

**Weakness of the Will and Akrasia:
Responding to Holton's Account**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations and borrowed ideas have been acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Philosophy, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Abstract

There is a standard problem in action theory regarding weakness of the will. The problem arises from a pair of claims that seem to be mutually exclusive. On the one hand there is the traditional account of action as put forward by Davidson in 1963 which says that an action x is intentional if the agent judges there to be a good reason to x , and so does x . On the other hand it seems that often an agent intentionally performs some action and yet that action is not what they judged to be best and so we call that action weak willed. The former statement of intentional action cannot account for the intentional action in the latter claim, and so there is on the face of things, a problem for the traditional Davidsonian account of action.

Richard Holton argues that we need to completely redefine weakness of the will in terms of the revision of resolutions. He offers a range of arguments which he thinks show the traditional account to be flawed. In his book *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (2009) Holton argues that there is both theoretical room for, and evidence of, intentions (and more specifically resolutions) as self-standing states. Resolutions are a second-order type of intentions with the specific goal of defeating contrary inclinations. Holton argues that, using resolutions, we can redefine weakness of the will. His claim is that an agent is weak willed if and only if the agent unreasonably reconsiders and revises their resolution to act. Much of this relies on his exposition of the notion of choice, where he argues that intentions and resolutions are formed independently of judgments. This means that weakness of the will in terms of resolutions avoids some of the problems posed by unorthodox cases of weakness of the will.

In this dissertation I will argue three central points. First, Holton does not show adequately that resolutions are the sorts of intentions that can be formed prior to judgment. Second I will argue that even if the first argument were to fail, there is no real problem for the Davidsonian account of weakness of the will. Finally I will argue that the inclusion of intentions warrants much further investigation. I will show that following Holton's elucidation of choice, the intentions-theorist faces a dilemma. I will argue that neither of these options is palatable for the intentions-theorist.

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1. Introduction

What does it take for an action to be weak willed? It is often said of an agent that some action of theirs shows them to be weak willed, but what does this mean?

There is a standard problem in action theory regarding weakness of the will. According to Davidson (1963), an action is intentional if it is motivated by one's judgment that performing that action is all-things-considered best. Simultaneously, the traditional account of weakness of the will claims that it is the same as acting contrary to one's better judgment (Davidson: 1980). The crux of the problem is that there are cases where the agent acts intentionally and yet the action is not motivated by a judgment that *that* action is all-things-considered best, or weak willed. Intentional actions contrary to one's better judgment therefore pose a problem for pristine belief-desire models of action.

In so far as the traditional Davidsonian account is concerned, weakness of the will is synonymous with 'akratic action' or 'incontinent action'. An action is akratic or incontinent if the agent judges it best to perform some action and then acts contrary to that judgment, and performs a different action which they judge not to be all-things-considered best.

In his 1980 paper 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible' Davidson argues that weakness of the will results when an agent irrationally acts contrary to their better judgment. In this way the weak willed agent is always both incontinent and weak willed.

Following Davidson's line of thinking, Alfred Mele extended the notion of weakness of the will to include cases where the agent acts in line with their better judgment and yet we still wish to call them weak willed. He argues that weakness of the will results if either the agent acts contrary to their better judgment or they violate an executive commitment (an intention).

Most recently Richard Holton has argued that weakness of the will is not reconcilable with incontinence at all. Holton uses Michael Bratman's exposition of intentions in his 1987 book *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason* to provide a basis for his own account of resolutions that are second order intentions, which aim at defeating contrary inclinations. He argues that weakness of the will arises when the agent unreasonably revises a resolution. In this way he fully departs from

the traditional view. Holton argues that intentions and indeed resolutions can be formed by choice without prior judgment. If this is so, intentions seem to be independent of our beliefs and desires. Holton argues that there are cases where the agent forms and subsequently breaks a resolution, but without a prior judgment. He argues that it is in unreasonably revising a resolution that an agent is weak willed. Since there is weakness of the will and no judgment, weakness of the will and incontinence (acting contrary to our better judgment) cannot be the same thing.

In his book *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (2009) Holton argues that there is both theoretical room for, and evidence of, intentions (and more specifically resolutions) as self-standing states. Resolutions are a second order type of intentions with the specific goal of defeating contrary inclinations. Holton argues that, using resolutions, we can redefine weakness of the will. His claim is that an agent is weak willed if and only if the agent unreasonably reconsiders and revises their resolution to act.

There are several questions that will be dealt with in this dissertation, all of which aim at settling the question, 'How ought we characterize weakness of the will?' First, should we be convinced by Holton's arguments that weakness of the will is better defined in terms of intentions as opposed to the traditional belief desire account?

Second, does Holton's account really offer us a better understanding of weakness of the will than the traditional account? If Holton fails to provide a better account of weakness of the will than Davidson does, are the examples that Holton provides as evidence of weakness of the will and incontinence coming apart still a threat to the traditional account?

Finally, what can be learnt from Holton's account of choice and how does it impact on a central aspect of the debate around causal theories of action? In particular does Holton's claim that choices are actions result in a non-reductive theory of actions, which is contrary to the goal of Bratman on which much of Holton's theory relies?

I will be arguing firstly that Holton's account of resolutions fails to make a case for weakness of the will and incontinence coming apart. I will show how although intentions *can* be formed independently of judgment, resolutions are not the sort of intentions that are formed in that way.

As a result, any problem that the traditional account of weakness of the will finds itself in is also a problem for Holton. There are three examples that Holton presents defending his account of weakness of the will. I will deal with each one of his examples in turn and show how, once we see that resolutions are judgment-dependent intentions, this account is prone to the same set of problems faced by the traditional approach.

Secondly, I will argue that even if I fail to show that resolutions are as I conceive them and Holton's account is plausible, we are not committed to Holton's account. I will show that there is good reason to suppose that the sorts of examples used by Holton and Mele to show that the traditional account is lacking can be dealt with if we use Davidson's account of weakness of the will accurately. Not only can it be dealt with, but this can be done without having to introduce any extra machinery (such as intentions, resolutions or Mele's practical commitments) to make his account work.

Finally, I will show that one of the principal reasons for having intentions in our ontology is to provide a more complete causal theory of action than the traditional Davidsonian account. In the final part of my paper I will show that, following Holton, intentions are formed by choice, which is an action. If this is true, we find ourselves in a difficult position. What Bratman is looking for in his use of intentions is a reductive account of action. If actions are caused by intentions which depend on a prior action we end up either with a vicious regress or a non reductive account. I will argue that neither of these positions is satisfactory.

2. Intentions and Resolutions

One main aim of Holton's book is to provide conceptual and empirical evidence of intentions. His hope is to convince us that not only is there conceptual room for intentions as self standing states, but that there is evidence of their existence. More specifically Holton argues that there is the room for *resolutions*, which are a type of second order intention that are formed with the aim of defeating contrary inclinations. Holton argues that resolutions can be used to solve some serious problems in philosophy of action. In particular he takes resolutions to be invaluable in understanding weakness of the will.¹

In this chapter, my aim is not to outline his arguments for intentions and resolutions, but rather to define these states as Holton does. For the majority of this paper the focus will not be on the intentions and resolutions themselves. Rather, I will be attempting to show that even if we have a clear picture of what intentions and resolutions could be responsible for, it is far from clear that resolutions give us the best explanation of weakness of the will as Holton suggests. For this reason, it is sufficient to simply define intentions and resolutions rather than argue, as Holton does, for their existence.²

Holton follows Bratman (1987) in characterizing intentions as controlling and stable states. What this means is that once formed, an intention can (unless revised) directly motivate an agent to perform the action that was the content of the intention. Moreover, intentions are the sorts of states that are stable. Intentions as Holton puts it are 'relatively immune to reconsideration and hence to revision' (Holton 2009: p.2). They are the sorts of states that once formed tend to persist. This is not to say that once an intention is formed it *will* be acted on. On the contrary, Holton thinks they *can* be revised. It is more that they are not the sorts of states that tend to be reconsidered. (I will discuss Holton's cases of revisiting intentions later in the chapter on weakness of the will.)

¹ I will argue this against this in Chapter 5.1 below.

² I will argue against the need for including resolutions and intentions below in chapter 5.

Holton provides what he takes to be evidence of states that are controlling and stable in the ways in which he has characterised intentions. Furthermore he argues that there we have a real use for a state with these features. Perhaps the evidence can be interpreted as intentions being stable and controlling or another state being responsible for the phenomena. For now, I am satisfied with the features of Holton ascribes to intentions.

