

Is the Contemporary Account of Weakness of Will Complete?

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Before an outstanding article in 1999 by Richard Holton, weakness of will was identified as an agent's action contrary to his or her better judgment, while other better choices are available. The contemporary account of weakness of will (i.e., Holton's theory) explains it in terms of intention. Accordingly, weakness of will happens if an agent fails to stick to his or her previously formed intention unreasonably while he or she should. However, this account fails to explain all cases of weakness of will and never takes into account the different types of reasonable judgments as found in deontological theories. This paper suggests that although weakness of will can be explained in terms of intention, the object which the will refers to plays a key role in identifying a complete understanding of weakness of will.

Key words: Akrasia, weakness of will, Richard Holton, the empirical will, the pure will.

1. Introduction

After Richard Holton's outstanding article *Intention and Weakness of Will* (Holton 1999, 241-262), there have been two accounts for weakness of will: the traditional and the contemporary. The traditional account of weakness of will identifies it with akrasia. Akrasia, which is scarcely a term of ordinary English (Holton 1999, 242), refers to an action voluntarily undertaken against one's best judgment. In other words, Akrasia is an agent's action contrary to his better judgment, while other better choices are available. On the other hand, the contemporary account of weakness of will explains it in terms of intention and resolution. This approach, proposed in Richard Holton's article, holds that weakness of will is not akrasia; rather, it is a certain kind of failure to stick to one's resolution (Holton 2009, 70-96). As Holton says,

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The agent forms the intention at one time by making a decision to perform the action (242-243) ... My suggestion now is that this [intention] gives the basis for an account of weakness of will. A person exhibits weakness of will when they revise their intention, in circumstances in which they should not have revised it (245).

Therefore, "A person is weak-willed if they revise their intentions [or resolutions] too readily (73).

In order to explain weakness of will in terms of intention and resolution, let us turn to the elements of Holton's theory.

2. *Intention and Resolution in Holton's Theory*

In order to summarize Holton's theory, it is necessary to mention what intention and resolution are. Let us start with an example used by Holton to explain the *intention*. Suppose that you want to paint your front door and have narrowed your options to dark red or dark blue. Both are available, and both would be nice. But the time is pressing and you need to decide, so you choose dark blue.

As a result of your choice you have obtained a new mental state. You still think that both are available. In addition, though, you are now in a state that does not look like either a belief or a desire. You have an *intention* to paint the door blue (Holton 2009, 1).

The agent, in this approach, forms the intention either by making an explicit conscious decision to perform the action or by some less deliberate process. Then the intention will lead the agent to the action directly (Holton 2009, 2 & 7).

Also, as we can see in the example, there are different functions between intentions and desires. In the mentioned example, the desire itself cannot push the agent to paint his door. However, when it becomes more and more strong, then it pushes the agent to paint. Holton holds that the intention has an important role to play which cannot be played by beliefs or desires (Holton 2009, 17). The only way of explaining intention in Holton's theory is to distinguish between the different states of mind. However, some philosophers try to understand intention as intentional action (2009, 14). In other words, this group of philosophers insists that an agent performs an action intentionally if and only if they act due to an intention. The reason for proposing such a theory, as Holton holds (14), is providing the basis of a reduction. The reduction tries to show that intention entails a belief or a desire. This theory can be presented as follows: if (a) acting on an intention is equivalent to acting intentionally, and (b) acting intentionally can be reduced to acting on the basis of certain

beliefs and desires, then (c) the intentions can be reduced to beliefs and desires.

Holton never accepts (c); He rejects any theory that reduces intentions to desires or beliefs, and insists that we should be skeptical of the *intention-entails-belief* thesis in any form (Holton 2009, 52). He tries to show that intention and intentionality are not equivalent, and such theories as the ones mentioned cannot explain intention by the intentional actions, because even though intentionality is very close to doing something on purpose, they are different. Another reason is that, unlike intention, intentionality is a normative term (15). Therefore, Holton concludes that in his works he should talk about intention, as mentioned, not intentional acts (17).

