

Weakness of Will, Compulsion, and Free Action

By Rachel Dichter

Recently, August Gorman has argued that two rival views of free action that have circulated in the philosophical literature can accommodate a distinction between weak-willed actions and compelled ones, according to which the basis for distinguishing between these two types of actions is the status of weak-willed actions as free. This paper examines the possible relationships between weak-willed actions and compelled ones, summarizes the line of thought on this issue taken up by Gorman, and finally highlights a view of free action on which, I argue, it is challenging to distinguish between weak-willed actions and compelled ones along the same lines that Gorman does.

The first section of the paper provides expository background on the way akratic, compelled, and free actions have been understood by other writers on these subjects. The second section explores the logically possible ways of thinking about the relationship between weak-willed actions and compelled ones. The third section introduces Gorman's project and situates their discussion of the debate between control theorists and identificationists among the possibilities discussed in the second section. The fourth section summarizes Gorman's proposal for a positive identificationist view that can accommodate a distinction between weak-willed actions and compelled ones along the lines of freedom. Finally, the rest of the essay argues that Kant's account of free action stands outside of Gorman's framework and makes it difficult to draw the distinction between weak-willed actions and compelled ones along the same lines that they do. This conclusion suggests that some accounts of free action may be incompatible with the position that all weak-willed actions are free actions.

I. Background on akratic, compelled, and free actions

For background, akratic actions are those that people have typically regarded as 'weak-willed.' Usually, weak-willed or akratic actions are pre-analytically assumed to some subset of the actions done by an agent despite her conscious judgment that some other action available to her in the situation would be better, with various philosophers holding that it is necessary that all actions that are considered analytically akratic be intentional actions that an agent performs against her better judgment (Davidson 1969 p. 26, Gorman 2023 p. 39). Writers on the subject of akrasia often assume that the subset of the actions an agent performs against her better judgment that are labeled 'akratic' can be singled out for special philosophical analysis or explanation.

Some, including Mele 1987 (p. 4, 20), have made having been done freely a requirement on an action's being akratic. Others, who have pushed for a close

descriptive link between agents' judgments about the rightness of actions and the strength of their motivation to perform those actions, have called into question the coherence of the notion of an akratic action on the basis of the demand that an action must be free to be akratic (Watson 1977 p. 321). If the strength of an agent's internal (or 'non-alien') motivation to Φ always correlates with her judgment about the relative value of Φ -ing in a given situation, then it seems like she will always only freely do what she judges it is best to do. Nonetheless, an action's having been done freely has seemed to many to be a reasonable constraint on its being akratic due to the intuition that agents who act akratically are blameworthy for what they do and the widely held idea that an agent is morally responsible to a greater degree for actions she does freely than she is for actions that she does that are not free.

The issue of whether akratic actions must be free and the sense in which they are has come up often for writers who have sought to investigate the difference between weakness of will and compulsion. These have included Mele 1987 (p. 4, 22, 29), Watson 1977, and Gorman 2022. Watson 1977 in particular suggests that all weak-willed action is compelled, while Mele 1987 attributes a similar view to Socrates. The relationship between akratic action and compulsion is salient to the issue of whether akratic actions should or must be considered free because compelled actions are generally assumed to be unfree. Therefore, those who hold that all akratic actions are compelled tacitly reject the claim that an action's having been done freely is a constraint on its being akratic.

II. Logically possible positions in the debate over the nature of the relationship between weakness of will and compulsion

There has, for some time, been a debate over the relationship between weakness of will (alternatively, *akrasia*) and compulsion. Before canvassing or summarizing actual positions from the debate, it may be helpful in showing what is at stake to list the logically possible positions.

First, it seems like when philosophers pre-analytically talk about putative cases of *akrasia*, they have a specific type of phenomenon in mind. Common examples that circulate in the literature include cases like that of an agent who takes an additional alcoholic drink after judging that it would be better not to (Watson 1977 p. 323), or that of an agent who overeats after he has resolved to follow a diet (Mele 1987 p. 22). The cases that belong to this repertoire are cases of actions that I am calling "apparently akratic." Apparently akratic actions are those actions performed in cases that philosophers would pre-analytically or pre-theoretically consider cases of weak-willed action. They are the cases whose explanation, philosophers hold, calls for the

development of an account of akrasia as a theoretical label that applies to certain actions but not others.

I assume that the set of apparently akratic actions comprises some subset of the set of cases in which agents act against their conscious judgments about what it is best to do. That is, what all apparently akratic actions have in common is that they are performed despite the performing agent's judgment that some other course of action available to her in the situation would be better. As others have observed, however, this common feature of apparently akratic actions is shared by many actions that are compelled (Gorman 2023 p. 37, Mele 1987 p. 4, Watson 1977 p. 324).

What compelled actions amount to theoretically or analytically is also not entirely clear, but an individual's relapse into drug addiction is often cited as an uncontroversial example of a compelled action (Gorman 2023 p. 27, Mele 1987 p. 30). As Gorman 2023 points out, there is supposed to be a phenomenological difference between an action like eating a slice of cake when one is on a diet and an action like shooting up heroin as a recovering addict (Gorman 2023 p. 37) that accounts for the intuition that there is an analytic difference between weakness of will and compulsion. Gorman also says that we tend to consider the weak-willed agent more blameworthy for their action than the compelled agent, which suggests that there is some analytic difference in kind between these two types of cases that accounts for our divergent evaluations of the agents involved in them (Gorman 2023 p. 37).

