

AGENCY IMPLIES WEAKNESS OF WILL

J. Gregory Keller

Abstract

Notions of agency and of weakness of will clearly seem to be related to one another. This essay takes on a rather modest task in relation to current discussion of these topics; it seeks to establish the following claim: If A is a normal human agent, weakness of will is possible for A . The argument relies on demonstrating that certain necessary conditions for normal human agency are at least roughly equivalent to certain sufficient conditions for weakness of will. The connection between agency and weakness of will is made through the use of an extended example that lays bare the links between the two.

There is considerable current talk of weakness of will and of agency in philosophical literature. There is less discussion, however, of the relation between those two concepts, although it's generally acknowledged that there is some such relation. This essay takes on a rather modest task in relation to current discussion of these topics; it seeks to establish the following claim: If A is an agent,¹ weakness of will is possible for A . In that regard, then, we will address the following argument:

1. If A is an agent, then it is possible for A to be morally responsible for (at least some of) A 's actions.
 2. If it is possible for A to be morally responsible for (at least some of) A 's actions, then A is capable of
 - a. intentional action,
 - b. making evaluative judgments concerning the actions she might take and of carrying out or failing to carry out those judgments, and
 - c. acting freely, which may be understood in terms of at least the following: acting without compulsion or strong coercion, or acting voluntarily, or believing that one has an alternative action open to one.
 3. If A is capable of 2a, 2b, and 2c, then weakness of will is possible for A .
- 1 As stated later, the only agents of interest to my argument are normal human beings who are capable of intentional actions.

4. So, if A is an agent, then weakness of will is possible for A.

Premise two is the crucial premise for the argument. We will begin by briefly describing the reasons for believing that premise one requires little argument. The essay concludes with a brief discussion of premise three. The part of the larger argument that primarily requires an argument of its own is premise two.

Concerning the discussion of acting freely in premise two, I follow Aristotle in considering the minimal requirements for voluntary action to be: (1) not being forced to act as one acts and (2) not being ignorant of relevant information about one's action. Aristotle's positive criterion for voluntary action is "that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action" (Aristotle *IIIa* 21-23, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1, Ross translation). Further, I mention believing one has an option open to one. It seems to me that such a belief does not work as the freedom condition for weakness of will. I include this idea because Donald Davidson's well-known discussion of weakness of will takes belief as such a condition. I argue against parts of Davidson's position in a separate essay ("Believing is not enough: A critique of Davidson's freedom condition for weakness of will," unpublished).

The argument as a whole involves a discussion of agency. The only agents of interest to my argument are normal human beings who are capable of intentional actions. (It is possible, of course, that there are no beings that are capable of intentional action. If that is the case, then there are no beings that are capable of being morally responsible and no beings that are capable of weakness of will.) I use the term 'agent' primarily for two reasons: (1) I am focusing on human *action*, not on any other fact or assumption about human beings and (2) it is less cumbersome for both writer and reader to have a single word to represent this idea than to repeat "a normal human being who is capable of intentional action" (or some similar phrase) each time. The question has been raised as to whether God is an agent and, further, whether one might claim that weakness of will is possible for all agents, including God (if God is an agent). Whether God is an agent is not relevant to my discussion. Presumably, if God exists and is in some sense an agent, then (1) there is at least one sense of 'agent' in which an agent is not capable of weakness of will and (2) the sense of 'agent' when that term is used of God seems to me to be different than the sense of 'agent' that may appropriately be applied to human beings.

Concerning premise one above, it must first of all be said that it requires little argument. Those entities who are human agents are exactly the sorts of beings who are morally responsible (if any beings are). I believe that the reader will be likely to grant me that assumption. If one were to argue for premise one, the argument might take the following shape: (1) If A is an agent, then A has certain characteristics x , y , and z . (2) If A has characteristics x , y , and z , then it is possible for A to be morally responsible for A 's actions. (3) Therefore, if A is an agent, then it is possible for A to be morally responsible for A 's actions. Exactly which characteristics x , y , and z are is not easy to describe. The point is that I believe my reader will grant that whatever those characteristics may be agents have them and they are sufficient for the possibility of moral responsibility.

