

CHAPTER FOUR

Weakness of Will

In the last chapter I was concerned with how we form our choices. In this and those that follow I shall be concerned with how we implement them. It is often helps to get clear on something by looking, not at the cases where it works, but at those where it fails. So I start by examining weakness of will. But when one turns to the philosophical literature on the topic, one finds that it is not as one might expect. Even David Wiggins, in a discussion that has much in common with that to be given here, starts out by claiming

Almost anyone not under the influence of theory will say that, when a person is weak-willed, he intentionally chooses that which he knows or believes to be the worse course of action when he could choose the better course.¹

I do not agree that this is the pre-theoretical view. Whenever I have asked non-philosophers what they take weakness of will to consist in, they have made no mention of judgements about the better or worse course of action. Rather, they have said things like this: weak-willed people are irresolute; they don't persist in their intentions; they are too easily deflected from the path that they have chosen. My aim in this chapter is to pursue this line of thought. I shall develop the idea that the central cases of weakness of will are best characterized not as cases in which people act against their better judgement, but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions. To say this is not to say enough. Not every case of a failure to act on one's intentions is a case of weakness of will. Sometimes we realize that our intentions were ill-judged, or that circumstances have changed to make them inappropriate. When, in such cases, we fail to act on our intentions, we need not display weakness of will. So a large part of this chapter will be concerned with saying what kind of failure to act on one's intention does constitute weakness of will. The basic idea is this. Just as it takes skill to form and employ beliefs, so it takes skill to form and employ intentions. In particular, if intentions are to fulfil their function, then, as we saw in Chapter One, they need to be relatively resistant to reconsideration. Weakness of will arises, I shall suggest, when agents are too ready to reconsider their intentions.

In taking this approach I depart from almost all of the literature on the subject.² Since I find the approach obvious, this calls for some explanation. I suspect that there are three factors

¹(Wiggins 1978), p. 239.

²Since writing the article on which this chapter is based, I have found that there are rather more exceptions than I had realize. I apologize to those authors I did not acknowledge there. Gilbert Ryle defines weakness of will much as I do, though in the context of an attack on the very idea of the will (Ryle, 1949) pp. 72–3. M. McGuire sketches an approach that is similar to mine in the course of responding to Hare (McGuire, 1961). Gwynneth Matthews argues that weakness of will can be constituted by, amongst other things, a failure to act on one's resolutions or decisions when one has insufficient grounds to revise them (Matthews, 1966). Donald Davidson raises failure to act on an intention, decision or choice as a possible form of weakness but does not go on to discuss them (Davidson, 1969) pp. 23–4. David Wiggins, in the article mentioned above, goes on to sketch an account of weakness of will that does tie it to failure to persist in one's intentions. Amelie Rorty insists in various articles that weakness of will should not be identified with

at work. First, as we have seen, there has been widespread philosophical suspicion of intentions, as something that should be, at best, reduced, and at worst eliminated. If intentions are under suspicion, then it is no wonder that philosophers have been unwilling to account for weakness of will in terms of it. I have already given my grounds for thinking that the suspicion is misplaced.

The second, related, factor that has plausibly been at work is a form of motivational internalism: this doesn't deny the existence of intentions, but denies any independent interest to them. If one thinks that intentions are so closely linked to judgements that they are bound to follow them, so that any change in intention must be occasioned by a change in judgment, then it might seem that it is judgment that is the real focus of interest. So an account of over-ready intention revision will just collapse back into an account of bad judgment formation. Such views find it hard to accommodate the possibility of action against one's better judgement, and this in itself should count against them. But my objections go further. Even if it is right that intentions and judgments typically line up, often the direction of influence goes in the opposite direction: as I shall argue in Chapter Four, agents frequently change their judgements because they change their intentions. The ability to maintain one's intentions is a skill that is distinct from the ability to form good judgments. It needs its own account.³

The final factor that has influenced the lines of the discussion is the impetus given by Plato and Aristotle. Both clearly were concerned with the question of whether it is possible to act against one's best judgement; and much of the contemporary literature has been concerned with assessing and responding to their arguments.⁴ Let us grant the term '*akrasia*' to refer to action voluntarily undertaken against one's best judgement; it is, after all, scarcely a term of ordinary English.⁵ Then my contention will be that weakness of will is not *akrasia*.⁶

akrasia; and in an unpublished piece outlined a distinction like that pressed here (it is mentioned in (Stocker, 1979) at p. 738). She also charts a number of places at which the 'akratic break' can take place, including at the point between forming an intention and acting on it (Rorty 1980). I discuss some of the issues raised by this paper below. Thomas Hill similarly argues that weakness of will should not be identified with *akrasia*; focusing on weakness of will as a character defect, he discusses a number of ways in which it can be manifested, amongst which the failure to persist in one's intentions is central (Hill, 1986). Alfred Mele discusses cases of weakness of will in which one acts against one's intention, but he still treats this as a special (and specially problematic) case of action against one's best judgement; that is, these are cases in which one judges a particular course as right, and then forms the intention to pursue it, and then fails to act on it (Mele, 1987). In contrast, I suggest that action against one's judgements about what is right need not enter into examples of weakness of will at all.

³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

⁴ It is far less clear that this was *all* that they were interested in. There are many passages in Aristotle that at least seem to be concerned with weakness of will as I shall understand it (for instance; *NE* 1145 and 1151 *passim*).

⁵ Though there is a now obsolete English term, 'acrazy', meaning 'intemperance' or 'excess'; it is used by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* as the name for intemperance personified as an enchantress. Though it stems from a different Greek root than the Aristotelian notion of *akrasia* (from *ακρασια* [add stress marks], meaning 'bad mixture', rather than *ακρασια* meaning 'ungoverned'), the *OED* suggests that the two terms have become confused.

