

Weakness of Will: Holton's View and a Criticism

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by  
Abram Feldman

The Ohio State University  
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Project Advisor: Professor Abraham Roth, Department of Philosophy

Weakness of will is a commonly discussed topic both colloquially and in the world of philosophy. Philosophers of action and of mind have attempted to explain the mechanisms by which weakness of will occurs, and what allows an agent to be deemed weak-willed. However, an important aspect of weakness of will is also the stigma that comes along with the charge. We seek to avoid weakness of will, and look down on those who fall victim to it regularly. The following is a discourse on a variation of the traditional view of weakness of will, that of akrasia, based on claims made by Richard Holton in his work *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*.

The account of weakness of will that will be argued for in this discourse is modeled after Holton's view. The traditional account of weakness of will is as follows: an agent is weak-willed on an occasion if and only if the agent does not do that which she believes is best. The agent thinks she knows what the best course of action to take is, and knowingly acts against it. Holton, on the other hand, argues that the traditional akratic account is flawed. Instead, he argues that an agent displays weakness of will when the agent unreasonably revises a resolution to do some action (Holton, 2009, p. 78). The agent resolves to act in one way, and in an unreasonable or irrational manner breaks the resolution and acts otherwise. The account presented here will build off of Holton's account. I will argue that an agent is weak-willed if he unreasonably revises a resolution or if he believes that an action is best, knows that if he formed a resolution to perform that action then he would follow through, and still does not form the resolution. Individuals are weak-willed if they do not follow through with their resolutions or if they do not make a resolution when they should. This form of weakness of will should be seen as a positive and normative explanation: it is both how people do allocate weakness of will to agents, and how people should allocate it.

The discussion will be outlined in the following way: first, I will explain the philosophical

notion of intentions. Some considerations for why intentions do exist as mental states will be presented, as well as how well they work in philosophy of action. The explanation of intentions will lead to how Holton views intentions and how he describes resolutions as stronger versions of intentions. Next, Holton's explanation of weakness of will based on breaking resolutions will be reviewed, along with how his account may be a more accurate representation than akrasia. Then, the history and previous arguments regarding akrasia as weak-willed action will be explained including other philosophers' views on akrasia. Moving forward from akrasia, a discussion will be presented on the objections to Holton's claim, and on the most powerful objection that I will claim necessitates adjusting the account. The new account will be explicated, and finally, I will entertain numerous objections to the account and respond to those objections.

## I

Intentions are generally understood today in the philosophical literature, though with some disagreement. A general understanding of what intentions are can be explained, by Holton, as a mental state in which an agent has made up his or her mind as to what to do. In order to form an intention to act, an agent must have a belief and a desire. The desire is something the agent wants to achieve, and the belief is a mental state describing the way the world is and what to do in order to achieve something. In this way, an agent desires to do something, and believes doing some action will achieve the desired results. If an agent holds both a belief and a desire, the agent can form an intention to act (Holton, 2009, p. 2).

The intentions that are formed by agents have stability. They persist beyond the time of being formed, and the length of time they remain depends on the intention, the changing facts of the world, and the action itself (Holton, 2009, p. 3). If one intends to pick up her coffee cup, the intention will likely only last momentarily – it will no longer be present once the coffee cup is

lifted. However, if an agent intends to go biking next Friday, then the intention will likely last until the time of biking (or if something comes up to change the agent's mind). The intention itself, according to Holton, can be seen as a mental state of decision. There is no reason to consider the matter of the intention further with the current facts about the world. The agent has made a decision and intends to do something. All further deliberation is ended regarding the intention until the act is committed or until the facts of the world change. Most often, an intention leads to an agent performing some action, and in this way, intentions are controlling.

The key feature of intentions is this stability. Once an intention is formed, an agent will usually perform the action. However, sometimes it is rational to change an intention. When intending to drive a car to the supermarket, it is a good idea to revise this intention when noticing the brake lines in the car have been cut. There needs to be some release from the hold of an intention. When is it permissible to revise an intention, and how does one revise an intention? What information can play a role in this process? If the car seat is a bit uncomfortable, should the intention be revised? If any information allows for the revising of an intention, then intentions do not seem to play any helpful, practical role at all. If this were true, any decision to act can be reconsidered immediately. The intentions should disarm any information that originally played a role in making the intentions – the fact that one only needs a few groceries should not revise the intention if that fact led to the intention being formed in the first place (Holton, 2009, p. 3). As soon as the intention is formed, all the information that went into forming the intention is irrelevant in any kind of reconsideration. All of these concerns regarding revising an intention will later be important in Holton's account of resolutions and weakness of will.

The question remains as to why think intentions exist at all. The most important reason is that they seem practically valuable. When, for example, we are deciding on what restaurant to

dine at some evening, it is very helpful to be able to decide on one, intend on going there for the rest of the day, and then go there when the time comes. It would be unpleasant if all we thought about all day was which restaurant we should go to and continue to deliberate until it is too late to make a decision. Agents have a limited amount of cognitive resources and it is highly impractical to waste those resources on considering and reconsidering decisions constantly (Holton, 2009, p. 5). Further, the whole idea of an intention is to save decisions that are made so that plans can be carried out to fulfill the intention. Perhaps later on there will be no time to make a decision, and it is best to have a decision ready-made for when the time comes to act. Likewise, it is possible that when it comes time to act, the agent knows that he or she will face inclinations to the contrary of acting in a certain way. For example, if one needs to complete yard work on Sunday despite how hot it will be that day, one may make the intention on Friday to do so on Sunday so that the heat does not dissuade the agent from getting the work done. Intentions turn out to be useful mental states in practical reasoning and are therefore helpful philosophical tools to explain action.

