

Procrastination as Rational Weakness of Will

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1 Introduction and Overview

Much psychological research has been conducted on the phenomenon of procrastination and the related problem of impulse control.¹ It is only in recent years, however, that philosophers have turned their attention to this phenomenon.² One question of recent philosophical interest in this area is the question of whether procrastination is an instance of weakness of will. In particular, Sarah Stroud has recently argued that procrastination is not weakness of will.³ In this paper, it will be shown that the main force of Stroud's argument lies in one's accepting a key assumption of traditional accounts of weakness of will, namely, the assumption that acting against one's best judgment is always irrational. A formal definition of procrastination will then be proposed. Building on this definition, it will then be shown that that at least some cases of procrastination are cases in which the agent acts rationally against her best judgment. Besides explaining why procrastination cannot be subsumed under traditional accounts of weakness of will, these cases also show that rational action against one's best judgment is possible, validating a view nascent in recent moral psychology and action theory.

¹ See, for instance, Piers Steel, "The Nature of Procrastination: A Meta-Analytic and Theoretical Review of Quintessential Self-Regulatory Failure", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 133, No. 1 (2007), 65–94.

² See, for instance, Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (eds.), *The Thief of Time: Philosophical Essays on Procrastination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ Sarah Stroud, "Is Procrastination Weakness of Will?" in *The Thief of Time: Philosophical Essays on Procrastination*, eds. Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 51–67.

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The work of this paper is divided into three parts. The first part outlines Stroud's arguments for procrastination not being weakness of will.⁴ Stroud arrives at her position by showing that many central cases of procrastination cannot be subsumed under either (1) the classic account of weakness of will as akrasia set forth by Donald Davidson,⁵ or (2) the more recent account of weakness of will as failure to implement future-directed intentions, as developed in the work of Richard Holton⁶ and Alison MacIntyre.⁷ This is so, she argues, despite the presence of significant affinities between procrastination and both of these accounts.

Building on the work done by Stroud, a formal definition of procrastination is set forth in the second part. With this definition as the starting point, it will be demonstrated that even though procrastination cannot be subsumed under traditional accounts of weakness of will, as expressed by (1) and (2), it is still true that many instances of procrastination share many of the traits that are characteristic of either (1) or (2). Yet other cases of procrastination possess features of both (1) and (2). This being the case, even though procrastination is not subsumable under traditional accounts of weakness of will, it nevertheless can be seen to possess a broadly akratic character: Cases of procrastination involve agents failing to act in accordance with their best judgments.

Why is procrastination not subsumable under traditional accounts of weakness of will, even though procrastinators clearly possess one central characteristic of weak-willed action, namely, failure to act in accordance with their best judgment? The answer lies in the fact that traditional accounts of weakness of will operate on the assumption that actions that go against or fail to implement one's best judgment are necessarily irrational actions that indicate a rational failure on the part of the agent. Procrastination cannot be subsumed under these traditional accounts because at least some cases of procrastination challenge this assumption. Although such cases involve an agent (the procrastinator) acting against her best judgment, they constitute a departure from traditional accounts of weakness of will, in that although the procrastinator acts against her best judgment, she turns out to be more rational in acting against her best judgment than she would be if she had acted in accordance with her best judgment. Drawing upon work done by Nomy Arpaly on the possibility of acting rationally against one's best judgment,⁸ it will be shown that such rational akratic action is possible because the procrastinator, in acting against her best judgment, is actually acting on facts that she notices and registers but does not deliberate upon. Although the procrastinator does not procrastinate as a result of deliberating upon reasons, such procrastination nevertheless constitutes rational action. Thus, at least some cases of procrastination are cases of rational action against one's best judgment. This being the case, procrastination cannot be

⁴ Ibid., pp. 51–67.

⁵ Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 21–43.

⁶ Richard Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will" in *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999), 241–262.

⁷ Alison MacIntyre, "What is Wrong with Weakness of Will?" in *Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006), 284–311.

⁸ Nomy Arpaly, "On Acting Rationally Against One's Best Judgment", *Ethics* 110 (2000), 488–513.

subsumed under traditional accounts of weakness of will because at least some cases of procrastination fly in the face of one key assumption held by these accounts, which is that acting against one's best judgment is always irrational.

