

Autonomy and self-respect

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Weakness of will and character

Some people, as we all know, are weak-willed, some more than others. This weakness is commonly regarded as a defect in a person, and when someone fails to meet his obligations from weakness of will this is not usually counted as an adequate excuse. Even when the weakness is manifested in morally innocent behavior, it tends to evoke contemptuous humor from others and feelings of shame in the agent. To the moral philosopher concerned with virtues and vices these facts raise both traditional questions and special puzzles. The traditional questions regarding any putative defect of character are "What is it?," "What reasons does one have for trying to avoid it?," and "What grounds, if any, are there for regarding it as a *moral defect*?" When we turn these questions specifically to weakness of will, we encounter the special puzzles. For example, if weakness of will is really a moral vice, why is the "lack of will power" of the compulsive eater, the alcoholic, etc., so often treated as a disability, calling for sympathy, understanding, and medical intervention rather than a defect of character calling for blame? If, on the other hand, weakness of will is a disability, like physical weakness, why is it not as readily counted as an excuse? Again, how can we regard weakness of will as a moral vice if so many of its manifestations are not themselves morally wrong? And why do we not think better of the Nazi whom we suspected of being both cruel and weak-willed when we learn that after all he has the strength of will to carry out his cruel aims?

When we review the impressive contemporary literature on weakness of will, we find that these questions are not the focus of attention.¹ Instead, philosophers have concentrated on what, quite naturally, has been taken to be a prior question: How is weakness of will possible? The main problem is seen as a puzzle for action theory, stemming from certain pervasive assumptions about the concepts of

¹ Prominent in these contemporary discussions are the following: R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (1963); G. Santas, "Plato's *Protagoras*, and Explanations of Weakness," *The Philosophical Review*, 1966; Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of Will Possible?" in *Moral Concepts*, edited by Joel Feinberg, Oxford University Press, 1970; Gary Watson, "Scepticism About Weakness of Will," *The Philosophical Review*, 1977; and David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality*, Clarendon Press (Oxford) 1983. Some early papers are collected in *Weakness of Will*, edited by G. W. Mortimore, Macmillan, 1971. I am indebted to these as well as the comments of many people on an earlier (unpublished) paper on weakness of will, especially Michael Bratman, J.O. Urmson, John Perry, Gregory Kavka, and Robert M. Adams. Thanks are due Bernard Boxill, Geoffrey Sayre McCord, and Gregory Trianosky for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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intending, wanting, and judging best to do. The focus, typically, is not on weakness of will as a character trait but rather on the particular instances in which, it seems, a person acts, with full awareness, contrary to what he judges he ought to do (or has the best reasons to do). The apparent phenomena do not seem to square with what theories of action and evaluative language allow to be possible, and the problem has been to "save the phenomena" by making subtle distinctions or modifications of the standard assumptions. Though the term "weakness of will" appears frequently in the discussions, most often references to "will" are replaced by other terms when the problem is posed most explicitly.

This concentration on the cases most puzzling for action theory has been unfortunate in some respects. Part of the problem is that doubts about the possibility of weakness of will have resulted from dubious assumptions about evaluative language (e.g., Hare's prescriptivism). Even the ingenious efforts to circumvent these doubts have so heightened our awareness of the conceptual difficulties in this area that moral philosophers have been understandably discouraged from pursuing their traditional questions about weakness of will as a defect of character. More importantly, I suspect, focus upon the problems arising within action theory has so dominated the selection of the phenomena to be considered that the resulting conceptions of weakness of will capture only a small part of what moralists have been concerned with. Eager to avoid the evils of Cartesianism in metaphysics and Descriptivism in metaethics, philosophers have too often circumscribed their questions so narrowly that the familiar problem of character is lost.

While it is tempting to wait for solutions in action theory before returning to the moralist's questions, there may be advantages in not postponing the latter. This would be so, for example, if my suspicion is correct that the moralist's questions direct us to a somewhat different range of cases and a conception of weakness of will that is less problematic than those that have so puzzled action theorists. Perhaps, too, by looking for the conception of weakness of will that best fits the common moral assessment, we can better understand why accounts which treat weakness of will as a disability strike many of us as inadequate or as at best revisionary of ordinary concepts.

In any case, I propose to approach the subject in an unconventional way: raising the moralist's questions, focusing upon a character trait rather than isolated acts, not shunning the idea of "will" in favor of intending, wanting, etc., and not assuming that one's will and intentional acts must be in accord with what one judges best to do. Although I shall make brief suggestions regarding the other questions, my focus will be primarily on the first traditional question, namely, what is weakness of will insofar as it is viewed as a defect of character? My aim, however, is not to give a definitive answer to any of these questions, much less to resolve the much debated puzzles in action theory. The aim is rather to shift or expand the subject under discussion to include more of what is at issue for

those thinking about how to live and what sort of person to try to become.

My procedure will be this: First I describe an example and what I take to be a common moral assessment of a weak-willed person. Next I try to distinguish this weakness of will from being will-less, acting against one's best judgment, and lacking willpower. Then, drawing from these discussions, I try to say more generally what weakness of will would be if conceived as a character trait that corresponds to familiar examples and our typical attitudes towards them. Finally, I make some brief comments on the disadvantages of being weak-willed and the case for thinking it to be incompatible with a fully moral life. Though I will not argue at length for the possibility of weakness of will as I construe it, I hope that it will be evident that my account avoids at least the most troublesome paradoxes which have plagued this subject.

I

Consider amiable Amy, well-intentioned and eager to please but weak-willed. Her weakness shows up in a variety of ways.