There is also another kind of intention which is stronger, called “resolution.” Resolution in Holton's definition is a specific type of intention that is designed to stand in face of the future against inclinations or beliefs (Holton 2009, 10).

A resolution has to be something that holds firm against temptation. In other words, resolution can be seen as involving an intention to engage in a certain action (Holton 2009, 11).

If intentions are real and irreducible, the important question will be how we come to have them (Holton 2009, 53). Therefore, the process in which an agent comes to actions will be clarified.

There is a four-stage model in Holton's theory to summarize the process of doing actions: deliberating, judging, choosing, and acting:

- *Deliberating*
In this stage, the agent considers the options that are available and their likely consequences.
- *Judging (deciding that)*
The agent makes a judgment that a certain action is the best.
- *Choosing (deciding to)*
Then, the agent decides to do the action that is judged as the best. Intentions to do actions are made at this stage.
- *Acting*

The agent acts on the intention that has been made at the third stage (Holton 2009, 57).

Therefore, weakness of will happens if and only if the agent abandons or fails to act on a previously formed intention.

Of course, not all cases of abandoning or failing to act on a

previously formed intention count as weakness of will. I intend, for instance, to run five miles tomorrow evening. If I break my leg tomorrow morning and consequently fail to run five miles, I will not have exhibited weakness of will. As another example, if an agent made a decision to go for a picnic and then abandoned his intention because of raining, we would not consider it as a weak-willed action. If all cases in which agents abandon their intentions should not be considered as weakness of will, how can we distinguish weakness of will from other types of abandoning intentions?

In order to clarify cases which are not the weak-willed ones, Holton introduces the character which plays role for understanding weakness of will. For him, as also for Bratman (1987, 68), cases in which agents reconsider their intentions *reasonably* should not be considered as weak-willed; for example, abandoning the intention to go to a picnic due to rain is not a weak-willed action, because this reconsideration is reasonable (Holton 2009, 75-76). So weakness of will in Holton's theory can be defined as follows: Weakness of will happens if and only if the agent abandons or fails to act on a previously formed intention unreasonably.

3. Can Holton's Theory explain Moral Weakness as well?

The problem of moral weakness is a specific instance of the larger difficulty known as the problem of weakness of will (McNaughton 1991, 120-121). Although Holton's viewpoint never explains what moral weakness is, in the light of his definition of weakness of will, I try to explain it in the language of intention and resolution. In the interest of finding such definition, let us turn to Holton's understanding of weakness of will:

Weakness of will happens if and only if the agent abandons or fails to act on a previously formed intention or resolution unreasonably while she should not. (2009, 73)

This "should," says Holton in his explanation of weakness of will, 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 intention (2009, 73).

If so, it is possible to explain moral weakness in the language of intention and resolution, while "should" is meant in both norms of the skill of managing one's intention and moral sense. Thus, moral weakness happens if and only if the agent abandons or fails to act on a previously formed intention or resolution unreasonably while he *morally* should not.

Holton argues that his theory explains weakness of will similar to the way that non-philosophers understand it, which, according to him, is the understanding that weak-willed people are those who too easily deflect from the path that they have chosen and do not persist in their intention (2009, 70).

The same group, then, considers the agent who does not persist in her intention, while she *morally* should, as a morally-weak one. A morally-weak agent abandons or fails to act on a previously formed intention or resolution.

4. Does Holton's Theory Cover All Cases of Weakness of Will and Moral Weakness?

According to Holton's theory, the *only* case in which agents abandon their already formed resolution or intention is the case of weakness of will and moral weakness². However, it is possible to add two other kinds of situations to this account: situations in which agents cannot, or do not, form intentions or resolutions while they rationally should, and those in which agents make resolutions or intentions while they rationally should not.