⁶ It is an interesting question when philosophers first started to translate, or gloss, Aristotle's term *akrasia* as 'weakness of will'. In the nineteenth century literature it is either left in the original Greek, or else translated, following the Latin, as 'incontinence'. See, for instance (Grant, 1857); (Cook Wilson, 1879); (Stewart, 1892); (Fairbrother, 1897). Sidgwick refers to it as 'want of self-restraint' and then as 'unreasonable action' (Sidgwick, 1893). The first place I have found it translated as 'weakness of will' is in (Ross, 1923) p. 221, though this is just a parenthetical gloss: his primary translation,

WEAKNESS OF WILL

I have argued that we have a need for intentions, that is, that we have a need for action guiding states that are not readily revised. My suggestion now is that this gives the basis for an account of weakness of will. For a first attempt, let us say that a person exhibits weakness of will when they revise an intention in circumstances in which they should not have revised it. This ‘should’ is not meant in a moral sense. Rather it is the ‘should’ which is generated by the norms of the skill of managing one’s intentions. A person is weak willed if they revise their intentions too readily.

What is it to be too ready to revise an intention? Clearly not every case of a revision is a case of an over-ready revision. If you and I intend to go for a picnic, and it starts to rain, we might be quite right to revise our intention, and in doing so we need not show weakness of will. (I only say we *need not* show weakness of will in such a case, for I have left it underdescribed; if we had vowed to go whatever the weather, then we probably would have been weak willed in giving up when it rained.) It might be thought that we can accommodate cases like these by invoking conditional intentions. Even if we did not say so explicitly, it might be thought that our intention was the conditional one of going for a picnic provided it did not rain. But not every reasonable revision of an intention can be understood as the triggering of an escape clause in a conditional intention. We would be equally right to abandon our intention in the face of a freak plague of frogs falling from the sky; but neither of us considered that, even implicitly. We need then some general account of when it is right to revise our intentions.

Nietzsche seems to have held that it is *always* wrong to revise an intention:

To close your ears to even the best arguments once the decision has been made: sign of a strong character. Thus an occasional will to stupidity.⁷

Perhaps this is good advice for football referees. But as a general attitude it is surely a recipe for disaster. Moreover, it isn’t even true that such intransigence is a sign of a strong character. One is reminded of Somerset Maugham’s jibe against the Vicar of Blackstable: ‘Like all weak men he laid an exaggerated stress on not changing one’s mind’.⁸ Nevertheless, if our account of intentions is correct, there is something right about the idea that there should be a real reluctance to revise an intention, and that at times this might lead one, if not to stupidity, at least to a less than optimal outcome. To see this, let us return once more to Bratman, and to his account of the circumstances in which we rationally should reconsider our intentions. Bratman’s idea is that it is rational to reconsider an intention just in case doing so manifests tendencies that it is reasonable for the agent to have; similarly it is rational to fail to reconsider an

both there and in his translation of the *Ethics* is ‘incontinence’. It is only with Hare that ‘weakness of will’ starts to become the standard term: (Hare, 1952), p. 169; (Hare, 1963), p. 77. Perhaps this should not be surprising, since the expression ‘weakness of will’ appears to be a fairly recent one. The earliest citation in the *OED* is from 1885. Earlier writers spoke of agents being faint-hearted, or weak-kneed, or of lacking fortitude.

⁷ (Nietzsche, 1886), §107; cited also in (Watson, 1977) p. 328.

⁸ (Maugham, 1915) Ch. 39. Note that Maugham doesn’t ascribe weakness of will to the vicar. There is more than one kind of weakness; what is at issue here is more like weakness of character. For a further distinction, consider Austin’s complaint about the ‘grotesque confusion of moral weakness with weakness of will’ (Austin, 1956) at p. 146 n.1.

intention just in case this manifests tendencies that it is reasonable for the agent to have.⁹ This means, of course, that sometimes it will be rational not to reconsider an intention even when reconsideration would, in that instance, have been in the agent's interests. In general once we've decided which restaurant to eat in, it is a good idea to let the matter rest, without endlessly discussing the pros and cons; and this is true even though it occasionally means that we'll go to a restaurant that, with some more discussion, we could have realized was not the best choice.

Presumably the converse of Bratman's criterion also holds: it is not rational to reconsider something if the reconsideration manifests tendencies that it is not reasonable for the agent to have. Adding this to the account proposed here, we arrive at the following: actors show weakness of will when they revise an intention as a result of a reconsideration that they should not have performed; that is, when their reconsideration exhibits tendencies that it is not reasonable for the agents to have.

As it stands this will seem horribly vague. Which tendencies of reconsideration is it reasonable for an agent to have? I would suggest rules of thumb like the following:

- it is reasonable to have a tendency to reconsider intentions if one believes that circumstances have changed in such a way that they defeat the purpose of having the intention;
- it is reasonable to have a tendency to reconsider intentions if one believes that they can no longer be carried out;¹⁰
- it is reasonable to have a tendency to reconsider intentions if one believes that they will lead one to great suffering when that suffering was not envisaged at the time of forming the intention;
- it is reasonable to have a tendency not to reconsider intentions in circumstances that prevent clear thought if those intentions were made in circumstances that allow clear thought;
- it is reasonable to have a tendency not to reconsider intentions that were expressly made in order to get over one's later reluctance to act.

This is still pretty vague: the principles themselves are vague, they are doubtless incomplete, and I have said nothing about which of them should take precedence over which. But I shall not try to eliminate this vagueness, at least not at this point.¹¹ Vagueness is a problem when we try to determine the extension of a concept: when we try to provide a means of telling for each particular act whether it does or does not display weakness of will. My concern here is rather with giving an account of the concept itself. If the concept is vague, then the account had

⁹ (Bratman, 1987) p. 68. Bratman actually talks in terms of habits rather than tendencies. But for something to be a habit, it must be habitually exhibited. In contrast it is possible for a tendency to be only rarely exhibited, if at all. I want the latter notion.

¹⁰ Note that this rule needs careful application if it is not to trivialize the whole account. For what if my reason for thinking that the intention cannot be carried out is my belief that I lack the will power to see it through? That had better only count as a reason for thinking that I *will not* see it through, not that I *cannot*.