(1) *Half-hearted efforts.* She often takes part in challenging activities, such as competitive sports and arguing with her opinionated husband, but she rarely tries very hard. She wants to win and makes some feeble efforts in that direction, but when the challenge becomes difficult she never exerts herself fully. She does not exactly "give up," for she continues to take minimal steps towards winning, hoping that somehow they will be enough. Usually she does not explicitly resolve to win, or even to try hard, but she undertakes the activities with winning as the end in view and she carries on without ever deciding to abandon the end. People say that she has the ability but not the strength of will to win. The problem is not simply a particular aversion to success in competition; she behaves in a similar way whenever her projects become difficult.

(2) *Weak resolves.* Sometimes she deliberates and makes resolutions about her future conduct. Each year, for example, she makes a list of New Year's resolutions about dieting, jogging, reading good books, etc. But often the resolutions are half-hearted even when they are made. She says, quite sincerely, that she intends to keep them, and by announcing them she puts herself in the position of being embarrassed and a bit ashamed if she does not. But she would not be surprised if later she "changed her mind," and she is purposefully vague about what she would count as a good reason for changing her mind. She makes charts for daily reminders and feels good about the "new direction" she is giving her life; but she knows that she could be persuaded to deviate even at that moment if the right opportunity came along. These resolves do not usually last long, sometimes giving way to considerations that seem more important at the time and sometimes simply fading into insignificant memories.

(3) *Surrendering after a struggle.* At times, however, Amy makes more whole-

hearted commitments. As she anticipates certain future situations, it is extremely important to her that she respond in one way rather than another. The reasons why this is important to her vary: for example, she made a solemn promise to others, she wants to be beautiful, or she wants to prove something to her cynical father. She is keenly aware of the temptations and pressures that will incline her to respond in the least preferred way; and in anticipation of this, she makes a solemn and explicit resolution forbidding herself to "change her mind" for such reasons. At the time of decision nothing could dissuade her, and she wishes more than anything that she could ensure that she will feel the same later. Seeing that to be impossible, she lays down the law for herself, as it were, complete with a list of punishments she intends to impose for noncompliance. But, as time passes and the anticipated temptations arise, she "feels torn" between her resolution and her immediate wants. When she reflects on her earlier perspective, she wants to carry out her resolution and she is angry that she hesitates; but when she focuses upon the situation at hand, she prefers to do something else and is annoyed that she ever made the resolution. In these situations typically she chooses to break the resolution, knowing full well her reason for doing so but soon feeling regrets and "kicking herself" for changing her mind in the very sort of situation she planned and "told herself" not to.

(4) *Fading will.* Sometimes she resolves to do something, but then her will seems simply to fade away. Though she may be determined and quite explicit at the outset, as time goes on she thinks less about her plan and when she does, it seems less important. It is not that she literally "forgets" her resolve when she deviates from it, thinking when she remembers, "Oh, yes, I planned not to do that." Nor does she reconsider in the light of a new situation and alter the plan. She does not lose an inner battle, or simply find herself, much to her surprise, acting contrary to what she now concludes she should do. She may have no opinion about which is best, the old plan or the current choice. It is as if she hears but does not bother to listen to the plans and orders she earlier left for herself.

(5) *Unstable will.* Earlier, when she was less reflective, Amy did not make explicit resolutions but was more prepared to exert herself fully in the project of the day. The trouble was that she kept changing her projects. One day she was "determined" to be a musician; but the next day she was enthusiastic about being an athlete; another time, she decided to be a great surgeon. Each time she worked hard at the project, bought instruments, running shoes, dissecting kit, etc., and gave up parties to study and practice; but, lacking a good sense of the sacrifices required, she never anticipated the temptations to give up and so never made any explicit resolutions to overcome them. For a while she had a will to do each of these things; but it was a fragile and unstable will, easily "broken" by parental ridicule and readily changed when new role models captured her imagination.

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Amy is not happy about these aspects of her life, we may suppose, for she admires her strong-willed friends and feels ashamed when they remind her how weak-willed she is. Her attitude about this, however, is not quite the same as her attitude about her involuntary stuttering, about which she is also ashamed. At least in her more honest moments, she is not inclined to say, "I can't help it; no matter how I try, it just happens." In fact she feels all the worse about herself because she believes that she could behave quite differently. She is not like the heavy smoker or heroin addict who has failed at so many sincere reform efforts that he has evidence that he cannot, by himself, change the pattern even though he still feels on particular occasions that he can resist. She feels that she would act like her strong-willed friends if she really set herself to change the pattern; but so far, despite her determination in making certain particular resolves, she has not been troubled enough to undertake this as a special task.

Except for those who draw contrary conclusions from philosophical determinism or particular psychological theories, most other people who know Amy share her view of her weakness. Though they naturally hesitate to say so, they believe she has reason to feel ashamed because they see the weakness as a defect in her character which she can and should change. When her broken promises inconvenience them, they are not inclined to excuse her on the ground that she is weak, although they may credit her for initial good intentions and forgive her because of her remorse and her generally amiable nature. When no obligations are involved, the question of blame does not arise and her displays of weakness are met variously with indifference, pity, condescending humor, self-righteous contempt, and empathetic understanding. Many see her as more likeable, and less threatening, than the typical strong-willed person; but, even aside from the broken promises, they would not mention her as a model for their children.

This description of Amy and others' reactions makes liberal use of everyday concepts, many of which are metaphorical and perplexing to philosophers; but I will not attempt to "analyze" or reduce these terms to more acceptable ones. Important questions arise even at this level of description, and we should not let our philosophical scruples constrain us so early in an investigation that we lose sight of the phenomena about which we were initially concerned.