So, I take premise one to be in accordance with beliefs most of us share. There is considerable discussion as to what counts as moral responsibility. In its simplest form, I take being morally responsible as amounting to, at least, being an appropriate recipient of moral praise and blame. One part of being an agent is to be (at least possibly) morally responsible for at least some of one's actions. If I say that Alan is an agent and that, without there being any extenuating circumstances, he stole Alice's purse, or robbed Joan's store, or shot Sam, I believe most of us will concur that Alan is morally, not just causally, responsible for those actions. All I need for my argument is acknowledgement that agency implies the possibility of moral responsibility, for at least some of the agent's actions. I believe that such acknowledgement can be granted both by those who agree with my overall thesis and by those who do not agree.

Next, then, I will work through a series of examples that will illustrate and explore the three conditions of premise two. In these examples the question will be whether an agent is morally responsible and not just causally responsible for an event or state of affairs. We might ask, e.g., what is the difference between: (1) faulty wiring was responsible for a fire, and (2) an electrician was responsible for the faulty wiring.

To say that faulty wiring is responsible for a fire is to assign causal responsibility, i.e., to tell what part of the environment we point to, in particular, as the cause of the fire. Wiring is not morally responsible, but only causally responsible for something. An electrician, on the other hand, may be both causally and morally responsible for something, e.g., faulty wiring. It would be inappropriate to assign moral blame to the faulty wiring. It would be equally inappropriate to *fail* to assign moral blame to the electrician, at least in certain cases. The distinction to be explored is that between those cases in which it is appropriate to place moral blame on an agent for an action or conse-

quence and those cases in which it is not. By distinguishing between these cases we will clarify under what conditions an agent is morally responsible and, by implication, how agency is related to the possibility of weakness of will.

Consider the following alternative explanations for why Susan, an electrician, acted as she did (in installing faulty wiring):

Case 1. She was ill-trained and didn't know that she was ill-trained and didn't know that she was installing the wiring incorrectly.

Case 2. Her boss told her to

- a. hurry, or
- b. disregard wiring regulations on this job, or
- c. make sure that the building would burn down.

Case 3. She could not have done otherwise because she was drugged or brainwashed, and was thus compelled to do what she did.

Case 4. Someone held a gun to her head and said "Mess up the wiring."

Case 5. She was having family problems and

- (a) correctly believed that she was unable to concentrate, or
- (b) falsely believed that she was unable to concentrate.

Case 6. She could not have done otherwise because White, an evil scientist, would make her decide to, intend to, and proceed to act in this way if she were not going to do so herself. In this case, either (a) she decides, on her own, to pay insufficient attention to the wiring and thus creates the faulty wiring which will be responsible for the building burning down, or (b) she would not have installed the wiring incorrectly on her own but does so due to White's intervention.

I will use these examples to argue for a thesis about the necessary conditions for moral responsibility. The thesis I argue for is that described in the second premise of the argument I present at the beginning of this essay, i.e., If *A* is morally responsible for (at least some of) *A*'s actions, then *A* is capable of (a) intentional action, and (b) acting either according or contrary to her evaluative judgments concerning actions she may take, and (c) acting freely, understood

in terms of: acting without compulsion or acting voluntarily or believing that one has an alternative action open to one.

I take it that Susan is causally responsible for the faulty wiring in each of the cases described above. Since I am arguing concerning a set of necessary conditions, I use examples to argue my case in the following way: if one acts unintentionally (for example), then one is not held morally responsible, and one is not held morally responsible in that instance for one reason only—that one is acting unintentionally. I attempt to show, by way of these examples, that there are certain necessary conditions of moral action which turn out to be sufficient conditions of weakness of will. The extended example of Susan is intended to illustrate a sufficiently coherent picture of the necessary conditions for moral responsibility so that we may proceed to an inference concerning weakness of will.