¹¹ I return to discuss these rules of thumb in Chapter Seven.

better be vague too, and along just the same dimensions.¹² I hope that we shall see that the account proposed here provides just the right sort of vagueness.

However, the account is not plausible as it stands. I need to make a clarification and an amendment. First the clarification. Suppose I intend to perform a rash and dangerous act: leaping from a high cliff on an untested home-made hang-glider. Would I show weakness of will in revising my intention? That rather depends on why I revise it. If I reassess the chances that the hang-glider will fail, and decide on a programme of more cautious preliminary testing, that is surely a reasonable revision. If, on the other hand, I simply suffer a failure of nerve, backing off from the edge of the cliff at the sight of the drop before me, a failure I would have suffered no matter how good the hang-glider, then that is plausibly a case of weakness of will. That is why I did not phrase the account in terms of whether or not it is reasonable to reconsider my intention; instead it is phrased in terms of whether or not the particular reconsideration I perform is one that exhibits tendencies that it is reasonable for me to have. Note further that these tendencies need not be all-or-nothing. Someone might well be very resolute when it comes to dangerous hang-gliders, but very irresolute when it comes to alcohol. So we should not talk of individuals being weak willed *simpliciter*, but of them weak willed with respect to a particular class of intentions, where this class might be very tightly circumscribed.

Now for the amendment.¹³ Some people go in for a lot of low level intention revision. They decide to go to one restaurant, change their minds in favour of another, switch back to the first, again to the second, and so on. Now it is not reasonable to have such tendencies; much time and effort is wasted, and interpersonal co-ordination becomes a nightmare. But whilst we might describe such people as fickle or capricious, we would not normally describe them as weak-willed. So the account offered so far is too broad. We need to know what is distinctive about weakness of will, what it is that distinguishes it from caprice.

In Chapter One I introduced the distinction between simple intentions and resolutions. Resolutions serve to overcome the desires or beliefs that the agent fears they will form by the time they come to act, desires or beliefs that will inhibit them from acting as they now plan. (Often the two will be muddled up in ways that we shall examine in the next chapter: the strong desire for a cigarette may bring the irrational belief that it won't actually do any harm; the drunken belief in one's own capacities may engender a new desire to climb the public statue.) To cover both cases, and perhaps others—fear, panic, lethargy—that are neither beliefs nor desires, that let us talk of resolutions being *contrary inclination defeating*.

The distinction between simple intentions and resolutions provides us with what we need to distinguish weakness of will from caprice. If someone over-readily revises a resolution, that is weakness of will; if they over-readily revise a simple intention, that is that is caprice. Consider again the vacillating diner. Suppose he has become concerned about his tendency to keep changing his mind, and so resolves to go to a particular restaurant even if another seems more attractive later on. In other words, suppose he forms a resolution to go to that restaurant. Then if he revises his intention once again, he would not merely be capricious; he would display weakness of will.

¹² I have authority on my side: 'It is the mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject matter than the nature of that subject permits'. Aristotle *NE* 1094b23-5

¹³ Jeanette Kennett pointed out that I needed to make an amendment here. Lloyd Humberstone showed me how to make it.

Thus we can think in terms of a genus with two species. The genus is that of unreasonable revision of intention. The two species, weakness of will and caprice, are distinguished by whether the intentions revised are resolutions or not.

Defeating contrary inclinations might be only part of the reason for forming a particular intention, and not a very important part at that. Indeed, sometimes this aspect might be merely implicit in an intention, and might only emerge if we asked the person what they would do if they were to change their preferences or beliefs in certain ways. So it will not always be easy to identify which intentions are resolutions. However, the notion is not vacuous, since some clearly are not. Thus I might form an intention which has the content: I will go to The Red Lion tonight, providing I still feel like going, and still think it a good idea to go. This is clearly not a resolution, but nor is it otiose. Such an intention can still have an important role in inter- and intra-personal co-ordination (we can know that it is very likely that I will not change my mind), despite its conditional nature.

We have arrived at the idea that weakness of will then is unreasonable revision of a resolution. But that is still not quite right.¹⁴ Suppose that I spend rather too much time reading various Dadaist tracts. As a result I decide that I am far too rule governed; I need to be more spontaneous. And as a result of that I abandon some of my resolutions. We might suppose that this is an utterly ridiculous, romantic gesture, one that is clearly not reasonable. But do I thereby show weakness of will? I think not. The problem is that the intentions have not been revised in the right way: they have not been revised in response to the pressure of the very inclinations that the intentions were supposed to defeat. We thus need to amend again: weakness of will is unreasonable revision of a contrary inclination defeating intention in response to the pressure of those very inclinations.

This is not a fully reductive account: what is it to say that a revision comes *in response* to the pressure of an inclination? That it is caused by it? That surely won't do: it would be easy to come up with deviant causal chains, in which the inclination causes the revision, but in the wrong sort of way. If we persist with causal talk we will probably have to end up saying that the revision is caused by the inclination in the *appropriate sort of way*, and whilst we can give plenty of examples of this, we will have no reductive analysis of what it means. But I don't think that we should let this detain us. We have a good enough grasp on the account that is being offered, certainly one that is sufficient to enable us to distinguish it from the traditional account, and to see which does best. It is to this task that I now turn.

3 ADVANTAGES OF THE PRESENT PROPOSAL

I shall present six reasons for believing the account of weakness of will that is offered here; or, to be more precise, six reasons for preferring it to the traditional account that understands weakness of will as a failure to do what one judges to be best.¹⁵

(i) *Accommodating weakness of will in cases of indifference or incommensurability*

We can form resolutions in cases where we treat the options as incommensurable. When we do so, and revise our resolutions, we can show weakness of will. That is just what the account proposed here would predict. But the traditional account can make no sense of such cases; for,

¹⁴ Thanks to Alison McIntyre for raising this point; see (McIntyre 2006) at n. 16.

