

## Habitual Weakness

Just now, I have settled in to write this paper. It's not a long paper, so maybe it won't take all day. (Of course, it did, and more days thereafter.) Though I resolve to concentrate on writing and avoid distractions, and I know that checking my email is an unnecessary distraction, I nevertheless continue to frequently check my email as time passes. I do not expect anything important, and yet I check.

This is a kind of case that I feel has been underdiscussed. *Prima facie*, it is an instance of *akrasia* and weakness of will. (Whether or not it is *truly* *akrasia* or weakness, I will consider at the end of the paper.) I judge it best to concentrate on work, perhaps even explicitly judging it best not to check my email. And yet I check. Here are some other quick cases of the same type, referencing different states that might be thought central to *akrasia*: Realizing that it's obnoxious to others when I twirl my pen, I resolve not to do it. And yet I find myself pen in hand and twirling away. Or, suppose I realize that I am likely to be late for a meeting and so decide to be quick about my usual routine in getting ready. Thereafter, however, I take about as long as always in the shower, in deciding what to wear, and in commuting.

These sorts of cases are ubiquitous in life. Though I won't argue for it, it is not hard to imagine that they might even be more prevalent than the highfalutin cases of caving to temptation which garnish most of the attention in the literature. What is distinctive about these cases is of course that they involve habits. When I am getting ready to leave, I tend to be on autopilot, doing what I always do without much thought, and instead pondering what I will do during the day. I am fiddly, so I am apt to be twirling my pen when I do not have anything else to do, regardless of whether I intended to or not. My habit of putting my shoes on in the order that I always do is good; it frees up cognitive space to consider more important matters. My habit of twirling my pen is bad; though I am pretty damn good at it, it can certainly be obnoxious for those around me.

Despite the prevalence of these cases, they have been somewhat underappreciated or underexplored in the literature on *akrasia* or weakness of will. While the relevance of habit in explaining *akratic* action has been recognized in Mele (1987:87) and Stroud and Tappolet (2003:8), as far as I can tell it has only received sustained treatment in the work of Amelie Rorty (1980a, 1980b, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Within each of these works, however, Rorty seems to go back and forth between two roles that habit might play in *akratic* action.

On the one hand, Rorty draws out how habitual behavior can consciously present itself as a way for the agent to act. For instance, she says, "The habitual course presents ready-made action solutions; the ease of following it is a function of its not requiring any *extra* motivation" (1980a:210). On this first construal, we see how habitual behavior can be attractive in its own way, as providing the agent an easy course of action, tempting for its familiarity.

On the other hand, Rorty appreciates how an agent can simply find herself having performed an action out of habit, where there is a kind of disconnect between her intellectual judgment and what she does. She says,

The *akratic* alternative can consist in reverting to lower gear, to relatively automatic psychological functioning, without having an over-riding reason for doing so. *Akrasia* often simply involves acting voluntarily lapsing into conventional, habitual or thoughtless behavior in situations where we take ourselves to have reason to act thoughtfully, deliberately. (2017:179-80)

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<sup>1</sup> These authors are concerned with *akrasia*, discussing habitual action briefly within that context. Chan (1995), however, offers an exception of someone writing about habitual action suggesting (in the last three paragraphs) that it has consequences for *akrasia*.

On this construal, habitual behavior is not a course of action that the agent chooses; the agent simply finds herself behaving as she habitually does.

My cases above concern instances where habits play this latter role. In the case of my email, I have not chosen to periodically check my email to take an easier course of action; I have chosen to concentrate. Unfortunately, I still check my email out of habit. Similarly, I choose not to twirl my pen only to habitually begin twirling it.

I think there are a few reasons why this kind of weakness, what we might call habitual weakness or weakness out of habit, has not been isolated or received sustained attention in the literature. First, paradigmatic cases of weakness of will are often rather intense, internally tumultuous occurrences. I am defeated by my desire for ice cream, seduced by the cool, milky-ness of its consistency and the pleasure of its flavor, ephemeral though it may be. Even if these actions can be performed intently or methodically, they are still performed at the behest of a strong motivation that has somehow caused me to submit to it. It is in just such cases of concupiscence that it becomes puzzling (and so worthy of considering) how agents subjected to them can nevertheless be acting freely.