What then of resolutions? Resolutions for Holton are a special type of intention. They are the type of future directed intention that is designed to result in the act despite envisaged contrary inclinations when the time comes to act. The feature of resolutions that distinguishes them from regular intentions is that they have a much higher degree of stability. That is, that they are less susceptible to revision and reconsideration in the face of temptation or contrary desires.

What makes an intention a resolution, is that it is formed with the specific goal of defeating contrary inclinations. It can be useful to think of resolutions as second order intentions where the first order intention is directed towards doing a specific act and the second order intention (the resolution) is the intention to not 'let that [first order] intention be deflected' (Holton 2009: p.11). So resolutions are only formed in a specific narrow set of cases whereas intentions are formed in a much larger set of cases.

For now it will suffice to accept Holton's features of intentions and resolutions. A discussion of whether or not they reduce to beliefs and desires is not within the scope of this paper. It might be possible to deny that Holton shows us that there really are intentions that are independent states and that they are not reducible. Though I am not convinced that intentions really are a separate state to beliefs and desires, I will take it that there may be intentions. In chapters below, I will discuss the role that these intentions are said to play and how they are formed.

3. Choice: Intending to without judging that

If intentions are indeed self - standing states that are not reducible to beliefs and desires, Holton needs to provide an explanation of how they are formed independently of beliefs and desires. For Holton evidence of intention being formed without judgment can be found in how we choose. Choice for Holton has three features. Firstly, choice is an act, which can be made either automatically or consciously. The focus of Holton's discussion is on the latter of these two. Secondly, choice is not necessarily determined by our prior beliefs and desires. Different choices are consistent with the same set of beliefs and desires. Finally, choice is necessary for action. Once the question of what to do has arisen, a choice must be made. Moreover, choice is sufficient to bring about action as it gives rise to an intention to act which motivates us to act.

The main question is with the second feature of choice. How do we choose *to* without judging *that*? The standard picture of choice (as outlined by Holton (2009)) is a four-part model. This is a picture of how we exercise our will. Once the question of what to do arises, there are four steps in exercising our will.

The first step is deliberation. When deliberating, we consider the various options, reasons and consequences of our possible actions. This step gives an agent a clear picture of all the stakes, including their beliefs and desires. The second step is judging. An agent judges what is best, based on the considerations of the deliberation process. Simply put, an agent weighs their options. The third step is choosing. Having judged what is best the agent chooses to act on that decision. This choice leads to an intention to act. The final step is acting on that intention.

On this standard view our choice depends on our judgment. In Holton's words 'the decision to perform an action will amount to no more than an echo of the decision *that*' (Holton 2009: p.58). For Holton this role of choice is not adequate.

Holton's aim is to provide evidence of choosing *to*, unconstrained by our judgment *that*. He provides examples of two types of choice made without prior judgment. The first is in cases of incommensurability, the second is in cases where judgment comes after choosing. If Holton is right

about choice being more than an echo of judgment, and intentions can be formed simply by choosing, then an agent's intention *to* is not necessarily constrained by their judgment *that*.

3.1. Choice and Incommensurability

What evidence of choice to act without a judgment of what is best can there be? The first evidence is to be found in incommensurability. Where an agent finds two options to be incommensurable – that is where they don't know how to form a judgment as to what is best – and yet still acts, they choose between the two options and then act without judging.

Let us take an example from Holton which he gets from Sartre (1945) (Holton 2009: p.4). A young man is faced with two options which he finds to be incommensurable. Either he can join the army to fight against the fascists or he can stay at home and look after his mother. After deliberating on all the facts he draws the conclusion that there are good reasons for both, although he can only do one. All-things-considered however, he cannot arrive at a judgment as to what is best. However, eventually the soldier chooses to go to war. Holton explains that there is a choice made without a judgment as to what is best.

The problem with this action based on no judgment is that the choice appears to be arbitrary, which is not ideal for Holton. Holton's concern is with choices unconstrained by judgment but which are non - arbitrary. This will provide an account of intentions as states that can allow an agent to exercise their will.

Holton appeals to experiments from social psychology to show that we often choose to act without being aware of the mechanism that drives our choice. One example of this is in an experiment that showed that individuals can choose to act based on emotional responses which are formed without conscious judgment. The experiment used four decks of cards from which a player could choose to

draw.³ Two decks were high reward and high risk while the other two were less risk with lower reward. As the game progressed, agents would exhibit more anxiety when choosing from the high risk decks, without being consciously aware that those decks were high yield. Their actions adapted accordingly. It was only much later that they became aware of which decks were high-risk decks.

Holton argues that this experiment is an example of actions guided by our emotional responses and not judgment. Moreover, he claims these choices cannot be random picking since the subjects were clearly guided their emotional response. It appears that choice can be made not on judgment yet be more than arbitrary picking.

A further example of choosing to act without judgment is the example of the fire chief who having entered a burning building orders his men out the building on gut feel (Holton 2009: p.62). It turns out the fire is in a lower floor and the house collapses shortly after they leave. The fire chief when asked, ascribes his decision to evacuate to ESP. It was only years later that he became aware of why he ordered the men out. What really happened was that the fire chief had unconsciously picked up signs as to the nature of the fire. Experience told him that these were the signs of a fire on a different floor. Holton argues that this is further evidence of action guided not by judgment but by responding to features of the circumstance of which we are unaware. For Holton an unconscious mechanism can and very often does guide our choices.

Importantly, Holton regards neither the emotional response, nor the unconscious mechanism as a judgment. He claims that the modularity of the gambling game makes the unconscious mechanism too far removed from the agent's other mental states to be regarded as a belief. Moreover, Holton thinks that the same can be said for the example of the fireman. The unconscious mechanism that moves him to choose is distinctly unlike a judgment. Such mechanisms are not the sorts of things that can be carefully weighed. Here again we have genuine non-arbitrary choice without judgment.

³ This experiment can be found in Bechara et al 1997

3.2. Judgment after Choice

The final piece of evidence Holton provides is where our judgment is not prior to choice. In the case that Holton provides, not only is the choosing prior to judgment but judgment is informed by that choice.

Holton's example is of an experiment in which subjects were asked to say which pair of stockings on the table was the best quality (Holton 2009: p.65).⁴ Of the four pairs on the table, subjects choose the right most pair significantly more often than any other pair despite all four pairs being of identical quality. Having chosen, the subjects were asked why they chose the pair that they did. The subjects never mentioned the positioning of the stockings and denied its being a factor. Instead, they would cite some other reason pertaining to the quality.

For Holton there are two possible explanations of the results. Either the subjects had a tendency to judge the pair on the right best, or they had a tendency to choose the right most, from which they inferred that their choice was made on a judgment that the right most was best. Holton believes that the latter of the two is the best interpretation. The argument is that the subjects would hold off on choice until the final item the same way shoppers hold off on buying until they have shopped around. It seems that the subjects choose first and then rationalize after the choice. This makes more sense to Holton than a brute tendency to judge the right most best.

Holton claims that not only do these people learn about their attitudes by the choices they make, but they can also learn something about the way the world is (Holton 2009: p.66).

Through Holton's exposition of choice, he provides an alternative model to the exercise of will. Instead of an agent deliberating, judging, choosing and then acting, Holton's agent could undergo a process that brings about certain emotional states, prompting an agent to choose (the upshot of which is an intention) and act, causing the agent to judge *that*. Holton thinks that this process can and in fact often does, happen. I will save my critique of this model for a later chapter. In the next chapter, I will set out how Holton's resolutions are used to explain weakness of the will.

⁴ Holton takes this example from Nisbett and Wilson 1977.

4. Weakness of the Will

Before getting to what Holton has to say about weakness of the will and the need for resolutions in its analysis, it is important to get an idea of what the traditional view is. In the section below I outline the Davidsonian view of weakness of the will and incontinent actions.

4.1. Davidson and the traditional account

In his paper 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?' (1980) Davidson provides what is taken as the traditional account of weakness of the will. Davidson's aim in the paper was to defend a traditional belief - desire account of action against the possibility that an agent acts intentionally contrary to their better judgment. Davidson takes intentional action to occur when an agent acts for a reason – that is when an action is caused by beliefs and desires which rationalize it – and so the possibility of intentional action that is not caused by reason poses a real problem for pristine belief/desire models of action.⁵ In the paper Davidson seeks to define weak willed or incontinent action so that it can be both intentional and incontinent.

