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Strong-willed Akrasia

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is traditionally assumed that to act *akratically* is to act against one's own best judgment, and that to do this is to be *weak-willed*. Given this identification of *akrasia* with *weakness of will*, philosophical questions about the possibility of the one are taken to be identical to questions about the possibility of the other. However, within the last few decades a small number of philosophers have challenged this identification thesis, arguing that a person can be weak-willed without acting against her best judgment, and that she might act against her best judgment without being weak-willed.¹ When considering the examples that these philosophers have raised to demonstrate that these phenomena are distinct from one another, it becomes clear that the identification stands or falls with theoretical and contentious views of the mind, and not given familiar senses of either what it is to act against one's own best judgment, nor what it is to be weak-willed.

Given that weakness of will may not be what philosophical tradition has assumed it to be, we are left with a new question: *what is it?* Moreover, *whatever* it is for an action or a person to be weak-willed, denying its identification with *akrasia* allows for a further interesting possibility that has been, so far, underexplored—even by those who deny the identification thesis. That is the possibility of being *strong-willed* in acting against one's best judgment.

It is this phenomenon, its normative status, and what it reveals about the normative statuses of both weakness and strength of will, that I will discuss in this paper. We often—both in philosophical discussions as well as in our everyday lives—tend to think that weakness of will is simply a vice, and

¹ Including Matthews (1966), Rorty (1980), Hill (1986), and Holton (1999).

that strength of will is simply a virtue.² One is a source of shame and disdain from others that is best avoided, the other a source of pride and praise to be cultivated. However, by examining cases of *strong-willed akrasia*, we find that our evaluations of one another along this dimension are more complicated than this simple picture suggests. Indeed, we will find that the ethical assessments used in both everyday and philosophical discussions of weakness and strength of will are too simple, and too thin, to mark certain salient and important differences between phenomena that are otherwise conflated with one another.

I will begin by discussing the initial questions that arise after a denial of the identification thesis: what is it to be weak-willed, and what is it to act in a weak-willed manner? According to one prominent view, recently articulated and defended by Richard Holton and Alison McIntyre,³ weakness of will is not essentially a matter of failing to do what one believes best to do, but instead a matter of *failing to be resolute in one's intentions*. While this is an improvement on an understanding of weakness of will that identifies it with akrasia, my suspicion is that it needs further refinement. As both Holton and McIntyre recognize, there are many ways in which a person can fail to be resolute in her intentions, and an account of weakness of will needs to capture what is distinctive about it, in particular. But, as I will argue, their attempt to do this assumes too much about how to evaluate both weakness of will, and strength of will, to do so.

This leads directly to the second question of this paper. How *should* we evaluate weakness of will, and strength of will? I will argue that there is a virtue exhibited by those who are strong-willed in a particular instance, or who are characteristically strong-willed, and that weakness of will is one way in which a person can fail to be strong-willed. But importantly, strength of will is best understood as an *executive virtue* that—like diligence, decisiveness, and efficiency, as well as some intellectual virtues—can be possessed without a person's also possessing or exercising moral or even prudential virtues. Indeed, strength of will can be manifested even when an agent acts against her own best judgment: that is, when she is simultaneously akratic *and* strong-willed. This conclusion complicates our

² Aristotle is an exception: he would not classify these characteristics with the other virtues and vices, since they do not involve the possession or lack of knowledge. Moreover, he would not take *strength of will* to be a mark of true excellence, given that the truly virtuous person is *wholehearted* in what she does, and so does not need to exercise her will. Nonetheless, he takes strength of will to be straightforwardly better than weakness of will. For some considerations about why we should not accept that wholeheartedness is a necessary condition on virtue, see Yao (2015).

³ Holton (1999, 2003), McIntyre (2006).

assessments of both her action and her character. But, as I will argue, this kind of complication is just the right result.

1.2 AKRASIA AND WEAKNESS OF WILL

Following contemporary discussion, I will stipulate that to act *akratically* is to either judge that one has decisive or all-things-considered most reason to perform some action, Φ , and to do something else; or to judge that one has decisive or all-things-considered most reason *not* to perform some action, Ψ , and to do Ψ anyway. To be *akratic* is to have the general disposition to act akratically.

Philosophical attention has focused largely on questions about whether or not akrasia (or at least, clear-eyed forms of it) are really possible. Skepticism about its possibility can be generated by noticing that it seems puzzling how, given one's certainty that some action is not what one should do, one could nonetheless do it in a way that is deliberate, or intentional. And skepticism about the possibility of *weakness of will* follows immediately from the traditional identification of akrasia with weakness of will.⁴ This identification can be motivated by a few, controversial statements that are sometimes presented as though they must be trivially true: that one intends to do those things that one wants to do most, and that one wants to do most whatever one judges would be best to do. It can also be motivated by a substantive conception of psychology, such as the view that the faculty that both judges what would be best to do, and leads to the performance of intentional action *just is* the "will". On this picture, to fail to do what one judges best to do would be to suffer, quite literally, from a failure, or "weakness", of the will.

But in abstraction from particular and controversial views of our psychologies, it can instead become puzzling why we should think that such phenomena are truly identical. As some have pointed out, in paradigmatic cases of weakness of will it can be quite easy to *revise* what your best judgment is, and act in a way consistent with your new, revised judgment. For example, imagine turning down a second helping of ice cream given that you've judged that it would best for you not to have it, but finding that your attention is drawn back and back again toward the freezer. You take into consideration that you *did* skip a helping last week, and because of this

⁴ For example, Donald Davidson writes: "An agent's will is weak if he acts, and acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgment; in such cases we sometimes say he lacks the willpower to do what he knows, or at any rate believes, would, everything considered, be better" (2001: 21).

perhaps not only would it be fine for you to have this second helping tonight, *you positively deserve it!* It would be best, after all, to reward yourself. Now, in having your second helping, you've successfully acted on your best judgment—quite easily. Nonetheless, as some philosophers point out, there is an important pre-theoretical sense of being weak-willed in which this sort of case counts as paradigmatically so, even though it is not an instance of akrasia.