¹⁵ Some of these considerations also, I believe, provide reasons for preferring it to the accounts offered in (Jackson, 1984), and (Bigelow, Dodds, and Pargetter, 1990); but I shall not argue for this contention here.

by hypothesis, the agents involved do not judge one option to be better than the other, and so cannot be acting against their better judgement.

To see the possibility of such cases, consider again the example of incommensurability mentioned in Chapter One. I am caught between the conflicting demands of fighting fascism and of staying to look after my mother. Unable to compare them in any meaningful way yet knowing I must choose, I resolve to go and fight. But then, when the moment to leave comes, I revise my resolution and stay with my mother. If the account of my revision is filled out in the right way, that will be an example of weakness of will. (Note that to generate such case we need not say that the options really are incommensurable; only that the agent judges them to be so.)¹⁶

(ii) *Explaining the relation of weakness of will to strength of will*

One would expect the property opposed to weakness of will to be strength of will. And strength of will is something that shades off into stubbornness. The account I propose explains this in a straightforward way. A person shows strength of will when they stick to their resolutions in circumstances in which they are right to do so; that is, when they do not reconsider them, and not doing so exhibits tendencies that it is reasonable for them to have. Strength of will turns to stubbornness when they stick by their resolutions even when it is reasonable to reconsider and revise them. And, of course, the boundary between these two is vague; reasonable people will disagree about which tendencies of intention revision it is reasonable to have, just as they will disagree on when strength of will moves over into stubbornness. (One way of understanding the quotation from Nietzsche is to see him placing the boundary at one extreme.) Here then is one place where the vagueness in the *analysans* mirrors the vagueness in the *analysandum*.

In contrast, the traditional account has real problems in explaining strength of will. Indeed, typically defenders of the traditional account have contrasted weakness of will with self-control, where this is understood as the ability to do what one believes to be best. But self-control is not continuous with stubbornness, in the way that strength of will is. It is perhaps possible to have too much self control; but the worry there is that one lacks spontaneity; and lacking spontaneity is very different from being stubborn.

(iii) *Accounting for cases of oscillating weakness of will*

Consider this example from Thomas Schelling:

As a boy I saw a movie about Admiral Byrd's Antarctic expedition and was impressed that as a boy he had gone outdoors in shirtsleeves to toughen himself up against the cold. I resolved to go to bed at night with one blanket too few. That decision to go to bed minus one blanket was made by a warm boy. Another boy awoke cold in the night, too cold to retrieve the blanket and resolving to restore it tomorrow. But the next bedtime it was the warm boy again, dreaming of Antarctica, who got to make the decision. And he always did it again.¹⁷

¹⁶ Can we generate parallel examples of weakness of will in cases of indifference? I see no reason in principle why not, but in practice it is hard to see why one would form resolutions in such cases, and hard to see why one would then be tempted to switch to other options.

¹⁷(Schelling, 1980) p. 59.

Let us suppose that the cold Schelling ineffectually tried to retrieve the blanket without leaving his bed. How would we describe the situation? Would we say that Schelling displayed weakness of will when he reached for the blanket despite his earlier resolution to leave it off? Or would we say that he displayed weakness of will in leaving the blanket off again the following night, despite his resolution to leave it on? I think that we might well want to say both (we would need to fill out the details in the right way; he must form each resolution seriously, having given it real consideration, and so on). The account I am offering enables us to do so. We say that in each case, in overturning his previous resolution, Schelling displays tendencies that it is not reasonable for him to have. But on the traditional account of weakness of will it is not easy to see how we can get this result.

On the traditional account, the normal case is one in which the agent maintains a view about which action is the right one, and then acts contrary to this belief. But that cannot be the case here, since if the young Schelling maintained a view, then it would have been either that it is best to leave the blanket on, or that it is best to take it off. But if he maintained either of these views, then it is not possible for *both* actions to display weakness of will, since it is not possible for both actions to be contrary to the view maintained. Alternatively proponents of the traditional account might think that the young Schelling changed his mind about which course was the best. Then, in order to characterize him as doubly weak willed, they would have to say that in the middle of the night, shivering beneath one blanket too few, he believed that what was best was to keep the blanket off, and his weakness stemmed from reaching for it; and they would have to say that when going to bed, warm and dreaming of the Antarctic, he believed that it was best to keep the blanket on, and his weakness stemmed from his leaving it off. But that is completely implausible; if there were any reason for thinking that, in the middle of the night, he believed it best to keep the blanket off, that would be because he believed this when he went to bed, and had not changed his mind; and similarly, if there were any reason for thinking that, at bedtime, he believed it best to keep the blanket on, that would be because he believed this in the middle of the night, and had not changed his mind.

(iv) Allocating the stigma of weakness of will

There is a considerable stigma attached to being weak willed. I think that the account offered here correctly predicts the times that it is deserved, and the traditional account does not. I have a friend who believes that all the arguments point to the same conclusion: he should not eat meat. But he is not moved. 'I am', he says disarmingly, 'inconsistent'. Now there is something very odd about that, but, although he is *akratic*, and he attracts the stigma that goes with that, he doesn't attract the stigma that attaches to weakness of will. Indeed, I would never call this friend weak willed. Suppose, however, that he were to announce that he has decided to give up meat; his resolve is firm. If I were then to find him roasting himself a suckling pig in a pit, I should say that he was weak willed, and quite rightly. It is the failure to persist in the resolution that makes all the difference.

We can make the point in another way. Suppose my friend tells me that he will give up eating meat on the first day of January; it is his New Year's resolution. I find him ruefully eating sausages on New Year's Eve; I cannot scorn him for his weakness of will. Yet were I to find him eating the same meal the following day I could. His views about what is best have not changed over the two days; the difference stems from the date built into the resolution.

These considerations are relevant to one of the binding strategies that was mentioned above. If I fear that I shall not persist in my resolution, then one thing I can do is to make it

public; for the scorn that I will suffer if I revise the resolution will provide me with an incentive to keep with it. The important point here is that if I want to enlist the potential scorn of others in this way, it is not much use simply announcing my opinion of what is best; I need to announce my resolution.

