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For What I Hate, I Do: An Investigation of Weakness of Will

Craig Knepley

I. Introduction

In most of our day-to-day decisions, we assess costs and benefits and then act in the way that we believe will best satisfy our preferences. However, there is a special class of decisions that are far more philosophically troubling. These are cases in which a person determines that a particular course of action is best and then nevertheless takes the contrary course of action. The notion that one can exhibit weakness of will, that it is possible for a person to act in this way, has been hotly contested. After all, the fact that someone chooses a certain action seems to imply that she thought that action best. If not, then what accounts for her acting in this way? On the other hand, cases in which a person forgoes her better judgment seem eminently plausible.

R. M. Hare and Alfred Mele offer opposing solutions to the problem of akrasia, or weakness of will. Hare develops an internalism that denies the possibility of akrasia, while Mele develops an externalism that tries to make room for it. The thesis of this paper is that Mele's externalism is more defensible than Hare's internalism. I begin by explicating the philosophical problem itself, making clear why instances of weakness of will seem genuinely perplexing. I then spell out the views of Hare and Mele respectively, briefly pointing to difficulties in each. After this, I examine J.L. Austin's objection to Hare's view of psychological forces, as well as the objection that Hare ultimately overreaches. I conclude that Hare might respond to the first but not the second of these

objections. Finally, I consider the objection that Mele's schema eliminates free will, in addition to Michael Bratman's objection that Mele's view of evaluative judgments is counter-intuitive. I conclude that Mele might respond to both of these objections.

II. Explanation of Akrasia

We cannot make sense of akratic action in the same way we can explain the choices of someone who, for example, picks the more expensive lunch. In a case like this, the person's decision is explainable. Even though in the financial respect option *a* was preferable to option *b*, option *b* was preferable to option *a* in other respects (taste, nutrition, etc.). Note that the evaluations of the person acting need not be accurate. Perhaps she is incorrect in her estimation of option *b*'s health benefits, or even of how option *b* will taste. Still, this person took option *b* to be the better option and acted accordingly. Even if her decision is ultimately the wrong one, it can be explained by what she believed to be the case: she was following her own reasoning. But weakness of will, or akasia, is precisely those cases in which a person knowingly makes a decision that runs counter to her own reasoning. The agent evaluates a particular course of action as better all things considered, yet fails to act accordingly. Cases like this are perplexing precisely because the agent seems to have no good reason for acting the way she does. She supposedly already considered the reasons in favor of the choice she made, and concluded that they were, overall, inadequate.

The difficulty in making sense of akratic action is that, on the one hand, it seems that judgments about what is better overall (all-things-considered judgments) bear a special connection to action and in this way are markedly different in kind from

judgments merely about what is healthier or less expensive. We expect a person to act in accordance with his better judgment, where “better judgment” is defined not as correct judgment, but as the evaluation of which option is overall most preferable. On the other hand, it seems that weakness of will is nonetheless possible and fairly common.

III. R. M. Hare and Internalism

In response to the problem, the internalist R. M. Hare denies any possibility of true akratic action, arguing that the appearance of weakness of will in any particular case is a misleading one.¹ Hare derives this view from his conception of all-things-considered judgments, judgments that a certain course of action is better or more preferable than another. Hare argues that these kinds of judgments have a special connection to action. He holds that this connection entails the impossibility of weakness of will. Hare begins his argument by drawing a distinction between what he sees as the descriptive quality of certain judgments (option *a* is, for example, more expensive or healthier than option *b*) and the seemingly prescriptive quality of all-things-considered judgments. He argues that judgments of the first kind have no connection to action whatsoever: simply recognizing that one option is, say, more expensive than another does not by itself compel a person to act. We would expect her to continue deliberating and to evaluate her options in additional respects. But Hare maintains that all-things-considered judgments have a connection to action in virtue of the fact that they, by their very nature, are intended to guide conduct.² The function of all-things-considered

¹ Hare 1952, 169.