In the third and final part of this paper, the implications of this view of procrastination for a question in contemporary moral psychology and action theory will be considered. Is rational action against one's best judgment possible? Although the prevailing view among philosophers still seems to be that weak-willed or akratic action is never rational, this view has been challenged in recent years by a relatively small but influential group of theorists, including Nomy Arpaly, Robert Audi, Harry Frankfurt and Alison McIntyre.⁹ If it is true that at least some cases of procrastination constitute rational action against one's best judgment, this would offer independent confirmation of the views of these theorists.

2 Stroud on Why Procrastination Cannot be Subsumed Under Weakness of Will

As mentioned in the previous section, Stroud attempts to show that procrastination cannot be subsumed under weakness of will, by arguing that many central cases of procrastination cannot be subsumed under either (1) the classic account of weakness of will as *akrasia* set forth by Donald Davidson, or (2) the more recent account of weakness of will as failure to implement future-directed intentions, as developed in the work of Richard Holton and Alison MacIntyre.

Let us first consider Stroud's argument that procrastination cannot be subsumed under Davidsonian *akrasia*. On Davidson's understanding of weakness of will as *akrasia*, an action is weak-willed or akratic if it is a free, intentional action that is undertaken contrary to one's own better judgment. An agent does an action *x* akratically at time *t* if she freely and intentionally does *x* at *t* even though she judges that all things considered, it is better to do another action, *y* at *t*.¹⁰

Can procrastination be subsumed under *akrasia*? At first glance, it seems that procrastination and *akrasia* have significant affinities with each other. Many cases of procrastination do seem to involve conflict between what the agent is doing or not doing at a particular moment in time, and a particular judgment or state held contemporaneously by the agent. Specifically, the procrastinator is not doing a particular action *x*, at time *t*, even though he judges that he ought, all things considered, to do *x* at *t*.

However, Stroud argues, closer examination reveals significant dissimilarities between *akrasia* and procrastination; dissimilarities which ultimately make the idea of subsuming the latter under the former an unpromising one.

⁹ See Arpaly, *op. cit.*; Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Audi, "Weakness of Will and Rational Action", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1990), 270–281; Harry Frankfurt, "Rationality and the Unthinkable", in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 177–190; Alison McIntyre, "Is Akratic Action Always Irrational?" in Owen Flanagan and A.O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 380–400.

¹⁰ Davidson, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–43.

First, it is worth noting the difference between the characteristic logical form of attributions of *akrasia* and the characteristic logical form of attributions of procrastination. In the classic literature on *akrasia*, being weak-willed or *akratic* is typically regarded as a property of actions: We say, for instance, that “S’s action is *akratic/weak-willed*.” But attributions of procrastination are not most naturally formulated as attributions of properties to particular actions: In speaking of procrastination, we typically make statements of the form, “S is procrastinating with respect to doing x.” This difference between the logical form of attributions of *akrasia* and attributions of procrastination might give us at least a *prima facie* reason to doubt the plausibility of subsuming procrastination under *akrasia*.¹¹

Secondly, Stroud continues, the paradigm case of *akrasia* is of an action that is undertaken despite the agent’s all-things-considered judgment that another action is the better action to take: For instance, the agent has another drink despite his better judgment to the contrary. The paradigm case of procrastination, however, is of an action that is *not* undertaken despite the agent’s judgment to the contrary. While this divergence in the paradigm cases of *akrasia* and procrastination is not decisive in determining the plausibility of subsuming procrastination under *akrasia*, it should at least give us pause.¹²

Finally, and most significantly, Stroud observes, *akrasia* is essentially a synchronic phenomenon. It consists in conflict between two contemporaneous entities: The agent’s action at time *t*, and her all-things-considered judgment that this action is not the best action to be taking at time *t*. We can see the centrality of synchronicity to *akrasia* if we note that if these two entities were not contemporaneous, we would not have a case of *akrasia*: Whether you used to think that you ought not to do *x* at *t*, or whether you later come to think that you ought not to have done *x* at *t*, is irrelevant to whether you were *akratic* at *t*.¹³