It also seems that one can act against her better judgment *without* being weak-willed. Being in a foul mood, one may have the desire to do something particularly destructive, where one uses one's judgment of what would be *worst* to do precisely to determine what it is that one will do. One's determination in doing this thing seems to tell against the idea that one is being weak-willed in trying to do the thing that would be worst.⁵

If this is right, why is it that we have so often identified weakness of will with akrasia? One explanation is simply that many of the most common and colorful examples that involve a person failing to do what he knows would be best *also* seem to involve whatever it is that seems characteristic of weakness of will. Frog and Toad know they will make themselves sick if they keep eating the chocolate chip cookies that Toad has just baked, and agree that they ought to stop. In order to stop, they realize that they must exercise their willpower—but find again and again that they just keep eating “one last cookie”.⁶ Similar examples are the bread and butter of philosophical discussions of akrasia, each reinforcing the idea that to be akratic just is to be weak-willed: I judge I ought to stop smoking, but try and fail to resist taking another drag; I judge that I ought to stop drinking, but try and fail to resist a nightcap.

But though examples of this sort are often the first to come to mind, we've seen that there are others in which the two phenomena come apart from one another. While there is *some* connection between weakness of will and akrasia, it appears to be a contingent one: when a person acts against her best judgment, it is sometimes, perhaps often, because she is suffering from weakness of will. But being weak-willed is just *one way* of failing to act according to your best judgment. There can be other explanations for what has happened.

⁵ Holton gives cases in which, in light of judging that one ought to Φ , one doesn't form the *intention* to Φ . If one hasn't even formed the intention to Φ (or perhaps less technically: if one isn't even trying to Φ), then when one fails to Φ , it isn't because one has been weak-willed. Rather, one simply didn't bother. In order to think that the phenomena are identical, one must think that to judge that one has most or decisive reason to Φ *just is* to form the intention to Φ —but this, as Holton argues, seems false. Intending to do something is different from settling that one has most reason to do it. Holton (1999).

⁶ From the classic children's book, *Frog and Toad Together*, by Arnold Lobel (1971).

1.3 WEAKNESS OF WILL AS INTENTION-VIOLATION

Once we see that the identification thesis is false, it now becomes a substantive question what exactly *weakness of will* is. According to one prominent view, the central feature of weakness of will is not that it is to act against one's better judgment, but that it is a matter of abandoning, or revising, a previously formed intention—where an intention to do something is neither identical to, reducible to, nor necessarily paired with, a judgment about what would be best to do.⁷ I will refer to this general approach as the *Intention-Violation* account of weakness of will.⁸

As its proponents recognize, the basic idea that weakness of will is a matter of abandoning or violating one's intentions must be sharpened. There are a number of different explanations for why a person might abandon or revise a previously formed intention, not all of which are identical to or even similar to being weak-willed. For example, I can abandon or revise an intention because certain obstacles have now made the satisfaction of my intention unfeasible, or undesirable. Suppose I intend to climb to the top of a tree in my backyard but injure myself on the way up, and so change my mind. Or suppose that upon learning that there is a nest of baby birds living in its canopy that would best be left undisturbed, I decide to do something else instead. Changing what I intend to do in such cases does not result from weakness of will. Or take into consideration that some people are particularly capricious or indecisive. Such a person might form a lot of intentions, but then revise them quite readily but for no particular reason at all. Scanning over the menu, I veer between the soup and the salad: intending to order one, but then intending to order the other. In each of these cases I revise or abandon my intention, but I do not seem to be weak-willed in doing so.

In his particular articulation and defense of the Intention-Violation account of weakness of will, Holton suggests two further conditions. First, he notes that to be weak-willed is not to revise *any* sort of intention, but a particular sort of intention that he labels a *resolution*.⁹ A *resolution* comes with it a prediction of the desires or inclinations that may result in my abandoning my resolution, and an intention to do what I intend to do in spite

⁷ Along with the authors I will discuss more explicitly, see Ryle (1949), McGuire (1961), Matthews (1966), Wiggins (1978), and Mele (1987).

⁸ Holton relies on Michael Bratman's rather technical understanding of what an intention is in his discussion of weakness of will as intention-violation. I will try to characterize the account in a way that is less technical, but I hope, just as plausible.

⁹ It is worth noting that Hill mentions this idea in his (earlier) account of weakness of will, suggesting that to *break* a resolution rather than to revise it, one's mind deviates from the resolution "in circumstances and for reasons the resolution was designed to exclude" (Hill 1986: 107).

of those desires. With this condition, we may now be able to distinguish somebody who is being weak-willed from, for example, somebody who is simply fickle: When I form the intention to order the salad, I do not do so with certain temptations in mind as precisely the sort of thing that I should resist, so my change of mind when I then intend to order the soup is not one that is best understood as the result of weakness of will. Had I set the *resolution*, “Order the salad and don’t not order the salad because you’ll find yourself wanting the soup a moment from now”, then I do begin, so Holton thinks, to look weak-willed rather than indecisive.¹⁰

Second, both Holton and McIntyre suggest that the other crucial step in precisifying the account is to notice weakness of will’s “irreducibly normative status”. McIntyre, for example, suggests that there is something especially *pejorative* about calling somebody “weak-willed”—and the fact that it is a stronger kind of condemnation marks it out as different from other ways in which a person might abandon his resolution.¹¹ She suggests that this is explained by the fact that not only does a weak-willed person give up on a resolution, it was a resolution that it was *good* or *important* for her to keep. So in order to determine what *weakness of will* is, and how it differs from other ways in which one can give up on a resolution, we need to assess the “reasonableness” of the agent’s original resolution. If it is the case that a person *doesn’t* have good reason to carry out her resolution in the first place, then she isn’t *weak-willed* when she fails to do so. And if we are unsure that the agent has good reason to carry out the resolution or not, we’ll correspondingly be unsure about whether or not she was being weak-willed.