For the purposes of this paper I will not be outlining the whole of Davidson's arguments for how weakness of the will is possible. Nor will I be setting up the problem posed by the possibility of intentional action that is contrary ones' better judgment. Rather, I will just be setting out Davidson's account of weakness of the will and incontinence, since the problems posed below are to do with defining weakness of the will as the same as incontinence.

Suppose an agent judges it best to perform action x rather than action y . Davidson argues that there are a few different judgments that can be made. The first sort of judgment is an unconditional judgment. An unconditional judgment⁶ is one that the agent makes in respect to only x or to only y (but not either x or y). The agent judges that they have reason to x . This judgment does not take into

⁵ The difficulty is that for Davidson, intentional action simply is an action that is done for a reason. In actions reasons and causes, Davidson argues that reasons cause actions. The explanation of the action is according to Davidson what caused the action. Furthermore, according to Davidson, 'Intentional action is action that is explainable, in the appropriate way, by appeal to the agents' reasons for action' (Bratman: 1985).

⁶ I will be following Davidson's use of *unconditional* and *conditional judgment*.

account other options. It is the sort of judgment that is *not* made in light of another available option. In the same way the agent can make the unconditional judgment that they have reason to y .

A different sort of judgment is made when the agent is faced with either x - in or y - in. This is a conditional, all-things-considered judgment. This is the sort of judgment that is made in light of the other available actions. The all-things-considered judgment is made by weighing the reasons for acting either way and judging that x - in is better than y - in or vice versa.

A good way to think of an unconditional judgment is that it is made on a set of reasons. An agent has a set of reasons r to x and judges that he has good reason to x . Perhaps the agent has a set of reasons r^* to y and judges that it is good to perform action y (again without considering alternate options). There is a set of reasons in favour of x - in and a set of reasons in favour of y - in.

What is different about the all-things-considered, conditional judgment, is that the reasons for acting one way or the other is made in light of both r and r^* . We can think of the reasons on which the all-things-considered judgment is made, as a superset of reasons r' which is made up of the sets or reasons r and r^* . When making the all-things-considered judgment the reasons for both x - in and y - in are taken into consideration. And the agent makes a decision on those reasons (the superset) to either x or y .

Once the question of which action to perform arises, the continent agent forms an all-things-considered judgment and this prompts the agent to act accordingly. The incontinent agent on the other hand forms an all-things-considered judgment and instead of acting on that judgment the agent intentionally performs an action other than the one prescribed by that judgment.

Davidson argues that the incontinent agent's action is caused by irrationally acting on the subset of reasons that he does not take to be all-things-considered best. If the agent judges that it is best all-things-considered to x and yet ends up y - in, he is irrationally acting on the subset of reasons that make up an unconditional judgment to y , rather than the superset of reasons that make up the all-things-considered judgment. Davidson proposes that the agent may do so for a non-exhaustive set of reasons including self-deception, overwhelming desire, or lack of imagination. The agent could deceive himself or simply be overcome by something that prevents him acting rationally.

In this way when the agent irrationally acts on a subset of reasons that suggest an alternate action to the one prescribed by the all-things-considered judgment, the agent is acting for a reason (albeit not the best one) and so the action is intentional, yet at the same time we can say of the agent that they are weak, in that they have acted irrationally.

We are now in a position to define weakness of the will in the Davidsonian way. For Davidson (1980) an agent's action x is akratic/weak willed if he irrationally performs x for reasons r where r is only a subset of some larger set of reasons r' which has r as a sub-set. The reasons r' indicate that all-things-considered, it would be better to perform y than x , but for some reason is motivated to act only by r . It is this in conjunction with a principle of rationality which Davidson calls the principle of continence that results in weakness of the will. Davidson defines the principle of continence as 'perform the action judged best, on the basis of all available relevant reasons' (p 41).

I take it that this is a viable theory as to how weakness of the will is possible that does not include intentions as self-standing states. This account is consistent with a pristine belief desire model of action. What I wish to stress is that traditionally weakness of the will is synonymous with akrasia.

4.2. Holton on weakness of the will

Traditionally if an agent is described as being weak willed in a particular case, the weakness is attributed to the fact that they acted contrary to what they believed, all-things-considered, to be best.

Holton however contends that, though there are akratic actions, weak willed actions fall into a separate class. Holton believes that weakness of the will can better be explained in terms of an agent unreasonably reconsidering their resolutions. Holton's goal in his chapter 4 of *Weakness of the Will*, is to show that we can have cases of weakness of the will without akrasia and vice versa. Moreover, he attempts to show that being irresolute is what makes an agent weak willed.

Holton characterizes weakness of will as the too-ready revision of one's intentions (more specifically resolutions, but I will come back to this below). He accepts that, we can and should in some circumstances revise our intentions. But we ought only to revise our intentions where a tendency to do so would be a rational one to have (Bratman 1987 in Holton 2009: p.74). Holton suggests that the natural converse of this is that we ought not to revise our intentions if the tendency to revise in such cases would be unreasonable. It is this addition to (or revision of) Bratman's account of intentions that Holton argues will provide an account of weakness of will.

Holton suggests three cases in which it can be reasonable to have a tendency to reconsider an intention, and two reasonable tendencies not to reconsider. It is reasonable to have a tendency to reconsider one's intentions if:

1. The agent 'believes the circumstances have changed in such a way that they defeat the purpose of having the intention' (Holton 2009: p.75)
2. The intention can no longer be carried out.
3. The carrying out of the intention will lead to suffering.

It is reasonable to have a tendency not to reconsider the intention just in case (Holton 2009: p.75):

1. The intention was formed to get past one's later inclination to break the intention
2. The circumstances at the time of reconsideration are such that they make it hard to clearly remember the previous considerations on which the intention was formed.

Holton is not worried about the revision of low-level intentions. In many cases, people revise their intention to go to one restaurant and instead go to another. We tend not to call this person weak willed but rather call them fickle. Holton is concerned with what separates being fickle from being weak willed.

Holton argues that an agent is weak willed when they break a resolution where a tendency to revise in such cases is an unreasonable one. What separates a resolution from an ordinary intention is that the resolution is contrary inclination defeating. An agent exhibits weakness of will if they resolved to act a certain way knowing they would later be inclined to act differently, and ultimately break

their resolution. Moreover, simply breaking one's resolution is not enough. The weak willed agent is only weak willed if the reason they break the resolution is the reason the agent resolved against causing action in the first place. Let us say I resolve to eat a healthy lunch today knowing that when lunchtime comes I will feel like eating a burger and I break the resolution *because* I feel like a burger, then I am weak willed.

4.2.1. Six arguments in favour of the weak willed being Irresolute

We still require some argument showing that weakness of will comes apart from akrasia. Holton thinks there are six advantages to using the unreasonable revision of resolutions to explain weakness of will.

The first argument is that if an agent finds two options incommensurable or the agent is indifferent, resolves to act in one way and acts in another we call them weak willed. Take the example of the soldier who resolves to go to war and then at the last minute breaks the resolution from fear and stays home instead. In this case, Holton thinks that the traditional account of akrasia does not find the young man weak willed, as he makes no judgment as to what is best. Yet we want to call him weak willed. It is important to note that Holton himself does not provide an example of an agent who finds the options incommensurable, and yet acts incontinently or in a weak willed fashion. He simply says that if an example was filled out in the right sorts of ways we can find incommensurable options, and weak willed action. In the example I have provided above Holton seems to suggest that our intuition that the boy is weak willed comes from his revision of his resolution in an instance where it was unreasonable for him to do so. There is weakness of will without akrasia.

The second argument is that the traditional account has difficulty in explaining strength of will which seems to be the natural corollary of weakness of will. It seems that strength of will exhibited unreasonably is stubbornness. The traditional accounts tend to suggest that the opposite of weakness of will is self-control, but it is hard to see how one could relate stubbornness and self-

control. For Holton, the ease with which weakness of will in terms of over ready revision of resolutions can be applied to the obvious corollary is an advantage of his account.