The last case of the usefulness of intentions is defeating contrary inclinations in the future. Holton uses this idea to form a different, special kind of intention: resolutions. Resolutions, on this account, are meant to be intentions that are formed when one wants to or believes one should do something, but realizes that there will be temptations in the future that might prevent one from taking the action (Holton, 2009, p. 10). An agent needs to be able to form an intention that will fight specific, contrary inclinations that come up before or at the time of performing the intended action. These intentions need to stand firm in light of future, specific beliefs (but certainly not all beliefs), and will be deemed resolutions.

Exactly what resolutions are other than stronger, contrary inclination defeating intentions is

unclear. Similarly, what makes these resolutions stronger versions of intentions is not spelled out specifically by Holton. If resolutions are strong intentions, where does the strength come from? It is possible that Holton regards resolutions as an intention to  $\Phi$ , and an intention to hold strong to that intention. This conception of resolutions does overcomplicate the account, however for the present purposes it is enough to hold that resolutions are strong, contrary inclination defeating intentions that are used to avoid temptation in the future. Whether resolutions are promises to oneself or second order intentions does not matter as long as the resolutions are aimed at helping an agent follow through with an intention despite future inclinations.

## II

Holton uses the introduction of intentions to bring up an important question that was left out. Once an agent forms an intention, how is it implemented? It seems clear that when one discusses a topic such as weakness of will, a critical step must be how intentions are carried out. There is something about failing to carry out some act that one wants to commit that leads to weakness of will.

One pre-theoretical and common view on weakness of will is that one intentionally chooses the worse course of action despite knowing that it is the worse course and despite having the ability to choose the better one. This account of weakness of will seems pretty pervasive in society. If an agent knows that eating a salad is a better course of action than eating ribs, and is able to choose to eat the salad instead of the ribs, but still eats the ribs, then many observers would call this agent weak-willed. She knew the best action to take and deliberately chose otherwise despite having the ability to act differently. There is something going wrong with the creation or the implementation of an intention to eat the salad, and it seems to be called weakness of will.

On the other hand, there is another seemingly common view on weakness of will that Holton claims is more widely used. The general notion is that a weak-willed individual is too easily distracted or removed from a certain path of action (Holton, 2009, p. 70). More precisely, an action is weak-willed if an agent reconsiders an intention too easily. To revisit the previous example, if an agent intends to eat the salad, regardless of what she thinks is the best course of action, but changes her mind too easily and eats the ribs, she is being weak-willed. This, too, seems like an appropriate time to claim she fell victim to weakness of will.

As to which version of weakness of will is a more accurate representation of the phenomenon is still up for debate. The first view, often called *akrasia*, depends only on what course of action is reported to be best and what the agent does. The second view, much more closely related to Holton's view, depends on what the agent does and the intentions of the agent. Much has been written in the philosophical literature about *akrasia*, but Holton's view stemming from intentions is the focus of this discussion.

The earlier explanation on intentions outlines how intentions are action-guiding states that are not readily revised which are essential for practical decision making. On this description, intentions that are too easily revised are worthless – they do not serve the purpose of holding one to a certain action – and intentions that are not revised easily enough are dangerous – agents must be able to adjust their actions based on the changing facts of the world. If we are too sensitive to unimportant information or too unresponsive to important information, the practical purposes of intentions are undermined. Holton seems to say that if one is under-responsive, one is senselessly stubborn, and if one is over-responsive, one is weak-willed (Holton, 2009, p. 79). Based on this evaluation of intentions, in order to understand Holton's account of weakness of will, over-responsiveness must be defined.

Obviously, breaking an intention at all is not necessarily being too responsive. If one intends to go to an amusement park on Friday, and on Thursday it burns to the ground in a freak thunderstorm, it would be completely understandable to cancel the plans to go - certainly not weak-willed. A possible thought here to avoid any needless dwelling on what is over-responsive is to use conditional intentions (Holton, 2009, p. 73). If every intention an agent forms is conditional, then any time the conditional obtains, the action will be committed, but otherwise, it will not. For example, if an agent intends to go to the amusement park on Friday as long as it does not burn down on Thursday, there is no apparent need to worry about breaking the intention too readily. Any reason to break the intention besides the reasons explained in the conditional would be acting over-responsively. However, all of the possible, sensible reasons to break the intention cannot by any means be included in a given intention. What if the amusement park burns down on Wednesday? What if it is closed due to rain? What if the agent forgot about several projects he had to complete? Any intention will not include all of the necessary breaks. Furthermore, it is unlikely that agents psychologically form intentions with these types of “outs.” When one forms an intention, one likely does not think of all the different reasons to break it. Instead, one forms plans to complete the intention, but remains responsive to certain changing facts and ignores others. It is clear that conditional intentions will not be enough to allow for the determination of being over-responsive.

Holton's method of dealing with how to define over-responsiveness or too readily revising intentions is by appealing to Bratman's account (Holton, 2009, p. 75). Bratman claims that it is not rational to alter an intention when the reconsideration “exhibits tendencies that it is not reasonable for the agent to have” (Bratman, 1987, p.68). This view, at first glance, is too vague. What is a reasonable tendency to have? There are many different tendencies under which it is



reasonable to reconsider an intention such as when the information available changes, when suffering will ensue, if the intention can no longer be completed, and many more. How can we know all the tendencies that are reasonable for an agent to have? Holton says that the account of unreasonably revising an intention needs to be as vague as the term “weakness of will” is (Holton, 2009, p. 76). However, with this vagueness, it will be difficult to know exactly when an agent can be called weak-willed. At the same time, this vagueness allows for more fluid judgments of weakness of will, and might allow different observers to delineate weak-willed actions differently.