McIntyre illustrates this point by providing the following example. A newlywed finds herself glancing at an attractive stranger on the bus, though she has resolved not to. Should we think that her resolution to avert her eyes is “unreasonable” (even though she herself might think otherwise), then we’ll be unlikely to assess her as being “weak-willed” when she gives up on her intention and takes another peek. But if one *did* believe that her original resolution was something that a good and proper spouse would set, then one *would* assess her as being weak-willed: “To declare that the newlywed has been weak-willed is to choose sides and judge that the problem lies not with the original resolution but with the failure to comply with it.”¹²

¹⁰ Holton gives the example of a person who, in being indecisive about which restaurant to go to, recognizes in himself this “unreasonable” tendency, and so sets a resolution to choose a restaurant and not waver from that decision, even though he will (given that he is a capricious sort of person) be inclined to do so.

¹¹ McIntyre (2006: 299). Holton’s condition of reasonability is harder to parse because it partly depends on a normative standard that governs the formation of good plans, or intentions. I will rely on McIntyre’s more familiar sort of standard.

¹² McIntyre (2006: 302).

Holton suggests that this standard of reasonability is one derived from considerations about the “norms of the skill of managing one’s intentions”.¹³ This idea is vague, but Holton is quite happy to accept this feature of his account: in spite of its vagueness, we nonetheless have some sense of how to apply it. It includes the thoughts that it is reasonable to revise one’s intentions when circumstances change so that there is no reason to have the intention anymore and that it is reasonable to revise one’s intention when one learns that it will entail undesirable consequences that one did not foresee. But he also includes not just the norms that govern a particular kind of skill (we might call this the skill of “planning”), but also, as McIntyre suggests, norms that inform the reasonability of the intention itself. In a later paper, Holton provides his own example of a “bad”, or “unreasonable” intention:

Sometimes I might form a resolution for a very trivial reason. I might, for instance, resolve to go without water for two days to see what it feels like. And sometimes the contrary desires will be far stronger than I had imagined: perhaps, after a day, the desire for water will be enormous. In such cases we might be reluctant to say that those who revise their resolutions are weak-willed. Indeed, the failing would lie with those who persist. They would exhibit an unreasonable inflexibility or stubbornness. So weakness of will involves, I think, a normative element.¹⁴

In other words, given that we know that being weak-willed is something *bad* (or “unreasonable”), and that being strong-willed is something *good* (or “reasonable”), it cannot be the case that persisting with this unreasonable plan to not drink water for two days could be an exercise of strength of will, rather than an “unreasonable inflexibility or stubbornness”. And a failure to persist with this plan would not be weakness of will, but something else.

To summarize, on the Intention-Violation account of weakness of will, weakness of will is a kind of intention violation or abandonment where i) that intention, or resolution, was formed *partly in order* to defeat certain foreseeable inclinations or desires, and so is paired with such a prediction; and ii) that resolution is something that would be “reasonable” for me to satisfy, given standards that are relevant to both assessing the resolution itself, as well as assessing good and bad reasons for giving up one’s resolutions. These two features are what make weakness of will a distinct phenomenon from merely revising one’s intentions, or being irresolute in other ways.

¹³ Holton (1999: 247).

¹⁴ Holton (2003: 42).

1.4 PROBLEMS WITH WEAKNESS OF WILL AS INTENTION-VIOLATION

Despite its strengths in comparison to the identification thesis, I am skeptical that the Intention-Violation account, at least in its current form, is able to mark the distinction between various ways in which we may fail, “unreasonably”, to persist in our resolutions. But before elaborating on this point, it will be best to first make a methodological one.

It is important to recognize that there is likely no systematic way in which people may appropriately use the term, “weakness of will”. Indeed, perhaps we use the term to pick out a variety of phenomena: sometimes to pick out people who *are* simply capricious or indecisive in their resolutions, who tend to set their intentions in a half-hearted ways, or who are easily susceptible to the influence of others in determining what to do or think.¹⁵ And in focusing on what we might think of as the “central” or “paradigmatic” cases of weakness of will, it seems more likely that we are picking out cases that are a combination of various phenomena that can all enhance the impression that the agent is being weak-willed. Akrasia may very well be one of these phenomena; though it is not identical to weakness of will, it may nonetheless be a common mark of it.

So my point here will not be to argue that there is some essential feature that all of these central or paradigmatic cases share in common. Instead, my aim here is to isolate a distinct and familiar way in which we recognize that a person can be weak-willed in abandoning a resolution *as opposed* to capricious, indecisive, anxious, or depressed, etc. I grant that this might not fit with ordinary usage, but my goal here is to keep distinct phenomena distinct.

1.4.1 The “Irreducibly Normative” Aspect of Weakness of Will

First, though I agree with Holton and McIntyre that weakness of will is likely, as they suggest, an “irreducibly normative concept”, I am skeptical that it is “normative” in the sense, and in the particular way, they propose. First, both begin with the assumption that being weak-willed is something especially bad, or “unreasonable”—worse or more unreasonable than other ways in which a person can fail to be resolute.

¹⁵ For example, in his characterization of the weak-willed person, Hill picks out a cluster of related phenomena—not all of which am I trying to isolate and discuss here.

But I sometimes find myself wondering whether being weak-willed really *is* that bad, or whether it *is* especially pejorative to be called, or to call another person, weak-willed. Part of this hesitation stems from personal reflection on the ways I realize that I am weak-willed, and my own sense that I *don't* feel particularly ashamed of it. I am not all that ashamed of myself when, for example, I try to resist eating too much bread before dinner is served but fail to do so.