The third advantage that Holton proposes is case of oscillating weakness of will. Let us take the case of a boy who while sitting in front of the fire decides that he would very much like to be an arctic explorer when he grows up (Holton 2009: p.80). He resolves to go to bed with one too few blankets to get used to the cold. In the middle of the night he wakes up cold and reaches for a blanket but is unsuccessful. He is too cold to get out of bed and resolves to replace the blanket for the next night. The next night while sitting in front of the fire he resolves again to go to bed with one blanket too few and the cycle repeats.

Traditional accounts, according to Holton, must maintain that the young boy retains one judgment throughout the story. If this is the case the boy can only be weak willed in one of the two actions. Either, he believed that he ought to keep the blanket off in which case he was only weak willed in the middle of the night, or he believed that he should put the blanket on, in which case he is only weak willed the following night when he failed to replace the blanket.

Alternately, the proponent of the traditional account could say that the boy changed his mind about what was best. He believed in the middle of the night that it was best for him to keep the blanket off and weakness stemmed from reaching for it. But, before bed the next night his belief was it best to replace the blanket and weakness came from leaving it off. Holton points out that if there is any reason for him believing before bed the second night that it was best for him to replace the blanket it would come from a decision made in the middle of the night with the blanket off. However, in the middle of the night, if his reaching for the blanket is to be weak willed, he must have believed that it was best to keep the blanket off. The traditional account still has a problem with attributing weakness of the will twice. Holton's account provides a simple solution. Twice the boy broke resolutions. First to keep the blanket off and second to replace the blanket. This seems to match more accurately our intuition that the boy is twice weak willed.

The fourth argument in favour of Holton's account is that only if we use resolutions in characterizing weakness of will can the stigma associated with the weak willed be explained. Holton

uses the example of the person who says that they are convinced by the arguments that it is best to not eat meat yet they are horribly inconsistent and continue eating meat (Holton 2009: p.82). Though this person is akratic they are not weak willed. Only if that person says that they have now resolved to give up meat and then go on to eat meat would we call them weak willed. This suggests that being akratic is different from being weak willed.

The fifth argument made by Holton is that there are cases of weakness of will that come without inner conflict. The traditional account of the akratic/weak willed man is that they feel some conflict before giving in and acting on something they do not believe to be best. Holton thinks this is wrong. Take a smoker who resolves to give up smoking now, and yet lights up a cigarette without any inner conflict. This person is weak willed though they feel no conflict. It is an advantage of his account that it does not need to apply a complex system of self-deception to get weakness of will without conflict.

The final argument is that we can find cases of weakness of will without akrasia and cases of akrasia without weakness of will. Holton provides three examples (2009: p.84) in which both cases are present at different times. I will use just one.⁷

Holton describes a man -Ravi- who believes that a life of poetry is best for him. However, he falls in love with a schoolgirl who subsequently falls pregnant. Fearing that her family will force her to abort the child they run away. The man still believes that the life of poetry is best however he resolves to stay with the girl and look after the child. The police find them and he faces prison. He has two choices either he runs away and is free to pursue a life of poetry or he can stand by the girl and the child and he chooses the latter. In the first place he is akratic in resolving to give up on what he thinks is best, but we would not call him weak willed. Later we call him weak willed but we do not want to call him akratic since he does what he thinks is best.

All of Holton's examples seem to show that akrasia and weakness of will come apart. For Holton this is strong evidence that weakness of will is something that cannot be synonymous with akrasia. I

⁷ Below I will use this sort of example to show how Mele (1995) makes use of this sort of case.

will come back to consider problems facing these examples in the next section and show why they are not as convincing as they at first seem.⁸

4.2.2. Mele on unorthodox cases

Holton is not the only philosopher to make use of the Ravi the poet style example. Holton is really building on what Mele (1995) calls ‘unorthodox’ cases. Unorthodox cases, according to Mele, pose a problem for traditional accounts of weakness of the will in that they force us to accept that the agent was incontinent and yet their action was strong willed, or else they were continent and we want to say of them that their action was weak willed.⁹

The example Mele uses is of young Bruce who decides to join in in breaking into a house. He judges that all-things-considered, it is best for him to not break into the house. Despite his better judgment, Bruce goes along. Just before actually breaking in, Bruce succumbs to his fear and fails to break-in. In this case his action is in line with his better judgment and thus continent, though we say of young Bruce that he exhibited weakness of the will.

Alternately, when the time comes to break in Bruce feels the force of his fears, but instead of succumbing, he masters the fear and breaks into the house. Now it seems that his action is incontinent as it is contrary to his better judgment though he has done something strong-willed. He has controlled his fear.

This appears to be damning for the traditional account. It seems that incontinence and weakness of the will simply cannot mean precisely the same thing, at least as it is traditionally defined. Mele’s solution, unlike Holton's complete revision, is to expand the traditional definition to incorporate unorthodox cases.

⁸ Holton goes on to counter some objections that he thinks might be raised against his view. I will not go into these problems here. My project is limited and so it is not within the scope of this paper to summarize the chapter. None of his responses to criticisms have any impact on my arguments below.

⁹ I will be using both Mele and Holton’s unorthodox cases later on and I will show that following the spirit of the traditional account we can easily get around these unorthodox cases.

Mele argues that what is common to both orthodox and unorthodox cases of weakness of the will, is that in both cases a practical commitment is broken. There are two types of practical commitments that Mele takes to be important in the case of weakness of the will.

The first is evaluative commitment. An *evaluative commitment* arises when an agent judges that it is best for them to perform some action given an alternative. In this way it is much the same as an all-things-considered judgment. The agent is rationally or practically committed to performing that action. On the other hand, there are also what Mele terms, *executive commitments*. An agent has an executive commitment to act just in case they have formed the intention to carry out some action. If the agent has an executive commitment to act, they are practically committed to act in that way.

In unorthodox cases of weakness of the will, the violation of one commitment will result in the adherence to the other. Either young Bruce adheres to his evaluative commitment, thus violating his executive commitment, and runs away, or he adheres to his executive commitment, breaks in and violates his evaluative commitment.

For Mele the answer is to say that weakness of the will is exhibited when one breaks a practical commitment. If however the commitment is an executive commitment, the motivating reason for action must not add to the motivation weight behind initial evaluative commitment. Taking young Bruce as the example, his reason for initially thinking that not breaking in was best was *not* because of his fear. His evaluation was based on reasons other than those taken to be a part of the initial evaluative judgment.¹⁰ So the violation of the executive commitment was not motivated by reasons the agent takes to be good motivation for acting.

Though it sounds clumsy, it appears to help Mele avoid the issue of the agent being both weak and continent. I will come back to Mele later and show why I believe it is unnecessary to include executive commitments. I will argue that we can avoid the problem by following a more Davidsonian style route.

¹⁰ If weakness of the will was simply left at the violation of a practical commitment, without the addition of the clause that if it is an executive commitment that was violated then it must be done so for a reason other than one which adds to the motivational force of the initial evaluative commitment, then the agent who breaks one commitment in favour of another, will always be both continent and incontinent. This is because a practical commitment is being adhered to and a different practical commitment is being violated in each of those cases.

5. The problems with Holton's account

So far, I have only been presenting Holton's arguments for choosing and intending *to* without judging *that*. This chapter has two aims. First, I will argue that there is a difficulty which Holton glosses over when explaining how resolutions are formed. I will argue that resolutions are not the sorts of intentions that can be formed without prior judgment. In section 5.1 I will show that resolutions as Holton defines them require judgment before they are formed, and I will revisit the examples that Holton uses in his attempt to show that his account can best cope with weakness of the will.

Second, in section 5.2 I will argue that perhaps Holton is wrong about resolutions explaining weakness of the will and yet his examples could still threaten the traditional account. I will go on to explain how we might take the unorthodox cases proposed by Mele and Holton, and provide an explanation which is consistent with a pristine belief-desire model of action and incontinence.

5.1. Resolution requires judgment

Let us suppose that Holton does succeed in showing that intentions can form without judgment. I will argue that resolutions are not the sort of intention that can be formed without making a judgment as to what is best.

Reflecting on what it takes for an intention to qualify as a resolution we find that a resolution is contrary inclination defeating. This means that before forming the resolution to act, the agent must have been actively aware of the fact that they were going to be tempted to act differently at the time and be aware of what the temptation will entail. This requires at minimum a certain amount of deliberation.¹¹

¹¹ Recall that this is the first step in a traditional account of how agents exercise their free will.

On top of this, it appears that the agent must necessarily believe that the action they are resolving to do is better than the action they will be tempted to do. If they did not they would feel no need to resolve, since being swayed is not something that they see as being something bad. This second point requires further argument before we ought to accept it.