On the other hand, synchronicity does not seem to be so central to something’s being a case of procrastination. It is quite possible for a case of procrastination to involve *akratic* behavior: The student who is procrastinating about starting on his term paper could be thinking, “I need to start working on that paper *now*,” even as he is enjoying himself at a party. However, many cases of procrastination do not have this synchronic characteristic. I may be thinking to myself that I should start grading these papers which I have promised to return to my students in a couple of days *soon*, as I sit here checking out my friends’ Facebook pages. Most of us would have no problem agreeing that I am procrastinating, even though I do not judge that all things considered, the best thing for me to do is to start grading these papers *now*.

Indeed, it seems that procrastination is very much a diachronic phenomenon, insofar as cases of procrastination typically involve an important challenge that we face as temporally extended rational agents: that of effectively ordering and performing actions over time. Because of this close connection between procrastination and ordering and performing actions over time, procrastination seems ultimately to be a poor fit with *akrasia*, which is essentially synchronic in nature.

¹¹ Stroud, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Having shown that procrastination is not subsumable under the Davidsonian account of akrasia, Stroud then turns her attention to showing that procrastination is also not subsumable under the Holton-McIntyre account of weakness of will as failure of intention implementation. Rejecting Davidson's view of akrasia, Holton and McIntyre argue that weakness of will is not action contrary to one's contemporaneous better judgment. Rather, they argue, weakness of will is better understood as a failure to do what one has decided one will do, as a failure to stick to one's intentions.

Holton and McIntyre develop their accounts by building on the work done by Michael Bratman on intentions. According to Bratman, a future-directed intention is an intention to perform a particular action at some future time. The agent forms such an intention by making a decision to perform the action. Such an intention is both *stable* and *controlling*. It is controlling, in that unless it is revised, it will directly lead the agent to perform the action. In addition, such an intention is also stable: It is relatively immune to reconsideration and revision, and, once formed, it has the tendency to persist.¹⁴

In order to see how this account of future-directed intentions can form the basis for an account of weakness of will, we need to consider one common reason for forming future-directed intentions: We commonly form such intentions in order to overcome particular contrary desires that we expect to have when it comes time to undertake a particular action. For instance, I might form the intention now to go to the gym immediately after I get off work tomorrow. An important reason for me to form this intention now is that if I simply leave it open until tomorrow whether to go to the gym after work, I may very well end up not doing so: Knowing myself, I may very well decide that I am tired after a long day's work, and simply opt to stop for a few drinks at the bar. But if I make such an intention now, this intention may lead me to put aside my feeling of tiredness or my inclination for a drink and head over to the gym when the time comes. So I form this intention for the express purpose of defeating the contrary inclinations that I anticipate I will have when the time comes to act. Holton calls future-directed intentions of this kind *contrary-inclination-defeating intentions*.¹⁵

On Holton's account, weakness of will arises when the agent fails to act on a contrary-inclination-defeating intention, and abandons the intention at the moment of action because of the inclinations the intention was formed in order to defeat. Thus, I can be charged with being weak-willed if, despite having formed this intention, I decide upon leaving the office that I am too tired to work out anyway, and head to the bar instead of the gym.¹⁶

Holton's account appears to be a much more promising candidate than Davidsonian akrasia as a template for procrastination. To begin with, Stroud argues, thinking of weakness of will as failure to follow through on intentions

¹⁴ See Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Holton, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–251.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–251.

allows us to eliminate at least two of the worries that we encountered in trying to subsume procrastination under Davidsonian akrasia. One worry, as noted above, is that akrasia is typically characterized as doing something that one judges to be ill-advised, whereas procrastination essentially involves *not* doing something one judges one should do. But Holton's account eliminates this worry, since weakness of will thus construed is also defined as a *not* doing of something, namely, whatever it was that one had set an intention to do.¹⁷

