

Rethinking Weakness of Will: Does Intending an End Entail Intending the Necessary Means?

Abstract

According to a longstanding tradition, weakness of will – to the extent that it is assumed to be a genuine phenomenon – is conceived as acting against one’s own best judgment. Against this tradition, a different conception of weakness of will has recently been advanced: it is thought to amount to revising one’s intentions, i.e. those intentions that were precisely formed to overcome temptation (cf. Richard Holton 1990 and 2009).

I will first show what supports this new conception of weakness of will: (i) it better accommodates our intuition that we can be weak-willed even if we act according to our best judgment; (ii) and it better captures the idea underlying commonsense that weakness of will is a problem that arises in our acting over time rather than at a single moment as conflict between various mental states (among other features that support it).

While these advantages largely pertain to the descriptive adequacy of weakness of will, I will show in a second step that any defender of this intention-based view of weakness of will has to take a stand on the following issue (and so far, this has not been done): If a person intends an end, she seems to be committed to take the means necessary to realize that end. If a person is weak-willed, she seems to intend an end, yet fails to take the necessary means. Typically, the relation between intending an end and intending the means necessary to realize that end, is thought to be analytical (cf. John Broome 1992; R. J. Wallace 2001; et al.). But this analytical relation between ends and means renders weakness of will impossible. The person who does not intend the means necessary to realize her end, does not seem to intend that end in the first place.

In a third step, I propose how to conceive the relation between intending an end and intending the means necessary to realize that end so as to rescue the phenomenon of weakness of will under the intention-based description.

I will lay out that we have to differentiate between different kinds of ends. Some ends are complex and extended over time, others are specific and rather simple. In cases of complex ends it is vague what the means necessary to realize such ends are. Weakness of will arises if a person intends a complex end (e.g., a career), but fails to take every means necessary to realize that end. If she intends only so many means that it is neither true nor false that they realize her intended end, she can be said to continue to intend an end, yet fails to take the means necessary to realize that end. She fails in that the means she intends neither undermine

her end nor help realize it. Once this relation between intended ends and intended means is brought out, we can better make sense of the intention-based view of weakness of will.