The cases that I have imagined, on the other hand, are simply not as enthralling. In the case of my email, I have not been overcome by some great tidal wave of desire, a powerful yen that must be satisfied for the sake of my sanity. It is not even a desire to which I calmly and calculatedly acquiesce. No, I just have this habit of checking my email periodically. Normally, it's not a big deal, and it's even typically virtuous insofar as it leads me to respond to students more quickly. In this instance, however, it runs counter to my resolution to concentrate.

A second reason that I suspect this flavor of weakness has been underexplored is that consideration of how best to think about marginal agency such as habits has been, as one might expect, on the margins of work within the philosophy of action. The predominant contemporary tradition of how to think about action stems from Anscombe (1957), who depicts instances of agency as in all cases answerable to reasons, and from Davidson (1963), who identifies those reasons with mental states within the agent (i.e., beliefs and desires) that causally explain each instance of agency. Though there has been a discussion since Anscombe of how to think about cases such as scratching an itch, it has only been recently that discussion of habits and other unreflective actions has picked up, and largely as a means of challenging Davidson's views in particular (Pollard 2006; Di Nucci 2013; Brownstein 2014; Douskos 2017; cf. Lumer 2017). What this discussion has also done, however, is made room for thinking of habitual action as action for which we can be responsible. Appreciating habitual agency as genuine agency has been a necessary step for recognizing habitual weakness.

Even if these considerations explain why habitual weakness has largely gone undiscussed, we might still think that it does not deserve *that much* discussion. It may be true that it is a kind of akrasia, but how much more is there to say about it? I take it to make up a substantial portion of our failures to act in accordance with our judgments of what we ought to do, so it deserves more discussion regardless. However, recognizing habitual weakness comes with a slew of further advantages. Here, I will advance three: (1) it challenges purportedly necessary conditions on akrasia; (2) it side-steps outstanding skeptical concerns; and (3) it provides a new model of considering the weak-willed behavior of group agents.

Though we might give a sparse definition of akrasia in terms of acting against our better judgment, we might think that other psychological features are necessary to actually act akratically. For example, Christine Tappolet has argued for the importance of emotions in akratic action, even calling into question the possibility of acting akratically without the involvement of emotions:

...there are grounds to think that akratic action that does not involve emotions lacks intelligibility. For what happens in cool akrasia is that some consideration which has been judged to furnish insufficient reason for action is supposed nonetheless to be the reason for the action, thus making the action intelligible. (2003:118)

It is indeed hard to imagine how a consideration that has been judged to furnish insufficient reason for action could then seduce one into action. But this is not how the cases I have imagined proceed. While we will say that my habit of twirling my pen is not a sufficient reason for me to twirl my pen in this situation, that it is a habit still explains and makes intelligible my twirling (Owens 2017:102). In this case, we may say that my habit was the reason why I twirled, but it was not *my* reason for twirling. As Maria Alvarez notes, if I engage in some behavior out of habit, this does not mean that I took the habit to be a reason to do it (2010:186-190). So, the thing that was not a sufficient reason for me to twirl—my habit—nevertheless moves me to twirl.

This is not to say that emotions do not play a necessary role in non-habitual weak-willed action, as Tappolet suggests. Even if instances of habitual weakness are akratic, the class of akratic behavior may be heterogenous, coming in different varieties, and some of those varieties may require certain emotions to be instantiated. I am also not saying that emotions *never* play a role in whether we act from habitual weakness. Perhaps if I am in the passionate grips of a philosophical idea, I will be too focused to check my email. And my casual engagement in pen-twirling is indeed often a product of a moment of idleness or boredom. The emotions, then, are not irrelevant to our habitual weakness. The point is just that they may not be necessary to our acting akratically (unlike in the stereotypical cases of akrasia).