Watson 1977, who provides one of the more comprehensive explanations of what a compelled action is supposed to consist in, says the following:

"The notion of psychological or motivational compulsion is probably an extension of the ordinary notion of interpersonal compulsion, in which one person is forced by another to act 'against his will.' Although psychological compulsion may not be widely recognized in ordinary life, I think that the concepts of mania, phobia, and addiction imply its possibility. I shall assume that when an action is literally compelled motivationally, the agent is motivated by a desire (or 'impulse' or 'inclination') that he or she is unable to resist." (Watson 1977 p. 324-325)

One complication with this explanation of what compulsion consists in is that Watson then distinguishes compelled actions from actions that are coerced. Coercion, he says, may "raise the cost of alternative actions [to the action one is coerced to do] prohibitively," (Watson 1977 p. 325) which means that coerced actions may not be

compelled because the agent may judge that the action she is coerced into doing is best. This explanation of the difference between compulsion and coercion reflects the commonplace assumption in the philosophical literature that, unlike coerced actions as Watson understands these, compelled actions are necessarily actions that are done against the performing agent's better judgment.

As others have noted (Gorman 2023 p. 39), the assumption that compelled actions are always done against the performing agent's better judgment conflicts with the layperson's understanding of what compulsion amounts to, since, in the non-philosophical sense, it seems like an action may be 'compelled' in a way that compromises its status as 'free' or 'voluntary' even if the agent who does it would have judged that it was the right thing to do anyway. Think of the case where a charitable person would have given the only five dollars in his pocket to a homeless man but ultimately ends up doing so because he is robbed at gunpoint.

Perhaps all of the cases that non-philosophical speakers would describe as cases of 'compelled' or 'compulsive' action in which the action done conforms to the agent's judgment about what is best to do would be captured by Watson's notion of 'coercion.' The reason non-philosophical speakers might prefer to think of the actions in question as 'compelled' could be that it seems counterintuitive, in virtue of the nature of the kind of motivation involved, to think of them as being freer or more voluntary than akratic actions or actions that are 'compelled' in the philosophical sense, despite their conformity to the agent's judgment about what it would have been best to do.

Gorman's statement of what 'compulsion,' in the philosopher's sense, amounts to, also invokes the assumption that compulsive or compelled actions are necessarily done against the performing agent's better judgment. They write:

"In philosophy, [the term compulsion]...is used almost as a term of art, which, as far as I can tell, does not neatly map onto any definition one might find in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. When I speak of *compulsion* I refer to what I believe is a genuine psychological phenomenon that is discussed by philosophers in which an agent decides that a certain action would be the one to perform but feels pulled to and ends up doing something else, where she is not at fault for the outcome."

They add:

"This philosophers' sense of compulsion seems to describe only

some proper subset of the behaviors primarily displayed by people with mental health disabilities like addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, trichotillomania, eating disorders, Tourette syndrome, provisional or persistent tic disorder, agitated depression, and misophonia. It is also possible for someone without any of these mental health conditions to act compulsively sometimes.” (Gorman 2023 p. 39)

It may be helpful to think of the existing positions in the debate over the relationship between weakness of will and compulsion as taking up one of the four following possible lines of thought. We reach these possibilities by noting that it is possible to hold either all apparently akratic actions are compelled or that it is not the case that all apparently akratic actions are compelled. Moreover, it is possible to hold either that a theoretical account of akratic action should be such as to exclude compelled actions or that a theoretical account of akrasia may be such as to allow that some akratic actions are compelled. These divisions give rise to the following four logical possibilities.

- (1) If all apparently akratic actions are compelled and an account of akratic action should be such as to exclude compelled actions, then there is no such thing as akratic action, conceived as an independent theoretical phenomenon.
- (2) If all apparently akratic actions are compelled and an account of akratic action need not be such as to exclude compelled actions, then all akratic action is compelled.
- (3) If it is not the case that all apparently akratic actions are compelled and an account of akratic action should be such as to exclude compelled actions, then we should be able to state the difference between cases of akratic action and cases of compelled action.
- (4) If it is not the case that all apparently akratic actions are compelled and an account of akratic action need not be such as to exclude compelled actions, then it may not be important to state the difference between weakness of will and compulsion.

To make a few remarks on the aforementioned four possible positions: the first two hold that all apparent cases of akratic action are compelled, but differ over whether ‘akratic’ still applies as a meaningful analytic label that picks out the subset of compelled actions that seem, pre-analytically, to be apparently akratic.

The first line of thought may be the one that has often been attributed to Socrates in *Protagoras*. I said earlier that all of the actions I call 'apparently akratic' are such that they are performed despite the performing agent's judgment that some other course of action available to her in the situation would be better.

It seems like Socrates would hold that in every case of what I have called 'apparently akratic action,' where an agent acts against her judgment about what it would be best to do, a compulsive desire is needed to motivate an agent against her better judgment (Mele 1987 p. 8). Thus, Socrates seems both to hold that all apparently akratic actions are compelled and to deny that 'akratic' is useful as an independent analytic label. (1) as a line of thought can be understood as concluding that the set of analytically akratic actions is empty.

(2) seems to be the line of thought taken by Watson 1977 in "Skepticism about Weakness of Will." It captures the idea that the set of actions explained by an account of akrasia is a non-empty subset of the set of compelled actions that can be meaningfully or analytically distinguished from the other actions in the set of compelled actions. The idea that 'akratic' applies to some subset of compelled actions as a meaningful analytic label is expressed in the following passage:

"It is important to emphasize that 'weakness of will,' in ordinary usage, purports to be an explanatory concept; weakness of will is not just any sort of action contrary to the agent's judgment. To identify behavior in this way is to offer a minimal kind of explanation: one acts contrary to one's better judgment *because* one is weak; one *yields* to temptation, *allows* oneself to give in to appetite, and so forth." (Watson 1977 p. 326)

The idea that all weak-willed actions are nonetheless, in some sense, compelled, however, is expressed in this next passage:

"Now the force of this explanation is quite unclear, especially if it is supposed to contrast with an explanation in terms of compulsion. For the present, the problem of distinguishing weakness from compulsion may be expressed in the following way. In those examples given earlier, what is most striking, and leads naturally to the invocation of the notion of compulsion, is that the agents' actual motivation is independent of any conception that they have of the worth of their actions. Their motivation is in this way 'alien' to them. In some significant sense, they seem motivated contrary to their own wills. Clearly, the 'will' here

cannot be the *strongest* motive; for compulsives do not act contrary to their strongest motive. They act contrary to their judgments of the worth of their actions. It is plausible, then, to identify the 'will' with practical judgment. But it follows that the weak agent acts contrary to his or her judgment in exactly the same sense, and therefore acts under compulsion." (Watson 1977 p. 326-327)

(3) says that there are some apparently akratic actions that could be meaningfully captured by an analytic account of akratic action that in principle excludes cases of compelled or compulsive actions. Since the set of apparently akratic actions (i.e. those an agent does against her better judgment) that can be explained by the kind of analysis allowed by (3) does not overlap with the set of compelled or compulsive actions, it should be possible to state in virtue of what analytically 'akratic' actions are not compelled. This is what (3) means when it says we should be able to state the difference between cases of akratic action and cases of compelled or compulsive action.