But beyond these personal observations, the worry could be put this way: when both Holton and McIntyre discuss this “irreducibly normative element”, they tend to use rather *thin* evaluations of a person such as “unreasonable”, “irrational”, “subversive”, or “defective”. This use of these relatively abstract, and so relatively empty, evaluative terms can have a distorting effect in trying to figure out what weakness of will is. To use this sort of language is just to note that something has gone wrong, or is bad, without exploring further *what* has gone wrong or *what* is bad, and why. So, to “unreasonably” revise one’s resolution, or to set a resolution that is “unreasonable” in the first place is still, I suspect, to pick out too general a class of possible phenomena, given that there are so many “unreasonable”, or bad, ways to be, or to act.

Moreover, it isn’t clear that coming to the assessment that a person’s original resolution is reasonable secures the thought that she was being weak-willed in abandoning it, even if she abandons it for no good reason at all. Consider the following example from the novel, *Artist of the Floating World*. In it, the narrator is describing a meeting between himself, his daughter, and the family of his daughter’s potential husband. Noticing that his daughter’s responses to their questions have been stilted and awkward throughout the dinner, he observes:

When amongst family, or in the company of close friends, Noriko is in the habit of adopting her somewhat flippant manner of address, and often achieves a wit and eloquence of sorts; but in more formal settings, I have often known her to have difficulty in finding an appropriate tone, thus giving the impression that she is a timid young lady. . . . I had in fact anticipated this, and in our preparation for the [dinner], had stressed my opinion that Noriko should as far as appropriate emphasize her lively, intelligent qualities. My daughter had been in full agreement with such a strategy, and indeed, had declared so determinedly her intention to behave in a frank and natural way, I had even feared she would go too far and outrage the proceedings. So, as I watched her struggling to produce simple, compliant replies to Saito’s prompting, her gaze rarely leaving her bowl, I could imagine the frustration Noriko was experiencing.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ishiguro (1986: 119). One persistent worry throughout the novel is that the narrator is suffering from certain failures of perception or understanding, so there is likely another explanation for Saito’s silence and discomfort at the dinner table. But his description is nonetheless possible and psychologically realistic.

In this case, Noriko (i) set a reasonable resolution and (ii) has failed to fulfill that resolution because of inclinations that she predicted she'd experience, and not because of a good reason to give up the resolution. But for those of us who have experienced this very sort of failure of intention due to the discomforts of shyness and social awkwardness, it might seem that there is something misleading about calling this an episode of weakness of will, rather than something else.

Take another case in which a person might fail to be resolute, but in a way that is distinct both from the way in which Noriko fails to be resolute, and the way in which an indecisive or capricious person is irresolute. Imagine that I am an easily distracted person. Novel or flashy things tend to catch my eye, and give rise to inclinations to examine those things. Knowing this about myself, and being under time constraints, I might form this sort of resolution: *Go into the grocery store and buy a gallon of milk without being distracted by the flower displays by the entrance.* Now, upon walking in the front door, my eye catches a particularly vibrant display. I am drawn in, and pause to take a look before continuing on. Rather than this episode being *either* one of weakness of will, social anxiety, or capriciousness, I think we should just attribute this episode to the fact that I am easily distracted.

Perhaps, in response to this worry, Holton and McIntyre might insist that they do not mean “bad” in this thin sense, but bad according to the “norms of the skill of managing one’s intentions”. But neither of them, in fact, stick to this narrow sense of reasonability: Holton relies on common ideas of stubbornness and stupidity in his discussion, McIntyre uses the idea of being overly scrupulous. I think that this is the right way to go, rather than sticking to the narrow set of norms that Holton initially proposes. But in allowing for certain sorts of ethical assessments such as these to guide our judgments of people when they fail to act on their resolutions, we should also allow for others as well—and once we do so, we will find that there are too many ways to fail to persist in one’s good resolutions for no good reason that are too distinct from one another to be captured under the one label of weakness of will.

1.4.2 The Importance of Pain and Pleasure

So, what, if not this irreducibly normative element, marks weakness of will as the distinctive sort of phenomenon it is? In re-examining the kind of case that Holton and McIntyre suggest supports their positions, I think we may be able to discover what this is.

Imagine that my friend and I have just finished watching the film *Hunger*, which dramatizes the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike. As the credits roll, my friend—trying to lighten the somber mood—casually suggests that he

could refrain from eating for a week. Considering this, I propose that I could refrain from eating for *a week and a half*. He remarks that he could, too. I scoff. He smirks. In order to get the other to back down, we begin to discuss in detail how terrible it would be to do this (it helps that we've just watched this film). The first few days will be terribly painful—not only will we experience terrible hunger pangs, we're likely to suffer from debilitating head-aches, and crippling exhaustion. Moreover, we know that both our pantries are stocked and so it will be a struggle just to resist going into the kitchen and eating. Nonetheless neither of us is fazed: indeed, this attempt to get the other to back down has only strengthened our resolve to prove that we could outlast the other. We agree to refrain from eating for a week and a half, beginning the next day.

Now imagine that during the first day, my friend has managed to suffer through typical hunger and fatigue, refraining from eating. By the second day, the pain has gotten worse, but he is nonetheless able to strive through it. Though it has crossed his mind repeatedly that he has plenty of food only rooms away, he manages to resist opening up a box of crackers or bag of nuts. Imagine that he manages to hold out for three days before finally giving in and eating.

In contrast, compare my attempt. On the first day, I remind myself of my resolution to not eat for a week and a half. I sit down to work, but as my first cup of coffee wears off, my stomach begins to rumble. I try to ignore the feeling of hunger and the uncomfortable emptiness of my stomach, but my mind keeps thinking of the breakfast I could throw together: I imagine in vivid detail, a plate of fresh scrambled eggs with herb butter sauce and a crusty piece of toast. Imagine I hold out for an hour longer—but by 10 a.m. I give up on my resolution and gorge, frustrated that my friend was right all along.