The first condition for being morally responsible for an action is that one be able to act. In each of the cases we will examine the electrician's acts. In some cases we would say that Susan is morally responsible for her actions and in some cases we would not. In what follows, I will be referring to *moral* responsibility whenever I refer to Susan's responsibility for her actions, unless I explicitly state otherwise.

In case (1), where she is ill-trained and does not know that she is installing the wiring improperly, Susan is not morally responsible for this particular installation of improper wiring, provided she is ignorant and not culpable for her ignorance. As mentioned above, ignorance is one of two factors that make an agent's action non-voluntary (the other being 'force,' which is similar to strong coercion or compulsion, to be discussed later) to which Aristotle alludes in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b30-1111b5. Given that Susan: (a) is ill-trained, (b) doesn't know this fact, (c) doesn't know for some other reason that (due to being ill-trained) she is incorrectly installing the wiring, and (d) is not culpable for her ignorance, we do not blame her for what she has done. If we have reason to believe that she should have known that she was ill-trained, or that her training—which she considers adequate—often results in obviously (to her) faulty wiring, then we may blame her for her ignorance and may or may not blame her for this specific result of it. If, for instance, she could have been expected to compare her training to that of others, or could have been expected to discover that what her instructors taught her was at odds with information available from other apparently reliable sources, and so on, or if she recognizes that installing wiring according to her training results in obviously faulty installation, then she is responsible to recognize that her training is, or

is likely to be, faulty. On the other hand, we don't blame her for inadequately installing the wiring in this case if she is intending to install it correctly, is not deceiving herself, and is simply mistaken about what correct installation requires.

This first example illustrates two necessary conditions for moral responsibility: (1) that an action be intentional and (2) that an action not be undertaken in ignorance of relevant information. First, then, we take Susan to be responsible for intending to install the wiring correctly. If she tried to do what she intended to do, then she is responsible for her intention and for her trying to carry out that intention—even if she fails, through no fault of her own, to carry it out. So, in this instance, if she intends to install the wiring correctly and fails to do so only because she does not know how to install it correctly, then we do not blame her for this failure (unless we believe that she is culpable for her ignorance). Similarly, if she intends to install the wiring incorrectly and, instead, installs it correctly due to ignorance, then she is responsible for what she intended but not for what she accomplished. That is, if she does not intend to install the wiring a particular way, then (assuming innocence concerning her ignorance of how it is actually being installed) she is not morally responsible for its being installed that way.

This result fits all instances of intentional versus unintentional action. Except for cases of negligence, which I will consider in a moment, if someone did not act intentionally, then they are not morally responsible for their action. This statement is the logical equivalent of: if someone is morally responsible for their action, then they acted intentionally.

Concerning negligence, we may say that if someone is ignorant of some relevant piece of information and is culpable concerning that ignorance, then she is morally responsible for her ignorance and for its effects. Someone is culpable for her ignorance if, given the general state of her knowledge and sources of information, she is morally responsible for failing to recognize either her ignorance itself or the possible effects of her ignorance. Of course, the issue of negligence is large and complex. I only intend here to sketch the details necessary for my overall account. The simplest criterion for culpable negligence concerning ignorance seems to be that the person is responsible if he could have known what he was doing if he had exercised reasonable care in considering an action or in acting the way he did. In general, if someone brought about her own ignorance, recognizing it to *be* ignorance, or if she failed to remedy ignorance that she had reason to believe might have significant effects, she is morally responsible for her ignorance.