II

The common moral reaction treats Amy as defective in some way, but we need to ask, "What is she lacking?" One answer that needs to be ruled out at once is, "a will." She is weak-willed, but not will-less. Many things, we suppose, lack a will (e.g., mushrooms, earthworms, corpses, and typewriters); others are said to have wills only by colorful exaggeration (e.g., hurricanes, newborn infants, and misbehaving computers); and some may be controversial borderline cases (e.g., committees, cats, and two-year old children). Even sane adult human

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beings may from time to time be will-less (e.g., when utterly depressed, indecisive, or drunk "out of their minds"). It may be helpful towards understanding the weak-willed person to review some of the features which we believe normal human adults (with "wills") have but which are absent in the "will-less."

To begin, having a will seems to require some foresight and awareness that some events cause others. Further, one must care about or take some interest in which outcomes occur. Thus the utterly apathetic person is said to have lost his will, and, if we could imagine it, a pure intellect indifferent to everything would lack a will. Also some awareness or belief that one can oneself make things happen seems necessary. This is what seems lacking in the newborn infant who wants to be fed but has not yet a sense of his own powers. For a similar reason we think of people as having wishes, but not a will, with respect to whatever they believe they cannot influence (e.g., the weather, living 200 years, the policy of foreign countries, and, sometimes, their teenage sons and daughters).

Again, setting aside certain speculations about God, our notion of human wills seems to presuppose we are talking about beings who experience obstacles in achieving what they want. Without this, the idea of trying, exerting more or less effort, and the like, would not make sense. Also, though perhaps we can imagine beings who experience only external obstacles, we ordinarily think of someone as willing to do something (as opposed to merely doing it intentionally) only when we suppose that they can also experience internal obstacles. For example, in thinking of primitive builders and hunters as showing a will, and not merely muscle and desire, as they lift a boulder and kill a bear, we think of their having to overcome their fatigue and fear as well as the stone's weight and the bear's strength. This requires both an awareness that one's wants may conflict and a sense of priorities among them.

Another dimension is added when we realize that we can achieve some things we want only by a sequence of acts over time. Our priorities require not only that we do something now but also that we follow through with appropriate action later. This makes room for reflective planning, devising schemes of future action that will achieve what we now want despite anticipated outer and inner obstacles. But, for better or worse, we are not designed so that current planning and intending guarantees future performance; no matter how strong our desires and efforts now, what we do later will depend on our state and view of the situation later. It is not as though we can do nothing now that will influence what we do later, but one's future acts do not flow from one's present views, preferences, and efforts in quite the way (typically) one's present acts do. Plans are essentially revisable, even if one wishes it otherwise. The problem is not simply that one's earlier view of the later situation may be inaccurate; for even if one anticipates correctly the alternatives and the inner and outer obstacles, one may later change one's priorities. These facts, I think, are the background of our full-fledged notion of having a will. It encompasses not merely our ability to act

a. foresight
b. interest

c. make things happen
(of wish)

d. obstacles

e. reflective planning

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from our deliberations at a moment but also our imperfect ability to make deliberation at one time appropriately influential on our decisions at a later time. The capacity to will, as I argue later, is not primarily a capacity to make effective one's best or most thoroughly reflective deliberations, nor is it merely a capacity to act on one's *current* deliberations. Accounts of weakness of will restricted to these special cases will miss an important temporal dimension.

The absence of one or more of these characteristic features of having a will seems to account for our regarding certain people as temporarily will-less or as having lost their wills with regard to particular matters. Thus when depressed persons become utterly apathetic about the future, they are said to have lost "the will to live." The addict who has become convinced that he cannot control his drug problem may wish to change but no longer has the will. A person so "blinded" by jealous rage that he is not aware of the consequences of what he does is distinguished in law from the calculating person who "willingly" takes revenge. The good-hearted benefactor, fortunately free from the usual temptations of greed and selfishness, is not thought to show strength of will in sharing his wealth; and we would not attribute to him a will to share at all if we thought he would stop sharing at any moment he found that it required effort. Similarly, I suppose, one who so thoroughly "lived in the present" that he made no plans or commitments might be said (with some exaggeration) to lack a will, unless of course he was resolved to live this way. The same might be said, with a bit more exaggeration, about the person who only formed highly flexible plans, intentions regarded as revisable at any moment, and never commitments or resolutions. These last remarks are exaggerations (at least partly) because in correctly emphasizing will as a capacity to influence one's future conduct in a certain way they neglect a more primitive aspect of will as a capacity for strenuous effort in the activities of the moment.

The special cases described above do not raise the usual questions about weakness and strength of will; for to some degree, or with regard to certain matters, the persons depicted lack a will. Admittedly this may at times be a good thing; but our question is not about the advantages and disadvantages of having a will but about the relative merits of having a strong or weak will.

III

Most contemporary writers concerned with weakness of will, incontinence, or *akrasia* focus their attention upon individual acts rather than patterns of character, and usually they identify a weak-willed (incontinent, or akratic) act as an act contrary to the agent's best judgment at the time about what would be best for him to do. The reason for concentrating upon this case, I suspect, is not that it is found to be the most common or important manifestation of weakness of will but rather that it is thought to be philosophically the most interesting case. The

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philosophical interest arises because experience makes it hard to deny what pervasive assumptions about action and evaluative language make it hard to understand, namely, how someone could at the same time judge that it is best to do something but yet, quite intentionally, choose not to do it. For the traditional purposes of moral philosophy, however, I think that it would be a serious mistake to identify weakness of will with acts contrary to what at the time one judges best. To do so would leave out of consideration much of what we commonly attribute to weakness of will. To be sure, people like Amy often, perhaps typically, judge it best, in some sense, to do what they aim at and resolve to do; but this is not always so, at least in the most common senses of "judging best," and weakness of will can also reveal itself in acts which *at the moment* one judges best (in some sense).