² Ibid., 125.

judgments is to answer the question “What am I to do?” Hare believes that all-things-considered judgments contain first-person commands, imperatives addressed to oneself.³ Thus, when a person concludes that option *a* is better than option *b*, she is in effect both commanding herself to “Do *a*.” and at the same time assenting to this command.

Accordingly, Hare denies the existence of akrasia: “We cannot sincerely assent . . . [to a] command addressed to ourselves, and at the same time not perform it.”⁴ If it is within a person’s physical and psychological power to perform the action that she judges to be best, then she will do so in response to her own imperative. This, by Hare’s definition, is what it means to judge an action to be best. If the person chooses a contrary course of action, then she must not have assented to the opposed imperative, in which case she must not have issued the opposed imperative in the first place. Thus she does not believe that the alternative course of action is best all-things-considered.

There are difficulties for accounts like Hare’s, however. For one, it seems too strong to say that persons always perform the actions that they believe are best as long as they are physically and psychologically capable of doing so⁵. Hare is committed to saying that any case of apparent akrasia is actually one in which the agent is either overcome by a physical or psychological force, or simply does not believe the alternative course of action is best. But we can think of plenty of cases in which a person seems to have acted akratically and yet does not appear to have been irresistibly overcome. As Austin notes, “[w]e often succumb to temptation with calm and

³ Ibid., 79.

⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁵ Stroud 2008, §1.

even with finesse.”⁶ Yet if Hare were right, it seems that we would be agitated.

Furthermore, Hare seems to overreach in saying that when the apparently akratic agent is free from constraint, she must therefore not in fact believe the alternative best. While in some instances it might be the case that a person merely pays lip service to believing a thing, we seem to have experiences of belief taking place simultaneously with contrary action.

IV. Alfred Mele and Externalism

For these reasons as well as others, thinkers like Alfred Mele have favored a kind of externalism that does away with the alleged special connection between all-things-considered judgments and action. Externalists point to factors that might come between a person’s judgment about what is best to do and her will to act. Mele offers a compelling thesis which allows for the possibility of akrasia: “The motivational force of a want may be out of line with the agent’s evaluation of the object of that want.”⁷ This means that even though a person might determine that a particular course of action is best, her desire(s) to take the opposing course of action might nonetheless exert a disproportionate influence upon her. Mele notes that certain rewards or goods wrought by a particular course of action might be perceived by the agent as proximate. These proximate rewards, Mele argues, are often enough to cause a person to undertake an action that she otherwise would not, even if in her estimation the promise of these rewards does not constitute a sufficient reason for taking that action.⁸ Thus, Mele wants to save the intuition that akrasia is possible by downplaying the intuition that all-things-

⁶ Austin 1956/1957, 198.

⁷ Mele 1987, 37.

⁸ Ibid., 75-96.

considered judgments are specially connected to action. If other factors besides the belief that a certain option is better overall can be responsible for producing motivation, then weakness of will becomes explainable. The person who believes that he should probably watch his eating but still finds himself raiding the pantry is responding to a proximate reward. In the moment, the promise of gustatory delight disproportionately influences him.

Like Hare, however, Mele encounters certain difficulties. If Mele is right that a person's motivation to perform a particular action can be drastically out of sync with her evaluation of whether that action is best, then it seems free will has been cut out of the picture. This becomes clear when we imagine the person standing in front of the open pantry, mesmerized by an abundant assortment of snack foods. If his motivation to close the pantry door and walk away is usurped by the force of many proximate rewards, how is this person's action his own? After all, it would appear that, at the moment of decision, external factors intervened to cause him to gorge himself. Therefore, in Mele's schema, no matter how deliberate the person is, no matter how carefully he has thought through the most preferable course of action, it is ultimately outside his control whether or not he will see this course of action through. Moreover, doing away with the special connection between all-things-considered judgments and action appears to make all-thing-considered judgments no different from any other judgments. In other words, determining "Option *a* is overall better than option *b*" says nothing more about how to act than determining "Option *a* is more expensive than option *b*." Yet it is precisely because we think there is a difference between failing to do

what is cheapest and failing to do what is best that akrasia represents such a perplexing philosophical problem.⁹