(v) *Explaining cases of weakness of will without inner conflict*

Some people say that in cases of weakness of will there must be an inner conflict: the agent must feel the pull of the course that they are weakly abandoning. And they take this as an argument for the traditional account.¹⁸ That strikes me as quite wrong. Of course when we self-ascribe weakness of will we will typically feel some tension; otherwise we wouldn't know to self-ascribe it. But we can ascribe weakness of will to a third party in whom there is no conflict. We surely can ascribe weakness of will to a person who has vowed to give up smoking, and who blithely starts up again straight away, saying that they have changed their mind (again we would need to fill in the details in the right way). We can make perfect sense of this on the view proposed here: we simply say that they gave up their resolution too easily. We need to be sure that the initial resolution really was formed, and too sudden a change might make us doubt that; and the revision itself might be seen as involving a kind of conflict. But there need be no internal conflict at all at the point at which they smoke the cigarette.

Thus it seems to be that rather than being a point in the traditional account's favour, its requirement that there be internal conflict actually counts against it. For it is hard to see that the traditional account could count our recidivist smoker as weak-willed unless there was, deep down and repressed, a belief that smoking was the wrong thing to do. Yet we do not need to attribute such self-deception in order to attribute weakness of will.

Note that I have not said that cases of *akrasia* are impossible. Suppose that I were tempted by the arguments of Socrates and Aristotle and their latter day followers, arguments to the conclusion that a person cannot choose other than that which they judge best. Then I might try to exploit the account given here to say that what appears to be *akrasia* is really just an unreasonable revision of resolution. But I am not tempted by those arguments. So I can happily accept that there are cases of *akrasia*, and that they do give rise to internal conflict. I simply claim that unless they also involve an unreasonable revision of a resolution, they are not cases of weakness of will.

(vi) *Accommodating cases of both akrasia without weakness of will, and weakness of will without akrasia*

So far we have considered cases of weakness of will without *akrasia*, and we have considered cases of *akrasia* without weakness of will. There are some cases that display both. Consider the following three examples:

(a) Ravi has devoted his life to his poetry and considers it the most important thing in the world. But he has fallen in love with Una, an English schoolgirl. She finds herself pregnant, and, fearing that her father will force her into an abortion, they elope. Despite his ongoing view that poetry is what is most important, Ravi vows that no one will harm the child. However, his commitment is short lived. They are found, and the police threaten him with prison. Faced with the choice between standing by Una and the unborn child, or leaving her to a forced abortion and going free to pursue his poetry once again, he shamefacedly chooses the latter.¹⁹

¹⁸For instance, (Cordner, 1985).

¹⁹(Godden, 1975)

(b) Christabel, an unmarried Victorian lady, has decided to embark on an affair that she knows will be disastrous. It will ruin her reputation, and quite probably leave her pregnant. Moreover, she considers it morally wrong. So she thinks it not the best option on either moral or prudential grounds. Nevertheless, she has resolved to go ahead with it. However, at the very last moment she pulls out: not because of a rational reconsideration of the pros and cons, but because she simply loses her nerve.²⁰

(c) The President has his finger on the nuclear button and his threat is simple: if the enemy invade, he will retaliate in massive fashion. That will be a catastrophe for everyone, for the President and his people as well as for the enemy. But he reasons that such a threat is needed to deter; and that in order for the threat to be credible it must be genuine: he must really form the conditional intention to retaliate if the enemy invade. Then the unthinkable happens: the enemy invade. Enraged, the President prepares to retaliate. But then, faced with doing what he takes to be morally and prudentially appalling, he hesitates, revises his resolution, and desists.²¹

All three examples have a similar form. At some point each agent either forms, or finds themselves with, a resolution which is in some sense *akratic*: a resolution to do other than what they judge best. Ravi resolves to stand by Una; Christabel resolves to have the affair; the President resolves to push the button. None at this point seems to show weakness of will, notwithstanding the gap between what they have resolved and what they judge best. So here we have *akrasia* without weakness of will; or at least, we would have if the agents had acted on those intentions. Then the agents revise their intentions, bringing them into line with what they judge best. Ravi now intends to abandon Una and pursue his poetry; Christabel now intends to forego the affair; the President now intends to take his finger off the button without pushing it. But in each case it is precisely the revision that leaves them open to the charge of weakness of will. So here we have weakness of will without *akrasia*.

For Ravi and Christabel, I think it is clear that revising the intention constitutes weakness of will. There are, however, important differences between the two examples. Ravi has a guilty conscience about what he is doing; whilst he does judge it the best option, all things considered, he doesn't judge it to be the morally best option. So we might try to save the traditional account by arguing that weakness of will consists in failing to do what one judges to be morally best. Christabel's case shows us that this defence will not work. She does think that the best option, all things considered, is the morally best option, yet in revising her intention she too shows weakness of will.²²

The case of the President is more complicated. It is not clear whether we should ascribe weakness of will to him; but that is because it is unclear whether or not it is reasonable for him to have a tendency to change his mind in this case. Let us return to the point at which the President was still trying to make the deterrence policy work. Then, at least according to the

²⁰ Thanks to Rae Langton for this example. It is adapted from the story of Christabel LaMotte in A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession* (Byatt, 1989)—Byatt's Christabel, however, does *not* lose her nerve. In thinking about the case it is important to recall the distinction, applied above to the hang glider example, between a revision that it is rational to make, and a revision that is made rationally.

²¹ I am grateful to David Lewis for this example. I am not sure that he intended it for quite the use to which I have put it.