The second necessary condition for moral responsibility illustrated by the above example is that the action not be taken in ignorance. This condition has already been discussed to some extent above. Susan is not morally responsible for installing the wiring incorrectly if she does not know that she is doing so and further believes that she is installing it correctly. If Susan is ignorant (and not culpably so) in doing x (thinking, say, that she is doing y instead), then she is not morally responsible for doing x . This condition seems straightforward and in need of little explanation. If an agent is ignorant of the relevant details concerning an action he believes himself to be performing, then that agent is not morally responsible for the action he performs (given an absence of culpability). This statement translates logically into the following: If an agent is morally responsible for an action, then he is not ignorant of the relevant details concerning that action.

So, we can say that if an agent is morally responsible for an action, then that action is both intentional and one concerning which the agent is not relevantly ignorant. All we need for the second major premise of the argument pursued in this essay is the possibility of being morally responsible. One can easily see that if having x is a necessary condition for R, then being capable of x is a necessary condition for the possibility of R. In a similar way, then, we can conclude: If it is possible for A to be morally responsible for (at least some of) A 's actions, then A is capable of intentional actions and of actions concerning which she is not ignorant.

If, as in case (2a), Susan's boss tells her to hurry, we will excuse her from responsibility if, but only if, she unthinkingly or under strong coercion or under compulsion follows orders or she incorrectly installs the wiring unwittingly while trying to hurry. First of all, then, concerning her unthinkingly following orders, there are three alternative assessments which may fit this case, and surely one of them does: (a) If Susan unthinkingly follows orders, then we will not hold her responsible for following those orders but we will hold her responsible for failing to think about what she is doing. (b) If Susan unthinkingly follows orders, then we will hold her responsible for following those orders because she failed to think before doing so and she is responsible so to think. (c) If Susan unthinkingly follows orders because she holds a firm judgment that following her boss's orders is the best thing for her to do when on the job or in this particular case, we will hold her responsible for her judgment but not for her action (unless we hold her culpably ignorant in holding that judgment). In instance (a) she is not responsible for the specific action she takes in following orders but is responsible for the act of following orders without thinking. In

instance (b) she is responsible for the action she engages in when following orders. In instance (c) she is responsible for her judgment, but is responsible for her action only if she is culpably ignorant in holding that judgment.

Second, cases such as (2a) in which Susan's boss tells her to hurry can be considered with other cases of ignorance, such as we discussed in relation to case (1), or with instances of compulsion/strong coercion, which we will discuss in greater detail later. If she is told by her boss to disregard regulations (case 2b) or to make it likely that the building burns due to faulty wiring (case 2c), we will hold her responsible unless she believes regulations not to apply in the first case or, in the second, believes that the appropriate task of her firm is to cause this building to burn. We hold her responsible for making a proper evaluation or judgment concerning the situation in which she finds herself, and for acting in accordance with her better judgment, or failing so to act. We may conclude, then, that being capable of evaluating actions that one might take is another condition of responsibility. Susan is morally responsible both for judging what she ought to do and for carrying out or failing to carry out the judgments she makes.

It is evident from examining this example that, in addition to the necessary conditions for moral responsibility described above, there is another condition. If an agent is morally responsible, then that agent is capable of making evaluative judgments concerning the actions she might take and of carrying out or failing to carry out those judgments. It seems unnecessary here to try to explain in detail what making judgments involves. Trying to pin down this concept would lead us far a field and such a discussion is not germane to the argument at hand. Further, concerning the concept of "carrying out or failing to carry out those judgments," I am not suggesting that the agent must have some form of libertarian or other non-deterministic freedom. I am simply asserting that, on whatever compatibilist or incompatibilist terms one wishes to consider, the agent is able both to carry out her evaluative judgments and also to fail to do so. The agent must be able to act on or fail to act on her judgments. A description of the sort of freedom this ability implies need not concern us here. Following then what was said in the previous case, we can conclude that if it is possible for *A* to be morally responsible for (at least some of) *A*'s actions, then *A* is capable of making evaluative judgments concerning the actions she might take and of carrying out or failing to carry out those judgments.