In order to make such situations more clear, let us turn to the example presented by Immanuel Kant in *Second Critique*. Kant, in the part related to the deduction of the fundamental principles of pure practical reason, explains that there are some actions which are always rationally good or evil:

When the maxim which I am disposed to follow in giving testimony is tested by the practical reason, I *always* consider what it would be if were to hold as a universal law of nature. It is manifest that in thus view it would be oblige everyone to speak the truth ... Similarly, the maxim which I adopt with respect to disposing freely of my life is at once determined, when I ask myself what it should be, in order that a system, of which it is the law, should maintain itself. It is obvious that in such system no one could arbitrary put an end to his own life, for such an arrangement would not be a permanent order of things. And so in all similar cases. (Kant 1889, 133)

Suppose that an agent who is about to do an action, which is always rationally evil, forms a resolution to do the action and then

2. Although , as was mentioned earlier, Holton's theory never addresses moral weakness, his definition of weakness of will can be applied to moral weakness as well, for "the problem of moral weakness is merely a specific instance of the larger difficulty known as the problem of weakness of will" (McNaughton 1991, 120-121). If weakness of will cannot be considered as a basis for understanding moral weakness, it is necessary for the theory to explain what moral weakness is.

does it. According to Holton's theory, this agent is neither a weak-willed nor a morally-weak agent, because she did not quit her resolution or intention. However, she is, because she finally did that action. However, forming an intention or resolution to do an action which is always rationally evil, given that we think like Kant, is not considered as weakness of will in Holton's theory. Similar to this example is the situation in which the action before the agent is always rationally good. He is a weak-willed, and then a morally-weak, agent if he cannot, or does not, form the resolution or intention to do the action. Contrary to Holton's theory, both should be considered as weak-willed, or morally-weak, agents.

According to Holton's theory, as we have discussed earlier, the only case in which an agent abandons her already formed resolution or intention is the case of a weak-willed or morally-weak agent. Such a view seems incomplete. In order to make it complete, it is possible to add, at least, two other kinds of situations to this account: situations in which the agent cannot, or does not, form a resolution or intention while he rationally should; and those in which he makes, or sticks to a resolution or intention while he rationally should not.

5. What Does “Unreasonably” Mean in Holton’s Theory?

As it was remarked earlier, Holton explains weakness of will from a reason-based viewpoint (Holton 2009, 75-76, 137) while Holton says, “things will be better if we move to a reason-based account” (Holton 2009, 137). Therefore, from Holton, weakness of will occurs only in the unreasonable abandoning of one's intention or resolution. What does “unreasonably” mean here? Who should judge whether an agent's failing to stick to her own formed intention or resolution is unreasonable or not? Now, in the light of Kantian ethics, I will try to explain why the mentioned stipulation is not clear enough to answer the reason-based, evaluative judgments' questions.

There is a distinction between reasonable judgments that are based on the laws of a natural system to which *the will is subject*, and those based on the laws of a natural system which is *subject to a will*.³ In the former, the objects are the causes of the ideas which determine the

3. Although I use some Kantian terms here, I try not to draw the same picture as Kant did. This is because Kant holds that the judgments based on the laws of a natural system which is *subject to a will* are the best judgments, or at least are better than their alternatives, for in this judgment, will is related only to itself (Kant 1889, 126, 135). This viewpoint puts the question under the problem of *akratic resolution* in Holton's theory (Holton 2009, 138, 148-52). I suppose that both rational judgments are reasonable, as it also seems, and both are equivalent to each other from the evaluative perspective.

will; whereas in the latter, the will is the cause of the objects (Kant 1889, 134). Call the former *the empirical reasonable judgment*, and the latter *the pure reasonable judgment*. In other words, reason can determine the will—whether this takes place only by means of empirical ideas as principles of determination, or whether pure reason can be practical and form the law of a possible order of nature which is not empirically knowable. Then, the judgments based on the latter are not knowable for the other and vice versa, while both are reason-based judgments (Kant 1889, 134).

As I have remarked earlier, there is an important point hidden in the mentioned distinctions in the way I have presented it here. Although the pure reasonable judgment is supersensible—for the laws which are the basis of such judgments are the laws of a natural system not given in experience—it is not considered here as a better or the best judgment (Kant 1889, 134). The key point is the fact that it is possible to have, at least, one context in which the judgments based on the different laws conflict with each other.