One possible way of determining which tendencies specifically are reasonable to have is to claim that if it is reasonable to reconsider the intention generally, then it is reasonable to reconsider on this occasion (Holton, 2009, p. 76). In this way, the tendencies do not matter and only the intentions themselves determine whether or not they can be reconsidered. This, though, runs into serious problems. For example, suppose one, with no training, constructs a tightrope between two buildings and plans to walk across it. As the agent reaches the edge of the tightrope to begin walking, she reconsiders her intention to walk across because she wants to do some experiments with the rope to see if it can support her weight. This is certainly a rational reconsideration. Conversely, if she reaches the edge of the tightrope and reconsiders her intention due to sudden fear and anxiety, this is likely not a rational reconsideration because it is an unreasonable tendency to have. It is not the intention itself that determines if the reconsideration is rational, but rather it is the tendency behind it. Clearly, the tendencies behind a particular reconsideration determine whether it is a rational reconsideration based on if the tendency is reasonable to have.

In order to fully describe his account, Holton continues by addressing other issues that arise

with weakness of will in hopes to figure out what tendencies are reasonable to have. A helpful thought that Holton has is the distinction between weakness of will and capriciousness (Holton, 2009, p. 76). It is allowable, it appears, for an individual to be unsettled in regards to where to eat dinner one night or a similar small decision. To intend to go to one restaurant and then to reconsider over and over cannot be deemed weakness of will. Individuals who are common offenders of this sort of intention-breaking cannot have that kind of stigma placed on them. This is where the differentiation between weakness of will and capriciousness comes into play. Any intention that is broken due to unreasonable tendencies will be termed capriciousness, while any resolution broken due to unreasonable tendencies will be termed weakness of will. In this way, weak-willed agents are only the ones that break the strongest of intentions, and those who cannot stick with small, simple decisions will only be afflicted with being overly capricious. Though there will not always be a plain difference between these two charges, the contrary inclination defeating nature of resolutions should make it much easier to ascertain which agent is guilty of which accusation.

Now there is some progress on Holton's account – we are not talking about intentions, but instead resolutions. Even further, consider the following scenario: Jim is a man who is spending a lot of time with his wife lately, and is falling behind on his work. He has a realization that he is dedicated to too many things. Jim thinks he has too many resolutions and because of it feels too busy. He decides that he will randomly choose certain resolutions, and immediately abandon them. Is he being weak-willed? The idea here is that Jim should not be called weak-willed when the reason he revises his resolutions is due to something irrelevant to the resolutions themselves. Weakness of will can only be when the tendency causing the reconsideration is unreasonable for the very resolution it is reconsidering (Holton, 2009, p. 78). When randomly choosing and

abandoning resolutions, this cannot be unreasonable for the resolutions that are abandoned. Maybe Jim will be weak-willed by breaking a resolution he has to stick by all of his resolutions, if he is a very resolute person, but he is not being weak-willed in regards to breaking his resolution to exercise three times every week. This makes the definition of weakness of will as an unreasonable revision of a resolution in response to the pressure of the contrary inclinations that the resolution is meant to defeat. Tendencies that are unreasonable to have must be the ones that are based on the inclinations a resolution is meant to defeat.

There is one problem that Holton's final account of weakness of will should deal with before use. How can it be known whether or not a reconsideration is due specifically to the inclinations the resolution is meant to defeat? Any causal explanation will not work because there can be many strange causal chains from an inclination to the reconsideration without, intuitively, the inclinations being the reason for the reconsideration (Holton, 2009, p. 76). Holton claims that the account can be understood well enough to be used without answering this question, though it is not clear that this account is viable without an explanation to how one knows that the inclination causes the reconsideration. Perhaps, as with the vagueness of "reasonable tendencies," a subjectivity in whether or not the contrary inclinations defeat the resolution will allow for normal disagreements in discerning who is being weak-willed.

### III

Now that Holton's account of weakness of will has been explained, it is necessary to quickly address the opposing view of weakness of will, and the discussion and disagreement that surrounds it. The classical account of weakness of will is *akrasia*, and an agent is weak-willed on this account when she does what she does not judge best to do. On first thought, this view seems very accurate to what society calls weakness of will. For example, a smoker might know that it

would be best if he did not smoke, and yet he continues to do so. One might call this smoker weak-willed for not stopping even though he knows it is best to stop. The addiction forces him to continue, and he is said to be weak because of it.

Other examples, though, do not fit as well with akrasia. If Harris decides it would be best to go bike riding on Friday regardless of the weather, but then Friday comes and it is raining outside so he does not go, he, too, can be called weak-willed through akrasia. He does not do what he judges to be best. However, this is where philosophers begin to disagree. If Harris decided not to go bike riding because it was raining, then he did not judge bike riding as the best course of action to take. Instead, the best thing to do was to not go bike riding. Therefore, Harris is not being akratic and not being weak-willed. For R. M. Hare, this form of weakness of will is impossible: akrasia does not occur (Hare, 1952, p. 169). That which an agent does determines that which the agent judges as best. It is impossible, on this view, for one to judge action A as best and to perform action B. If one continues to smoke and fall victim to the addiction, then one judges the continuation of smoking as the best course of action given the circumstances.

Obviously this agent does not believe that smoking is what is best for her health, that it is best for her breath, or that it is best for her psychological well-being. But overall, if she continues to smoke, she believes smoking is the best action to take. On this view, there is no way to call someone weak-willed based on akrasia.

Davidson replies to this position by drawing a distinction between an “all things considered” judgment, and an “all-out” judgment (Davidson, 1970, p. 41). Davidson claims that any piece of evidence *r* may tell an agent that action A is better than B. This one dimensional preference is in no way binding, instead it is only a single way in which A is considered better than B. There are many different ways to compare two actions, and all of the individual

preferences can be added up. For example, smoking may be considered better than not smoking because it helps keep one's weight lower and eases one's anxiety, but not smoking may be considered better than smoking because it is cheaper and better for one's health. If all of the preferences are added up, one can come up with an "all things considered preference" for one action rather than another. All things considered, an agent judges A as preferable to B. This, though, is still not an all-out belief regarding the two actions, it is only in light of all the available evidence collected so far. One can still choose to do B despite, all things considered, A is preferable. Due to the judgments being relational, one does not form an all-out belief, only that *prima facie*, in all these ways considered, A is better than B. It is still irrational to do B when A is judged to be better, claims Davidson, because the evidence supports action A. But, it is not impossible to do so, though it is impossible to all-out believe that A is better than B and perform action B (Davidson, 1970, p. 42). Agents will always perform the action that they all-out believe to be best. When discussing akrasia, agents are working in practical rationality and adding up evidence, not necessarily coming to an all-out conclusion. On this view, akrasia survives Hare's attack, and akrasia is a form of irrationality upon which weakness of will is defined.