Beyond stating why 'akratic action' should be considered a meaningful analytic label for a subset of compelled actions, as the proponent of (2) does, it should be possible, taking up (3), to say why akratic actions, analytically conceived, do not belong to the set of compelled or compulsive actions. (3), in other words, holds that the set of actions picked out by an account of akrasia is non-empty and non-overlapping with the set of compelled actions.

(3) seems like the line of thought taken up by Gorman 2023 and entertained in parts of Watson 1977. It is also the line of thought presupposed by the commitment to the claim that akratic actions are free whereas compelled or compulsive actions are not.

(4) is not a line of thought that has been taken seriously but represents the final, unexplored logical possibility given the two possible views of apparently akratic action discussed (with respect to the status of these as compelled or not) and the two possible views discussed of whether a theoretical account of akratic action should allow that these may be compelled. (4) allows that some akratic actions may be compelled while others may not be. It corresponds, in other words, to the possibility that the set of analytically akratic actions is non-empty and overlapping with the set of compelled actions, such that some akratic actions are compelled while others are not.

III. Gorman on how others have distinguished weakness of will and compulsion

This section of the paper examines accounts of the distinction between weakness of will and compulsion that have been proposed along the lines of (3) outlined in the previous section, where (3) is roughly a commitment to the claim that the set of actions that count as analytically akratic is non-empty and does not overlap with the set of actions that count as compelled or compulsive. The section will first summarize August Gorman's paper "What is the Difference between Weakness of Will and Compulsion?," which gives a comprehensive summary of views that, taking the reasoning of (3) for granted, try to state what the difference between weakness of will and compulsion consists in.

Gorman takes for granted that what distinguishes weak-willed actions from compelled actions is that weak-willed actions are free. They divide the views that others have proposed to distinguish weakness of will from compulsion into two main types: control-based views and identificationist views. These two types of views give different criteria for the conditions under which an action is done freely.

The former category of control-based views are supposed to represent the orthodoxy. Control-based views distinguish compelled or compulsive actions "from weak-willed actions by some notion of ability or control that can explain why weak-willed actions are, by contrast, 'resistible' in some sense" (Gorman 2023 p. 40).

Gorman supposes that control-based views tie an agent's degree of control over the occurrence of some action she does to whether she has agency in doing that action. If someone Φ -s when she could have done something else because it was in her power at the time she was motivated to Φ to resist her motivating desire to Φ , then she is an agent at the time she Φ -s and is responsible for Φ -ing. In other words, her Φ -ing is attributable to her. Someone's failure to resist a resistible desire to Φ when she does not judge that Φ -ing is the thing to do is therefore a case of weakness of will. In cases of compulsive or compelled action, those who act are beset by irresistible desires whose objects conflict with their judgments about what it would be best to do.

Watson's explanation of what compulsive action is generally supposed by philosophers to consist in, quoted earlier, seems to presuppose a control-based view where he says "I shall assume that when an action is literally compelled motivationally, the agent is motivated by a desire (or "impulse" or "inclination") that he or she is unable to resist." (Watson 1977 p. 325). Mele 1987 also seems to presuppose this view in various discussions and explores several ways of cashing out the notion of resistibility as it applies to desires (Mele 1987 p. 26). In discussing the case of a man named Fred who breaks his New Year's resolution to stick to a diet by eating an extra slice of pie, for example, Mele says that Fred's eating the pie was not compelled "[i]f it was within

Fred's power successfully to resist acting on this desire..., in which case (other things being equal) his eating the pie was a free action." (Mele 1987 p. 22).

Gorman contrasts control-based views of agency and the distinction between weakness of will and compulsion with identificationist views of the same, which "locate...agency not in an agent's control over her actions but in the expression of her aims through her actions" (Gorman 2023 p. 41). What is supposed to be characteristic of identificationist views is that they take only certain motivational states of an agent to be ones that she is "identified with" (Gorman 2023 p. 41). Only actions that are motivated by the motivational states that an agent is identified with, on these views, are expressive of her agency. As a result, an agent is not responsible for some subset of her motivated behavior.

It may be important to note that both the control-based and identificationist views of agency that Gorman discusses in their paper distinguish weak-willed actions from compelled ones, and, by fiat, free actions from unfree ones, by the type of motivational state involved in motivating each. Control-based views and identificationist views alike hold that all of an individual's motivated behavior belongs to one of two sets: the set of her behavior motivated by states that are expressive of her agency or the set of her behavior motivated by states that are in some sense 'alien' to her in a way that absolves her of responsibility for the actions motivated by those states.

Control-based and identificationist views differ, however, in the criterion they propose for demarcating the motivational states that count as 'alien,' or responsibility-absolving where the associated actions are concerned, from the ones that count as non-alien. For proponents of the control-based view, what separates alien from non-alien states is whether they are resistible; a motivational state or desire's resistibility by an agent is enough to locate the state and associated behavior within the bounds of her agency.

For proponents of the identificationist view, the criterion for distinguishing the motivational states that are alien to an agent from the states that are not is something other than whether the agent in question has the ability to 'resist' the motivation or prevent herself from performing the associated action. Gorman says the identificationist criterion for identifying the actions for which an agent is responsible on the basis of the kind of motivation involved has to do with the agent's "expression of her aims through her actions" (Gorman 2023 p. 41).