Let us suppose a case in which two reasonable, but contradictory, judgments are available—one of them based on the laws of a natural system to which the *will is subject* (e.g., self-love), and the other based on the laws of a natural system which is *subject to a will* (e.g., universal law). Suppose someone recommends you a steward, describing him as a person whom you can completely trust in all your affairs and as a prudent person who thoroughly understands your interest. So, you trust the steward in all your affairs, and even authorize him to manage your financial resources. Then, you go on a trip, and he cannot contact you as to whether, for instance, he can give some money to charity. According to his own self-love and happiness to do a moral action, he withdraws a considerable amount of your money and spends it as soon as it is possible. When you come back, you will see your money is not there. In this situation, it is possible to have different judgments based on different laws. From your point of view, the only reasonable judgment was abandoning any intention or resolution to do a moral action based on the laws such as self-love or happiness; however, according to the steward's own self-love and happiness, the exact decision he made was the reasonable judgment. Both are reasonable, but contrary to each other. So, we may ask, which one is reasonable? Which one is correct? Is it possible to prove that one of them is unreasonable?

This example presents a situation in which empirical and pure judgments conflict, even though each of them is reasonable if taken separately. If so, what is meant by “unreasonably” in Holton's theory?

Which one is suggested by Holton's theory: the empirical or pure rationality, while the pure one is supersensible and it can be considered as an unreasonable judgment? Indeed, in the context of conflict, there is only one possible, reasonable judgment that should be made by the agent, but Holton's theory never clarifies which one should be made by the agent.

Contrary to Kant, it is possible to suppose that nobody can show that being moral is actually part of the rational life, as Frankena holds (Frankena 1983, 74). Then, would I be a weak-willed agent if I abandoned my previously formed intention or resolution in order to do a moral action?

Consequently, "unreasonably" in Holton's definition of weakness of will is completely vague; it fails to distinguish between two possible rationalities when they conflict with each other, and fails to explain whether being moral means being rational or not, at least when one is not egoistic.

6. A Suggestion

Although Holton's theory explains weakness of will from the agent's perspective, it seems that the action, to which the will is related, should also be taken in to account, because in some situations weakness of will, and then moral weakness, happens if and only if the agent *abandons* the previously formed intention or resolution *reasonably*, such as in a Kantian-ethics-based situation in which the agent does not persist to do an action which is always rationally good because she considers her own self-love (or happiness). Moreover, there are possible situations in which weakness of will, and then moral weakness, means sticking to previously formed intention or resolution, (e.g., when the action before the agent, in a given situation, is an always-rationally-evil action).

Not only for a theory like the one we are discussing but also for the accounts that do not regard being moral as a part of rational life, weakness of will can be both *abandoning* or *sticking to* the previously formed intention or resolution; it depends on the actions to which the will is related.

For explaining weakness of will, as I suggest, the will's relation with its object (i.e., the action), should also be taken into account. In other words, the object which is about to be produced by the will can play a role in making the will weak. If so, weakness of will can be explained by its relation to its object(s) as well. Therefore, weakness of will can be defined as "abandoning a previously formed intention or resolution" or "sticking to a previously formed intention or

resolution.” It depends on the action to which the agent’s will relates. If so, is there any classification for the possible distinctions between actions or situations, at least in moral ones?

In the light of one of the schools of Islamic ethics,⁴ it is possible to suggest the following classification according to the distinctions between actions and then explain weakness of will in each class separately:

- **AE** or the actions that are *always evil*

Weakness of will in this type is “forming intention or resolution” or “sticking to a previously formed intention or resolution” to do AE.

- **AG** or the actions that are *always good*

For this type of actions, weakness of will is “failing to form an intention or resolution” or “abandoning a previously formed intention or resolution” to do AG.

- **PE** or the actions that are only *prima facie*⁵ *evil*

If such actions are *ultima facie* good, weakness of will can be explained as in AG. Otherwise, the explanation in AE can be used.