Another more significant worry, also noted above, is that akrasia is a synchronic phenomenon, whereas procrastination seems essentially to be diachronic in nature. But this worry is also adequately addressed on Holton's account, since on this account, weakness of will involves a failure to follow through on future-directed intentions and is therefore, like procrastination, also essentially diachronic in nature.¹⁸

In light of the above, weakness of will as failure of intention implementation seems to be a better fit as a template for procrastination than weakness of will as akrasia. Despite this, Stroud argues, many cases of procrastination still cannot be subsumed under Holton's account. Stroud notes that on weakness of will as failure of intention implementation, "weakness of will resides exclusively in what we might term the executive branch of our agency, the aspect of agency that consists in actually carrying out, or following through on, what we have so to speak legislated." It follows, then, that on such an account, "[d]efects in plan design and formation... cannot open one to a charge of weakness of will."¹⁹

The problem, Stroud continues, is that many cases that we would quite unproblematically identify as cases of procrastination do not involve failure of intention implementation, but are actually cases of defective or inadequate planning. An example from McIntyre illustrates such a case:

Suppose I carry some student essays around with me planning to do some essay grading at some point in the next few days. If the essays should be returned soon, then I have formed only a temporary indeterminate intention when a resolution that is quite specific about the time to act is needed to get the job done.²⁰

Such a case, Stroud argues, would not qualify as a case of weakness of will, on the Holton-McIntyre account, because in this case, the problem is not that the agent has failed to follow through on a future-directed intention. The problem, rather, is that the intention that was formed was inadequate to fulfill one's goal (i.e., getting the papers graded in a timely manner). Indeed, the agent may very well have followed through with this intention, and have done "some essay grading" which was nevertheless insufficient to get the papers graded within the specific time frame.²¹

Indeed, Stroud goes on to argue, many cases of procrastination seem to involve even more extensive failures of the legislative branch of our agency; failures which

¹⁷ Stroud, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁰ McIntyre, "What is Wrong with Weakness of Will?", p. 298.

²¹ Stroud, *op. cit.*, pp. 64–65.

have nothing to do with failures to implement intentions.²² For instance, Tom may be thinking that he has a good idea for a conference paper, and may judge that he should write and submit this paper to a particular conference, but whenever he thinks about sitting down to actually start working on the paper, he gets anxious about whether the ideas that he has are good ideas, and whether the paper will be a good one. The submission deadline for the conference passes, and he never got started on the paper. In this case as imagined, even though Tom has a desire to write such a paper, and judges that it would be a good idea to write it and submit it to the conference, he never forms the intention to write it. Since he never formed the relevant intention, he cannot be said to suffer from weakness of will, on the Holton-McIntyre account. But it is surely plausible to say that Tom was procrastinating about writing the paper.

3 Procrastination as Rational Action Against One's Best Judgment

If they are correct, Stroud's arguments as outlined above would prove that many central cases of procrastination cannot be subsumed under either Davidsonian akrasia or the Holton-McIntyre account of weakness of will. We are not concerned here with carrying out a detailed scrutiny of Stroud's arguments (although there are good reasons to believe that they are at least initially plausible). Rather, let us move the inquiry in a different direction. Specifically, in what follows, we will build upon Stroud's work by offering an explanation for why these central cases of procrastination are so un-subsumable, and what implications this nonsubsumability has on specific issues in recent moral psychology and action theory.

To begin with, it is interesting to note that many cases of procrastination that cannot be characterized either as akrasia or failure of intention implementation actually exhibit features of both. Specifically, such cases can be characterized as akratic failures at an earlier point in time to set specific intentions to undertake particular actions at a later point in time, despite one's earlier judgment that one ought, all things considered, to set these intentions. Consider, for instance, the essay grading example from McIntyre. It is quite plausible that before the agent formed the weak intention of doing "some essay grading", she may have judged that all things considered, a stronger, more resolute intention was needed to get the job done. However, despite her judgment, she akratically forms the weaker intention of simply doing "some essay grading". It is quite plausible that a similar akratic failure to form the appropriate intention may also have occurred in the case of Tom: Despite judging that a determinate intention to start working on the paper at a particular point in time is needed if he wants to complete the paper in time for submission, he ends up akratically forming no intention at all.