In this sort of case, I am assuming that the original intentions both my friend and I set were silly or unreasonable. It is presumably just as silly as the intention to try to refrain from drinking water for two days. Given this, according to the Intention-Violation account, *neither* my friend nor I should be described as being “weak-willed”—but something else. This is because it was *better* that we didn't achieve our stupid goal, caving in to our hunger instead. To persist and not eat for a week and a half, Holton would conclude, would have just been evidence of a kind of “stubbornness”, or “unreasonable inflexibility”.

Fair enough. But notice that there is something notably different about the way in which my friend and I violated our resolutions: my friend *persevered* where I didn't, resisting the pain and the discomfort in a way that I didn't. He lasted *three* days; I could barely make it past breakfast. I find it plausible to characterize this difference in terms of the strength of our wills:

mine was comparatively weak, and his strong. Moreover, I seem to have given in not because I am easily distracted or capricious—I seem to have abandoned my resolution for the kind of reason that other, paradigmatic cases of weakness of will tend to involve. Indeed, this kind of case highlights, I think, two important psychological dimensions of weakness of will that the Intention-Violation account so far leaves out.

The first is a psychological dimension that Aristotle, when discussing the nature of “incontinence”, takes to be worth emphasizing. Abstracting from Aristotle’s identification of incontinence with acting against one’s better judgment, we can focus on just Aristotle’s understanding of this particular form of weakness. He notes that it is a sort of weakness in regard to particular kinds of experiences: pleasures and pains. While there *are* people who are incontinent about other sorts of things—such as “victory, honour, wealth”, he notes that these are not paradigmatic cases of incontinence: “we do not call them simply incontinent, but add the qualification that they are incontinence about wealth, gain, honour, or spirit, and not simply incontinent”.¹⁷ The *simply* incontinent are incontinent about bodily gratifications: “Some of these people go to excess in pursuing those pleasant things and avoiding painful things—hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and all the objects of touch and taste”.¹⁸ And this is why, Aristotle also notes, we often associate the incontinent with those who are *intemperate*. It is not that to be incontinent is to be intemperate, but it is to give in too easily to pleasure and pain of the very same kinds that the intemperate person values and devalues too much, respectively.

We should preserve the insights that Aristotle has provided us here. To be weak-willed rather than capricious, easily distracted, or listless, is to be deficient in withstanding certain physical and psychological pressures that tend to tempt human beings into giving up certain ends. When one acts in a weak-willed manner, her disposition of being deficient in withstanding these sorts of pressures is manifested in her failure to do what it is that she was trying to do, instead. Importantly, these pressures are certain kinds of pleasures and pains, while what would be easier to do typically involves doing something that either simply avoids doing the more painful thing, or doing what will yield pleasure. This is why the most common examples of weakness of will involve things that are typically pleasant to human beings, such as food, sex, and drink.

But it is important that what I mean here by both “pleasure” and “pain” is rather broad, and includes much more than these typical pleasures. Both

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, Chapter 4: 1148a 23.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, Chapter 4: 1148a 5.

include a wide range of pleasant and unpleasant phenomena that are phenomenologically distinct from one another, and distinct from paradigmatic pains and pleasures. One might be weak-willed in being deficient in withstanding things that one finds boring, annoying, or frightening; or one might act in a weak-willed way when one fails to resist scratching an itchy bug bite, or worrying a loose tooth, or when one gives in to sheer physical fatigue that isn't exactly *painful*, but something else. And in many cases one might be weak-willed not because she is giving in to the pleasure of say, a dessert or a drag on a cigarette, but simply because she'd rather do *nothing* than do whatever else would take more effort—such episodes of stasis aren't exactly *pleasurable*, nor such exertions of effort *painful*.¹⁹ Perhaps we can understand the relevant sorts of pleasures as being the *simple*, “lower” pleasures. We don't associate the pleasures that have to do with the virtue of temperance as being “higher” pleasures like the pleasure of contemplating a mathematical truth, the pleasure of listening to a complex piece of music, or the pleasure of seeing one's child grow into an adult, nor would we take a person seriously should he claim that he is weak-willed in regards to these sorts of pleasures.²⁰

According to this proposal, when we judge or criticize somebody for being weak-willed, the basic thought is that she failed to do something she was trying to do because she succumbed to certain pleasures, or failed to endure certain pains—not because she is depressed, or easily distracted, or shy. And given this understanding of weakness of will, as long as we do not assume that being “soft” in regards to simple pleasures and pains is always or typically something *bad* or “unreasonable”—for example, by assuming, as perhaps some do, that taking part in simple pleasures is *itself* bad—this understanding of weakness of will is not yet to think that weakness of will is something clearly and notably bad. That a person exhibits weakness of will in eating another piece of bread before dinner or another helping of dessert afterwards need not be something that is all that *bad* to do, and we can identify her action as a matter of being weak-willed without yet

¹⁹ Aristotle gives the example of a person who “trails his cloak to avoid the labor and pain of lifting it”; Lifting one's cloak would not *literally* be a pain. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, Chapter 7: 1150b 5.)

²⁰ Imagine somebody who, with a straight face, expressed the thought that he tried to resist going to the ballet, or seeing a collection of Andrew Wyeth's paintings, but couldn't out of *weakness of will*. There would be something pretentious about this person—where his pretense is that these sorts of higher pleasures are, for him, like the simple pleasures of food and drink for the rest of us. Philippa Foot notices that temperance and intemperance range over a particular sort of object as well, writing “whereas a cowardly act must be motivated by fear or a desire for safety...an act of intemperance [is motivated] by a desire for pleasure, perhaps even for a particular range of pleasures such as those of eating or drinking or sex” (Foot 1978: 9).

assessing she's done something especially bad in failing to resist. For example, it is *good* that I didn't persist in my attempt not to eat for a week and a half, but it is also true (I'm suggesting) that I didn't succeed in this resolution because I was being weak-willed.