4. Mu'tazilite ethics is one of the schools of Islamic ethics. This school, which is also known as *rational ethics*, holds that human reason can discover the goodness or evilness of actions. Contrary to this approach, another school in Islamic ethics, Ash'arī ethics, holds that the right and wrong is determined by the will or law of God, and that human reason is not able to discover it. Similar to Ash'arī viewpoint in Western ethics is “the Divine Command Theory” (Hourani 1985, 67-98, 118-24). There is a classification of actions presented in Mu'tazilite ethics, according to which there are different types of actions. Some actions are *always* rationally evil, and there is no context in which they can be considered good—even in moral dilemmas. In other words, according to this view, there are some actions which are always evil, such as wrongdoing (*ẓulm*), regardless of circumstances; neutral acts, which can never be regarded as good or evil; and actions which are *always* rationally good. These groups of actions are those which cannot be considered as evil. Another group of actions are those which *can be* considered good or bad. In order to determine the wrongness or rightness of actions in this group, the agent should examine the moral context carefully (Hourani 1985, 103). Call the former *grounds* which refer to those actions which are always good or evil, and the latter *aspects* which refer to actions which are *prima facie* good or evil (Hourani 1985, 103). For *ultima facie* evaluating the goodness or badness of actions in aspects, the agent should examine moral contexts carefully (Hourani 1985, 100-104).

5. *Prima facie* means the same as W.D. Ross’s theory. Ross presents two different types of duties: *Prima* and *Ultima Facie* Duties. *Prima facie* duties, in his point of view, are several, systemized moral principles that can be actualized in the case before the agent; to actualize any principles depends on the agent’s determination. *Ultima facie* duties are therefore the *prima facie* duties which are actualized by the agents in the case before them. So, according to this view, some actions can be considered good while they are *prima facie* bad. For example, telling a lie is, *prima facie*, a bad action. However, it is a good action, *ultima facie*, if it saves someone's life (Ross 1930, xxxv, xxxvi, 19, 21-23).

- **PG** or the actions that are only *prima facie* good

If such actions are *ultima facie* evil, weakness of will can be explained as in AE. Otherwise, the explanation in AG can be used.

Although the mentioned classification explains only the possible distinctions between (im)moral actions, it makes the fact more clear that weakness of will can be explained differently in different situations. The will's objects (i.e., actions) have an important role to play in changing the definition of weakness of will or moral weakness.

7. Conclusion

A paradigm shift happened in the understanding of weakness of will with an outstanding article in 1999 by Richard Holton. According to Holton's viewpoint, weakness of will is not an agent's action contrary to her better judgment while other better choices are available. Instead, weakness of will is an agent's failing to stick to her previously formed intention or resolution unreasonably while she should stick to it. However, there are reasons that prevent us from considering it as a complete theory.

The relation between weakness of will and moral weakness is vague. This theory never explains whether the problem of moral weakness is merely a specific instance of the larger difficulty of weakness of will. Even if this theory accepts the mentioned, well-known relation, it cannot explain *all* cases of weakness of will and then moral weakness. Suppose a situation in which the agent sticks to the previously formed intention or resolution to do an action which is evil, and then she does it. According to this theory she is not a weak-willed or a morally-weak agent, for she did not abandon the previously formed intention or resolution. Moreover, in some cases it is a theory that misguides agents. In the case of an agent who never forms an intention or resolution to do a moral action, the theory holds that he is neither a weak-willed nor a morally-weak agent, whereas in both cases he really is.

Consequently, Holton's theory has to be modified in order to include at least two other types of situations: situations in which the agent cannot, or does not, form resolutions or intentions while she rationally should; and those in which she makes, or sticks to, resolutions or intentions while she rationally should not.

Although this theory explains weakness of will as occurring only in the *unreasonable* abandoning of one's intention or resolution, it cannot answer the questions about reason-based, evaluative judgments, such as whether or not it is possible to have more than one

reasonable judgment, or whether being moral is a part of rational life. If an affirmative answer is given to these questions, in a case which two reason-based judgments (i.e., *the empirical reasonable judgment* and *the pure reasonable judgment*) conflict with each other, this account cannot explain which one is unreasonable.

Besides all these problems, this article suggests that in order to explain weakness of will, the relation between will and its objects (i.e., different types of actions) should be clarified first. Then, weakness of will should be explained in each type separately.

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