To take the last point first, let us suppose that Amy thinks that she has good and sufficient reason to engage in her competitive activities and to do what she resolves to do. When she makes only weak efforts towards success, she is not naturally described as performing an intentional act contrary to her best judgment. Her problem is not so much in what she is doing but in how she is doing it. She judges that what she is doing (e.g., playing or arguing with a view to winning) is best but she is not doing it with determination and vigor. Again, when she makes "weak resolves," she may be doing what she judges best but she is still willing weakly. The weakness here is independent of whether later she acts against her resolve and judgment; it lies in the way she resolved, leaving herself so much leeway for opting out. Resolving weakly, in this sense, is of course often the intelligent thing to do; but nonetheless to make such weak resolves repeatedly, even when circumstances call for more, is characteristic of the weak-willed person.

Suppose, however, she makes some firm resolutions in accord with her best judgment but later suddenly "changes her mind" about what is best to do. If the change was not due to new information, unforeseen circumstances, etc., but resulted from the very sort of momentary shift in priorities which she anticipated and wanted to avoid, the change itself is of a sort which, if characteristic of her, reveals her to be weak-willed. Her will-of-the-moment, we might say, is strong, for she was initially quite determined and even later she did not act against anything she willed at that time. But we also think of a person's will as something persisting over time, and one with a vacillating, ever changing will is not a strong-willed person in the ordinary sense. A weak-willed person should not be identified as one who, paradoxically, wills against her (current) will; for the more common cases involve having a will that is unstable, fluctuating, fading, or prone to surrender under pressure. A "push-over" who can be easily persuaded to give up earlier resolutions is weak-willed even if she always acts as at the moment she thinks best.

There is a further problem with identifying weakness of will with acting

contrary to what one judges best. If we make this identification, we will ignore familiar cases in which one's initial resolutions were not based on what one judged it best to do. Though this may be controversial among philosophers, it seems obvious that at times we resolutely set ourselves to pursue difficult courses of action without deciding, or even taking for granted, that doing so is the best thing to do. We may fail to act on these resolutions in just the ways we fail to act on resolutions to do what we regard best; and when we do so repeatedly, we again give evidence that we are weak-willed. Consider, for example, the boxer who learns that another fight will probably cost him his eyesight but nonetheless resolves to defeat a hated opponent at all costs. Or think of the jilted lover who sets herself on a course of revenge which she knows is morally indefensible and will result in jail or execution for herself. Some will say that they "must" have thought at the time that these undertakings were best and must have been insincere if they said otherwise. But most of us, I suspect, will find this unconvincing, more likely a desperate attempt to save a philosophical theory than an honest expression of conviction. And if the boxer and the vengeful lover balk at the moment of imminent success, not from wise reconsideration but from fear or an impulsive decision to pursue an equally unsavory alternative, then surely this can be part of the pattern which constitutes their being weak-willed.

There are different views, of course, about what it means to judge a course of action best, and these have different implications about the possibility of resolving, or breaking a resolution, without judging it best at the time to do so. But if a familiar notion of "morally best" or "prudentially best" is what is at work, it is hard to deny these possibilities. The vengeful lover may grant the obvious moral and prudential objections to her project and accordingly, let us suppose, she feels some aversion to carrying it out. In resolving to take revenge despite these considerations she need not be thinking that some further esoteric reason renders her murderous project morally or prudentially best; nor need she be momentarily blind or "out of control." She may simply count it more important to her to get even.

Prescriptivist theories hold that in judging a course of action best (in their sense) one commits oneself to a self-directed imperative to act accordingly, and they construe failure to follow such an imperative, when one can, as proof that one did not genuinely and fully judge the act to be best. (Here I treat "judging best" as the same as "judging that I ought, all considered.") This sort of theory, without refinements, must deny that one can display weakness of will by acting contrary to what one judges best *at the moment*, but it is quite compatible with many of the patterns of weakness of will which we have considered (e.g., weak efforts, weak resolves, fading and unstable will, and breaking resolutions through irrational changes of judgment). Still, persistent doubts about the prescriptivist position on the remaining controversial case (acting against one's *current* judgment about what is best) are often counted as a major objection to the theory. When,

to allay these doubts, the prescriptivist makes action in accord with one's judgment *definitive* of judging it best in *the prescriptive sense*, then one's doubts naturally turn to whether the prescriptive sense, so defined, is what is at work in the daily contexts in which weakness of will is a practical problem.

Those influenced by economic theory may insist that the vengeful lover resolves according to her best judgment in the sense that she resolves to act in a way she believes will satisfy her strongest preference. This, however, is not the sense at issue when we say, "She knew it was not the best thing to do, but still she resolved to kill him." The point is that she resolved to kill, despite her awareness that this was foolish and immoral; that her resolution reflected her strongest preference is not denied.

These, admittedly, are difficult issues which cannot be adequately resolved without fuller discussion of evaluative judgments. For present purposes it suffices to raise doubts about the conventional wisdom that one cannot act contrary to one's current judgment about what is best to do, and to note how much of Amy's weakness can be described without presupposing a position on that controversial point.

IV

A weak-willed person does not lack willpower but wills weakly; that is, she fails to exercise appropriately the willpower which she has. This, at least, is the conception which I believe is presupposed by the common moral assessment with which we began. There is, however, a pervasive ambiguity in our talk about weakness of will, which easily confuses the issue. Sometimes, I think, we speak of a person as "having a weak will" when we mean that the person suffers from an abnormal incapacity; she cannot, by willing alone, overcome certain inner obstacles to doing what she sets herself to do even though most people in her position can do so. She lacks the ability, or has a diminished capacity, to do certain things which others can do, but not because she suffers from obvious physical limitations, low intelligence, misinformation, weak memory, extraordinarily difficult circumstances, apathy, or abnormal desires. On this conception the person with a "weak will" cannot do things which she wants and decides to do even though various familiar obstacles are absent. I prefer to call this disability "lack of willpower" to distinguish it from my conception of "being weak-willed," though of course merely labeling it does not explain it. One can suffer the disability to different degrees, but for simplicity I will focus upon extreme cases.