The second advantage of recognizing this kind of akratic action is in appreciating how it appears to avoid the skeptical challenge sometimes made to weak-willed action. That challenge (from Watson 1977) is to say what distinguishes weak-willed behavior from something done compulsively, given that in both cases the agent's effective desire is stronger than the motivation that follows from her judgment of what she ought to do. We will blame the weak-willed agent, but not the compelled agent. However, it is unclear what allows us to distinguish between them, given that in both cases the agent was caused to act by her strongest motivation. Without an appropriate answer to this challenge, we will worry that we are not genuinely responsible for weak-willed actions after all.

Notice that the worry here is manifest when we attend to how the weak-willed agent is so *overcome* by her desire that she freely acts on it. How are we supposed to distinguish this case from one in which she is *compelled* by her desire? This question may yet have an answer, but it is a question that does not arise in cases of habitual weakness. Those cases do not involve motivations that overwhelm the agent. The motivation from habit might itself not be very strong,<sup>2</sup> but it will be strong enough to generate action unless the agent is appropriately attentive to her judgment to not act on it. So, the motivation from habit is not strong enough to be confused with a motivation that compels one to act.

As a third advantage of recognizing habitual weakness, it provides a new way to appreciate how groups can act weakly. Thus far, very little has been written on the topic of group weakness. Some even argue that groups like corporations are less likely to be prone to weakness (French 1995). However, Pettit (2003) is one example of a thorough discussion of a way that organized group agents can act akratically. There, Pettit shows how a group structured in the right way could count as forming a resolution at one time (via a voting procedure) and then later forming an inconsistent judgment.

Of course, how we feel about this case will depend upon our views on the possibility of group agency. If we take it for granted that groups can act, however, then we can see how this kind of case could arise for certain group agents. If the mentioned group resolution is abandoned because the group has collectively given in to the inclination that the resolution was created to defeat,<sup>3</sup> then this

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, some habits are compulsive, or, if not strictly-speaking compulsive, involve a strong enough urge to exculpate to some degree (Schroeder 2005).

<sup>3</sup> In the article, Pettit does not show that the previous group judgments are abandoned and replaced; instead, the group has simply come to form inconsistent judgments. We can tell this because if his imagined group needed to make another decision that would be in conflict with either the newest group judgment or the older ones, it is not clear that there would be a preference for consistency only with the most recent judgment.

will indeed constitute a kind of weak-willed group behavior. However, this is a very niche example. If this is a way that sophisticated groups can misbehave, it surely is not one that we see often. Instead, imagine this much more likely scenario: The management team for Corporation X resolves to revamp some of the company's selling practice (e.g., by making a website or introducing employees to business management software). The executives may even add this new tech-driven attitude into the business plan and disseminate it to local branches. Nevertheless, the employees may not get the memo (metaphorically speaking). As many of the employees have been doing things the same way long before these executives arrived, they may not comply (or may not do so fully).

In this case, the corporation has arguably formed a resolution yet failed to act in accordance with it. A natural response here is to say that it is the management team that has formed a resolution, not the corporation itself. However, many working within social ontology and business ethics are willing to say that groups like corporations are capable of themselves forming resolutions. At least, those sympathetic to group agency will say this. And this procedure with management is how the corporation may generally count as forming resolutions. Given this, and given that the individuals that constitute the corporation's behavior continue acting as they always have (because that's just how we do things around here), we can say that Corporation X judges it best to be tech-driven but fails to act in tech-driven ways out of habit.

Habitual weakness is not a matter of being tempted away from your previous judgment; it is instead a matter of failing to control yourself appropriately given your judgment. Complying with our own judgments is hard enough, and groups are even more challenging things to control. So, it should not be surprising that they would suffer from this kind of weakness.

Recognizing what I have called habitual weakness might be important in the ways that I have discussed, but it is appropriate to wonder: Is it *really* weakness of will? Let me end by offering a few thoughts on this question. One issue we might have concerns whether the phenomenon that I have described is best thought of as *weakness of will* or *akrasia*. I have throughout used both terms to describe this phenomenon, but of course there is a debate concerning the meaning of these terms and whether they are coextensive. I take my cases to be akratic action that does constitute a kind of weakness of will. However, if we think that weakness of will requires abandoning or being willing to reconsider your resolution (*à la* Holton 2009), then my cases will fall short of weakness of will. In my cases, I do not abandon my resolution; I fail to attend to how the behavior I am manifesting is contrary to them. If anything, I am *under*-considering my resolution, not *re*considering it.