²² Advocates of the traditional account have typically insisted that the judgement of what is best, all things considered, is not the same as the judgement of what is morally best; and that the account of weakness of will should be framed in terms of the former notion, not the latter. See (Davidson, 1970) p. 30.

logic of deterrence, it was reasonable for him to form the resolution to retaliate if the invasion happened. At that point we could surely have expressed a conviction that he would stick with this resolution by describing him as strong willed; and, equally, we could have expressed a doubt that he would stick with it by describing him as weak-willed. That is what the account predicts. But once things have gone wrong, it's not obvious what he should reasonably do, even if we accept the logic of deterrence. On the one hand, he reasonably judged that he should retaliate in case of invasion, and he is now in such a case; on the other, triggering an all out nuclear war is madness. If we incline to the second of these considerations (as we surely should) then we won't describe him as weak-willed if he revises his resolution. But the memory of what we said before the invasion should make us uneasy with that judgement. In cases like this we get ourselves into a very real and very dangerous muddle over what it is reasonable to do; our confusion over applying the notion of weakness of will reflects that muddle.

4 RESPONSES TO OBJECTIONS

I have given my six reasons in favour of the account that I propose. I shall conclude this chapter by responding to seven possible objections.

(i) *Why be so strict?*

Amelie Rorty, in her enlightening paper 'Where does the Akratic Break Take Place?' answers her own question by providing a multitude of candidates.²³ I have suggested that weakness of will consists in just one kind of failing. Why should I be so strict? The English language is a plastic instrument. It seems overwhelming likely that sometimes people have used the expression 'weakness of will' to describe other failings, such as some of the others that Rorty mentions. In particular, isn't it very likely that sometimes it has been used to describe the case in which a person fails to form an intention to do what they know to be best, and as a result does what they know not to be. In short, isn't it very likely that the traditional account captures one of our uses of the expression?

Perhaps that is right. If so I should rest content with the claim that many cases of weakness of will are captured by the account proposed here; I should offer it as a supplement to the traditional account, not as a replacement. But I cannot help thinking that the traditional account is not simply inadequate, but straight-out wrong. Firstly, we have seen a number of cases in which people appear to be *akratic* without being weak willed. Secondly, I doubt that there are any clear cases of weakness of will that can be captured by the traditional account and not by mine.

Consider this example concerning Jim Dixon, hero of Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim*.²⁴ Dixon, a junior and untenured lecturer, is staying with Professor Welch, his head of department and arbiter of his future in the university. He awakens after a night of heavy drinking to discover cigarette burns through his bedclothes.

Had he done all this himself? Or had a wayfarer, a burglar, camped out in his room?
Or was he the victim of some Horla fond of tobacco? He thought that on the

²³(Rorty, 1980) Note that Rorty is here giving a discussion of *akrasia*, not of weakness of will; like me she denies that the two are the same. See her note on p. 333. For an enlightening discussion of the different forms that weakness of will can take, see (Hill, 1986)

²⁴ (Amis, 1956)

whole he must have done it himself, and wished he hadn't. Surely this would mean the loss of his job, especially if he failed to go to Mrs. Welch and confess what he'd done, and he knew already that he wouldn't be able to do that.

Wouldn't we say that Dixon displays weakness of will here? Yet he never forms an intention to tell Mrs. Welch. So mustn't we accept that there can be weakness of will that does not consist of a failure to do what one intends? This might seem like good evidence that the traditional account is at least sometimes correct.

I am not so sure. Why doesn't Dixon resolve to tell Mrs. Welch? Presumably because he knows that he wouldn't be able to go thorough with it if he did: "he already knew that he wouldn't be able to do that". So he knows that if he did form such a resolution he would display weakness of will, where this is understood in terms of the present account. It is because he knows that he is someone with a tendency to weakness of will that he acts as he does. So, on the account given here his weakness of will explains his action (or rather his inaction). It seems to me that is good enough. Once we have said that we feel no compelling need to insist that Dixon actually exhibits weakness of will here.

If we are to get a really compelling counterexample, we need a clear case of weakness of will in which a person knows that, if they were to form the resolution to do what they judge best, they would stick to that resolution; but they fail to form it. Perhaps I am blinded by partiality to my account, but none comes to mind.

So I doubt that the traditional account captures a natural sense of our talk of weakness of will. However, I should concede that there is at least one common use which does not conform to my account either. I have been talking about an intra-personal phenomenon, in which agents do or do not abide by their own intentions. But there is also an important social use of the expression. Thus we say of individuals who habitually manage to impose their wills on others—whether in a boardroom or a preschool class—that they are strong willed; and those who too easily agree to the imposition we readily describe as weak willed. We might try to treat this as simply requiring a generalization of the account that I have offered: the weak willed person is someone who gives up on their intentions too easily, whether in the face of their own desires, or in the face of pressure from others. But I doubt that this line can be maintained: there is no requirement that the socially weak willed person abandons their prior intentions (perhaps they are so weak willed that they never think to form them); and even when they do, there is no requirement that they be contrary inclination defeating. Better to concede that this is a different, though related, use.²⁵

(ii) *Can the account accommodate disagreement?*

I said that one plausible way of filling out the story of the young Schelling and his blankets is to say that he displayed weakness of will twice over. But there are other things we might say. Knowing Schelling's subsequent career as an economist rather than an explorer, we might say that the real Schelling (the rational, realistic, Schelling) is the one who wanted to keep the blanket on; hence it was only the fanciful dreamer who displayed weakness of will when trying

²⁵ There are doubtless others. For instance, we read in the *New York Times* that Jonathan Edwards criticized Barack Obama "by portraying him as weak-willed for voting "present" — rather than yea or nay — on scores of bills as an Illinois state senator" (22nd January 2008). Here it seems to mean something like 'cautious' or 'over-ready to avoid commitment'.

to get it off. (Contrast Sir Francis Chichester, who, true to his real self, stripped his childhood bed down to just a sheet, seems never to have been tempted to pile on extra blankets, and became a fearless adventurer.²⁶) Alternatively we might say that the weakness of will occurred only in the middle of the night; the real Schelling was the one who made his decisions in the light of day, not tempted by the lure of the warm blanket. We can imagine that debate about this could go on for some time. We can imagine the kinds of evidence that would be relevant. And we can even imagine that, when all the available evidence was in, people might still disagree.