Some of the "will-less" persons considered earlier might also be said to lack "willpower," at least temporarily or with respect to certain matters; but typically we think of the person who lacks willpower as having a will but being unable to carry it out. The person too depressed to act, for example, is more naturally described as lacking the will to act rather than as having little or no willpower.

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On the other hand, the hopeless drug addict might be thought to lack both the will and the willpower to change his behavior if the reason he could not will (but only wish) to change his behavior was that he finally realized that, even if he were to will, the result would be the same. Without the hope of success, he cannot develop the will to change; but since he is not able to change even if he so willed, he lacks the willpower.

Though lack of willpower is an inability to do what one wills, not every inability to do what one wills is lack of willpower. Most obviously, when one is physically too weak to lift the weight one earnestly tries to lift, the problem is not with one's willpower. Similarly, magicians, even if mad enough to think otherwise, cannot levitate objects at a distance just by "willing" them to rise, but this is not seen as a defect of willpower. A paralyzed person, before discovering his condition, might be said to "will" to move his leg, but again it seems inappropriate to count his failure to move the leg as due to inadequate willpower. Sometimes we say that we "cannot" do what we (previously) resolved and committed ourselves to doing because the sacrifice is too great, our consciences would be offended, or we now see the activity as disgusting, embarrassing, or pointless. But what we are claiming here, typically, is not that we have deficient willpower but rather that we have reasons which justify or explain our giving up what we earlier resolved to do.

The classic cases of lack of willpower seem to involve physical addictions, compulsive behavior, and "irresistible impulses," though the idea, I think, leaves room for other patterns. These cases are complex and difficult to understand, partly because more empirical study is needed but also because we have both common-sense and theory-laden ways of describing and thinking about the same examples. The most I can hope to do here is to indicate briefly the main feature that seems to distinguish these (and other) ways of lacking willpower from the conception of weakness of will which is my main concern. It should be noted, too, that I am not arguing that everything we suppose to be weakness of will, as opposed to diminished willpower, is really so; in fact I am not even *arguing* that there actually are weak-willed persons as I conceive them. It would not be surprising if we are sometimes mistaken in our views about apparently weak-willed persons; and it is conceivable that we are thoroughly and systematically mistaken. But some attempt to distinguish ideas is necessary just to understand the common moral assessment.

An important feature of extreme addictions and compulsions seems to be that the agent is seen as unable to control the behavior in question even if, on reflection, he wants to and tries to. The problems are easiest to identify when the agent has actually decided, on reflection, that he does not want to behave as he does but finds, to his dismay, that all his efforts (without outside intervention) yield no results. But the problems are supposed to exist, in a less obvious way, even in persons who "gladly" behave as they do and never try to stop. Sometimes

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even the agent's insistence, to himself and others, that he is doing just what he wants may be taken in context as evidence that he has the problem. Some evidence may be taken from similarities in the pattern of his behavior with that of people who try but fail to change, from the incoherence of his "explanations," from correlations between his biological state with other addicts (human or animal), and from the way in which the behavior is manifestly destructive of what human beings need and the agent professes to value. But the inference drawn is something which of course cannot be directly observed, namely, that the agent cannot by his own efforts significantly change the behavior. The idea of irresistible impulses apparently requires the same inference, though without patterns of repeated behavior it is hard to see how the evidence could be as substantial.

In an admirable paper, Gary Watson attempts to distinguish compulsions from a more ordinary disability which he calls "weakness of will."² In both cases the agent is sometimes unable to act on his practical deliberations, but the explanations are different. Watson's weak-willed persons do not have a capacity of self-control to the degree that normal persons (in the comparison class) have this, and so they "give in to desires which the possession of the normal degree of self-control would enable them to resist."³ Compulsive persons, by contrast, have desires that even the normal capacity of self-control would not enable them to resist. This, in my view, is a plausible contrast between compulsions and another type of diminished willpower; but since neither of Watson's types are able to act on the results of their deliberations, their problem is not weakness of will of the sort I propose to consider. Even Watson himself, we should note, points out that his idea of weakness of will is at odds with "the common account," though he argues (from assumptions I reject) that the common account is incoherent.

The idea of the weak-willed person that I think best fits the common moral assessment is different from the idea of a person suffering from a disability of any of the types mentioned above. Her problem is not that she is an addict, a compulsive, or even abnormal in her *ability* to carry out her resolutions, exert appropriate effort, etc. Her problem lies in the pattern of what she does when she could do otherwise. In saying this I do not mean that believing that people are weak-willed implies a belief in metaphysical indeterminism; what is meant is just that the weak-willed person, in displaying her weakness, was able to act differently in just the same (limited) sense that the ordinary (noncompulsive) liar could have told the truth, the common thief could have chosen not to steal, and the lazy student could have worked harder. The notions of "could have," "ability," and "self-control" are notoriously slippery, and it is controversial whether determinism poses a genuine challenge to any of our ordinary beliefs expressed in these terms. But my suggestion is that it is not a special problem about weakness

² See footnote 1.

³ "Scepticism About Weakness of Will," p. 330.

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or strength of will; if the ordinary liar, thief, and lazy student could act differently, then, in that sense, so could Amy.