#### IV

Weakness of will defined as akrasia does not feel quite accurate, and in this section I will present several problems with the akratic account that Holton's view seems to get right. Consider the following: Sarah considers herself a fairly healthy person, but knows that she has a sweet tooth. She always thinks to herself that it would really be best for her, all things considered, to stop eating all cakes and cookies. She is handed a piece of cake at a birthday party, and knowing that it would be best to not eat the cake, she has some anyway. While enjoying her dessert, she is asked by a friend why she decided to eat the cake, and to that she responds that she does not

know. Should Sarah be considered weak-willed? I would like to say no – she never decided not to eat the cake, she just thought it would be best for her not to. Yes, she is being irrational or inconsistent by going against her best judgment, but she is not weak-willed – she has not willed to do anything!

Similarly, with the smoking example, if an agent judges it best not to smoke, but decides to continue smoking because she wants to, then she certainly is not being weak-willed. This agent is being inconsistent in light of her actions not matching up with her judgments, but she is not weak-willed until she *decides* to stop and does not follow through. The judgment alone is not enough to cause someone to be weak-willed: a decision has to be made.

Not every example of weakness of will can be explained by akrasia, but every example of akrasia that does explain weakness of will can also be explained by Holton's account. In the biking example, Harris was akratic because he judged it best to go biking while he still did not go because it was raining. Similarly, Harris made the decision (or a resolution) to go biking even if it is raining, and revises his resolution for the very inclinations it was meant to defeat. Harris is weak-willed on both the akrasia account and Holton's account.

The feeling, alone, that akrasia misses the mark is not enough to dismiss the account. There are several other problems on which the account fails. Firstly, akrasia has problems dealing with indifference (Holton, 2009, p. 79). Gabe wants to go buy some cereal, and needs to decide between Loopy O's and Sugar Crunch. The cereals are of very similar quality, and neither seems much better than the other. Gabe has no preference whatsoever between the two. However, he will be in a big hurry when he gets to the supermarket, so he must decide now and be sure of his choice. He chooses to buy Sugar Crunch, and is so sure of his choice (he really does not want to waste a moment) that he resolves to buy Sugar Crunch even if he sees Loopy O's first. All day

before going to the supermarket he is very confident that he will get Sugar Crunch, but when he does finally get there and sees Loopy O's first, he revises his resolution and buys the Loopy O's. He concludes he may as well abandon his resolution. In this case, Gabe is weak-willed but not akratic. He made no judgment as to what is best, but resolved to buy the Sugar Crunch and did not follow through due to the inclinations he was trying to avoid. If one of his friends knew the situation and what Gabe planned but failed to do, the friend would call Gabe weak-willed.

Holton also describes oscillating weakness of will as a reason to abandon the akrasia view (Holton, 2009, p. 80). His example is from Thomas Schelling and involves a young boy who wants to be an explorer who will have to deal with terribly cold environments (Schelling, 1980, p.59). In order to prepare himself, every night the boy resolves to sleep without a blanket so that he can be cold as he sleeps. However, in the middle of the night, the boy feels the cold that he thought he wanted, ineffectively reaches for a blanket, and resolves to wear the blanket the following night even if he wants to be cold to prepare for the arctic weather. This cycle repeats itself over and over. Intuitively, one would likely call the boy weak-willed on both occasions: when he does not wear a blanket even though he resolved to wear it earlier, and when he resolves to wear the blanket the next night when he resolved that he would not. It is easy for Holton's account to accommodate this situation because the boy is breaking resolutions because of the inclinations they were meant to defeat: being cold and being comfortable, respectively. Akrasia, Holton claims, can only account for one of the occurrences of weakness of will. Either, the boy judges it best to leave the blanket on or to leave it off. If he judges it best to leave it on, he is being weak-willed only when he leaves it off at bedtime and not when he reaches for it at night, and if he judges it best to leave it off, he is being weak-willed reaching for it in the middle of the night and not when he leaves it off going to bed. Those who believe akrasia is the correct

account could try to save their view by arguing the boy is not weak-willed when he goes to bed, because he is in the right state of mind (whatever that is meant to mean) while his judgment is flawed in the middle of the night. However, this requires much further explanation to the traditional akratic account and until then, akrasia is not equivalent to weakness of will in this case.

There are many further examples of weakness of will without akrasia, according to Holton. The perfect recipe for this to occur is when an agent resolves to do something that he judges as not the best thing to do (Holton, 2009, p. 84). Once this resolution is formed for the worse action, when the resolution is broken in an unreasonable way, then the agent will not be akratic but will be considered weak-willed. The agent will do that action that he considers best, but will also be unreasonably revising a resolution. One example of this is Holton's adaptation of a story by Godden (Godden, 1975). Essentially, a man has devoted his life to art, but he ends up getting married and having a child. He resolves to always protect the child despite art still being the best thing to pursue. When he is confronted with the choice of giving up art and protecting the child or giving up the child and being free to pursue his artistic dreams, he chooses the art. Though he is not falling victim to akrasia, he is still being weak-willed.