In case (3), Susan could not have done otherwise (than to improperly install the wiring) because she was drugged or brainwashed. She was compelled to do as she did. It seems obvious that compulsion implies lack of moral responsibil-

ity and, therefore, being capable of not being compelled and in any specific instance not in fact being compelled is necessary for the possibility of moral responsibility. But in order to more clearly understand what this conclusion suggests, we need to examine the concept of compulsion.

In order to try to understand what is meant, then, when we say that Susan was compelled to do as she did, I will briefly investigate the notion of compulsion used here. The point at issue is the situation of being compelled to act in a particular way, although the account I give of compulsion fits other cases of compulsion as well. What, then, is compulsion?

I offer the following thesis concerning compulsion: *A* is compelled by *Y* to do *x* at time *t* and in way *w* iff *Y* is causally sufficient for *A*'s doing *x* at time *t* and in way *w* (and *Y* is not simply describable in terms of *A*'s acting as an agent). Either the time or the way one acts can be thought of narrowly or broadly. The narrow interpretation may be compared to calling an event or state of affairs a particular. The broad interpretation may be compared to calling an event or a state of affairs a universal. This distinction is discussed by Peter van Inwagen ("Ability and Responsibility," *Philosophical Review*, 87 (April 1978) 201-224, reprinted in *Moral Responsibility*, ed. John Martin Fischer). Nothing of significance for my discussion relies upon taking events or states of affairs in one of these ways rather than the other.

Let us suppose then that Arthur is about to bend over to pick up a stick from the ground. (It obscures his favorite path through the woods and he intends to remove it.) Moments before he would have done so, however, he hears a gunshot nearby. He bends over hoping that, if someone is shooting his way, they will be more likely to miss him if he is bent over. Arthur's bending over in the woods on Tuesday afternoon is in the terms I am using a broad description of his action, an action potentially motivated in different ways (We might compare what I am here calling a "broad" description of an action to Danto's idea of "basic actions" (1965)). Arthur's bending over (beginning to bend over) at 2:36:20 p.m. Tuesday, March 7, 1995, because he intends to pick up a stick is a narrow description, fitting only a situation that turns out not to be the case.

If I want to turn my head and James, my friend who's a weight-lifter, turns my head exactly in the direction I would have turned it (though not in exactly the same way that I would have turned it), his action is causally sufficient for my head's turning even though I would have turned it anyway. My head's turning, in this case, is compelled. If I want to take a drug and my addiction makes me take it, the addiction is causally sufficient for my action, although I would have taken the drug anyway. My taking the drug, in this case, is compelled, despite

my wanting to take the drug. In both cases, I would have acted to (somewhat) the same effect if I had not been compelled. And if I had acted in that way prior to the compelling action of James or the addiction, I would not have been compelled despite the fact that what I did would have occurred anyway.

Suppose that Sam wants, as he would put it, “more than anything in the world” to date Rachel. He asks her out and, much to his surprise, she accepts and they go out on a date. Was Sam compelled to ask her out and subsequently to go out with her by his want? It seems not. Although the want strongly inclined Sam to act, it was not causally sufficient for the action. Given even a very strong want, an agent is not ordinarily compelled to act on that want. If the want is such that Sam’s having it is causally sufficient for Sam’s action, then he is compelled to act in that way and he no longer simply wants to act that way. A strong want, then, may be differentiated from a psychological compulsion. Something internal to Sam as agent – I am referring here to something internal to Sam’s mental functioning, not to something internal to Sam’s physiology, such as a heart attack or a stroke – could intervene between a strong want and an action, but not between a compulsion and an action. If Sam had no beliefs, wants, or values at conflict with asking Rachel out and then going out with her when she accepts, does his very strong want compel him to act? The answer is still no. A series of decisions stands between Sam’s want and Sam’s action. We might note here that if the thesis of determinism is true, although Sam’s ‘want’ may not compel him, the series of Sam’s decisions and the state of the universe as a whole is causally sufficient for him to act as he does. If determinism is false, then it could be that neither Sam’s wants nor his decisions are causally sufficient for his action. In any case, the process of deciding can be swept aside by a compulsion to act. It is important to distinguish between Sam’s wants and decisions and those things which compel (or which strongly coerce) Sam to act.