V. Objections to Hare

So we should revisit the difficulties facing Hare's internalism. Can they be faced, and his account made preferable to Mele's? Recall Hare's view that if it is within a person's physical and psychological power to perform a certain action which she judges to be best, then she will do so in response to her own imperative. Austin seems correct in saying that in many cases where we act akratically, we do so calmly and deliberately; and this seems at odds with Hare's idea that when a person is unable to act in accordance with her better judgment, it is because she is violently overtaken by certain internal psychological forces. But it is far from clear that simply because a person is overcome by a psychological force, she must be agitated. Indeed, it seems plausible that certain psychological forces are powerful enough to disable a person without being violent. Certainly, depression, boredom, and apathy may generate akratic action, and they are not always violent. On the contrary, someone who is depressed sometimes seems to others to be listless or aloof. So Hare's account might forestall objections like Austin's by pointing to psychological forces which can be just as responsible for incapacitating a person, but which do not necessarily effect a tortured moment of "succumbing to temptation."¹⁰

The second objection to Hare's thesis, that he overreaches when he says that in no seeming case of weak-willed action does the agent genuinely believe that another

⁹ Stroud 2008 §3.1.

¹⁰ Austin 1956/1957, 198.

course of action is best, seems harder to defeat. However, Hare seems free to reply that a person might believe in the moment that what she is doing is best, even if immediately afterward she returns to her belief that it is not (out of feelings of guilt, etc.). If this is the case, then so-called akratic actions, even though they seem to be those in which the agent genuinely believes that what she is doing is not the best option, can be explained by stipulating that the belief was genuine until the very moment of action. Still, this means that in apparent instances of repeated or habitual akratic action, such as an addict attempting to quit smoking cigarettes, the person's beliefs are consistently changing, and this appears to run counter to our own experience. Even the smoker himself would hesitate to say that his beliefs are repeatedly flip-flopping. If Hare is correct that a would-be akratic agent does not genuinely believe that the alternative action is indeed best, then it seems impossible to differentiate between the appearance of belief and belief proper. We will have to say that in no seeming case of weak-willed action does the agent believe what she takes herself to believe. But it seems that, to the contrary, taking oneself to believe a thing and genuinely believing that thing are one and the same. If not, how is anyone to determine what her beliefs are?

VI. Objections to Mele

As noted, externalist arguments like Mele's downplay the alleged special connection between all-things-considered judgments and action. A consequence of this is that akratic or weak-willed actions seem compelled. If Mele is right that proximate rewards can disproportionately influence a person's motivation to act, then it seems the cause of an agent's akratic action is these rewards, these external factors. This would mean that the person is compelled against her will. Yet even though, in Mele's schema,

it seems that some akratic actions would indeed be compulsory for the weak-willed person, it is not clear that all potentially akratic actions would have to be. Consider a person who wakes up in the middle of the night to gorge himself on his pantry foodstuffs, even though his better judgment tells him he should probably not. If he makes it to the pantry and opens the door, the proximate rewards of snacks might indeed compel him to eat. But these rewards were presumably less proximate when he merely stood up and got out of bed in the first place. If this is the case, then it seems the agent still retained control of his free will at this earlier point insofar as the motivational influence of the rewards was strong enough to tempt him, but not to overwhelm him. By walking to the pantry and opening the door, he exposed himself to too many proximate rewards all at once. It seems plausible to think, however, that by resisting smaller temptations on one or more occasions, a person might, over time, lessen the motivational influence of certain proximate rewards that might previously have compelled him to akratic action. That is to say, by going back to bed instead of walking to the pantry, the midnight snacker might slowly habituate himself so that eventually he would not feel overwhelmed or compelled when faced with an open pantry of snacks (although he would likely, of course, still feel tempted). In any case, it seems Mele's schema need not entail a total denial of free will when it comes to temptation and potentially akratic action.