It must be emphasized that although both Tom and the grader in McIntyre's case act in an akratic manner, they are not exhibiting weakness of will as akrasia. We might think of the phenomenon known as procrastination as being akin to an animal with many facets. Some instances of procrastination exhibit only akratic characteristics

²² Ibid., pp. 65–66.

(for instance, the partying college student who judges that he ought to begin work on his paper now, but continues to party anyway), others possess only features that are characteristic of weakness of will as failure of intention implementation (for instance, failing to follow through on my intention to start working on a paper); yet others (like the cases of Tom and McIntyre's procrastinating grader) possess features of both. More formally, procrastination can be defined as follows. In order for something to qualify as an instance of procrastination, a set of disjunctive conditions must first apply:

- (I) The agent judges at t_m that, all other things being equal, it is better to do x sooner rather than later. She recognizes that this can be accomplished either:
- (i) by doing x right away
 - Or
 - (ii) by forming an intention at t_m to do x at t_n , where $m < n$.

This being the case, the agent procrastinates if, despite (I), either:

- (II) in case (i), she fails to do x right away
- Or, in case (ii),
- (III) She fails to form the intention at t_m to do x at t_n , and does not do x before or at t_n .
- Or
- (IV) She forms the intention at t_m to do x at t_n , but fails to do x at t_n .

This formal definition of procrastination is capable of including what we commonly regard as central cases of procrastination. Via (II) and (III), this definition covers those cases of procrastination which can be subsumed under akrasia. The partying college student recognizes that, all other things being equal, it is better to start working on his paper sooner rather than later. He recognizes that this can be accomplished either by starting on the paper right away, or by forming the relevant intention at t_m to start working on his paper at t_n . He fails to start on the paper right away, and also fails to form the relevant intention, and also does not get started on the paper before or at t_n . (III) also covers McIntyre's procrastinating grader and Tom, since in both of these cases, the relevant intention was never formed. This definition also covers, via (IV), those cases of procrastination which can be subsumed under the Holton-McIntyre account.

Looking at this definition, one observation can be made: Although procrastination cannot be subsumed under either Davidsonian akrasia or failure of intention implementation, it is still true that procrastination has a broadly akratic character. Whether the instance of procrastination in question is a straightforward case of Davidsonian akrasia (as with the partying college student), a case of failure of intention implementation (as with not following through on an existing intention to get started on a paper), or a case that exhibits characteristics of both accounts (as with the cases of Tom and McIntyre's procrastinating grader), a common underlying characteristic can be observed: The agents in all these cases have failed to act in accordance with their best judgments. Tom, for instance, fails to set a determinate

intention to get started on his paper at a particular point in time, despite judging that it is best to set such an intention, all things considered.

Extending the biological analogy, we might say that procrastination is a beast that closely resembles its traditionally weak-willed cousins: So much so, that many instances of procrastination seem indistinguishable from traditional weakness of will. But it is ultimately unsatisfying simply to label procrastination as a different species of animal, and leave it at that. A further explanation of why and how procrastination came to be this different animal is needed. To extend the biological analogy even further, could it be that just as organisms evolved into different species in response to particular stimuli in the biological environment, procrastination is an “animal” that evolved in response to a particular set of stimuli in the human moral and social environment? Further, just as organisms that evolve into a particular species develop specific characteristics in order to adequately fulfill particular functions in a specific biological environment, might it not be possible that procrastination fulfills particular functions within the social and moral environments that contemporary human beings often find themselves in? Could it be that unlike traditional weakness of will, in which action against one’s best judgment supposedly constitutes a bane of effective rational agency, the kind of action against one’s best judgment that is found in at least some cases of procrastination may actually serve to further rational agency rather than frustrate it, enabling humans to survive better, even flourish, in their social and moral environments?