The strongest argument against akrasia as being weakness of will is how the stigma of weakness of will is allocated (Holton, 2009, p. 82). Holton uses this argument to illustrate that the decision in any action is most important for determining weakness of will, not the judgment. The example that is presented is that of a man who judges it is best to not eat meat any longer. Though he has this belief, he still can be found eating meat consistently. When asked why he does this he says that he is "inconsistent." This man does not appear to be weak-willed. However, if this man judges that it is best to stop eating meat, and resolves that starting on



January 1st, he will stop, then on January 2nd if he is eating meat he *does* seem to be weak-willed. What is going on here? Even if he makes the resolution on December 1st to stop eating meat on January 1st, and all throughout the month of December he knows it is best to stop eating meat but he continues, he is not weak-willed. As soon as January 1st comes, though, he is weak-willed when he eats meat. There is something going on with making the decision to take some action that causes the change for weakness of will. The judgment that one action is better than another is not enough to cause an agent to be worthy of the stigma. The stigma can only be charged to an agent when the agent made some resolution and falls short. Holton says that the stigma of weakness of will illustrates that akrasia is not weakness of will while his account can explain the phenomenon precisely.

## V

The akrasia account falls short of accurately describing weakness of will, while Holton's account appears to approximate our intuitions about when one is weak-willed. The Holton account is far from perfect, though. In this section I will describe several objections to the Holton account, and will end with an objection that, as I will explain, requires a response that Holton does not provide.

The first objection that Holton entertains is the charge that perhaps this description of weakness of will is too strict (Holton, 2009, p. 86). It may miss cases of weakness of will and those cases might be cases in which akrasia does hold. There should be no problem in claiming that weakness of will is akrasia and is also how Holton describes it. Could this not be the case? Holton merely cites his previous examples to explain how akrasia gives no help to weakness of will. However, as I will discuss later on, this will turn out to be a form of the most damaging objection to Holton's account: there are occasions where an agent is weak-willed but is not

unreasonably revising a resolution. Holton even refers to the problem in this section without ever addressing it, speaking of agents who are socially weak-willed. He says, in regards to weak-willed people in social interactions being unable to form resolutions in the first place, “perhaps they are so weak-willed that they never think to form them.” Holton seems to be implying that not forming a resolution in itself might be weak-willed, but his account as described cannot accommodate this reality. This is where the adjusted account will come into play.

Another objection to the Holton account is that it cannot deal with disagreements among people in determining what is weakness of will and what is not (Holton, 2009, p. 89). Akrasia has no trouble doing this. Since one is being weak-willed if one acts against what one judges to be best, then depending on what an observer thinks that the individual judges to be best, one may or may not be called weak-willed. One observer may think the agent thought it would be best to do A, while another observer may think the agent thought it would be best to do B, so when the agent does A, the observers disagree about the agent's weakness of will status. Holton insists that his account can allow for disagreements, as well. Observers could disagree on whether or not the revision to the resolution that the agent made was due to the contrary inclinations it was meant to defeat or not. Similarly, observers could disagree if the revision made to the resolution was one that is reasonable or not even if it was due to the contrary inclinations. This leaves room for plenty of disagreement.

Policy resolutions, also, can give Holton's account trouble (Holton, 2009, p. 91). Suppose Nancy has the judgment that it is always best to do her errands before eating lunch. One day, she decides to go against her best judgment and eat lunch first. This is considered akrasia and would be weakness of will on that account. However, for Holton, if she made the resolution to always do errands before eating lunch, she does not seem to break the resolution, she just is not

following it on this occasion and is not weak-willed. Holton's response to this objection is that Nancy, in fact, is breaking her resolution. She revises it to be that she will always do her errands before eating lunch *except today*. If her resolution was meant to defeat feeling hungry and she eats lunch first on this day due to hunger, then she is being unreasonable in revising her resolution. She would be weak-willed. Breaking policy resolutions one time is essentially revising the resolution.

Jamie Swann also objects to Holton's account of weakness of will and argues that it is unnecessary if one redefines akrasia into not doing what one judges best because one judges it to be best (Swann, unpublished). This, it is argued, allows for there to be no weakness of will without akrasia, and avoids the need for Holton's conception. On this view, an agent could do that which she judges best, but if it is due to an unreasonable revision of a resolution, she will not do it *because* she judges it best. She will revise her resolution because her nerve fails, because she gets scared, or she will not be able to explain it at all. Any unreasonable revision of a resolution will never be judged as the best thing to do, so this account strengthens an akrasia based weakness of will. Holton's response to this criticism is that the adjusted akrasia account still does not accommodate many cases of weakness of will. The reason resolutions are often made is because desires or beliefs may change at the time of action, and resolutions stick agents to their paths. Bob might make the resolution not to do stupid things while drinking, for fear that when he drinks he might hurt himself. He may feel he is able to curtail this behavior by having a resolution in place. Once he is inebriated, Bob's opinions on what is best to do have changed: he judges it best to do something stupid. Bob performs this stupid action, and does it because he thinks it is what is best to do. On the adjusted akrasia account, Bob is not weak-willed, but it intuitively seems that he is weak-willed in deciding not to do stupid things and yet still doing

them. Holton's account handles Bob well, while Swann's account still does not.

The final objection, and the most damaging, stems from the first objection discussed. The charge against Holton is that his account is too weak and does not cover all weak-willed actions. The objection comes from Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim*, and is an example of an agent, Jim, who is too afraid of breaking a resolution to even form one in the first place (Amis, 1956). Jim burns clothes that were lent to him by his superior in academia, and knows that his superior will fire him if he does not confess to what he has done. However, Jim also knows that if he makes the resolution to confess, he will not follow through with it. Jim knows that it would be best to confess, but cannot, and knows that even if he resolved to, he would not. Jim is being weak-willed. The akrasia account easily handles this case: Jim judges it best to confess and he does not do so. Holton's account, conversely, does not appear to deal with Jim appropriately. Jim makes no resolution, and therefore Jim cannot be called weak-willed.