Returning, then, to the example of Susan the electrician, we will examine next the case in which she is strongly coerced. As a working distinction, I take coercion to allow the agent an alternative to the coerced action and strong coercion to offer only normally unacceptable alternatives. When one is compelled there is not an alternative available to one. I have defined compulsion in more detail in the immediately previous section. What constitutes strong enough coercion to relieve the agent of responsibility is dependent on the context. Case (4), in which someone holds a gun to Susan’s head, has obvious implications for moral responsibility. We ordinarily consider having someone hold a gun to one’s head a sufficient reason for carrying out the action the gun

wielder demands. We would ask if the gun is loaded, whether the person holding the gun is joking, whether Susan is able readily to disarm the gun holder, and so on. But, under normal circumstances, we would consider someone excusably coerced by having a gun held to her head. We would say that Susan is not responsible for her action in this case, if she is either strongly enough coerced or if she is compelled. If she is not either sufficiently strongly coerced or compelled by the gun to her head, then she is responsible. Thus, since being either strongly enough coerced or compelled to act as one acts makes one not responsible, not being either so coerced or compelled is a necessary condition of responsibility. Further, this implies that one's being capable of acting without compulsion or strong coercion is a necessary condition for the possibility of moral responsibility.

If, as in case (5), Susan believes she cannot concentrate due to family problems, we do not hold her responsible if, but only if, either what she believes is true and she literally cannot concentrate, or she has no legitimate reason for doubting her belief. Of course, if she literally cannot concentrate (5a), then the first disjunct above is fulfilled and we do not hold her responsible. If she believes that she cannot concentrate adequately and her belief is false (5b), we will have to understand the sincerity of her belief in order to make a judgment. Case (5), then, agrees with our earlier conclusions concerning ignorance or compulsion/strong coercion as legitimate excuses. In case (5a) Susan appears to be compelled not to concentrate by her family troubles, and we would excuse her. In case (5b), if her belief is sincere, she is ignorant of her ability to concentrate and, we must suppose, finds herself sufficiently distracted so that she does not concentrate. Of course, we must recognize that if strict causal determinism is true and Susan does not concentrate, she does not have the ability, in this circumstance and given who she is at this time, to concentrate. In our ordinary moral judgments, and most of our philosophical ones, we judge Susan as though she had abilities which, in a given circumstance, she could—in the strict sense—exercise but is not exercising. We see here, as in case (1), that if one is ignorant, strongly coerced, or compelled, one is not responsible for one's actions. But we can reach another conclusion as well. One's belief that one has or does not have an alternative open to one is a factor in one's being or not being responsible. If an agent legitimately believes that he does not have an alternative, then he is not morally responsible for acting as he does. There is a difficult issue here of how one ought to act if one legitimately yet falsely believes that one has no alternatives. Is one morally responsible for trying to act as one thinks one should?

It seems to me as though this is the case. If, for instance, an agent believes falsely that he is locked in a room and is aware of some action he ought to take that requires leaving that room, then he is probably responsible for attempting to do what he believes he cannot do. I think the responsibility one has in this instance may be proportional to the level of moral obligation one has for action as well as, perhaps, to the strength of one's belief concerning a lack of alternatives. It also seems to be the case that one is morally responsible for an action one takes if one believes oneself to have an alternative when one does not. The complexities of the relationship between belief and responsibility go beyond the scope of the present essay. As previously mentioned, some of these issues concerning belief and choice are addressed by Davidson (1980).

