guidingness of practical judgments without ruling out strict akratic actions. In particular, what has to be explored is the plausibility of weaker forms of internalism, such as the claim according to which either the agent is motivated to act according to his better judgment, or he suffers from practical irrationality (Smith 1994).

A third source of puzzlement concerns our conception of choice and freedom (*see* FREE WILL). As we have seen, Watson (1977) argues that there is no difference between the akratic and the compulsive agent in terms of freedom: neither of them could have done otherwise. Watson is happy to allow that agents can intentionally act against their better judgments; what he denies is that they freely do so. Watson asks what explains the akratic agent's failing to resist the temptation. He discusses two explanations, both of which he considers to be unsatisfactory, of how an action against one's better judgment could be a free action. According to the first explanation, the agent does not resist the temptation because he chooses not to resist. Watson claims that we cannot assume this, for "to choose not to implement this choice would be to change (the) original judgment" (1977, p 55). Thus, what we would have is a case of recklessness, not a case of akrasia. The second explanation is that the effort to resist the temptation is culpably insufficient. If we suppose that the action is free, we have to assume that the agent could have made a sufficient effort. Hence, the question is why the agent did not make this effort. Again, one cannot say that the agent did not make the relevant effort because he thought the effort was not worth it, for that would indicate that the agent had changed his mind. Moreover, one cannot say that the agent was mistaken about the effort required, for this would be a different fault from that of akrasia. The intuition which drives Watson is that choice, and hence free action, follows better judgment. This is a conception of action which ties together free agency and autonomy (*see* AUTONOMY), and sees free action as flowing from the agent's evaluative capacities. What free action requires is controversial, but the force of the conception Watson is proposing should not be underestimated. Before putting aside Watson's argument, we need a plausible alternative to the account of free agency he proposes. According to one such alternative, free agency is explained in terms of the exercise of a rational capacity; the difference between the weak agent and the compulsive agent is that the latter has, but fails to exercise, the rational capacity to bring her desires into line with her better judgment,

while the latter lacks this capacity (see Smith 2003). One question that arises, obviously, is what explains the agent's failure to exercise his rational capacity.

These three lines of argument give weight to skepticism about strict akratic actions. However, since Davidson (1970) the general tendency has been to accept that it is possible to freely and intentionally act against one's better judgment. Without going as far as John Searle, who takes the question to be "why anyone would doubt or even be puzzled by the possibility (of akrasia) since in real life it is so common" (2001, p. 220), most would agree that the possibility of strict akratic action has to be taken as a constraint on theories of intentional action, practical reasoning, and free agency. The puzzle is how to make room for this possibility, which is taken as given, within our understanding of human agency.

SEE ALSO: ACTION; ARISTOTLE; AUTONOMY; BLAME; EXTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; FREE WILL; GUISE OF THE GOOD; INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; PRUDENCE; RATIONALITY; MORAL MOTIVATION; MORAL PSYCHOLOGY; MORAL REASONING; NON-COGNITIVISM; PLATO; PRESCRIPTIVISM; RESPONSIBILITY; SOCRATES

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Suggested Readings

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