The response Holton gives to this criticism is wholly unsatisfying. What Holton wonders is why Jim does not make the resolution in the first place. He is afraid that if he makes the resolution, he still would not be able to follow through. To Jim, making a resolution is worthless because it only leads to his unreasonable revision of a resolution that was made in order to defeat his fear. He knows his fear will overcome him and his resolution will be revised. Holton claims that Jim's fear of weakness of will is what prevents his resolution from being formed (Holton, 2009, p. 88). He says that Jim is someone that tends to be weak-willed and this is why he does not form the resolution. Holton states, "So, on the account given here, his weakness of will explains his action (or rather his inaction). It seems to me that is good enough." Jim's action can be explained by Holton's account of weakness of will, though his action does not show that he is weak-willed. His action gives the observer insight as to Jim's personality, but the action is not a

weak-willed one.

Holton's response is a squirming attempt to dodge the criticism, but his account will not survive this objection without adjustment. There are two major problems with Holton's reply. Firstly, Jim is not necessarily a weak-willed person, he is only being weak-willed on this occasion. It is unfair to rely on Jim's chronic weakness of will to explain this occurrence, because if this is a viable option, any example of weakness of will can be explained by the weak-willed agent. It is possible that anyone in Jim's position would act the way he did, weak-willed or not. It seems as though Jim *should have* formed a resolution, but failed to do so. The action he should have taken would do no harm and could only have helped him. It is in Jim's best interest, and yet he neglects to form the resolution. Jim's tendency towards weakness of will is not enough to explain this action.

Secondly, even given that Jim has been weak-willed in the past, he cannot be called weak-willed here on Holton's view. No matter how Jim would have acted had he made a resolution, he did not make a resolution and cannot be called weak-willed. Because Jim never made a decision, he does not deserve to have the stigma allocated to him, according to Holton's own view. Further, it is Jim's fear of the stigma of weakness of will that prevents him from forming a resolution, not weakness of will itself. His weak-willed nature does not even prevent him from forming a resolution, it would only cause him to fail at following through. It is possible that Jim only thinks he has been weak-willed in the past, but he is wrong. In fact, Jim has never been weak-willed. Holton cannot claim that his weak-willed personality causes the inaction nor can he say that the action itself is weak-willed. The irrational fear of weakness of will alone prevents him from forming the resolution.

Holton's account clearly needs something to help deal with this case. This type of case can

arise all of the time: anytime one should form a resolution but does not due to any reason. Not making resolutions when it appears that one should seems like weakness of will. To make this point stronger, I will grant Holton the case of Jim Dixon and say that his previous weakness of will explains his current action (even to the point of making it weak-willed itself). The question is, can there be a case in which an agent has a belief and a desire sufficient to form a resolution, and thinks that if the resolution is formed, the agent will follow through with the resolution, yet still does not form the resolution in the first place? This would be a far more problematic case for Holton's account and likely a case that could not be dismissed. This would be a case in which the agent would be considered weak-willed (like Jim), however there is no resolution formed that can be unreasonably revised, and there is no fear of weakness of will preventing the agent from forming the resolution. If this is the case, Holton cannot claim that the agent is being weak-willed on his account, and his view will require revision.

At this point I will turn back to the case of the meat eater. Marissa often eats meat, but has recently realized that it would be best to stop eating meat and to become a vegetarian. She has a belief - "it would be best if I stop eating meat and if I do stop, I will be a vegetarian" - and a desire - "I would like to stop eating meat and be a vegetarian." Marissa also believes, "If I set out to be a vegetarian, I know I will follow through with it." She believes this because she is the type of person that almost always follows through with her resolutions. Marissa wants to be a vegetarian, thinks it is best for her to be a vegetarian, and knows that if she sets out to be one, she will become one. Yet, she does not do it. The reasons Marissa gives for not forming the resolution vary; she says that she is inconsistent, lazy, and indifferent towards making a resolution. Is Marissa being weak-willed by not taking any action in regards to her beliefs and desires? It certainly appears so. There seems to be nothing stopping her from forming the

resolution and becoming a vegetarian, and she still does not do it. She almost seems as weak-willed as the agent who claims that he will stop eating meat on January 1st but still continues to do so.

Holton has two possible responses to this example. One possible response is to bite the bullet and accept the consequences of his account. Marissa is not weak-willed because she does not form a resolution, and her action cannot be explained by her fear of being weak-willed. She does not deserve the stigma of weakness of will. Though this response allows Holton's view to remain as it stands, it makes his account much weaker. There are a whole class of actions that would commonly be called weak-willed and Holton must insist that they are not. This basically undermines much of what Holton is trying to do in forming a positivist account of weakness of will in which he attempts to mirror how observers actually do charge agents with being weak-willed. Furthermore, this only lends more credit to the akrasia account due to akrasia easily explaining Marissa's inaction as weakness of will. This does not seem like a good response for Holton to make.

The other response Holton can make is that Marissa is in fact being weak-willed. The resolution she is breaking is her resolution to make resolutions when they are needed. Marissa is confronted with a situation in which she should have made a resolution, she unreasonably revised her resolution to make resolutions, and is therefore weak-willed. Her resolution to make resolutions, which must be an overarching, life-long resolution, might be something like she is resolving to form a resolution when in a situation in which she knows what action is best to take, she wants to complete that action, and she knows that if she made a resolution to complete that action, she would follow through. This resolution would also have to defeat the contrary inclinations of feeling indifferent or inconsistent. In this way, Marissa unreasonably revised her

resolution to form resolutions, and on Holton's account, is weak-willed. A response like this one, however, does not seem to be in the spirit of Holton's account. Holton says that Jim does not break any resolution when he fails to form one to confess, and so it seems as if Holton does not believe in this type of life-long, implied resolution. Without those underlying resolutions, Holton will only be able to bite the bullet in Marissa's situation.