This case also suggests that we need to add a second dimension to our understanding of weakness of will: there is some level of resistance to pain and pleasure that is just *not good enough* to count as exhibiting or possessing either self-control or strength of will. We assess a person in light of how *easy* or how *hard* certain sorts of things are for a normal adult human being to resist, as well as according to a standard of how much self-control a normal adult human being should have.²¹

Not only do these two elaborations of weakness of will capture the difference between me and my friend in the *Hunger* example, we can now also make sense—better sense—of why certain cases that are otherwise similar to weakness of will still seem importantly different, such as the case in which I am distracted by the flowers in the grocery store, or the case in which the formality of the social situation has left Noriko tongue-tied. Such cases don't involve giving in to pains or pleasures. And the second dimension of weakness of will—that it involves a comparison to a standard of normal competence—helps explain why it doesn't seem as though my friend has been weak-willed in giving up his resolution not to eat for a week and a half. In resisting his appetites and his desires to eat for three days, he has also resisted more pain and discomfort than we'd expect from a normal adult human being.

Now, should we understand strength of will as simply the converse of weakness of will? If so, then those who are strong-willed are simply those who are good at resisting pleasures and pains when trying to do something that involves resisting those pleasures and pains. But as I've suggested, this is in fact just one way in which a person can fail to do what she resolves to do. So in order to be strong-willed, not only must a person not be *weak-willed*,

²¹ Gary Watson also suggests using such a standard, writing that “weak agents fall short of standards of ‘reasonable and normal’ self-control (for which we hold them responsible), whereas compulsive agents are motivated by desires that they could not resist even if they met those standards” (Watson 1977: 330). Watson is concerned to distinguish the weak-willed from the compulsive—this is a difficult question that I have not tried to resolve here. However, while I agree with Watson that we must refer to some standard of normal self-control, I am skeptical that we will be able to fully capture what marks the difference between the weak-willed and the compulsive person without taking into consideration *what it is* that a person is unable to resist. Moreover, as I will discuss later, there are two different ways in which a person can be weak-willed, one of which involves the thought that a person (given that she has normal capacities of self-control) could have resisted, and another that (given that her self-control is weaker than normal) she *couldn't* have resisted—but even in this latter case she may not be compulsive.

but she must also not have the other common sorts of dispositions and habits that can result in our failing to execute our ends, some of which I have discussed here. A strong-willed person is somebody who isn't weak-willed, but she also does not tend toward listlessness, indecisiveness, capriciousness, or fickleness; she isn't easily distracted, or thrown off by social awkwardness. She is able to focus on what it is that she is trying to do, and persist in a sustained effort to get it done.

1.4.3 Character and the (Un)importance of Fulfilled Intentions

In his paper, "Weakness of Will and Character", Thomas Hill argues that by focusing exclusively on weakness of will at the level of assessing *actions*, philosophers have distorted the phenomenon. He suggests that when we make assessments of particular actions (or failures to perform such actions), our judgments are necessarily incomplete because they are not informed by considerations about a particular person's general tendencies. He writes, "To say that people are weak-willed, as I conceive this, is not to give a causal explanation of *why* they act as they do, but to state *how* they characteristically act."²² If this is right, we won't be able to judge at the level of a particular action whether or not it was weak-willed, or (for example) a result of being fickle.

But while looking at person's general tendencies is good evidence when determining whether a particular action of hers was of one kind or another, it still seems possible to understand weakness of will as something that can happen at the level of particular actions in a way that abstracts from what the agent is usually like. In other words, people who are otherwise strong-willed can sometimes be—uncharacteristically—weak-willed. And if this is right, then we still need to isolate some explanation for why a person has done what he has done—perhaps not exactly causal in nature—that makes his action, or failure, distinctively weak-willed.

The proposal I've offered above provides this explanation: perhaps a person who in general has a high resistance to pleasure and pain and so doesn't characteristically act in a weak-willed manner finds that, after a day of waiting in line at the DMV all day, she (uncharacteristically) eats too much ice cream for dessert.²³ Her *action* was weak-willed, even though she isn't a weak-willed person.

²² Hill (1986: 107).

²³ This sort of behavior is consistent with recent psychological research that shows that our willpower can be depleted—that if we must do something that involves exercising strength of will we'll be more likely to be weak-willed later on. See, for example, Baumeister et al (1998).

Nonetheless, we can still take seriously Hill's suggestion that when we assess a person for being weak-willed, we often do so at the level of their character. And, given the account I've offered, there are two ways in which it could manifest as a character trait. A person might have normal capacities of self-control, but nonetheless consistently fail to exercise her capacities and so consistently fail to do what she intends to do. But a person can also be weak-willed *without* actually characteristically failing to do what she intends to do.

Some people who are characteristically weak-willed might know this about themselves, and so be rather unambitious in the resolutions that they form; or they might plan around their predicted failures. For example, I know that I am particularly weak-willed when it comes to certain flavors of ice cream. My capacities for resisting those flavors in particular are underdeveloped. In light of this knowledge of my disposition I often plan in advance—buying flavors of ice cream that I find easier to resist. I am then able to successfully satisfy all of my ice-cream related intentions—“Only eat one serving of ice cream tonight, no matter how much I would like another”. But these actions, though not themselves weak-willed, are nonetheless expressions of the fact that *I* am weak-willed (at least, in relation to chocolate ice cream).

Given this relationship between assessing weakness of will at the level of character, and weakness of will at the level of an action, we can loosen the connection between being weak-willed, and being irresolute in one's intentions. When my friend gives in and eats after a week, and if Holton gives in and drinks some water after almost two days of not doing so, it won't seem like they are being weak-willed, even though neither successfully satisfied their intentions. Indeed, they seem to be exercising a notably high degree of willpower. So in order to judge that a *person* is weak-willed, we can't just look at how they characteristically act—we have to see whether they are bad at resisting certain pleasures, or withstanding certain pains, in comparison to a standard of normal adult competence.