V

To review, so far I have suggested that a weak-willed person has a will, has willpower, and does not necessarily act contrary to his best judgment. In characterizing someone as weak-willed, in this sense, we are describing him as the sort of person who repeatedly acts in certain ways but without implying that he is unable, or less able than people with other "vices," to act in alternative ways. The example of Amy suggests that weakness of will is a complex trait, which can be manifested in a variety of different patterns of action. The example also suggests we cannot identify weakness of will simply by looking to see whether at each moment the agent's acts correspond to his deliberative conclusions at that moment; we need to survey several aspects of the agent's history over time, including the degree of effort, the type of resolves, and the frequency and reasons for "changes of mind."

Our reflections so far point towards a complex conception of weakness of will which might be expressed as follows: Though not will-less or without willpower, weak-willed persons are the sort of persons who repeatedly and more than normal (a) make inadequate efforts, (b) resolve with too little determination, (c) break their resolutions, with or without a struggle, and/or (d) too readily abandon their undertakings.

Like the concept of "being hairy," this idea does not admit of precise determinations of "how much" and "how many parts" of the person (or the life) must satisfy the criteria, and what is considered "normal" may vary with the class to which the agent is compared. What is "inadequate" effort, "too little" determination, and "too readily" abandoning one's undertakings will also depend on what the agent's ends, projects, and undertakings are, and perhaps it is also to some extent relative to what is usual or commonly expected for the sort of activities in question. The idea of weakness of will, as I see it, is not so mysterious or obscure as many think, but it is many-sided and inexact.

A few comments on the different aspects of the account may be helpful. Consider first "inadequate effort." The point is that it counts towards a person's being weak-willed if the person, like Amy, characteristically exerts too little effort to achieve what she is aiming to do (assuming the end is attainable with more effort, she is not prevented in various familiar ways from exerting more effort, and the required level of effort is not extraordinary for that sort of activity).⁴

4 The sorts of things I have in mind that might be said to prevent a person from exerting more effort are, for example, ignorance of a remaining option, gross muscle fatigue (for some physical tasks), discovery that one lacks prerequisites (e.g., the mathematical knowledge to do a proof), not being able to conceive what more one could do that would count as "trying" (e.g., to recall

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She wills weakly, we may say; but "exerting more effort" is not just one sort of thing for all activities, say, a special mental event like the flexing of an "inner" muscle. This seems obvious when we think, for example, of trying harder to win a chess game, to solve a logic problem, to run faster, to serve better in tennis, to recall a name, to identify brands of coffee by taste, or to be civil when very angry. Also, I should note that the standard of "inadequate effort" I have in mind is not a moral or prudential standard, nor is it what the agent believes at the time to be adequate. The standard has more to do with what is likely to bring off whatever it is she is up to.

Similar remarks apply to (b), e.g., Amy's "weak resolves." The standard of "too little determination" is not moral or prudential, nor is it what the agent thinks at the moment. The main question is what sort of resolve will best serve her purposes in resolving, no matter how foolish or immoral those purposes may be. And resolves may be weaker or firmer in two dimensions. Some resolves, first, are more "determined" in that the resolution has fewer significant loopholes and escape clauses enabling the agent to ignore it without "breaking" it. A weak resolution in this sense would be like a "weak law" which leaves plenty of room for citizens to defeat its purpose by taking advantage of its special provisions. The other dimension has to do with the attitude the agent takes towards her possible noncompliance in the future. One is more resolute, in this sense, when one puts one's self-image on the line, expecting and intending that if one fails one will chastise oneself and feel not merely disappointment but some self-contempt. The analogy here would be between a law without sanctions and a law "with teeth in it." One may, of course, question the utility or psychological wisdom of making strong resolutions of these sorts; but the point here is a conditional one. That is, if a person repeatedly makes only weak resolutions when stronger ones are needed for the purpose, then (given some further assumptions) this pattern is one of several which give evidence of weakness of will.

The third pattern, (c) above, presupposes a distinction between "breaking" a resolution and taking advantage of its (often implicit) option to "change one's mind" in the light of new information. Except when one anticipates a period of incompetence (as with Ulysses and the Sirens), one generally takes for granted that one's resolutions are meant to be revisable if various sorts of unanticipated circumstances arise. On the other hand, resolutions (in contrast to mere plans and policies) would be pointless if they did not direct one not to reconsider or deviate from the resolve for certain anticipated reasons (e.g., the arrival of an expected temptation or pres-

the smell of an exotic herb experienced once), extraordinary psychological domination by a Rasputin, and perhaps a hypothesized emotional "block" evidenced by repeated failures of efforts (of one sort, e.g., listening to martial music, lecturing oneself, asking others to offer rewards) to get oneself to "try harder" (in another way, e.g., to win at boxing). None of these are present in the ordinary case of weakness of will, and we cannot simply infer an "inability to exert more effort," in the sense intended here, from the general belief that all behavior is caused or from the particular fact that the agent *did not want* to exert more effort.

The first of the resolutions that I have discussed may be broken in an alternative way. It is possible to break a resolution by fulfilling its purpose in an alternative way. Given this distinction, the normative standard in (c) is built into the idea that the weak-willed person tends to *break* her resolutions rather than merely revise them or exercise an implicit option to respond to unforeseen circumstances. Breaking a resolution is not, of course, a paradoxical case of willingly acting against one's current will; rather, it is a willful refusal to be guided by a *prior* resolution in the very circumstances for which the resolution had been intended.