In case (6) we have a Frankfurt-style example similar to the one originally designed to defeat the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), defined by Frankfurt as follows: "... a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise." This formulation of PAP is found in Harry G. Frankfurt's "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," (*Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (December 1969), 828-839, reprinted in *Moral Responsibility*, edited by John Martin Fischer – the above quote is found on p. 143 of the latter). White, an evil scientist, would make Susan decide to, intend to, and proceed to act in a particular way if she were not going to do so herself. In case (6a) – in which Susan decides, without intervention, to pay insufficient attention to the wiring – it seems clear that we will hold Susan morally responsible for her failure, although it certainly appears that she could not have done otherwise. This demonstrates a distinction between 'could not have done otherwise' and compulsion. As a morally responsible agent, she is not compelled to act as she does, for neither her decision to act that way, nor an intervention by White, is causally sufficient for her action. Susan's decision is not causally sufficient for her action because, at least so examples of this type assume, she could have decided otherwise (were it not for White). Her decision to act *and* the possible intervention by White are jointly causally sufficient for her acting as she does, but if White were to intervene Susan would no longer be morally responsible (as we shall see shortly). Her action is free of compulsion, although she appears to be unable to do otherwise.

In case (6b) Susan would not have installed the wiring incorrectly on her own but, due to White's intervention, she does so. In this case we will not hold Susan morally responsible for the faulty wiring, but instead will hold White responsible. If Susan were to stab someone with a kitchen knife, we would not hold the knife morally responsible for the stabbing. We would hold Susan

responsible, the knife being only an instrument of Susan's. The knife would be causally responsible for the wound (and so would Susan, by a transitivity of causation). So, in case (6b) we will have to rule that White, rather than Susan, is morally responsible for messing up the installation of the wiring. We do not hold Susan responsible, since, although Susan was the instrument of action, the action was brought about in the (morally) relevant way by White. In case (6b) we ought to say that Susan is causally but not morally responsible for the faulty wiring and that White is causally responsible (by transitivity) and morally responsible. The moral agent in the case where White causes Susan to decide, intend, and proceed to act in a particular way is clearly White, not Susan.

In all the cases above in which Susan is not morally responsible for her actions, we recognize her either acting involuntarily or acting as an instrument in the action (and in causing certain results). In either case we do not see her as a moral agent in relation to the action or its consequences. If one is ignorant (concerning the particulars), or strongly coerced or compelled (either to act or to want to act),² one is not responsible for one's actions. In the case of ignorance, one is not the instrument of another, yet one fails to act fully as an agent. Action done in ignorance is a kind of involuntary action. In the case of compulsion – also a form of involuntary action –, one can properly be called an instrument of another, e.g., of one's compelling desires or of the mad scientist or the gunman who compels. Strictly speaking, of course, we want to say that a gunman never *compels* since when one is confronted by a gunman either one is compelled by one's fear or another internal state, or one is strongly coerced by the gunman, i.e., the gunman offers normally unacceptable alternatives to doing as the gunman says. Coercion does not make the agent unable to do otherwise, although in most cases strong coercion becomes increasingly hard to distinguish from compulsion.

What is the case when one is morally responsible for one's actions? We have used the example of Susan, an electrician who installs faulty wiring, to make clear a simple analysis of the relation between certain types of action and moral responsibility. We have aimed to show what conditions are necessary for the possibility of moral responsibility. Our conclusions may be described as follows:

Premise 2. If it is possible for *A* to be morally responsible for (at least some of) *A*'s actions, then *A* is capable of

2 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b30-1111b5, where that which makes an action involuntary, and thus makes the agent not morally responsible, is ignorance or force.

- a. intentional action;
 - b. making evaluative judgments concerning the actions she might take and of carrying out or failing to carry out those judgments;
- and
- c. acting freely, which may be understood in terms of at least the following: acting without compulsion or strong coercion, or acting voluntarily, or believing that one has an alternative action open to one.