A closer look at resolutions will show that there is clearly some judgment that is made which prompts the forming of the resolution. This judgment made by the agent comes in the form of the recognition that they will be prompted to act in a way they find undesirable for some reason or other. Now this is looking remarkably like a judgment that takes *very* seriously the value of the contrary inclinations. The agent must judge that those contrary inclinations (which form a subset of the reasons for action) are not all-things-considered best. The agent resolves not to be tempted (by the subset) when the time comes because they realize that the overall reasons they resolved to act on -prior to temptation- are all-things-considered best. If there is no such judgment, it becomes difficult to see how the intention formed is a resolution.

Resolutions then are the sort of intentions that are only formed in light of judgment. Not only do they require a judgment but also I suspect that the judgment needs to be carefully deliberated on, taking into account all subsets of reasons arriving at a final judgment that some action is all-things-considered best.

The formation of resolutions begins to look a lot like the Davidsonian picture now. There are sets of reasons in favour of different actions and there is an all-things-considered judgment, which includes and ranks all the smaller sets. We can see how weakness of the will can fit into the Davidsonian account of incontinence and explain why weakness of the will, akrasia and resolutions seem to go together so often.

To break one's resolution is to act on a subset of reasons r rather than the overall judgment r' on which the resolution was made. This is the same as the akratic person.

There are still the six arguments which separate akrasia and weakness of the will. I think however that they can all be dealt with rather swiftly. Though I will only refer to a few of the examples my explanation can be extended to all the examples Holton provides.¹²

Firstly, in the case of indifference and incommensurability, in which a young man finds two options incommensurable and in order to act, imply resolves to do one of the actions, I deny that the young man really resolves to do one of the options. If he does so, it can only be because he does not wish to be swayed by his contrary inclinations. This is enough to suggest that he values not being swayed in the first place. However, this cannot be the case since Holton asserts that the agent finds the options to be incommensurable. Being swayed would not be better or worse for him. My suggestion then is that either the agent values one set over the other, in which case he does not find them incommensurable, or he does not genuinely resolve but rather intends to a strong degree to act one way. We still find no reason to call the man weak willed since he never formed a resolution.

Now the obvious response to this line of attack is to say that I have not filled out the example of the incommensurable options in the right sorts of ways along the line that Holton suggests. One way that we might amend the story is to say that the boy genuinely is find the options incommensurable and realized that the only way he would act is to resolve to act.

What can we say that the contrary inclination is in this case? It is hard to put our finger on it. Perhaps the agent resolves simply to put an end to deliberation. Here the agent resolves not to reconsider the options¹³.

¹² The second and fourth examples turn on how we ordinarily use the term weakness of the will. Both the second and fourth arguments seem to be more in line with arguments made by Holton in a paper responding to Alfred Mele (2010). The argument pushes us in the direction of an elucidation of the 'ordinary concept' of weakness of the will. The debate between Mele and Holton in 2010 was an attempt to show how ordinary people use the concept weakness of the will (which ultimately resulted in Holton concluding that we ought to be agnostic on the matter. Despite this, it is far from what I plan to do in this paper. It seems that in philosophy of action we are not concerned with ordinary concepts at all. It is not a question that we ought to concern ourselves with, nor is it a question that is within the scope of this paper. This is a point that even Holton himself acknowledges. For this reason, it seems that examples two and four do not serve as counter examples my position.

¹³ I thank Jacek Brzozowski for pointing this out to me and for a useful discussion on this with himself and the members of those that attended my presentation of a draft of this paper at the PSSA conference in 2011.

Resolution in this sort of case however is unnecessary to move the agent to action. As Holton argues in his section on choice, the act of choosing is sufficient to move an agent to act. As he points out himself with cases of incommensurability (Holton 2009: p.4), choice and the formation of an intention will be able to move an agent to action in spite of either indifference or incommensurability. It seems that Holton has provided evidence that this sort of amendment to the example is unnecessary.

It is important to note that any amendment to the story that includes a resolution to not be persuaded to reconsider by the contrary inclination results in the agent making some value judgment about that set of reasons. Any amendment suggesting that the resolution is necessary to bring the agent to action is at odds with Holton's earlier point that choice and straight-forward first order intentions are sufficient to move the agent to action.

In the case of incommensurability it seems that it is simply not possible to get weakness of the will as it is traditionally conceived or as Holton defines it. What is evident from this example is that Holton's account is not as simply applied as it seems. An attempt to apply his theory leads us straight to the traditional account of weakness of the will or at the least into the same troubles that the traditional account faces. The problem Holton poses is one that only works if we do not consider holistically what is going on when the agent chooses to act, and actually acts.

Similarly, in the case of the young boy who wishes to be an arctic explorer who resolves to leave his blankets off at night to accustom himself to the cold, Holton's account is found wanting. If resolutions are only formed on the basis of a judgment, Holton's account is in the same boat as the traditional account. In the middle of the night the boy reaches for the blanket breaking the resolution and acting on a lesser valued subset of reasons. But then they are just that - a subset of values with the greater set being that it is best to keep the blanket off. In the middle of the night the temptation envisaged will in fact be what the boy judges to be best. It is odd to suggest that he would resolve not to be tempted by what he judges to be best. Moreover, we cannot resolve on what we do not think is best. The boy cannot resolve appropriately in the middle of the night and thus cannot be weak willed the following evening.

Of course Holton could suggest that the judgment changed as the traditional theorists do, but this raises for him the same problem he posed for the traditional account.

Though I have only made use of two of his examples of weakness of the will and akrasia coming apart, I believe that if we keep in mind the fact that resolutions are formed on the basis of judgments, the other examples can be resolved in the same manner as above.

Take for example the case of the Ravi poet that was described above. It would be impossible for him to resolve to look after the schoolgirl and his child unless he judged that set of actions to be all-things-considered best. He would be resolving to not be tempted by what he takes to be all-things-considered best.

Though resolutions may seem to be responsible for weakness of the will, it can be at least as well explained in terms of Davidson's account of akrasia. Since resolutions are the sorts of things that are made on prior judgments it becomes difficult to see how one can resolve when they do not truly believe that their action is all-things-considered best

5.2. Unorthodox cases and the traditional account

Suppose that the argument in 5.1 fails and resolutions are the sorts of intentions that can be formed without prior judgment¹⁴, I suggest that the traditional account can provide adequate explanation of these unorthodox cases presented by Mele and Holton. In this section, I will argue that the traditional account need not be revised or amended as Holton and Mele suggest. Unorthodox cases can be dealt with following the spirit of the Davidsonian account of how weakness of the will is possible.

Let me start with young Bruce, the predecessor of the Ravi example used by Holton. Remember that Mele's solution to the problem was to suggest that in cases where an executive commitment is

¹⁴ I have argued above that this does not seem likely given the nature of resolutions. But for the sake of argument I will suppose that for some reason it fails.

broken in favour of an action judged to be best, the action is weak willed if and only if the agent did not count the ultimate motivation (Bruce's fear) as adding to the motivational force of the original judgment. For Bruce the motivation for running away was subjectively not the right reason for acting as he did, even though it motivated him to act.

Though the problem seems quite straightforward for the traditional account, the solution is as straight forward. Look again at the problem that it poses for the traditional account. The agent performs an action that appears to be continent (running away), and yet in that action there is something weak that happens. Where can this weakness stem from on the traditional account? This is the question that seems to drive Mele and Holton to make amendments to or complete revision of the definition of weakness of the will.

The solution to this problem can be found once we take note of the spirit of what Davidson has to say. If we think about the Davidson-style sets of reasons, we can find a rather simple and elegant solution. Remember that for Davidson weakness of the will stems from *irrationally* acting on a sub set of reasons that the agent does not (subjectively) take to be all-things-considered a reason to act.

Had Bruce controlled his fear and broken in, weakness would have stemmed from irrationally acting on a sub set of reasons for action that the agent did not ultimately judge to be best (they did not add to the motivational force of the original judgment). However in the alternate case, having succumbed to his fear, the agent once again irrationally acts on a subset of reasons which he does not take to be a motivating force of the superset of reasons. Bruce does not think that his fear is a reason not to break in.¹⁵ It therefore makes up a separate (weak) set of reasons for acting. This set is not the set of reasons that Bruce takes to be the *best* reason for acting. Though the action is the same as the one prescribed by the all-things-considered judgment, it is not for those reasons that he acts, and the reasons are seen subjectively as weak reasons for acting.