Yet because Mele distances all-things-considered judgments from action, he seems to commit himself to saying that these kinds of judgments are no different from judgments about what is less expensive or healthier. In the same way that a person who has extra money to spend need not choose the least expensive option, a person who

does not care about what is best need not choose the option that is better overall. Yet judgments about what is better overall seem qualitatively different from mere judgments about a particular option's cost or health benefits. A schema in which all of these judgments fall into the same category seems to fly in the face of our own experiences with decision-making, since most of us seem to evaluate an option's cost or health benefits for the purpose of determining which course of action is best. As Bratman puts it, Mele's account implies that:

deliberation about what it would be best to do has no closer relation to practical reasoning than, say, deliberation about what it would be chic to do. If one happens to care about what it would be chic to do, then a consideration of this matter may play an important role in one's practical reasoning. If one does not care, it will be irrelevant. (158)

The case is the same with reasoning about what it would be best to do.

But is Mele's view so radical? Indeed, the fair majority of people would like to think that they abide by the principle of continence that one ought to "perform the action judged best on the basis of all relevant reasons."¹¹ Nevertheless, we all seem to have akratic moments in which we cannot bring ourselves to care enough. It might be said that weakness of will is simply failing to care about abiding by the principle of continence. Thus the akratic agent is a person who evaluates the various courses of action open to her, acknowledges that a particular course of action is better overall, and yet cannot bring herself to care about or affirm the principle of continence in the case in

¹¹ Davidson 1980, 41.

question (though she might recognize a rational desire in herself to care about or affirm it). If this is the case, then Bratman's objection seems to target this practical difficulty in human beings' overcoming akrasia (How does one cause oneself to care about the principle of continence?) rather than Mele's account of akrasia itself. Perhaps one indeed must care about or affirm the principle of continence before one's judgments about what is best all- things-considered become relevant to her decision-making. Still, to note this is not so much to undermine Mele's schema as it is to merely point to yet another way in which human beings might encounter practical in-the-moment difficulties when considering potentially akratic action.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mele's internalism is more defensible than Hare's externalism. The problem of akrasia is a tension between two intuitions: on the one hand, that judgments about what is better overall bear a special connection to action and on the other, that human weakness of will is possible and even common. R. M. Hare's internalist account of akrasia depends on his unique conception of all-things-considered judgments as first-person imperatives meant to guide conduct. Hare's schema entails a denial of the possibility of akrasia; he argues that assent to a first-person imperative means simultaneously obeying it. Alfred Mele's externalist account notes how proximate rewards might unduly influence a person's motivation. Accounts like Mele's downplay the connection between action and judgments about what is better overall, suggesting that other factors besides one's beliefs about the situation might be responsible for producing motivation.

Austin objects to Hare's internalism, citing instances of akrasia which are calm and deliberate. This seems to undermine Hare's view that any apparent instance of akrasia is one in which the agent is overwhelmed by psychological forces that are outside of her control. However, there are psychological forces, which are powerful enough to overwhelm a person, and yet are not typically expressed in violent agitation, such as depression. Still, Hare overreaches in declaring that in no case of apparently akratic action does the agent genuinely believe that what she is doing is less than best. The internalist response that perhaps beliefs are discarded and returned to before and after the apparently akratic action is difficult to defend consistently. In any case, Hare's schema seems problematic insofar as it allows little room for differentiating between the appearance of belief and belief proper. Mele's account seemed to imply that external factors compel a person to act contrary to her free will. While this might indeed be a consequence of Mele's view and an accurate description of some cases, it is far from clear that this is the case in every instance of akrasia. Over time, a person might control the extent to which certain would-be proximate rewards influence her motivation. Bratman objects to the way Mele downplays the connection between all-things-considered judgments and action. Yet defining motivation in terms of whether one cares about or abides by the principle of continence makes clear how Bratman presents a difficulty for our human attempts to overcome akrasia, but not for Mele's account *simpliciter*.

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