It is easy to see how the traditional account of weakness of will can try to explain this disagreement. The debate would be over what Schelling really judged best: his comfortable sleep or his training as an explorer. Can the account offered here explain it as well? I think it can; indeed, I think it can actually do better than the traditional account. The account offered here employs both a descriptive and a normative element. To display weakness of will agents must have formed a resolution that they then revise in response to the very inclinations that it was supposed to defeat; that is the descriptive element. And their revision must have been something that, by the standards of a good intender, they should not have done; that is the normative element. Disagreements about whether or when agents manifest weakness of will typically result from disagreements about the second of these two factors. So we might argue that Schelling should have kept to resolutions that were formed when he could think clearly (such as in the daytime) rather than when he could not (such as when he was tired at night). Or we might argue that he should have kept to resolutions that were realistic (the resolution to get a good night's sleep) rather than romantic and unrealistic (the resolution to become an Antarctic explorer.)

Here we have the second way in which the vagueness in the account mirrors the vagueness in the concept. I doubt that there will in general be agreement on when an agent shows weakness of will; and I suspect that this disagreement is actually better captured by the account on offer here than on the traditional account. On the traditional account the answers will depend on what the agent thought best, and that is a purely descriptive question. On the account on offer here the answers will depend on which resolutions he should have stuck with as a rational intender. That is a normative question. I suspect that the deep-rootedness of the debate gives us some reason for characterizing it as normative, but I cannot think of a way of resolving the issue with any degree of certainty.

There is an alternative course here, once urged on me by Alison MacIntyre.²⁷ We might say that *every* instance of the kind of resolution revision that I have been talking about is an instance of weakness of will. The normative considerations simply determine whether or not the weakness of will is reasonable. So, in the case we have been discussing, Schelling shows weakness of will twice over; disagreement would be only over which, if either, is reasonable.

This would certainly simplify the account, and it is far from obvious that it is wrong. Nevertheless, I am disinclined to accept it. I tend to think that there is a more pejorative element in a charge of weakness of will than MacIntyre's proposal allows. If we really think that a revision is justified, we would not think of it as weakness of will. Consider this case. I have formed a resolution to give up drinking tea. It is not that I think I think that drinking tea is bad for me; quite the opposite, I think that it probably beneficial. But a friend has recently claimed that I am becoming dependent on tea, and I decide to demonstrate, both to her and to myself, that I can stop if I choose. I anticipate that there will be some withdrawal symptoms

²⁶(Chichester, 1964), p. 26.

²⁷ She no longer holds such a view; see (MacIntyre, 2006) pp. 299ff.

and I steel myself to endure them. When it comes to it, there are indeed withdrawal symptoms: a nagging headache that persists despite not having had any tea for some weeks, and that I am now using codeine to dislodge; a craving for tea that stops me concentrating on other things; and a general sense of misery in the mornings. I decide to go back to drinking tea.

It seems clear that my decision to go back to drinking tea is reasonable. Indeed, persisting with the resolution comes close to infringing the third of the rules of thumb that I sketched earlier: do not persist if this involves great suffering that was not envisaged at the time the resolution was formed. Nevertheless, the resolution has been defeated by exactly the kind of inclinations that it was designed to overcome. Is this a case of weakness of will? I am inclined to say that it is not, and so to stick to my original account. Those who think it is, even if a justifiable one, should embrace McIntyre's revision.

(iv) Does the account work for policy resolutions and for procrastination?

It might be thought that the account cannot accommodate weakness of will with respect to policy resolutions. Suppose I intend to get up every morning at six. Then can't I show weakness of will by lounging in bed today till nine, even though I have not revised my resolution? The right answer is that I have revised the resolution. I haven't abandoned it altogether, but I have revised it. I have inserted a let-out clause: I intend to get up every day at six, *except today*. (The case brings out a feature of my use of the word 'resolution' that deserves remark. I understand resolutions as a species of intention. But they can also be thought of as a species of rule. It is only in the former sense that the exception requires a revision; I can break a rule without revising it.)

A similar thing should be said about procrastination. I resolve to start on some tedious task, yet every day put it off. This surely might be a case of weakness of will, even though I haven't abandoned my intention to do it. The explanation is that I have revised it. I intended to start *some time soon*, and I have failed to do so.

(v) Can the account accommodate actions performed without intentions?

I have written as though there is a tight link between intentions and actions: as though we do not get actions without intentions. But as I conceded in Chapter One, that might be wrong; there may be direct actions that work without the need for intervening intentions. Then it seems that the following is possible. I form a resolution to perform some act, and then do something else. But I don't revise my resolution; I simply act without an intention. Couldn't that be a case of weakness of will that doesn't fit the account offered here?

If there were such cases I doubt that they would pose too much of a problem; we could extend the account to embrace certain failures to act on intentions as well as revisions of intentions. (Not all such failures should be included: I do not typically display weakness of will if I *forget* my intention.) But I am not convinced that there are any cases of this kind. Let us consider one of Bratman's examples of action without intention. Suppose you throw me a ball and, without thinking, I just reach out and catch it. That is perhaps an intentional act; but it is not clear that I formed an intention to catch it. I acted quite without reflection.²⁸ But now suppose I form the resolution not to catch the ball; I have had enough of your games. You throw it, and again I just reach out and catch it. Have I shown weakness of will? I rather doubt that I have. I suspect that in so far as the act really is one that is done without an intention, it

²⁸(Bratman, 1987) p. 126.

is one that falls outside my immediate control, and so outside of the area in which weakness of will can be shown. I might resolve not to faint when the incision is made, not to duck when the jets fly low overhead, not to smile when my friend inadvertently makes a clown of himself. However, if I cannot help myself do these things, my failure to stick by my resolution does not manifest weakness of will. Certainly these are failures of self control. But this is just another reason for not equating such failure with weakness of will.