One might remark that this seems to suggest that we are simply talking about a subset of an unconditional judgment which is a subset of the all-things-considered superset. This would be unacceptable since with unconditional judgments the agent is not taking into account other available

¹⁵ Remember that Davidson would say that this means that if Bruce is motivated by that reason it is irrational.

options. It is important to note that the agent acts on a subset of reasons which would have been considered in the all-things-considered set and not a subset of the unconditional judgment set.¹⁶ The agent does not take his fear as a reason for forming the all-things-considered judgment that it is best to perform action x over action y . For the agent in the unorthodox case, their fear is a reason that is a member of the sets of reasons in the all-things-considered judgment, not a subset of reasons of one of the unconditional judgments. It is just a reason that he does not take as a good reason and therefore not one that he bases his all-things-considered judgment on.

As Mele points out the action is performed for the subjectively wrong reason. The traditional account can still remark on the weakness of the action, as it conflicts with the principle of rationality, while explaining how the agent's actions conformed to those prescribed by the all-things-considered judgment. The agent irrationally acted on a set of reasons that he did not take as a set of reasons that prompted him to judge all-things-considered he ought to perform x rather than y . For the agent the controllable fear (in Bruce's case), was taken as a bad reason to not break in, it was not included as a reason for not breaking in.

One might be tempted to stop me here and point out that it is a reason that was taken into account in the all-things-considered judgment and though he does not think it is a *good* reason to act, Bruce still takes it as a reason to act. This is to miss Davidson's point though. For Davidson to get weakness of the will out of an action is simply to break with the principle of continence and *irrationally* act on a set of reasons that the agent does not take as a reason to favour action x as better than y .

In the case of Bruce this is precisely what happens. Mele asserts that Bruce takes this as a bad reasons for action. For the Davidsonian account the reason for action is not the best reason for acting and so any action on that reason would be irrational. Since the reason for the action is an irrational one, we ought to accept that the action is irrational and thus weak. In this way the traditional account can explain why the action is weak, even though it appears to be in line with the better judgment.

¹⁶ This is because for an unconditional judgment does not contain other possible actions. The unconditional judgment is something along the lines of 'action x is good' or bad. Not 'action x is better than some other action'.

The same seems to hold for the case of Ravi that Holton describes. Ravi's fear is not subjectively the reason that results in his all-things-considered better judgment. It was only a subset of reasons, which he did not take as the best reason for acting. For Ravi, succumbing to fear is not valued and thus cannot form a part of his all-things-considered rational commitment to leave his baby. For the traditional account Ravi irrationally acts on a sub set of reasons that he does not take as a reason to leave the schoolgirl and baby. The act is intentional as it is done for a reason, and yet it is irrational and it is not all-things-considered best by Ravi to succumb to fear.

In this way weakness of the will as it is traditionally conceived seems to avoid the problem which seems apparent in unorthodox cases. It does so without having to include in its explanation any new machinery such as executive commitments or resolutions, which seem to complicate the matter more than anything else.

6. The problem with Choosing

Up until now the chapters have been focused towards showing that Holton's arguments regarding weakness of the will hold no water. Instead, I have been favoring a traditional approach to understanding weakness of the will. I argued that the inclusion of intentions, especially resolutions, is less theoretically valuable than Holton takes them to be in our theories of action. In this chapter, I will shift my focus from arguments pertaining to weak willed action, to the broader concept of action.

Before getting into my final argument, I will preface the chapter with a reminder that Holton never claims to be presenting a theory of action. His explicit aim was never to explain what an action is. His aim was to show that there is room for intentions as self-standing mental states rather than to argue that the concept of action cannot be understood without intentions. What I have to say in this chapter is not directly an argument against Holton's *Willing, Wanting Waiting*. The argument is

instead that given what we can learn from Holton about where intentions come from, their use and his defense of intentions warrants further scrutiny.

In contrast to Holton's approach of finding room for intentions in our ontology, one might also include intentions as self-standing states in our theory of the mind by providing an account of what makes an event an action, or explaining the concept of an action. I take it that providing an account of what makes an event an action gives us an understanding of the concept of an action.¹⁷ One of the proponents of just such an intentional theory of action, on whom Holton bases his notion of intentions, is Bratman. I will explain how intentional theories of actions like Bratman's are offering us a reductive account of action. They aim at explaining why an event is an action in terms of intentions. The concept of action is thus explained in terms that do not include actions. In this way they are offering a reductive account.¹⁸ Even though this reductive goal is never stated outright, we can find clear evidence of it in the types of moves that theorists like Bratman make.

Holton implicitly provides all the evidence necessary to show that intentions are at odds with a reductive theory of action. His exposition of choice explains how an agent forms an intention. I will argue that this explanation leads an intentional theory onto the horns of a dilemma. Either the theory leads to a vicious regress or the theory is a non-reductive one. I will show that neither of these options is viable.

6.1. Intentional theories of action and reductionism

Let us begin with a traditional reductive account of the concept of action. For Davidson, an action is caused by the reason for that action (appropriate beliefs and desires or pro-attitude). Beliefs and desires are the mental states responsible for bringing about an action. An action is intentional when it is caused by one's relevant beliefs and desires. It seems to be a simple reductive account of action, in which the concept of action can be explained without mentioning actions in the *explanans*. On

¹⁷ One might wish to disagree with this point, though I am not concerned with the technicalities here. For my purposes, the two are interchangeable.

¹⁸ I am only relying on a very broad notion of reduction, as this makes clear. I am not committing to any particular account.

this account, the concept of action or actions simpliciter, reduces to the concepts of pro-attitudes or beliefs and desires.

It is generally understood that authors such as Bratman, who propose intentions as a means of filling some of the gaps in Davidson's theory, likewise seek an account of action that does not itself appeal to actions either explicitly or implicitly. One example is of Bratman's planned actions. Bratman's claim is that the Davidsonian picture of action cannot sufficiently explain *planned* actions in relation only to an agent's beliefs and desires. He argues that intentions are needed to explain such actions. The crucial point is that when making plans, Davidson's account of intentions as reducible to beliefs and desires cannot account properly for the situation in which an agent plans to do something at a later stage. When an agent makes a plan to go to the theatre it seems that the intention is not reducible to belief, desire or any combination of the two. In brief it is for this sort of reason that he argues that there is something more than beliefs and desires in our explanation of actions, and intentional states fill that gap (1987).¹⁹

As with the Davidsonian account of action, Bratman's intentions introduced with the same reductive goal. The attacks on belief-desire models and solutions to those problems (in the form of intentions) point to a reductive account. If the problem with Davidson's view were that it is unrealistically reductionist, the intentions theorist would have made this point. Instead, they accept that a reductionist explanation is the goal and continue in that vein trying to show that our actions are explainable in terms of intentions together with other related mental states such as beliefs and desires. Importantly, actions are not included in the analysis of the concept of action.

¹⁹ I will not go into the details of this account of planned action. my argument is not that the Davidsonian picture is without problems, but rather that intentions cannot be used to solve the problems.

6.2. Volitions and their critics

There is a long line of influential philosophers holding that there is a necessary intermediary between an agent's desires and beliefs and their action. Volition or 'the will' was usually held responsible for this. Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume all seemed to believe that it was the will or one's volition which moved an agent to action. Their intuition was that there must be a willing or exercise of will that brings about the action.

As Smith and Jones (1996) rightly point out (crediting Ryle with the original problem) there is something fundamentally problematic and indeed circular with the idea explaining of action by inserting a further action that explains what makes that event an action. If we are looking for an explanation of actions simpliciter or the concept of actions, with reference to actions, we are no closer to understanding what action is. As Smith and Jones argue volition is an action, but then the analysis of action is circular or viciously regressive.

What was taken from this long list of proponents of volitional theory is that there seems to be a need for something in between desires and action that connects the desires to the actual action. Out of this we get our more contemporary theories that propose mental states –intentions- which are to do the work of volitions. The hope is that these mental states are not actions and so the theory avoids the circularity or regress that crippled volitional theory.

On the face of it, intentions as states seem to do this rather neatly. I believe that the use of intentions (at least in Holton's case) only masks the problem and repackages it in fresh garb. Part of the credibility we find with intentions is that they solve some problems that volitions solved without any of the drawbacks. In the next section, I will argue that intentions are subject to a similar problem, even if it is harder to see.