## VI

Instead of trying to skirt this example, it would be best for Holton to accept that there is a problem with his account, and adjust accordingly. I propose that weakness of will is not only when an agent unreasonably revises a resolution, but also when an agent unreasonably fails to form a resolution. To put this into Holton's terminology, it is weak-willed to fail to form a resolution due to a tendency that it is unreasonable to have. This allows for a similar definition as Holton's original conception of weakness of will. The same constraints will be used on formed resolutions as on unformed resolutions: if a formed resolution is abandoned or if a resolution is not formed due to a tendency it is unreasonable to have, then the agent is being weak-willed.

The tendencies that are unreasonable to have in revising a resolution have already been discussed, but the question remains as to what tendencies are unreasonable to have in not forming a resolution. When an agent deems it best to  $\Phi$ , has a belief and a desire sufficient to form a resolution to  $\Phi$ , and believes that if the agent made a resolution to  $\Phi$ , the agent would follow through, it is unreasonable to not form a resolution. Any tendency that prevents a resolution from being made in this case is unreasonable.

I will quickly return to the case of Marissa. She believes it is best to be a vegetarian. She has a belief and a desire sufficient to form a resolution to stop eating meat. She believes that if she forms the resolution to stop eating meat, she really will stop. Therefore, any tendency that



leads her to not forming the resolution, be it laziness, inconsistency, or anything else, will be an unreasonable tendency to have and she will be charged with being weak-willed.

## VII

My view on weakness of will has now been established. Unreasonably revising a resolution or unreasonably failing to form one are both weak-willed actions. In this section, I will entertain some criticisms of my view and respond to those criticisms.

Some, specifically from Holton's school of thought, will argue that the example of Marissa described earlier is not a realistic situation. The description is illegitimate and therefore, Holton's model does not have to be changed. If an agent deems an action best to do, and has a belief and a desire sufficient for forming a resolution, then the agent will either form the resolution and follow through, or the agent in fact believes that if a resolution is formed, it will be revised unreasonably. This puts the example in the same place that Jim was in. Either Jim will make the resolution and will follow through with it, or Jim is afraid that if he makes the resolution, he will be weak-willed, and so weakness of will (on Holton's account) explains his action. In essence, this criticism is general skepticism regarding my example.

There is no response to this objection other than a foot stamp and an insistent glare. It seems utterly obvious that situations like these come up all of the time. Perhaps a more poignant example would be of Ted during tax time: Ted wants to get started on his taxes very badly. He believes that doing his taxes now, ahead of time, would be best. Ted also thinks that if he only made a resolution to sit down and do his taxes, he certainly would. Every time in the past that Ted made the resolution to do his taxes, he has followed through. Yet, Ted, knowing all of these facts very well, finds himself seated and watching television. He makes no plans to get started on his taxes or even move from his seat. He has no reason to continue watching television, and

continues to feel guilty knowing that he should do his taxes and if he decided to he would. It really seems that situations like these arise often and that Ted is being weak-willed. How to prove that these situations really do exist relies solely on our intuition. Even though no one like Ted “comes to mind” for Holton, I insist that these circumstances are not very rare (Holton, 2009, p. 88).

Holton supporters could also argue that this example does, in fact, occur, but it is not weakness of will. Something is going on in these examples, but whatever it is, it is not weak-willed action. Weak-willed action is only unreasonably revising a resolution. Further, unreasonably revising a resolution is so different and distinct from failing to form a resolution that the two cannot be considered the same phenomenon. This other intuitive charge that one might want to give to Ted or Marissa is not weakness of will, it is something else that is being confused and confounded with weakness of will.

*Prima facie*, this idea seems plainly false. However, to soothe the minds of strong Holton supporters, I can call this phenomenon shmeakness of shmilla. Shmeakness of shmilla should not be confused with weakness of will, and occurs when an agent unreasonably fails to form a resolution when the agent should. The common notion of weakness of will and the akratic notion of weakness of will both encompass shmeakness of shmilla, and would charge that someone who displays shmeak-shmilled action is also being weak-willed. Furthermore, even those who support Holton's unadjusted view on weakness of will would agree that a weak-willed person has the tendency to manifest weakness of will and shmeakness of shmilla. I would like to contend that given shmeakness of shmilla and weakness of will are so intimately tied together that it does not make sense to talk about weakness of will without mentioning shmeakness of shmilla. Also, my goal here is to elucidate weakness of will philosophically and to capture its intuitive, stigma-

filled notion in the real world. Making such a small differentiation between weakness of will and shmeakness of shmill, then, is unnecessary, and for the matter of this discussion, will be ignored.

Others may contend that this account is not significantly different from the original akrasia account. On this account, we are appealing to what the agent judges as best to do to determine weakness of will. The agent judges it best to  $\Phi$  and yet does not form a resolution to  $\Phi$ . Using a more lenient form of akrasia, is this agent not just being akratic? However, this is a stretch from forming the resolution to  $\Phi$  to actually  $\Phi$ ing. To make this argument stronger, I will assume that many people from Holton's camp and in the akrasia camp are willing to grant that not forming the resolution to  $\Phi$  is as weak-willed as not  $\Phi$ ing outright on the akrasia account. If this adjusted version of Holton's weakness of will is not very different from the akrasia view, it might just be easiest, as Amelie Rorty might support, to simply add akrasia to Holton's account (Rorty, 1980).

Holton himself tries to avoid this argument earlier, and uses the reply that akrasia obtains numerous unintuitive examples of weakness of will, whereas his account meshes well with how individuals allocate the stigma. However, in this case the problem is not with Holton's account, but moreover it is with using what the agent judges as best in an explanation of weakness of will without appealing to akrasia. The key response here is that not only is the agent not doing what he judges best, but the agent thinks that he would follow through with a resolution if he were to make one. Akrasia is not enough to define someone as weak-willed in the cases where a resolution is not formed. Holton has described numerous cases of agents who display akrasia but not weakness of will, and the same cases apply when a resolution is not formed while the agent is akratic. What is important here is that the agent believes that if she made a resolution, then she would follow through with it. Otherwise, not doing what she judges best is just being inconsistent with her beliefs, not being weak-willed.