To see how this might be so, let us consider a couple of different ways of fleshing out Tom’s story in more detail. Tom, as we have seen, fails to set a determinate intention to start writing his paper, despite his best judgment to the contrary. Why did he fail to do so? It is possible that his failure is simply an akratic failure in the traditional sense: He really does have some good ideas for a conference paper; ideas which, if presented at the conference and later expanded and published as a longer, more detailed article in a peer-reviewed journal, would significantly advance scholarship in that particular field, not to mention raise Tom’s standing as a scholar in said field. Despite these considerations, however, Tom intentionally fails to set the intention to write the paper. In doing so, Tom is being less than fully rational.

But are all procrastinators necessarily less than fully rational in going about their procrastinating ways? Consider the following alternate explanation of Tom’s behavior. Suppose that Tom’s ideas for the paper are really not as good as he thinks they are. Suppose also that Tom has been spending a lot of time at work lately, and has been neglecting his family and friends as a result. These factors do not manifest themselves as reasons that he consciously entertains in deciding whether or not to write the paper; however, whenever he thinks about getting started on the paper, he feels a certain ennui or “mental resistance” to the idea of writing the paper. Among other things, he has this vague sense that there exist certain reasons for not writing this paper, although he does not yet know what these reasons are, and is therefore unable to deliberate on them at that point in time. Nevertheless, although he does not yet know what these reasons are, they are still strong enough to cause him to hesitate about setting a determinate intention to get started on the paper. Thus, he procrastinates, and misses the submission deadline. Some weeks later, as he is

spending time with his family on a well-deserved vacation, it suddenly dawns on him that his procrastination over writing the paper was not irrational behavior at all. He realizes that his ideas were not very well-developed (he needs to do a whole lot more research on the subject), and that trying to write the paper at that time would have been unproductive, and would have caused him to neglect his family even more. He also realizes, with the benefit of hindsight, that although he was not consciously aware of or deliberating over these reasons for not writing the paper at that time, they were nevertheless strong enough to move him not to get started on the paper.

If this alternate explanation of Tom's behavior is plausible, it would suggest that procrastination can serve a positive function in rational agency by causing agents to act in accordance with good reasons that they are not yet aware of (and thus not able to take account of in their deliberations). This would suggest that certain instances of procrastination might constitute a special kind of "irrational" behavior: They involve acting against one's best judgment, but in such a way as to ultimately further rational agency rather than frustrate it. In order for this view of procrastination to be plausible, it would have to be possible for agents to be motivated by reasons that they are not consciously entertaining or deliberating over. This is not only possible, but quite plausible, actually. It often happens that in the course of moving through our daily lives, we register facts about ourselves and the world around us, facts which ultimately move us to take or not take certain actions, or to formulate or not formulate certain decisions and intentions. Thus it is quite possible that whenever Tom considers sitting down to write his paper, he registers certain facts about the state of his knowledge of the subject at hand; facts which indicate that he is not ready to write such a paper at that point in time. Tom feels a certain restlessness and ennui in response to these facts, but does not acknowledge these facts in his deliberation. As a result, he continues to strongly believe that he should write and submit this paper to the conference, even though he simply cannot bring himself to do so. Tom, like most people, does not give up on his strongly-held beliefs so easily. He berates himself for what he perceives to be his laziness, and keeps telling himself to "get over it" and to "get started on the paper already." Over time, he encounters additional facts which are inconsistent with his belief that he needs to write that paper now; for instance, facts that suggest that he is not spending enough time with his family and friends. In response to these facts, he reluctantly decides to take a vacation with his family, all the while beating himself up for being lazy and unproductive. It is only while on vacation, reflecting on the situation all over again, that he finally perceives these reasons weighing against writing the paper, and it then dawns on him that writing the paper at that time would have been a bad idea, in light of these reasons.

The upshot is not only that it is quite possible for Tom to be acting under the influence of reasons that he is not yet fully aware of; it is also that he might well have acted rationally in doing so. Somebody might object to this view by saying, "Look, I can agree that what Tom did (abandoning the paper project) was the rational thing to do. I can even agree that he was moved to take that action because of these reasons. However, since he wasn't deliberating over these reasons when he decided to abandon the project and go on a vacation instead, these reasons did not

factor into the decision-making which led up to his decision. Therefore, even though I can allow that he did what he did *because of* these reasons, he nevertheless did not act *for* these reasons. Therefore, although what Tom did was the rational thing to do (it was what a rational person would have done), he nevertheless cannot be said to have acted rationally in doing what he did.”