Importantly, then, identificationist views do not simply encompass all views of free action other than the view according to which an agent acts freely iff she acts on

the basis of a motive she could have resisted. There may be some views of free action, in other words, that are neither control-based nor identificationist. Gorman characterizes identificationist views as holding that actions are free iff their motives or motivating desires are ‘conatively aligned’ with the performing agent’s personhood in some special sense (Gorman 2023 p. 44). I assume throughout the paper that the term “motive” means ‘motivational state,’ as this seems to be the intended meaning of “motive” in the literature with which I am working.

Gorman takes the conative alignment of motivating desires with a person’s aims to be sufficient for the freedom of the associated actions because the kind of conative alignment they are talking about allows actions on the basis of the desires that are so aligned to be expressive of the performing agent’s agency. The positive account Gorman defends in the paper holds roughly that weak-willed acts, unlike compulsive ones, have conative alignment of the right kind to be considered free, but lack conative alignment of the right kind to be considered non-akratic (Gorman 2023 p. 44).

Because Gorman cites Frankfurt as a “flagship identificationist” (Gorman 2023 p. 41), it may be worth taking a more detailed look at Frankfurt’s view to get a better handle on what the ‘conative alignment’ of motivating desires consists in that identificationists identify as sufficient for the freedom of actions done on the basis of those desires.

Frankfurt’s account relies on a distinction between two types of desires that people supposedly have: first and second-order desires. First-order desires are “desires to do or not to do one thing or another” (Frankfurt 1971 p. 7). A desire to play tennis and a desire to go to the store would count as first-order desires on this view. Second-order desires, on Frankfurt’s account, are desires “to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives” (Frankfurt 1971 p. 7). A desire not to have a desire to shoot up heroin would be considered a second-order desire on Frankfurt’s view.

Importantly, Frankfurt also distinguishes two classes of second-order desires. Where ‘the will’ in a given instance of acting is supposed to be identical to an agent’s motivating desire, Frankfurt defines second-order volitions as second-order desires whose objects an agent wants to become motivating desires for her (Frankfurt 1971 p. 10). He makes this qualification after noting that it may be possible for an agent to want to have a desire to act in some way without actually wanting that desire to motivate her to action. The example he uses is of a researcher who wants to have a first-order desire to do a drug of interest for research purposes, but does not actually want his first-order desire for the drug to motivate him to use the drug.

In giving an account of freedom, Frankfurt distinguishes an agent's having a free will in performing an action from her doing an action freely and of her own free will. For Frankfurt, an agent's 'having [had] a free will' in acting means that she both (1) acted freely and of her own free will and (2) had the ability to do otherwise. (2) implies something like the resistibility criterion that Gorman identifies as distinctive of control-based views of agency. An agent can do an action freely and of her own free will, however, without having had a free will in performing the action in question. An agent's doing an action freely and of her own free will, for Frankfurt, just amounts to her doing an action whose motivating desire is the object of one of her second-order volitions; that is, it is an agent's action on the basis of a desire that she wants to be effective (Frankfurt 1971 p. 19).

The criterion for freedom of action that Gorman takes to be distinctive of identificationist views of agency is something like what Frankfurt takes to be the criterion for an agent's "doing an action freely and of her own free will:" the alignment of an action's motivating desire with some higher-order feature with which the agent who acts identifies herself. In the case of Frankfurt's account, the higher-order feature with which an agent's motivating desire must be aligned in order to have been done freely is a second-order volition whose object is the first-order desire by which she is moved. Frankfurt's contention that the possession of second-order volitions is "the essential feature of 'the concept of a person'" (Watson 1975 p. 217) captures the sense in which an agent's set of these is supposed to be constitutive of her identity as an agent.

The kind of higher-order feature with which a motivating desire must be aligned for the associated action to be considered free in the sense required for moral responsibility, according to other identificationist views, may differ from the one that Frankfurt identifies. It is significant, for example, that although he rejects Frankfurt's view that higher-order volitions are central to acting freely, Watson is also cited by Gorman as an identificationist about free action. According to Watson's view, "acts of 'identification and commitment' [to certain desires] are generally...first-order" (Watson 1975 p. 219), and actions are free insofar as one's motivational system is aligned with one's valuational system in an instance of acting (Watson 1975 p. 215).

Where an agent's motivational system in an instance of acting is "what motivates him" and is elsewhere called a "consideration" by Watson, an agent's valuational system "is that set of considerations which, when combined with [the agent's]...factual beliefs (and probability estimates), yields judgments of the form: the thing for me to do in these circumstances, all things considered, is *a*" (Watson 1975 p. 215). One acts freely, then, when the consideration that motivates one to act is identical to one's all things considered judgment about how to act.

The main point in the characterization of identificationist views is that the identificationist criterion for freedom of action says that an agent's action is free iff its motive corresponds in the right way to a higher-order feature of the agent's that is supposed to, in some way, constitute her identity.

IV. Gorman's identificationist account of the distinction between weakness of will and compulsion

Gorman states their contribution to the debate over how to distinguish weakness of will and compulsion as that of showing "that it is possible to draw an identificationist distinction between weakness of will and compulsion" (Gorman 2023 p. 41).

"Somewhat surprisingly...identificationists have failed to produce a leading competitor account [to that of the control-based view] of the distinction [between weakness of will and compulsion]. In fact, the identificationist's inability to adequately distinguish weakness from compulsion has been seen as one of the major downfalls of the identificationist program, even as a nail in its coffin." (Gorman 2023 p. 41)

Gorman cites a number of others who make the point that identificationists have historically struggled to distinguish weakness of will and compulsion, including Fischer 2012 (p. 138), McKenna 2011 (p. 181-182), and Strabbing 2016. Although these writers offer independent explanations for this phenomenon, it may be illuminating to try to state why an identificationist view of agency that holds that weak-willed actions are characteristically free would be hard pressed to distinguish any cases of apparent akrasia from cases of compulsion. Again, I am taking identificationist views to be those that say an agent's action is free iff its motive corresponds in the right way to a higher-order desire she has about which desires she wants to move her to action.