The more challenging question is whether my cases suffice for akratic action. I have made a judgment and am acting in a way contrary to that judgment, but would we really say that my cases involve *knowingly* acting *against* my judgments?<sup>4</sup> Well, I certainly did not forget how I had judged as I acted. It's more like I failed to bring that knowledge to salience as I engaged in my habit, or I failed to infer from my knowledge that it meant not engaging in this instance of my habit, or I failed to recognize that I had a habit. Perhaps a better way to put it would be to say that I failed to act in view of my judgment. I did not intentionally act under the description 'behavior contrary to my judgment.'

In his discussion of a closely related instance of misfiring agency, Santiago Amaya argues that so-called 'slips' are not akratic actions despite being intentional and contrary to one's judgment (2013:563-4).<sup>5</sup> He also appeals to this idea that the agent intentionally acts, but not under the

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<sup>4</sup> See Watson: "Weakness of will occurs only if one knowingly does something contrary to one's better judgments" (*op. cit.*:fn.1).

<sup>5</sup> According to Amaya, "...if there is a slip, the agent sets out to act on a governing intention that discloses what she prefers to do. Yet she makes a mistake in the implementation of that intention. Unlike other performance mistakes, however, slips are characterized by intentional behavior" (569). Slips are not coextensive with habitual action, as there are instances of habitual action that are not slips (e.g., checking my email before forming a judgment about whether I ought to be) and

description of behaving contrary to her judgment (fn.14). Amaya takes it to instead be central to akrasia that the agent's preferences come apart from her judgments. If we take this to be necessary for akratic action, then habitual weakness will not even be akratic.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, settling these issues of labeling is less important. What is more important is that habitual weakness is ubiquitous, and it's a kind of moral failing that we take ourselves to be responsible for. However, I will say against these authors that I do think that my cases involve both akrasia and weakness. I take what is central to akrasia to be that it involves instantiating a kind of practical irrationality, and cases of habitual weakness do seem to be practically irrational insofar as the agent's actions do not cohere with her judgments. Concerning weakness, for Holton weakness is understood as a failure of the will, which was not strong enough to resist reconsidering one's resolutions. But habitual weakness too can be understood as a failure of the will. Weakness is typically construed as the will's not being *strong* enough to combat temptation, but in my cases the will may be strong enough yet lack sufficient *diligence*. The will must not only be strong but have fortitude. What is needed is not only power but endurance (or perhaps persistence).

This last point suggests an important but overlooked role that the will should play in governing our behavior. Not only must we steel ourselves for the temptations that we are to face, but we must remain vigilant, simultaneously able to monitor the situation that we are in while remaining aware of our outstanding resolutions. The importance of this kind of vigilance to our moral responsibility has only recently been acknowledged (Murray 2017), but it is not hard to appreciate how it will require a different set of skills from those needed to stand up to temptations. As Christoph Lumer says, "Psychological research has revealed that bad habits, unlike responses to temptations, are controlled most effectively through spontaneous use of vigilant monitoring (thinking "don't do it," and watching carefully for slip-ups) (Quinn, Pascoe, Wood, & Neal, 2010, p.499)" (*op. cit.*:618).

Treating weakness of will as one thing makes us insensitive to its different manifestations, and effectively guarding against them may require different psychological techniques. That being said, sometimes the same remedy may be in order regardless. For instance, one can actively avoid the object of temptation just as well as one can perhaps avoid that which facilitates one's habit. Given that, for the next paper I write I really ought to just lash myself to the mast and go to a coffee shop without Wi-Fi.

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slips that are not a matter of habit (e.g., landing a plane while forgetting to deploy the landing gear). Still, my cases of habitual action will be slips as he understands them.

<sup>6</sup> The deeper worry that I will not address is how to show that cases of habitual action even count as *intentional* action in the first place. See Peabody (2005) and Amaya (*op. cit.*:fn.20) for some discussion of this issue in the context of slips.

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