The last criticism I will discuss is a possible response by Holton to eliminate the danger of the first example of Marissa that seems to force him into a corner. Marissa's example is meant to illustrate that an agent can fail to form a resolution and still be weak-willed. Holton's account does not accommodate this possibility unless the agent believes that she will not act on the resolution even if she makes one. This is the justification that I have used for adjusting Holton's version of weakness of will. However, it is possible for Holton to have a reply to the counterexample that may save his project. Holton might say that what is needed in this account of weakness of will is not an addition to what qualifies a person as weak-willed, but instead we must suppose that individuals may have a resolution to form resolutions when they should. If Holton is under the impression that these types of resolutions exist, then when one should form a resolution and does not (which seems to be the case in all of these examples of weakness of will without a resolution being formed), one is breaking an overarching resolution and being weak-willed. What still needs to be determined is when one "should" form a resolution.

To flesh out this assumption needed to avoid the counterexample, Holton must explain when an agent should form a resolution. The easiest response to this would be the same normative requirements placed on the adjusted Holton account. One should form a resolution when one thinks that a certain action is best, and believes that if a resolution was made to carry out that action it would be followed through. The more elaborate account that is explained in this discussion would then be simply unnecessary. All that is needed is the understanding that resolutions to make resolutions exist, and those are the resolutions broken in the cases of weakness of will where resolutions are not formed.

To respond to this objection, it needs to be made clear who has a resolution to form resolutions when one should. If it is only the people who get themselves into situations in which

they judge an action to be best, believe that if they made a resolution they would carry it out, and still don't make a resolution, then this objection appears weak and rather *ad hoc*. The resolution to form resolutions itself is worthless if only people who break the resolution to form resolutions form the resolution. The people who have a tendency to not form resolutions when they should are the only people to form the resolution to form resolutions, and therefore the resolution is made only to be broken. If it is never broken, then they never had the resolution. It is as if these resolutions are placed in the minds of only the people who fail to form resolutions when they should at the time that they are weak-willed and not forming the resolution. If this is the case, Holton is picking and choosing who to give this resolution to: only if they should form a resolution and do not. Even worse for this objection, when do these agents form this resolution? Resolution generation seems to be a fairly conscious process most of the time, with specific goals in mind for the agent generating the resolutions. Do the agents know beforehand that they are going to get into a situation in which they judge an action best and believe that if they formed a resolution they would follow through, but still will not form one? Does this resolution ever help an agent form a resolution when he should? If it does, then maybe Holton can say that everyone has a resolution to form resolutions, not just those who fail to form resolutions when they should. That way, the people who are not weak-willed can be explained as such by showing how they form resolutions easily with the overarching resolution, and the people who are weak-willed in the cases where they should form a resolution but do not are in fact breaking a resolution. This would allow Holton's account to explain weak-willed failure to form resolutions.

This second option – that all agents always have a resolution to form resolutions when they should – is also doomed to failure. The most powerful reason this appears to be false is because it simply does not seem like we have resolutions to form resolutions. Though it is not contradictory

for there to be unconscious resolutions that we follow, it still seems as if these resolutions are assigned to us after the fact. We need some way to explain why people are weak-willed when they do not form a resolution in a way that illustrates they are breaking some resolution.

Furthermore, as questioned earlier, when is the resolution to form resolutions formed? If it is formed at birth, it is no longer coherent because infants certainly do not know what a resolution is, understand that they will have contrary inclinations that they will want to defeat, or have any reason to want to stay resolute. If the resolution to form resolutions is formed later in life, what triggers it to be formed and how can one be sure that every agent forms the resolution? Even if it is the case that people have these resolutions, why does Holton not bring this up in regards to Jim Dixon? He could assert that given a case of an individual who judges an action best and thinks she will follow through with a resolution if she made one but does not make it is being weak-willed by breaking the resolution to form resolutions. It seems against the spirit of Holton to claim that all agents have a resolution to form resolutions when they should.

Yet, if one can accept that these resolutions really do exist in all agents, and we accept that this response is not against the spirit of what Holton is trying to accomplish, this may be a worthwhile objection to the account presented. If this is the case, then it may be possible for Holton to argue that the adjustment to his account is unnecessary: all that is needed is an explication of a single resolution constraint on rational agency. When laying out his account, he would need to mention that all agents have a resolution to form resolutions when they should. This would avoid all of the problems with the Marissa example.

I contend that if Holton takes this point of view, his new account and the adjusted account presented here are essentially identical explanations of weakness of will. While Holton will explain the cases of weakness of will without an apparent resolution by using resolutions, the

account presented here explains the same episodes of weakness of will with a normative requirement to form resolutions when one should. Holton has the requirement come from within the agent, while this account places the requirement outside of the agent and on agency as a whole. But, both views exemplify the same account of weakness of will and allocate the stigma of the charge identically. In fact, the change Holton would have to make to his account by including resolutions to form resolutions is only transforming Holton's account into the one presented. His account is not fully explained until he mentions that resolutions to form resolutions are included, and therefore, without that change or without using the adjusted account presented, Holton's account falls short of accurately depicting weakness of will.

### Conclusion

I presented an adjusted account of Richard Holton's understanding of weakness of will. The account I uphold is similar to Holton's account in as much as it relies on resolutions and unreasonable revisions to them. However, I offer an additional criterion to evaluating an agent for weakness of will: an agent is weak-willed if the agent unreasonably fails to form a resolution. Unreasonably failing to form a resolution turns out to be failing to form a resolution when an agent judges the action as the best thing to do and the agent believing that if the resolution was formed, the agent would follow through. Although it is still unclear how to precisely approach the problem of Jim Dixon, the new account greatly strengthens Holton's original conception.

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