6.3. Forming Intentions and Regress

As outlined in chapter 3 the standard picture that traditional belief-desire models provide is that we deliberate, judge, choose (the upshot of which is an intention), and then act. Under this picture, the agent's intentions depend on the judgment made. If they are acting rationally, the agent will always choose to do what they judge to be best.²⁰ This picture of our exercise of the will is completely compatible with belief-desire theories of action. Actions reduce to talk of beliefs and desires. An event being an action is analyzable in terms of the beliefs and desires that cause it. There is no mention of actions in the analysis itself.

Let us turn to the formation of intentions. In his discussion of choice, Holton argues that intentions are formed by an agent choosing and that choosing is an action. One story that can be told here is one of an indifferent agent who is faced with two options, x and y , and does not find either x or y better than the other. The agent makes no judgment and instead chooses to x , the upshot of which is an intention, followed (usually) by the agent x -in. Holton makes it explicit that even in more standard cases, the choice is what leads to the formation of an intention. It is this intention, which both Holton and Bratman take to be a mental state, that moves the agent directly to action.

What is not explicit in either Bratman or Holton's account is whether or not they are committed to there always being a choice of some sort or some other action in the formation of intentions. As discussed earlier, Holton concerns himself with whether or not intentions are dependent on beliefs and desires. Holton makes this point: "A reduction of intentions to beliefs and desires only confuses things." (Holton 2009: p.18) Holton is able to get the formation of intentions, independently of beliefs and desires, only by insisting that the agent must choose first. In this way the intention depends not on beliefs and desires, but on there being prior choice

²⁰ I have discussed above the problems of choosing to do other than what we judge best. I believe that my weakness of the will discussion serves to get around that problem.

It is difficult to see how intentions could be formed without some active participation on the agents' behalf.²¹ In the case of Bratman's planning theory (1987), the agent who forms an intention about a future action does so by "*sett[ing]* in advance on more or less complex plans concerning the future, and then these plans guide our later conduct." (1987: p.2 My italics). Indeed, he makes a point of noting that we *form* and then execute our plans. All this indicates that intentions are formed, by *some* action (if not choice) that the agent performs.

This brings us back to a rather familiar problem for an intentional theory of action that was faced by volitional theories of action. If actions cause intentions and intentions cause actions, then if we are to reduce talk of actions, we cannot stop reducing at intentions, as this would require *a priori* understanding of actions. In this case, talk of actions reduces to more talk of actions. In fact we are no closer to understanding what makes an event an action at all. An event is an action since it was caused by an intention which is only explainable in terms of an action. Intentions yield a theory that is not the simple explanation of actions that it was presented as.

My contention then is that intention theorists seem to smuggle actions in to the *explanans*. We must ask (as we are trying to provide a causal theory of action), why did the agent choose? If choice is an action and we are seeking to explain what action is, we must provide an answer to "what caused the action?" in terms that do not refer to actions.

If we are looking for a reductive causal theory of action, we need to find what explains the action. It seems that intentions cannot do this, since an explanation of the action results in our putting forward a further action to explain what makes it an action. We never get an adequate explanation of action simpliciter.

We now have the makings of a regress on our hands. Although a regress is usually taken to be a *reductio* of theory, not all regresses are vicious. Some regresses are benign. An example of this would be a truth regress where for instance the truth of 'p is true' depends on p being true and the

²¹ Again, the Velleman paper (1992) devote its entirety to discussing the importance of the agents involvement in actually moving the agent to act. Velleman ultimately reduces the agents role to beliefs and desire talk. Even if it can be shown that there is something to the claim that we need to talk of an agent's intention, it is at least possible that the agent is composed of beliefs and desires, reintroducing the worry our actions reduce to beliefs and desires alone. This move ought to worry the intentions theorist since it points to another area of action that need not be reduced to talk of intentions.

truth of ‘p is true’ is true’ depends on ‘p is true’ being true and so on. This sort of regress is taken to be benign.

As Nolan (2001) points out however, there are instances in which a regress is a *reductio* of a theory. One such instance is when a theory is put forward and intended as a reductive theory. The example Nolan uses is of a Homuncular theory of vision.²² Nolan puts it as follows:

“...in order for someone or something to see something, there must be a Homunculus in the head that sits just behind the eyeball. The homunculus sees what comes through the eyeball and communicates this information to the brain.” (2001: p.530)

The problem is that we still must ask the question, what is it for a homunculus to see? A ready answer is that there is a smaller homunculus between the eye and the previously mentioned homunculus. It sees and relays the information to the larger homunculus, which imparts the information to the brain. In this case, we have a regress off the ground. We have no explanation of what takes to see universally. All we have is that there are homunculi that see *ad infinitum*.

This by itself is not a *reductio* of the homuncular theory. It is evidence that the homuncular theory of vision is a non-reductive one. It is only a vicious regress if the theory is meant to be a reductive one. If the homunculus case is intended as a reductive one, it should be reducible to something other than vision. But, since the homunculus case never reduces all the way down to some ultimate explanation of vision, in terms that do not include ‘vision’, the regress would serve as a *reductio*.

One option available to the theorist is to bite the bullet and admit that their theory is a non-reductive one. In this case the theory is not intended to produce an ultimate explanation of vision which does not explain it in terms of further ‘vision’. Some might suggest that this makes the theory less plausible (a sentiment to which I am partial and I suspect many theorists interested in providing a theory of action) though it is far from a contradiction of the theory.

²² Though nobody takes this seriously and it appears to be a straw man, the example serves to show what ones options are if their theory results in a regress.

This can now be applied to a theory of intentional action. One who seeks to explain the concept of action in terms of intentions is forced in to a similar predicament. Either they bite the bullet and accept that they are not offering a reductive account of action, or they accept that their including choice (or some other action) in the formation of intentions, serves as a *reductio* of their theory.

6.4. Reductionism or non-reductionism?

Perhaps the intentional theorist could bite the bullet and accept that theirs is a non-reductive theory. It does not seem to me that those interested in providing an account of action would or should be happy to bite the bullet. Those engaged in the debates around action theory tend to be aiming at providing a reductive account. As I pointed out above, those arguing for intentions are doing so as a means to bolster or improve on Davidson's reductive account. They are engaged in a reductive discussion. A non-reductive explanation serves to undermine the rationale of including intentions in their theory of action. Why try and explain what actions are if you acknowledge that you cannot understand actions in terms that do not require an understanding of actions already?

There is a further reason why biting the bullet is an unattractive option. As Cameron argues (2008) a theory that does not result in an infinite regress has theoretical advantage over one that does. Cameron argues that if we accept that what we are looking for in a theory is its ability to provide metaphysical explanation; we should also accept that a theory that provides a full explanation is better than one that cannot. When we are faced with two theories we should choose the one that provides the best explanation.

In the case of action theories, Davidson's reductive account seems far more attractive one in the face of choosing a non-reductive one that cannot explain action in general.

This is not to say that this Ockham's razor-style attack on a non-reductive account is the final word. However, it seems that if we are taking part in the game of explanation of action, we should try and

avoid backing a non reductive theory, since its ability to provide metaphysical explanation is inferior to a reductive one.²³

We are faced with two options here. We can either accept the reductive Davidsonian account or the non-reductive intentions account of what it takes to cause action in general. It would seem given the discussion above that we should choose the one with the most complete explanation. In this case the Davidsonian account is distinctly superior.

While it is possible that a non-reductive account of action is the correct one, it is unlikely given that it does not provide as good an explanation of action as a reductive account. While a particular action can be explained in terms of a different prior action, the non reductive account cannot provide a unified account of universal actions. We should only opt for non-reductive explanations once it is clear that we cannot rationally commit ourselves to the best of the reductive theories. In the case of actions, this is simply not the case. The Davidsonian account is still plausible and very attractive.

There is a further reason for not biting the bullet. If intentions-theorists do, the place of intentions is put in a rather compromising position. Their claim is that we need intentions to explain actions and yet we need actions to explain intention. It is hard to see the value of including talk of intentions when explaining an action at all. We might just leave out all talk of intentions at all and describe actions as being caused by prior actions which drove an agent to act.