(vi) *Can the account distinguish weakness of will from compulsion?*

It is a commonplace in the philosophical literature that weakness of will should be distinguished from compulsion. On the traditional account, the distinction is made as follows: one displays weakness of will when one *freely* acts against one's own best judgement; one is compelled when one's action against one's own best judgement is *not free*.²⁹ But it might seem that the account offered here can make no such distinction. For consider a compulsive person—a kleptomaniac for instance—who intends never to steal again, but who revises that intention and does. Won't his revision be one that he rationally should not have made? Yet if so he will count as weak willed.³⁰

I shall talk about compulsion more fully in the next chapter, where I will question the traditional account. But even leaving it in place for now I have two things to say. First, it is not obvious to me that it would be a disaster if the account did classify compulsive acts as weak willed. For it is not obvious to me that they are not. Certainly we would not normally *say* that a compulsive person was weak willed, but that could be because it would be inappropriate rather than false to say so—in the way that it would be inappropriate to say that sadistic torturers are unkind. Are we really averse to saying that compulsives are *pathologically* weak willed?

Second, it is not obvious whether the account offered here would classify compulsives as weak willed. Certainly one can imagine cases for whom the compulsive action is so automatic that there is no need of an intention, and hence no need to revise any contrary intention: for the kleptomaniac who simply finds himself placing objects in his pocket, intentions to steal or not to steal are quite beside the point. So such cases will not be classed as weak willed. But what of the kleptomaniac who consciously but compulsively does revise his intention not to steal; that is, who is simply unable to refrain from making the revision? Will he count as someone who has an unreasonable tendency to revise, and hence as someone who is weak willed? This depends, of course, on how we determine what is reasonable. We could use internal criteria, criteria which always restrict what it is reasonable for an agent to do to that which it is in the agent's power to do.³¹ Such criteria would not classify the kleptomaniac's revision as unreasonable, and hence would not classify him as weak willed. Alternatively, we could use external criteria, criteria which do not restrict what it is reasonable for an agent to do to that which it is in the agent's power to do. Such criteria probably would class the kleptomaniac's revision as unreasonable, and hence probably would classify him as weak willed. I have not come down in favour of one or the other

²⁹See (Watson, 1977), (Kennett & Smith, 1994). Watson argues that the relevant notion of a free action is one that the agent could have performed had they developed in themselves the kinds of skills and capacities which we expect them to develop.

³⁰Thanks to Linda Barclay and Michael Smith for making me think about this issue.

³¹In the agent's power in some broad sense; we could follow Watson in thinking that what is important is what would have been in the agent's power if the agent had developed the capacities that they would normally be expected to develop.

of these criteria of what is reasonable; indeed, I suspect that whilst I am trying to give an account of our ordinary notion of weakness of will I should remain uncommitted. For I suspect that this is another place where our ordinary concept is vague.

So the present account of weakness of will has difficulties with compulsion only if two further claims are met: if it is right to use external criteria of what is reasonable, *and* if the compulsive should certainly not count as weak willed. I have questioned both of these claims; but even if they were true, a simple amendment to the account would fix things up. Rather than saying that weakness of will consists in over readily revising an intention, say that it consists in over readily revising an intention *when it is in the agent's power to desist from that revision*.

(vii) *Are we working with too simple an account of akrasia?*

I have characterized *akrasia* as simply doing other than that which one judges best. In an unpublished paper Jamie Swann objects that in order to avoid *akrasia*, it is not enough just to do what one judges best; one must do it *because* one judges it best.³² He points out that this will, in turn, have repercussions for some of my cases that purportedly involve weakness of will without *akrasia*: the cases of Ravi and Christabel. For in these cases whilst the agents do that which they judge best, they do not do it because they judge it best; rather, they do it because their nerve fails. Swann goes on to suggest that my failure to give cases of weakness of will without *akrasia* in this revised sense is not accidental: if one unreasonably revises a resolution (which is what is required for weakness of will) one will never be doing something which one judges best because it is best: one can never judge an unreasonable revision to be the best thing. So a case of weakness of will cannot be a case in which the agent avoids *akrasia*.

I think of *akrasia* as a technical term. So I could respond by insisting that what I mean by *akrasia* is what is meant by it in the philosophical literature, and here one finds only the simple account that I have worked with, and not the more involved one that Swann proposes. But that would be a superficial response. For even if that is indeed what is meant in the literature, there is a clear sense in which it is inadequate. The interesting idea is that of doing what one judges best *because* one judges it best; and one should still count as deviating from this even if, by chance, one happens to end up doing what one judges best for some other reason.

Let us concede then that Swann's revised definition of *akrasia* is the more interesting one. Can we come up with examples of actions that are weak willed but are not akratic in this sense? I think we can. But we will need to pay a little more attention to the issue of whether it is the revision that is unreasonable, or the reconsideration itself. Recall that I mentioned two different (though frequently entwined) reasons for forming a contrary inclination defeating intention: the expectation that one's desires will change, and the expectation that one's beliefs will change. Consider first an example of the second of these sorts of reasons. Suppose that I know that I am going to be drinking, and I know that this will radically inflate my confidence in my physical abilities. I therefore resolve not to contemplate performing various pranks that might present themselves, for were I to deliberate about them I know that I would reach dangerous conclusions. Weakness of will here consists in allowing myself serious deliberation at all: in allowing the pranks to become real possibilities for me. If I do, weakly, allow myself to deliberate, I will do what I then judge best, and for the very reason that I judge it best. So the ensuing foolhardy action will not be akratic, even in Swann's revised sense. Yet it will exhibit weakness of will. The crucial point is that, given my drunken confidence, revising my resolution

³² (Swann, unpublished).

will not be unreasonable, in the sense that it will not be contrary to my current best judgement; but it will be unreasonable to let myself perform that revision in the first place.

A parallel phenomenon can arise in cases in which the resolution is aimed at overcoming a change in desire. Consider again the blithely recidivist smoker mentioned earlier. Comfortable in the café, surrounded by his smoking friends, the earnest desire to give up, and the attendant resolution, have melted away. They are replaced by the desire for a cigarette. Once he thinks it through, he becomes convinced that taking a cigarette is the best thing to do; and he forms an intention to do so. The mistake comes in allowing himself to think it through. Again we can have a case of weakness of will without akrasia. I will have much more to say about such cases in the ensuing chapters.