Having established these necessary conditions of moral responsibility, we are ready to turn to a brief discussion of weakness of will. First, what is weakness of will? Weakness of will (WW) is generally believed to have three conditions which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a particular act to be an instance of WW.³ There is wide agreement that a weak-willed action is an intentional action and that it is contrary to one's better, or preferred,⁴ judgment. The third condition is variously described as: that an act is uncompelled,⁵ voluntary,⁶ or free,⁷ or that one believes one has an alternative open to one.⁸ If agents are capable of engaging in actions that fulfill these conditions, then WW is possible for an agent.

Conditions for weakness of will are described by the following: Robert Audi, in "Weakness of Will and Rational Action," defines WW as follows: "... we may take incontinent actions to be *uncompelled actions against one's better judgment*" (1993, 321). Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, in "Akrasia and Conflict," says, "The akratic agent voluntarily acts against his preferred judgment" (1988, 255). Donald Davidson, in "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?," says, "In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does *x* intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*" (1980, 22). Finally, Alfred R. Mele, in *Irrationality: An Essay on Akrasia, Self-*

3 These three conditions are found in most discussions of weakness of will. They are set forth with particular clarity by Donald Davidson in "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in his *Essays on Actions and Events* and by Alfred R. Mele in *Irrationality: An Essay on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Self-Control*.

4 Amelie Rorty

5 Robert Audi

6 Amelie Rorty

7 Alfred R. Mele.

8 Donald Davidson. Davidson adds in a footnote that WW is understood to be free, implying that his condition of believing one has an alternative open to one captures what is essential in the idea of free action.

Deception, and Self-Control, gives the following definition of WW, “Standardly conceived, akratic or incontinent action is *free, intentional* action contrary to the agent’s *better judgment*” (1987, 4).

As we can see from the necessary conditions for moral responsibility described above, these conditions, or conditions very much like them, are a part of human moral agency. We can state our conclusions concerning agency as follows:

If *A* is an agent, *A* is able (1) to act intentionally, (2) to evaluate or judge her possible actions and act in accordance with her positive evaluations or better judgments, and (3) to act (a) without compulsion, (b) voluntarily (in a way that is free of relevant ignorance or force⁹), (c) believing she has an alternative action open to her, or (d) freely.¹⁰

As a quick comparison shows, these necessary conditions for agency are essentially equivalent to the sufficient conditions for weakness of will described above. It seems apparent from this equivalence that since agency implies the possibility of moral responsibility, the possibility of moral responsibility implies the conditions listed above, and the conditions listed above imply the possibility of weakness of will, then agency implies the possibility of weakness of will.

References

- Aristotle. 1980. *Nicomachean ethics*, rev. ed. World’s Classics. Translated by W. D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Audi, Robert. 1993. Weakness of will and rational action. In *Action, intention, and reason*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Danto, Arthur. 1965. Basic actions. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 pp. 141-148.

- 9 These are Aristotle’s two criteria for voluntary action. The force criterion could be included under compulsion. I separate it for two reasons: historically voluntary action has been defined in terms of ignorance and force, following Aristotle; and force can include strong coercion, which cannot be strictly categorized under compulsion.
- 10 We can conclude this since if *A* is an agent, *A* is morally responsible for at least some of her actions; and if *A* is morally responsible for at least some of her actions, *A* is capable of intentional action, judgments concerning what is the right thing to do, and acting ‘freely’ (defined as encompassing at least one of (a-c)).

- Davidson, Donald. 1980. How is weakness of the will possible? In *Essays on actions and events*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1986a. Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility. In *Moral responsibility*, ed. John Martin Fischer, 143-152. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mele, Alfred R. 1987. *Irrationality: An essay on akrasia, self-deception, and self-control*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rorty, Amelie Oksenberg. 1988. Akrasia and conflict. *Mind in action: Essays in the philosophy of mind*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. 1986. Ability and responsibility. In *Moral Responsibility*, ed. John-Martin Fischer, 153-173. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.