One answer to the question of why an identificationist view committed to the free status of akratic actions would be challenged to distinguish cases of analytic akrasia, conceived here as cases of free action against the agent's better judgment, from cases of compulsion, is that it seems like, by definition, all apparently akratic actions are motivated by desires that the akratic agent does not approve of as motives. This much is secured by the stipulation that the set of apparently akratic actions is a subset of the set of actions that an agent does against her judgment that some alternative available to her would be better; it is plausible to think that an agent's acting against her better judgment implies her disapproval of her akratic motivating desire as a motive.

The identificationist view, furthermore, seems to demand as a criterion for an agent's acting freely in a given case that she approves of the desire that motivates her as a motive, either because she endorses it in a higher-order way or because it aligns with an all things considered judgment of hers about what to do. As a result, any candidate akratic actions would, on the face of it, be judged by identificationists to be actions that are motivated by desires that lack the relevant conative alignment to be considered free. This would make the apparently akratic actions in question indistinguishable from compelled or compulsive actions in respect of their status as free.

The control-based view of agency seems to fare better in allowing theorists to distinguish between cases of weakness of will and cases of compulsion by maintaining the independence of the features of a desire that qualify it as free from the features of a desire that would lead an agent to approve of it as a motive. As you may recall, the difference between weakness of will and compulsion, according to the control theorist, is the difference between a failure to resist a resistible desire and a failure to resist an irresistible desire; actions in cases involving the latter type of failure count as compelled or compulsive, whereas actions in cases involving the former type of failure count as voluntary. Because the features of a desire that make it resistible or not are independent of the features of a desire that would lead an agent to approve of it as a motive or not, control-based views allow that an akratic agent can act freely on the basis of a desire that she disapproves of as a motive.

To reiterate, the problem with identificationism for accommodating akratic actions, conceived as free actions against the agent's better judgment, is that an action's being weak-willed, definitionally, seems to prevent it from meeting the criterion that identificationism gives for an action's counting as free; acting against one's better judgment seems to imply disapproving of one's motive for action in a way that rules out the conative alignment of one's motive with one's higher order desires or values, where this kind of alignment is what the identificationist view requires for free action.

Gorman's proposal for reconciling identificationism with a view of akratic actions on which these are said to be done freely gets around this problem by denying that the desires that motivate weak-willed actions really fail to be conatively aligned with the set of higher-order features relevant to free action. This is made possible by their distinction between two kinds of conative alignment: the kind involved when one acts freely and non-akratically and the supposedly weaker kind involved when one acts freely and akratically. Gorman adopts a version of Frankfurt's picture, on which the higher-order feature with which an agent's motivating desire in a case of action must be aligned to be considered free is a higher-order volition whose object is the motivating desire.

When one acts freely on the basis of an all-things-considered judgment that one's course of action is best, the idea seems to be, one's motive is maximally conatively aligned with the set of higher-order desires that is relevant for freedom. When one acts freely on the basis of a consideration that one takes to be something like a pro tanto reason, but acts in a way that defies an all-things-considered judgment one has made about how best to act in that situation, one's motive for action is more minimally conatively aligned with the relevant set of higher-order desires, but still aligned enough to qualify as free the action in question.

This squares with the insight that all of the subjective pro tanto reasons for an action, from the perspective of some agent, are considerations that the agent at least minimally takes to count in favor of that action. An individual pro tanto reason, however, often does not count in favor of a course of action *enough*, by itself, to warrant an all-things-considered judgment that an agent should act in the way it recommends. Gorman's exact proposal is the following:

"An agent acts out of compulsion iff she wants most to act on a desire to Φ , but acts on a desire to Ψ instead AND her doing so comes about either via the sheer force of her desire to Ψ absent any further aim she has in Ψ -ing, or via the mere management of a desire to Ψ (prototypically: Ψ -ing in order to rid herself of the desire to Ψ).

An agent acts out of weakness of will iff she wants most to act on a desire to Φ , but acts on a desire to Ψ instead AND the sequence of mental states that lead her to Ψ are suitably related to the fact that if she were to reflect on her desire to Ψ at t , she would want to act on it with some further aim in doing so other than merely eliminating her Ψ -desire." (Gorman 2023 p. 45)

One could notice a similarity between Gorman's way of characterizing what weakness of will amounts to and Davidson's way of characterizing weakness of will in his 1969 paper "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" In this paper, Davidson seeks to resolve a paradox whose conclusion is that there are no 'incontinent' (i.e. akratic) actions. The paradox arises when one holds both (1) that an agent's judgment that one action would be better to do than another always gives rise to his having greater desire to do the action he judges it is better to do and (2) that an agent's having greater desire to do one action than he does to do another action will always result in his doing the action he has greater desire to do, if he does one of the two intentionally. If (1) and (2) are true, then it does not seem like it is possible for an agent to intentionally do something after he has already made an all things considered judgment to do something else. The occurrence of weak-willed actions, however, is supposed to involve

agents' intentionally acting against all-things-considered judgments they have already made that support different actions than the ones they end up doing incontinently.

Davidson resolves the paradox by granting (2) and qualifying (1) so that it applies only to 'unconditional' comparative judgments that one action is better than another. The 'better judgments' that agents supposedly act against in cases of weak-willed or incontinent action are, by contrast, all things considered. Whereas all things considered judgments are based on "the sum of [the agent's]...relevant principles, opinions, attitudes, and desires," unconditional judgments may be based on only one or a proper subset of the considerations available to an agent (Davidson 1969 p. 41).

Gorman's proposal seems also to characterize incontinent actions as those done on the basis of *pro tanto* reasons that support a different course of action than the one recommended by the agent's all things considered judgment about what to do. This is supported by the claim that the mental states that are related to an agent's acting akratically "are suitably related to the fact that if she were to reflect on her desire to Ψ [where Ψ -ing is acting akratically] at t , she would want to act on it with some further aim in doing so other than merely eliminating her Ψ -desire" (Gorman 2023 p. 45).