This objection would be sound if it were true that only actions resulting from deliberation can be considered rational actions. Is this true? To begin with, there are good reasons to believe that holding that only actions resulting from deliberation can be rational actions would be setting the bar for rational action too high; if this were true, we would then have to say—implausibly—that only a very small percentage of our everyday actions are actually rational. In a very interesting paper in which she argues for the possibility of acting rationally against one’s best judgment, Nomy Arpaly remarks:

If we were only to call people rational when their actions were caused by deliberation, we would have to call people rational considerably less often than we do, and if we were to deny that people act for reasons whenever their actions are not the result of deliberation, then we would find that it is uncomfortably rare for people to act for reasons.²³

We shall presently consider some examples that Arpaly brings up to provide support for her position that actions do not have to be the result of deliberation in order to be considered rational. Arpaly employs these examples to support her view that it is possible to act rationally against one’s own best judgment. In light of everything that has been said earlier in this paper, it should not be difficult to see how her position is related to this paper’s position on procrastination: Although she does not say anything about procrastination, her position can be seen to lend support for the view that procrastination can be a kind of rational action against one’s best judgment. As such, the examples she employs can also be used to support this view of procrastination.

The first class of Arpaly’s examples that we shall look at are those involving cases of fast action. Arpaly writes:

It is not a provocative view that an accomplished tennis player, for example, does not have time to deliberate on all her moves during a fast-paced game. Not only that, but given the complex factors to which she responds, she is unlikely to be able to reconstruct her reasons for action after the game. However, even after the ball is served, we can legitimately judge her moves as rational (“That was brilliant!”) or criticize her for irrationality (“What on earth were you thinking there?”). If undeliberated-upon action is irrational by definition, it is hard to see how we can praise the player for the brilliance (rationality) of her action, and it is also hard to see how we can criticize her for a “crazy” (irrational) action, for we do not expect a person to be able to deliberate in the middle of a fast-paced game.²⁴

²³ Arpaly, “On Acting Rationally Against One’s Best Judgment”, p. 506.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

Even though the tennis player cannot be expected to deliberate over her responses to everything that happens in the course of a fast-paced game, given the very short response time available to her, we still deem it proper to judge her game-related actions as being rational or irrational. This suggests, Arpaly continues, that “[a] major part of what it is to be a competent tennis player is to have the ability to play tennis rationally—to act for good reasons rather than bad reasons in all your game-related actions.”²⁵

In addition to fast actions, there is another class of everyday behavior in which we judge people to be rational or at least potentially rational even though they do not deliberate. These involve certain cases of belief formation. Perceptual beliefs are typical examples of this class. As a result of seeing a cat on the mat in front of me, I immediately form the belief that there is a cat on the mat. I do not deliberate before forming this belief, and under ordinary circumstances, we would not say that I am irrational for not having deliberated before arriving at this belief. If it is possible to rationally form these kinds of beliefs without deliberation in everyday circumstances, Arpaly suggests, it should at least be reasonable to believe that other kinds of beliefs of “considerably more complex character” can also be rationally formed without deliberation. She brings our attention to what she calls cases of *dawning*—“cases in which people change their minds, sans deliberation, as a result of a long period of exposure to new evidence.”²⁶ One such example of dawning that she brings up involves the case of Emily, a graduate student in a chemistry Ph.D. program:

Emily’s best judgment has always told her that she should pursue a Ph.D. in chemistry. But as she proceeds through a graduate program, she starts feeling restless, sad, and ill motivated to stick to her studies. These feelings are triggered by a variety of factors which, let us suppose, are good reasons for her, given her beliefs and desires, not to be in the program. The kind of research that she is expected to do, for example, does not allow her to fully exercise her talents, she does not possess some of the talents that the program requires, and the people who seem most happy in the program are very different from her in their general preferences and character. All these factors she notices and registers, but they are also something that she ignores when she deliberates about the rightness of her choice of vocation: like most of us, she tends to find it hard, even threatening, to take leave of a long-held conviction and to admit to herself the evidence against it. But every day she encounters the evidence again, her restlessness grows, her sense of dissatisfaction grows, and she finds it harder to motivate herself to study.²⁷