The last criterion, (d), most obviously requires us to look beyond the relation between the agent's acts and judgment at each moment. The person who "too readily abandons her projects" has her judgments and her acts in phase at each moment, but she vacillates in what she wills. She does not will weakly at each moment, we might say; but her will to fulfill particular projects is never strong and stable over time. One might object that what is weak here is not "her will" *per se* but her will to fulfill this or that end; however, despite this, I think that this tendency to abandon lightly particular projects that one has just energetically undertaken is among the patterns which characterize those we regard as weak-willed persons. In saying that they "too readily" give up their undertakings, I do not mean "to a morally undesirable degree" or even "to the detriment of their long-term interests"; the point is just that they are constantly pursuing ends which they give up before they can fulfill them and so, by their own voluntary choices, they systematically undermine what they work for.

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. The description may be compatible with a variety of explanations though not, on my view, with explanations that imply that weak-willed persons suffer from a special sort of inability to change their conduct that does not affect the garden-variety liar and thief. In saying that I was weak-willed in doing something, I do not even characterize my motives or reasons as specifically as if I reported that I acted from greed or malice or cowardice. I do indicate that what I did was not in accord with what I wholeheartedly and steadfastly endorse over time; for in calling my act "weak-willed," I place it with others in a class of acts which are at odds, in the various ways we have considered, with my own ends, projects, and previous commitments.

VI

Although I hope that my description of the weak-willed person avoids the worst paradoxes which action theorists have discussed, my aim has not been to solve

The questions that I have raised are some of the most important in moral philosophy. For this purpose it is important to have identified the trait in terms familiar enough to make it readily recognizable and clear enough to dispel genuine doubts about its possibility: but it is not necessary to resolve all theoretical questions that can be raised about the various concepts employed in the description, especially if these concepts are not unique to weakness of will but are pervasive in our ordinary understanding of human action. No doubt there are objections to my characterization of weakness of will even for our limited purposes, but let us set these aside for now so that we can, at least briefly, consider the main evaluative questions which prompted this inquiry.

These questions express the traditional concerns of moral philosophy about traits commonly supposed to be character defects: What reason does one have to avoid the trait, and why regard it as a *moral* defect? The questions seem particularly pressing about weakness of will as described here because that description does not itself imply that being weak-willed is always immoral or even disadvantageous to the agent. The weak-willed person, to be sure, exerts "inadequate effort," switches projects "too readily," etc.; but adequacy here is relative to the agent's own ends, which may themselves be foolish or immoral. The weak-willed person tends to break resolutions, but the resolutions may be more imprudent or morally objectionable than the decisions to break them.

Consider first the disadvantages of being weak-willed for the person who has this trait. Some of these are rather obvious. Even setting aside the disapproving and contemptuous reactions of others, weak-willed agents are more liable than most to fail in projects which they would find rewarding if they persisted in them and were moderately successful. Their feeble efforts, ineffective resolutions, and flip-flopping choices typically undermine their chances of gaining satisfactions they could have and would have if they were strong-willed. With such failures usually come feelings of disappointment and regret, often more disturbing than the external losses. But, though typical and important, these costs are not inevitable in every case and may even be compensated by lucky consequences of being weak. For example, those who have amply demonstrated their weakness may be less frequently called upon to make heroic sacrifices and to do more mundane chores which require effort and reliability. Weak memory and self-deception may reduce the liability to regrets. If a stupid resolution is made, weakness of will may block the bad consequences of carrying it out, even if one wishes that wiser planning or reconsideration could have done the job. There may be social rewards for the weak-willed in that others often find them easy to empathize with (in contrast, say, to the cruel), easy to pity (for their failures), and easy to bend to one's own will.

On balance, no doubt, even these considerations leave weakness of will a bad bet for most who weigh them wisely. But there is another important disadvantage

→ of being weak-willed, namely, that weakness of will tends to undermine one's self-esteem and self-respect. This can happen in several ways. Most obviously, weakness of will tends to undermine self-esteem by making the agent less likely to reach levels of skill and accomplishment that he and others admire; for weak-willed persons, by definition, do "too little" of what they can do to fulfill their projects. Self-esteem, of at least one sort, depends upon belief that one has successfully completed undertakings that one counts important, or at least that one has done one's best towards this. Admiration and recognition by others tend to reinforce this self-esteem, but primarily because it leads one to suppose that one has earned it. One may still feel proud of one's natural good looks, one's distinguished heritage, etc., while knowing that one has failed at all one's projects; but one could not have the sort of self-esteem that amounts to recognition that one has oneself done what one regards significant. The problem is not that the weak-willed lack the ability to succeed but rather that they do not fully use their ability; and their low self-esteem stems not so much from doubting their ability to carry out their intentions as from their awareness that they typically choose to act in ways that prevent success.⁵

1) In another sense, I think, to respect oneself is to live up to one's minimal or base-line personal standards, where adopting "personal standards" is more than merely setting oneself an end which one wants very much to achieve.⁶ To earn a higher salary, for example, may be an important end for me, but failure to achieve this will not make me "think less" of myself in the way, say, that failing to write intelligibly will. I do not put my self-respect on the line in pursuing the first as I do in working at the second. Being weak-willed, it seems, makes one liable to suffer diminished self-respect of this further kind. If one never sets personal standards, one cannot respect (or disrespect) oneself in this sense; and if one sets standards but constantly fails to meet them, one fails to respect oneself. 2) The point here, unlike previously, is not that one lacks a welcome *feeling* (self-esteem) but rather that, by violating standards one has set for oneself, one *acts* with disrespect for oneself.

3) In addition, in their characteristic pattern of making and breaking resolutions, the weak-willed do not display full respect for themselves as rational deliberative agents. If one fully respected oneself as a rational agent, one would not make resolutions unless one had a good reason; for resolutions are our attempts at one time to constrain our deliberations at later times. Unlike mere intentions and tentative plans, they are like "orders" to oneself, prescribing how to act later and forbidding reconsideration (if later conditions are as anticipated). If we fully respected ourselves as rational agents, we would constrain our later deliberations

⁵ Compare John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (p. 440).