I am assuming that Gorman characterizes akratic actions as those done for *pro tanto* reasons even though they take care to distinguish their view from "a mosaic version of the valuing view on which weakness is differentiated from compulsion by the fact that agents act in accordance with something they *pro tanto* value" (Gorman 2022 p. 43). By contrast to 'a mosaic version of the valuing view,' they say, their own view is "a close cousin" of "a mosaic version of Frankfurt's endorsement view" (Gorman 2022 p. 43).

What Gorman calls 'mosaic views' seem roughly to be identificationist views that allow that actions done on the basis of *pro tanto* reasons that are not all things considered are expressive, to some degree, of 'the agential self.' On 'valuing views,' the set of *pro tanto* reasons that may result in actions that are expressive of an individual's agency is constrained by an associated set of values, whereas 'endorsement views' allow that an action done by an agent on the basis of a consideration not associated with any value may be expressive of her agency, so long as it led her to endorse the motive she acted on in a higher-order way.

Thus, Gorman proposes that by adopting a mosaic view of the features that constitute one's agency, one can hold both an identificationist view of freedom and take up the position called (3) from section 2: that the set of actions picked out by an account of akrasia is non-empty and non-overlapping with the set of compelled actions. These

views are compatible because mosaic views make a motive's alignment with the set of higher-order features that the identificationist holds is constitutive of the actor's identity into a degreed or graded notion. The motives of free actions are more aligned than those of weak-willed ones, and the motives of weak-willed actions are more aligned than those of unfree ones.

V. Characterizing Kant's view of free action

It might be tempting to conclude on the basis of Gorman's setup that there are no views of free action that would render (3) logically untenable. The following sections, however, make a case for the point that Kant's view of free action, as it is conveyed in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, poses a challenge for embracing (3) with respect to an account of akrasia. This is made more significant, moreover, by the difficulty of identifying Kant's view of free action as either a control-based view or an identificationist one. The conclusion is that it seems like there are some views of what free action consists in that imply that at least some weak-willed actions are unfree. The structural reasons that underlie this implication for Kant's view also differ from those that lead Plato to conclude that one never acts freely against one's better judgment, since arguably, Plato can be read as an identificationist who does not adopt a mosaic view.

Before trying to give an exposition of Kant's account of free action, it may be helpful to substantiate the point that Kant's view of free action cannot be fit into either of the frameworks discussed by Gorman; that is, that his view of free action is neither a control theory nor an identificationist view.

It is relatively straightforward to see that Kant is not a control theorist, since he refers, in the following passage, to a special sense in which even free actions may be done "from natural necessity" on his account:

"no true contradiction can be found between freedom and natural necessity of just the same human actions, for [philosophy and human reason]...cannot give up the concept of nature, any more than that of freedom...But it is impossible to steer clear of this contradiction if the subject who deems himself free were to think of himself *in the same sense*, or *in just the same relation* when he calls himself free, as when he takes himself to be subject to the law of nature with respect to the same action. That is why it is an indispensable task of speculative philosophy: at least to show that its deception concerning the contradiction rests in this, that we think a human being in a different sense and relation when we

call him free from when we take him, as a piece of nature, to be subject to its laws, and that both not only *can* very well coexist, but also must be thought *as necessarily united* in the same subject...” (Kant 1785 p. 65).

If an acting agent’s “be[ing] subject to the law of nature” with respect to some free action implies that he did not have the ability to act otherwise, then this passage suggests that actions that are done freely may be motivated by states that are in some sense ‘irresistible,’ or at least, that Kant takes this to be conceptually possible. This point suggests that Kant does not take an agent’s ability to resist the motive from which some action of his was done as conceptually definitive of its freedom, as the control theorist does.

It is less straightforward to see that Kant’s view of free action is not an identificationist view. Recall that identificationists about free action hold that an action is free iff its motive stands in the right kind of relation (to a feature of the acting agent’s that is constitutive of her identity) for the resulting action to be expressive of the agent’s identity. The motive on which an agent acts when she acts freely is one that she ‘identifies’ with, where the alignment of the motive with some feature like the agent’s approval of it (either under the guise of value or in light of its relation to some goal of hers) is a proxy for the identification in question.

Many of Kant’s discussions of the concept of freedom in the *Groundwork* refer to it principally as a property of the will. Kant defines ‘the will’ variously as practical reason (Kant 1785 p. 27), as “a capacity to determine itself to action *in conformity with the representation of certain laws*” (Kant 1785 p. 39), and as “a kind of causality of living beings in so far as they are rational,” (Kant 1785 p. 56). Kant also writes in one place that a person does not attribute his “inclinations and impulses...to his actual self, i.e. to his will” (Kant 1785 p. 67), which suggests that Kant also conceives of the will as being identical to a person’s actual self.

Although Kant characterizes freedom as a “property of the will” (Kant 1785 p. 56), my suggestion is that we may extrapolate from Kant’s account of freedom an account of free action, where a free action is just an action that is done by an agent when his will has the property that Kant calls freedom at the time he acts. As he does above in the quoted passage about natural necessity, Kant seems in places to adopt a similar linguistic strategy when he discusses conceiving of an agent as free with respect to his performance of a particular action (Kant 1785 p. 65).

That Kant conceives of an agent's will as being identical to his actual self (Kant 1785 p. 67) might preliminarily incline opponents to think that if freedom is a property of the will and the will is identical to a person's actual self, then an agent's exercise of freedom in action constitutes a realization of a property of her actual self. This is a non-starter as an argument for the interpretation of Kant as an identificationist because even unfree actions, in Kant's sense, are expressive of some property of a person's will *qua* actual self that is not the property called "freedom." It is even fair to say that when an agent acts unfreely, the will has the property of not being free. Since all actions are either free or not free, this implies that any action whatsoever expresses a property of the will, conceived as identical to the acting agent's actual self. Thus, an agent's expression or realization of a property of her actual self in action cannot be sufficient for its having been done freely.