If this is right, we have come to a realization that is similar to the one that we reached when we saw that being weak-willed is not identical to being akratic. There, I suggested that it is commonly the case that when people are akratic, it is because they are weak-willed—but that nonetheless, weakness of will is not the only explanation for why people are akratic, and people can be weak-willed without being akratic. And now we can reach a similar conclusion about violating one's resolutions in unreasonable ways: it is commonly the case that when people violate their resolutions for no good reason, it is often because they are weak-willed. But nonetheless, weakness of will is not the only explanation for why people break their resolutions for no good reason, and people can be weak-willed while successfully doing the things they intend to do.

1.5 STRONG-WILLED AKRASIA

While the account I propose is by no means a “non-normative” one, it does allow for us to ask a certain question that Holton and McIntyre’s approach does not. Recall that both begin by assuming that weakness of will is a particularly bad way of revising one’s resolutions and that being strong-willed, in not being weak-willed, is a reasonable way of sticking to one’s resolutions. But this is to build in the assessment too early in the analysis, allowing too many kinds of failures to count as weakness of will, and taking for granted that being strong-willed is always reasonable. But we should now re-investigate these questions: How should we assess both weakness of will, and strength of will? I will answer this question by way of discussing an interesting phenomenon that I think we can now get a better sense of: people who are strong-willed in acting against their best judgment.

To illustrate what is distinctive of this sort of case, let’s first compare it to another kind of case that has recently garnered attention under the name “inverse akrasia”.²⁴ These are cases of akrasia that have an added peculiarity: an agent acts akratically, but ends up doing the right, or best thing, even though she did not believe at the time that what she is doing was right or best. So for example, on one reading of Huckleberry Finn’s deciding to not turn Jim in to Miss Watson, Huck sincerely believes that he ought to turn Jim in, but finds that he cannot bring himself to do it. From the inside, he feels that he is being weak-willed *and* that he is unjustified in his failure to turn Jim in. From the outside, however, we know that Huck ends up doing the right thing—he has just been prevented from seeing that it was the right thing.

In contrast, imagine another sort of case of akrasia that is also peculiar, but in a different respect. Tom Sawyer and his cousin, Mary, are watching a pie cool outside of Aunt Polly’s window. Tom expresses that it’s his favorite sort of pie, and that it’s a shame that Aunt Polly means to take it to the neighborhood picnic later that day. Spying an opportunity for some fun, he *dares* Mary to snatch the pie. Mary, being the good child she is, would never think of doing such a thing on her own. She turns Tom down. Tom continues to goad her—*I knew you wouldn’t be able to, you goody-goody!* Mary, annoyed by this charge, reconsiders stealing the pie. She knows that it wouldn’t be right to do so—it isn’t hers for the taking. She doesn’t even *want* the pie, and *Tom* surely doesn’t deserve it. Nonetheless, she finds herself susceptible to Tom’s provocations. She resolves to steal the pie. Now, we can

²⁴ This is Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder’s label for such cases (Arpaly and Schroeder 1998).

imagine that she does experience some resistance to the idea of taking the pie—she feels the pangs of a guilty conscience, and she’s also afraid. She isn’t a rule-breaker to begin with, and she trembles when she considers the disappointment Aunt Polly will feel should she get caught in the act. Nonetheless, she takes a deep breath and readies herself, dashes by the window and snatches the pie.

This sort of case is different from the Huck Finn case, even though both are—ostensibly—cases of akrasia. First of all, we can see that Huck Finn’s evaluations of the situation are distorted—he thinks that turning Jim in would be the right thing to do. And given his motivations to do the right thing, he feels conflicted between that judgment, and a motivation he has *not* to turn Jim in. We can imagine that Huck feels that when he gives in to his motivation not to turn Jim in, he *feels* as though he is giving in to a sort of weakness: he believes he shouldn’t give preferential treatment to his friend, but he can’t help but give in to the pain he feels at the thought of returning Jim, and so “fails” to do so.

Mary too, we can imagine, both feels conflicted *and* ends up acting in a way that is contrary to her best judgment. But rather than feeling as though she is “giving in” to a temptation, she feels as though she must steel her will to do the thing that she knows she shouldn’t. And moreover, there is no sharp distinction here—as there is in Huck’s case—between what it is that she thinks she ought not do, and what, as a matter of fact, she ought not do. We can imagine that she’s *right* to think that she shouldn’t steal the pie.

If this sort of case is possible, then not only is it true that to be akratic is not to be weak-willed: one can be *strong willed*, rather than weak-willed, in doing precisely what one thinks one shouldn’t do. Among other things, Mary is able to resist the sort of pain and discomfort that she experienced in considering the idea of stealing the pie. In particular, she had to resist the painful and distressing feelings that she experienced in realizing that this would be doing something that she shouldn’t do: a form of guilt, and more straightforwardly, fear and anxiety. Similar sorts of examples that might ring more familiar are cases of people who, believing that doing such things would be bad or even wrong, muster up the strength of will in order to dine-and-dash, or shoplift something—perhaps because of the kind of dare that Mary is presented with.²⁵

How should we react to people who do this sort of thing? One is to think that they should simply be blamed for what it is that they do. That seems fair enough. But what sort of assessment should we make of their *character*,

²⁵ Such people might be rightly characterized as “weak” in some other sort of way—perhaps they give in to peer pressure too easily!

in light of what it is that they have done? Consider Mary. We know she shouldn't have stolen the pie. And we know that *Mary* knows she shouldn't have stolen the pie.²⁶ Nonetheless, when she steels her will and does it despite of this, we learned something notable about her: we've learned that she has a kind of *determination*. And this coheres with how at least some of us actually feel about people who are not only strong-willed in their ability to resist certain temptations, but have a notably more robust capacity to persevere through obstacles of all sorts in order to get something—whatever it is they have their sights on—done.²⁷ Such people have a sort of doggedness or tenacity. We might think that they have a certain sort of *grit*, *moxie*, or *gall*; they are *willful*. While our assessments of a person's character are no doubt sensitive to what it is that they were intending to do, what it is that they actually end up doing, and whether or not those things are good or worth doing, we are able to recognize this trait in abstraction from those sorts of questions.