Eventually, after a certain period of time of continually being confronted with all this evidence that getting a Ph.D. in chemistry is not the right life choice for her, the soundness of all these reasons to not be in the Ph.D. program finally dawns on Emily one day: She “comes to her senses”, realizes that getting a Ph.D. in chemistry is not

²⁵ Ibid., p. 507.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 508.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 504.

the thing for her, given her inclinations and talents, and leaves the program wholeheartedly.

Although Emily's circumstances are very different from those of Tom's, there is nevertheless a striking similarity in the rational dilemmas that they each had to confront in their lives. Like Emily, Tom had set his mind to pursue a particular course of action (writing and submitting the paper to the conference), and was faced with abundant evidence indicating that this is not the best course of action for him to take; evidence which he notices and registers, but does not take into account when deliberating over whether to write and submit the paper. Like Emily, he had to go through some kind of akratic break in order for him to "come to his senses" and realize that what his best judgment prescribes (writing the paper) was really not the best thing for him to be doing, given his circumstances. In Tom's case, the akratic break manifests itself as procrastination over getting started on the paper, whereas in Emily's case, the break involved feelings of restlessness and disaffection towards her studies (it is also quite possible that these feelings also led her to procrastinate with regard to accomplishing the day-to-day assignments and coursework requirements that the program involves). Thus, it seems reasonable to say that procrastination plays a similar role in Tom's rational life to that of the feelings of restlessness and disaffection in Emily's. Just as Emily's feelings of disaffection and restlessness function to incline her toward making a choice that was best for her given her beliefs and desires, even if it was a choice that went against her best judgment, Tom's procrastination also functions to incline him toward making a choice that was best for him given his beliefs and desires, even if it was a choice that went against his best judgment.

4 Implications for Issues in Contemporary Moral Psychology and Action Theory

If Tom's case is indicative of what is actually going on in many cases of procrastination, then it seems plausible to hold that procrastination is not always irrational behavior. In certain cases, it can cause the agent to act rationally against her best judgment when what her best judgment prescribes is not what is in fact best for her.

All of this has an important bearing on a question in moral psychology and action theory that has recently received much attention. This is the question of whether actions against one's best judgment are necessarily irrational. The prevailing view among philosophers seems to be that acting against one's best judgment is never rational, although this view has been challenged in recent years by a relatively small but influential group of theorists, including Nomy Arpaly, Robert Audi, Harry Frankfurt and Alison McIntyre. Arpaly, for instance, employs examples such as the ones related above to demonstrate the general point that "sometimes, an agent is more rational for acting against her best judgment than she would be if she acted in accordance with her best judgment."²⁸ In a similar vein, Robert Audi argues that

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

akratic action can be rational because the rationality of an action should be assessed holistically rather than locally: Whether an action is rational or not is to be decided by the balance of reasons that the agent has. Being imperfect deliberators, there is often a discrepancy between the balance of reasons that we have and the judgments that we make on the basis of our reasons. Thus, our best judgments may often not take fully into account the balance of reasons that we have. This being the case, akratic action which goes against our best judgment need not be irrational.²⁹

There is not the space here to consider in greater depth this question of whether action against one's best judgment is necessarily irrational. However, it is surely reasonable to conclude that if at least certain cases of procrastination are cases in which by procrastinating, the agent is acting more rationally than he would have if he had undertaken the action his best judgment prescribes (and which he is presently procrastinating over undertaking), then such cases would constitute proof that rational action against one's best judgment is possible. At any rate, at least this much appears to be true: Contrary to what some may say, we may actually have good reason at least some of the time to put off till tomorrow what we can do today, even if our best judgment tells us otherwise.³⁰

²⁹ Audi, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–281.

³⁰ Michael Brownstein and David Copp have offered invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Earlier versions of this paper have also been presented at philosophy conferences at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, and Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.