Roughly, Kant's view of free action is distinct from the identificationist one by its contention that free actions are all done from a single motive type *qua* mental state type. On Kant's view, an action's motive type *qua* mental state type matters more for whether it is free than whether the agent acting approved of its motive or engaged in an act of identification with its motive, either under the guise of value or as serving a goal. Pending a more detailed reconstruction, Kant's account of free action says that an action is free iff it is done from the motive of duty, which puts an additional constraint on which act types can be instantiated by free actions. This is the case because, as I will argue, the motive of duty on Kant's account in the *Groundwork* is defined as a distinctive mental state type that is only capable of motivating act types that conform to the categorical imperative.

One could push back that identificationists similarly require that free actions be done from a specific type of motive conceived as a mental state type. Namely, the identificationist requires that the motives of free actions belong to the type of mental state the acting agent identifies with, either occurrently or dispositionally, due to either the values or goals that constitute her self.

The reply is that the set of motives with which an agent identifies in the way required by the identificationist does not exclusively pick out mental states that belong to a single physiological type. On Frankfurt's endorsement view, for example, any physiological kind of first-order desire may motivate an action done freely, so long as the first-order desire in question is the object of some second-order volition of the agent's. Frankfurt's concluding example of an action done freely is that of a willing addict who is motivated by a physiologically irresistible desire to use drugs. Watson similarly speaks of the motives that may motivate free actions on his value-based, identificationist account as encompassing a range of what we would consider 'physiological' mental state types,

including passions (Watson 1975 p. 211), appetites (Watson 1975 p. 12), and acculturated desires (Watson 1975 p. 214).

Thus, it is a mistake to think that the identificationist requires the mental states that motivate free actions to belong to a single physiological type. Where appetites and desire-like states based on reasoned value judgments have been thought by some to comprise physiologically distinct kinds of motivation, identificationist views allow that either kind of state may motivate an action done freely. The identificationist criterion of freedom for actions demands only an alignment between the mental state that motivates an action and further features of the acting agent in a way that makes it possible for various mental state kinds to motivate free actions. I argue that Kant's view, by contrast, makes the mental state type of an action's motive the criterion of its freedom.

There may be a general question in the background about how philosophers tend to distinguish mental state types from each other on a physiological basis. The notion of a 'physiological kind,' as I use it here with reference to mental states, is admittedly rough. Most often, philosophers seem to distinguish what I am calling 'physiological state kinds' based on armchair theorizing about the comparative phenomenology of token mental states or 'attitudes.' Few in philosophy have tried to draw distinctions between mental state kinds from empirical data, such as data from brain scans.

It is nonetheless fairly typical for theorists to posit based on phenomenological and conceptual comparisons of token instances that states like beliefs and desires, for example, belong to physiologically distinct kinds. In the case of beliefs and desires in particular, a point often cited in favor of distinguishing these kinds of states physiologically is their alleged possession of different kinds of 'contents;' beliefs are supposed to be cognitive states, whereas desires are supposed to be noncognitive. As mentioned earlier, many have similarly assumed that appetites and desire-like states based on reasoned value judgments belong to physiologically distinct kinds. The distinctions that philosophers conceive between mental state kinds usually suggest that if empirical data were sought, the mental states belonging to kinds conceived as different would have significant enough qualitative differences to justify placing them in distinct physiological categories. These distinctions likewise suggest that empirical data would substantiate members of a single mental state kind having enough qualitative similarities to be classed together on an empirical basis.

I have preliminarily argued, in this section, that Kant's view of free action is neither a control theory nor an identificationist view. In one passage, Kant appears to explicitly reject the control theory. There is no reason to think, moreover, that Kant's

account takes free actions to be more expressive of the features that constitute an agent's true identity than unfree ones.

VI. Interpreting Kant's View of Free Action

This section gives an explication of Kant's account of free action that further substantiates the argument of the last section that Kant is neither a control theorist nor an identificationist about free action. The interpretive claim is that Kant holds that free actions are those done from respect for the law, where respect is conceived as a physiologically distinctive kind of mental state that motivates actions from duty and whose only proper object is the moral law.

That free actions are necessarily done from 'respect,' which I argue is identical to what many others call Kant's 'motive of duty,' places a substantive constraint that applies to all agents on the act types that may be instantiated by free actions. Because Kant holds that the set of free actions just is the set of morally right actions and that the only act types that can be instantiated by morally right actions are those that conform to the categorical imperative, the only act types that can be instantiated by free actions are those that conform to the categorical imperative.

An initial point worth noting is that I am only dealing, here, with Kant's treatment of the concept of freedom in the *Groundwork* and am not drawing my analysis of this concept from Kant's remarks in *Critique of Judgment*. H. Sidgwick has argued based on an analysis of Kant's corpus that "two essentially different conceptions are expressed by the same word freedom" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 405) throughout, alleging a "confusion...[between these two conceptions] to exist in Kant's ethical doctrine" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 405). Most of the passages cited in his argument, however, are drawn from *Critique of Judgment* rather than the *Groundwork*.

Sidgwick calls the sense of the term "freedom" that I hold Kant takes to be primary in the *Groundwork* "'Good' or 'Rational Freedom'" and says it is "the Freedom that is only realised in right conduct" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 405), or that "manifest[ed by man] more in proportion as he acts more under the guidance of reason" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 407). Sidgwick distinguishes this 'Good' or 'Rational Freedom' from a sense of the term "freedom" that he calls "'Neutral' or 'Moral Freedom'" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 407). He defines 'Neutral' or 'Moral Freedom' as "the Freedom to choose between right and wrong" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 405), and, alternately, as "the freedom that is manifested in choosing between good and evil" (Sidgwick 1888 p. 407). Although Sidgwick cites a passage from *Critique of Judgment* suggesting that all motivated behavior, including morally wrong behavior, is free in the 'Neutral' or 'Moral' sense (Sidgwick 1888 p. 409-

10), this latter notion of freedom, which Kant calls ‘transcendental freedom,’ does not make a prominent appearance in the *Groundwork*, where Kant seems primarily to be concerned with freedom in the ‘Good’ or ‘Rational’ sense.