Now, perhaps one simply thinks that a person who acts in this sort of way—who is a strong-willed akratic or who is *willfully* akratic—is simply beyond the pale. No doubt, if they are really doing something that is actually bad, they deserve to be blamed or even punished by those who stand in the right sorts of relationships to the person. But I suspect that not all of us *do* think this way—even while recognizing that they are performing actions that are bad, and that such people might be, for other reasons as well, sort of frustrating to deal with. Why is this?

One possible answer is that those of us who are unwilling to simply see *nothing* good about such people are recognizing that being strong-willed, or even willful, is to possess a certain kind of *executive virtue*.²⁸ These are not

²⁶ Perhaps one might deny that it is possible to intentionally and knowingly act against your all-things-considered best judgment, and so deny that it is right to understand Mary (or anybody) as doing this sort of thing. But my discussion here is focused on elaborating a view of weakness of will that accepts that akrasia of this sort is possible.

²⁷ The discussion that follows has benefited greatly from Hill's careful treatment of weakness of will as a character trait.

²⁸ Both Onora O'Neill and Bernard Williams discuss a distinctive category of executive virtues, and how they are different from both moral virtues. Williams notes executive virtues in suggesting that *integrity* can't be understood as a virtue at all, not even an executive virtue, "which do not themselves yield a characteristic motive, but are necessary for that relation to oneself and the world which enables one to act from desirable motives in desirable ways—the type that includes courage and self-control." (Williams 1981: 49). O'Neill writes, "These virtues are manifested in deciding on, controlling and guiding action, policies and practices of all sorts. Executive virtues might include self-respect, self-control and decisiveness; courage and endurance, as well as numerous contemporary conceptions of autonomy, insight and self-knowledge, and various traits that are both cognitive and practical, such as efficiency, carefulness, and accuracy." For O'Neill, executive virtues are "means to action" (O'Neill 1996: 187).

moral virtues, and they may even come into conflict with certain moral virtues, as is illustrated by the example of Mary. They may even come into conflict with *prudential* virtues: some of the people that I've described earlier—such as my friend who lasts three days without eating, a person who is able to withstand drinking something for two days just to see what it will feel like, or (more familiarly) extreme athletes who engage in insane kinds of activities—seem to demonstrate strength of will, even though they may also be imprudent.

Likewise, a person who is weak-willed lacks this executive virtue, or fails to exhibit it when she acts in a weak-willed manner. But this evaluation is not identical to assessments that the weak-willed person is simply “unreasonable” or a bad person, and that the strong-willed person is more reasonable, or a better person. Rather, if one is weak-willed, one is simply not that good at resisting certain sorts of pains and pleasures that can interfere with what she's trying to do; a strong-willed person is particularly good at doing what she's trying to do, where this includes an ability to resist the pains and pleasures that others more readily succumb to.

All of these observations should complicate our assessments of one another in ways that I think are exactly right. Typically, a person who is weak-willed may not be able to successfully perform a lot of actions that a morally better person would do, because in many cases doing what would be the moral thing to do would involve giving up certain pleasures or resisting certain pains. But such a person might nonetheless exhibit the right sorts of attitudes and emotions toward other people that could constitute, for example, being benevolent, or kind. She might be spontaneous and whimsical, or laid-back and easygoing.²⁹ And a person who is strong-willed may be able to successfully *do more things*, while having a kind of intensity that we find off-putting, or severe. But then again, it may be off-putting in the way that we sometimes admire, or have other positive reactions to. If she is a child, we may be impressed by her determination, even while thinking that she should be punished for whatever mischief she has gotten herself into.³⁰ When it comes to athletes, we are often in awe of their sheer determination, even if we recognize too that this will likely be paired with a fierce competitiveness that can be abrasive at best, and obnoxious or outrageous or prudentially insane otherwise. And when it comes to people who deliberately do things that are both morally or prudentially bad, or even morally wrong—even *when they themselves recognize*

²⁹ There is a reason, after all, that Hill's example of a characteristically weak-willed person is named “Amiable Amy”.

³⁰ Among others, that “wild villain”, Cam Ramsey from Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*—who darts in and out of the action as she pleases—comes to mind.

that *this is the case*—we may still have a more complex evaluation of them than we might feel comfortable in acknowledging: in such cases, we might *still* recognize within these people a kind of formidable capacity that we do not see, even when exhibited in these ways, as wholly worthless.

Finally, I hope that my discussion has also made salient a certain methodological point. When we assess people, we do not simply assess them for what they are like *as agents*. We assess them as people. And when we assess them as people, we make use of a rich set of concepts—concepts that are germane not only in our everyday lives, but which serve as important observations in philosophical investigations.³¹ Approaching weakness of will from the perspective of analyzing actions in abstraction from how we assess one another more generally, and in abstraction from the terms we use in these more general assessments, risks conflating the target of our analysis with other phenomena. The proposed alternative understanding of both weakness and strength of will—one which takes seriously all of the various ways in which we can evaluate a person for what she does and what she is like—complicates our assessments of one another, but in a way that is just as it should be.³²

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³¹ This is a point that has been made by, among others, both Iris Murdoch and Bernard Williams; Murdoch calls such concepts "normative-descriptive", and Williams calls them "thick" ethical terms.

³² I am grateful to Susan Wolf, Thomas Hill, Sam Reis-Dennis, and John Lawless for their comments and discussion. Thanks also to the organizers and participants at the 2015 New Orleans Workshop on Agency and Responsibility, especially David Shoemaker.

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