⁶ This idea of self-respect is developed in my "Self-Respect Reconsidered," in this volume. This is distinct from the sort of self-respect I discussed in "Servility and Self-Respect," also in this volume.

in this way only for good reasons; for example, if we foresaw obstacles to deliberating rationally at the later time (too little time, distracting pressures, or temporary incompetence). If the weak-willed make irrational resolutions, then, this is one way of not showing full respect for themselves as rational agents.

Suppose, on the other hand, they make only rational resolutions, constraining their later deliberations only for good reasons and leaving themselves room for reconsideration in case circumstances significantly change. In this case to break the resolution is irrational and shows a sort of disrespect for oneself as a person capable of rational self-control; for, by hypothesis, the resolution was made for good reasons and no change of circumstance or information warranted reconsideration. Respecting oneself as a rational agent does not require blindly following prior resolutions in all circumstances; but also it does not require, and may even rule out, trying to deliberate anew in each situation one faces.

Although some may not agree, or care, about the particular disadvantages I have mentioned, I suspect that few would deny that being weak-willed is generally disadvantageous to the agent. The more controversial issues concern the moral status of weakness of will. Although our account of weakness of will does not (and, I think, should not) settle these issues by definition, in various ways the account fits with the idea that weakness of will is a moral defect of character. By distinguishing, for example, between weakness of will and the disabilities we called "lack of willpower," the account helps to explain why weakness of will is not regarded as an adequate excuse for wrongdoing. Also the account, unlike some, fits the common idea that, even though weakness of will is a defect in character, many weak-willed acts are morally innocent, i.e., not wrong to do. The tendency of weakness of will to undermine self-esteem and self-respect helps to explain why weakness of will often provokes shame and contempt; and this may partially explain the moral disapproval of weakness of will, given the common belief that failure to maintain one's self-respect (in some relevant sense) is morally objectionable. Nevertheless, it remains a large and unsettled question whether weakness of will should be regarded a moral defect and, if so, in what sense. Disagreements about this, I suspect, result more from deep differences in how we see morality than from differences in what we think about the nature and effects of weakness of will. I conclude with a few tentative remarks on the problem.

First, the fulfillment of moral obligations and duties to others is often a difficult task, requiring at times strong effort, determination, and steadiness of purpose as well as sympathetic feelings and good intentions. As a result, an extremely weak-willed person is unlikely to meet all such obligations and duties. This is not because he suffers from a special debilitating condition; to the contrary, it is because if he did all he could to fulfill these obligations and duties he would not be the sort of person who displays the patterns we identified as weakness of will.

If this were the only moral argument against weakness of will, it would raise

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the possibility that a person might be *selectively weak-willed* without displaying any moral defect. That is, one might be vigorous, steadfast, and resolute in fulfilling one's obligations and duties to others but weak, vacillating, and self-defeating in the rest of one's life. If so, weakness of will (as I have described it) would not itself be a defect of moral character but only a pattern often associated with moral failings.

If, however, morality consists of more than fulfilling duties and obligations to others, then the room for being weak-willed selectively, without moral defect, shrinks. The virtues of justice, fidelity, and courage, for example, often call for just the sort of strength and stability of effort and resolution that the weak-willed person characteristically lacks. It is not that these virtues require a special *power* which the weak-willed lack. Both the weak-willed and the strong-willed have the power to be just, loyal, and courageous, but to have these virtues, given normal human liabilities and circumstances, one needs to use these powers in ways that tend to disqualify one from the category of the weak-willed. If we add that morality calls us, but does not command us, to tasks that are supererogatory, then there is further reason not to regard it as morally indifferent whether or not one is weak-willed so long as one fulfills one's obligations and duties to others. One can, of course, occasionally act in some of the ways typical of the weak-willed person without doing anything wrong, and not every act which actually manifests an agent's weakness of will need be morally significant. But it is not morally insignificant whether one rests content in a character, or characteristic pattern of action, which rules out leading the most worthy moral lives, which go beyond duty.

If we acknowledge obligations to oneself or self-regarding virtues and vices, we may find it even less likely that one can be weak-willed so selectively that one's weakness is morally indifferent. It can take strength of will, for example, to avoid servility, abuse of one's gifts, and various other forms of self-degradation. If it is a self-regarding virtue to respect oneself in any of the ways considered previously, this too would provide an argument.

All of these arguments (except perhaps the very last) treat the character trait, being weak-willed, not as inherently evil or vicious but as persistently liable, in normal human circumstances, to interfere with living by the demands and ideals of morality. Though this may be enough to qualify it for a place among the moral "vices," it does not by itself seem to warrant the kind of blame we give to cruelty, injustice, and dishonesty.

Some of the resistance to viewing weakness of will as a moral vice may come from the puzzle raised by our earlier example of the cruel Nazi who turns out to be strong-willed but is not thought to be a better person because of this. If weakness of will is a vice, one might think, then a Nazi with bad principles would be a better person if he had the strength of will to carry them out than if he failed to do so from weakness. But, one might continue, we are not inclined

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to think this; and so weakness of will must not be a vice. This reasoning is not compelling, however, for the moral worth of a person is not determined by simply adding points for virtues and subtracting for vices. The moral worth of having certain virtues, such as strength of will, may be conditional; that is, they may be to a person's credit only if that person also possesses certain other good traits. On this view, though no ideal person would be weak-willed, a weak-willed person does not automatically become better if, keeping all else the same, he or she becomes strong-willed. Strength of will would be an ideal to strive for along with charity, justice, etc., but it might be worthless by itself.

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