We seem to have now arrived at much the same position that the volitional theories found themselves in. If the answer to the question ‘why did the form that intention?’ is that the agent chose or performed some other such act, we have a *reductio* their theory unless they bite the bullet and accept that they are not putting forward a reductive account of action. I have argued that if we value metaphysical explanation a non-reductive account will almost always play second fiddle to a reductive account.

²³ It is possible to argue that a theory that results in a regress provides more detailed explanation at each step of explanation. This would give the theoretical advantage to the non reductive account. But this would take us into the arena of metaphysical explanation and this is far from my project here. For my purposes I will follow Cameron in his suggestion that a theory that does not result in a regress has the theoretical advantage.

Perhaps the theorist might take the second of my two options. They might not bite the bullet and accept that there is at least on the face of things a serious problem for intentions. One way out of the situation may be to show how intentions are formed independently of some action. This would allow intentions more credibility in a reductive theory of action. As I pointed out earlier this is a view that has not yet been much discussed, and it is certainly not Holton's view.

One point that comes to mind here is that there might be intentions that are not dependent on some prior action. One could point out that there are intentions formed without choice. Depending on how this account is fleshed out it might be a possible way to avoid the regress problem. What I can say is that there are two problems that would need to be avoided in such a theory.

Firstly, there is the risk of providing cases where intentions depend on some other feature. I am envisaging sort of automatic processes that Holton describes which kick off a growing intention. Holton argues that at some point a choice must be made which forms that intention. He does so because he is not interested in intentions that are formed automatically. These sorts of intentions are not interesting in that they render the resulting action more or less involuntary or lacking the input of the agent. Such an event would not qualify as an action in the sense that action theorists are interested in. The sort of event that they would count as an action is the sort of event that agent could be otherwise asked not to perform. Involuntary events do not seem to be actions. They certainly would not be intentional.

A second danger is that there is the risk that the intentions depend on or can be reduced to something further which is not an intention. This leaves the role of intention in an uncomfortable intermediate position. They are not the ultimate cause of actions in general as they can be explained in more fundamental terms. And then we are left with the same problem as before, what need have we for intentions? They simply seem to clutter up our ontology without adding value.

It seems that all that the intentions-theorist could do is to claim that intentional states can and are formed without prior actions and are not dependent on their being a prior process or state which causes its coming into existence. They might wish to posit brute intentions that are simply formed.

This seems contrary to all the empirical evidence given so far by Holton. Despite this, an intention that is formed in some brute way takes control away from the agent. The resulting event looks unlike an action that action theorists are interested in.

Holton's discussion of choice provides some rather damning evidence that intentions require a prior action, at the least, to get off the ground. If indeed intentions are not formed by judgments then they must be formed somehow. All the evidence that has been presented so far by Holton and implicitly by Bratman is that intentions are actively formed by the agent, leading the theory into the reductive/non-reductive dilemma. This argument is primarily to show that there is something hard to explain away for those who argue for intentions in a theory of action.

So far I have given little evidence to support the Davidsonian picture. What is evident is that the Davidsonian account of action does not fall into this non-reductive regress trap. There is no problem of vicious regress that arises. Given the two options that I have presented here, the Davidsonian account and the intentional account, it seems that when weighing up the theoretical costs the Davidsonian view is on the front foot. The Davidsonian account provides a neat picture of actions, without including extra unnecessary items in our ontology.

On the other hand, the intentions account seems to be caught out by the regress problem proposed above. There are only two ways out. They can accept the theoretically less viable non-reductive account which cannot give a universal explanation of action, and includes what appears to be ontologically redundant psychological items. Alternately they could attempt to show that intentions are not formed by actions but by something else, which runs the risk of leaving intentions in the same ontologically redundant position.

In terms of its explanatory power the traditional Davidsonian account is far and away in the lead. This is not to say that there are not costs to the Davidsonian account. There are standard problems which suggest that the traditional account has some difficulty. One such example is deviant causal chains although this is not peculiar to Davidson's account. What I can say to this is that though there is some further tweaking and explaining that the traditional account requires as to how certain cases are to be dealt with, it offers a general explanation of what it takes for an agent to perform some

action is not lead into the depths of a non-reductive regress. The cost of having to radically revise the intentional theory in order to explain simple actions seems a price far too high to pay.

Tentatively then, if we are to weigh the two theories in terms of their ability to provide a reductive theory of action, the Davidsonian account has many theoretical advantages over the alternative. It is simpler, it can explain action in general and, against the intentional theory, it posits the fewest ontological items, none of which appear to run the risk of being redundant.

7. Conclusion

In the above chapters I have focused on Holton's works on weakness of the will and resolutions. I argued that even if we accept that intentions can be formed independently of beliefs and desires, the resolutions concept requires prior beliefs and desires. This means that the use of resolutions in weakness of the will leaves us with a disguised traditional Davidsonian account of akrasia.

I showed that with a less narrow reading of Davidson we can explain weakness of the will in the unorthodox cases of weakness of the will. This means that instead of revising the understanding of weakness of the will to include revision of intentions (a la Mele) or resolutions as per Holton's suggestion, we can maintain a minimal number of action causing psychological items in our ontology. Beliefs and desires alone can account for the problem of weakness of the will.

One outstanding problem has been raised by both Mele and Holton in more recent papers. The problem revolves around questions as to common usage of the phrase or term 'weakness of the will'. Holton suggests that we ought to be agnostic as to how we commonly use the concept. For me this is what Holton's examples of the stigma attached to weakness of the will and inner conflict in cases of weakness of the will are pointing to. The claim made by Holton is that it is only in cases of resolution revision that we allocate the stigma of weakness of the will to an agent. Furthermore, resolution revision accounts for our belief that there must be inner conflict. These arguments rely on how weakness of the will is commonly used.

For my purposes, I do not believe that we ought to take too seriously how the common person uses our philosophical terms. In fact Holton recognizes this line of attack when he admits that many philosophers will find this project of common usage 'perverse' (May, Holton: 2010). I think that this is right. Common usage does not carry much weight in philosophical discourse. Perhaps it is of valuable psychological or anthropological value, but it is of little importance in philosophical enquiry.

This is not to say that it is not an area worthy of study. Perhaps it is true that common usage of weakness of the will indicates resolution revision or that it is a cluster concept. However, this carries little weight in suggesting that this matches on to the philosophical concept of weakness of the will. The arguments made above stand up to criticisms that common usage requires resolution revision. My argument is that even if we talk about resolutions when in everyday life we make use of 'weakness of the will', philosophically, this is analyzable in terms of nothing more than beliefs and desires.

The final part of this dissertation shifts focus from weakness of the will to intentions and the concept of action. I argue that it is clear from Holton's discussion of choices place in the formation of intentions, that intentions find themselves in a tricky position in a theory of action. I suggested that since choice is an action and choice leads to an intention which causes action, an intentions theorist finds themselves at the horns of a dilemma. Either they accept that they are offering a non-reductive theory of action, or they attempt to solve the problem of the regress. If they take either horn they will find that they leave intentions in an awkward intermediate position. If they are non-reductionist, talk of intentions is redundant. They might as well talk of actions causing actions. On the other hand reducing talk of intentions to something other than choice, makes talk of intentions once again redundant. We should rather talk about this new psychological item as causing action. In a reductive account, we should not include these intermediate, redundant items in our explanation.

I suggested that though there are perhaps other problems for a traditional belief/desire account of action, intentions cannot adequately fill in the gaps. Intentions only *appear* to solve the problem. In

fact, they only mask it, bringing with them the problem of a vicious regress. This same type of regress resulted in the abandonment of volitional theories of action.

I would like to suggest that though I argued above that the intentions theorist should not accept a non-reductive account of actions, it could be fruitful to try to theorise a clear non-reductive account. I am not sure how valuable such an account would be, nor am I sure of what such an account will look like. However if the problems for Davison's account cannot be solved by tweaking his account, or by intentions as I suggested, we may be left with no choice but to explore a non-reductive approach. Such an approach would however have some serious obstacles to overcome. One example is that the non-reductive account would need to explain away problems of first cause, in which many have strong intuitions that there is some first cause. A better discussion of benign regress might shed light on this problem, though it is unclear.

For now, it is far from clear that we are forced to accept this type of non-reductive account. There is much space to revisit the traditional problems for belief/desire theories of action.

Though there are still perhaps problems for the traditional account of action, I have shown that weakness of the will is not the problem that philosophers like Mele and Holton take it to be. Furthermore, intentions are theoretically unsuitable to take center stage in a causal theory of action.

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