The argument for the big interpretive claim of this section that, according to Kant in the *Groundwork*, free actions are those done from a distinctive kind of mental state called ‘respect’ relies on a particular interpretation of what an ‘action from duty’ amounts to. The first step to showing that Kant holds that free actions are those done from respect for the law, therefore, will be to substantiate the interpretation of “respect” as a distinctive kind of mental state that motivates actions from duty and whose only proper object is the moral law.

In the first section of the *Groundwork*, Kant defines duty in the following passage:

“duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law. For the object as the effect of the action I have in mind I can indeed have inclination, but never respect, precisely because it is merely an effect and not activity of a will. Likewise, I cannot have respect for inclination as such, whether it is mine or that of another; I can at most in the first case approve of it, in the second at times love it myself, i.e. view it as favorable to my own advantage. Only what is connected with my will merely as ground, never as effect, what does not serve my inclination, but outweighs it, or at least excludes it entirely from calculations when we make a choice, hence the mere law by itself, can be an object of respect and thus a command.”
(Kant 1785 p. 16).

The first important point to note from this passage is that respect is introduced as an attitude, or type of mental state, with an object. That ‘respect’ is conceived as a distinctive type of mental state, and as a motivational state, in particular, is supported by a footnote in the 2012 edition of the *Groundwork* edited by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman. There, they characterize ‘respect’ as “a positive motivating moral force” (Kant 1785 p. 16).

Kant also spends much of the quoted passage discussing what can and cannot be a proper object of respect. We are told that neither “the object as the effect of the action I have in mind” nor “inclination as such” can be the object of respect, and that “only...the mere law by itself....can be an object of respect.” Respect as a type of motivating mental state is also distinguished, in the quoted passage, from a type of

state called “inclination,” which we are told, unlike respect, *can* take as its object “the object as the effect of the action I have in mind.”

That respect is a representational state, or that it represents the moral law, is implied by Kant’s remark that when an action is done from duty, “[n]othing other than the *representation of the law* in itself” determines the will (Kant 1785 p. 16). The definition of duty as “*the necessity of an action from respect for the law*” further suggests that respect is what determines the will when an action is done from duty. If what determines the will when an action is done from duty is equivalent to both ‘respect for the law’ and ‘the representation of the law in itself,’ then respect for the law must be equivalent to the representation of the law in itself. This supports the reading of ‘respect’ as a distinctive type of representational, motivating mental state whose object is the moral law, or more specifically, the maxim of complying with it. Kant states this equivalence more explicitly when he writes:

“Now, an action from duty is to separate off entirely the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will; thus nothing remains for the will that could determine it except, objectively, the *law* and, subjectively, *pure respect* for this practical law, and hence the maxim of complying with such a law, even if it infringes on all my inclinations.” (Kant 1785 p. 16)

Now, it remains to be shown that a free action is equivalent to an action done from duty, so conceived, where we have said that a free action is one done by an agent whose will has the property called freedom at the time she acts. In the third section of the *Groundwork*, Kant provides both a positive and a negative characterization of freedom. In stating the negative characterization, he writes:

“A *will* is a kind of causality of living beings in so far as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that property of such a causality, as it can be efficient independently of alien causes *determining* it; just as *natural necessity* is the property of the causality of all non-rational beings to be determined to activity by the influence of alien causes.” (Kant 1785 p. 56)

It should be evident from this passage that an exercise of freedom, or an action done when the will is actually “efficient independently of alien causes *determining* it,” is just an action done from duty, i.e. one done from respect for the law. Since we have seen that “an action from duty is to separate off entirely the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will” (Kant 1785 p. 16), and “alien causes” are just non-rational

ones, an action done when the will is “efficient independently of alien causes *determining* it” is just an action that is done without “the influence of inclination.” Recall that Kant writes that in the case where an action is done without “the influence of inclination...[,]nothing remains for the will that could determine it except, objectively, the *law* and, subjectively, *pure respect* for this practical law” (Kant 1785 p. 16).

Kant’s subsequent, positive characterization of freedom also supports the equivalence of his notion of free action to that of action done from respect for the law. Recall that an action done from pure respect for the law is supposed to be an action done such that “[n]othing other than the *representation of the law* in itself” determines the will (Kant 1785 p. 16). In explaining the “*positive* concept of freedom,” Kant writes:

“freedom...must...be a causality according to immutable laws, but of a special kind; for otherwise a free will would be an absurdity. Natural necessity was a heteronomy of efficient causes; for every effect was possible only according to the law that something else determines the efficient cause to causality; what else, then, can freedom of the will be, but autonomy, i.e. the property of the will of being a law to itself? But the proposition: the will is in all actions a law to itself, designates only the principle of acting on no maxim other than that which can also have itself as its object as a universal law. But this is just the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality: thus a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.” (Kant 1785 p. 56)

The end of the quoted passage explicitly states that an exercise of freedom amounts to the will being determined by “[n]othing other than the *representation of the law* in itself” (Kant 1785 p. 16). That is, the passage conveys that a free will is determined by “no maxim other than...the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality” (Kant 1785 p. 56). This much should be enough to establish that Kant’s notion of free action, conceived of as action that results from the willing of a will that has the property of freedom, is equivalent to his notion of action from duty, i.e. action done from respect for the law, where respect is conceived of as a motivating mental state that represents the moral law, or the maxim of complying with the categorical imperative.

VII. The implication of Kant’s view of free action for his conception of the relationship between weak-willed actions and compelled ones

Having defended the interpretation of Kant's account of free action as action done from duty, i.e. motivated by the distinctive type of representational mental state called 'respect' whose object is the moral law, and having preliminarily stated why this account should be considered neither a control theory nor an identificationist view of free action, I discuss in virtue of what Kant's account of free action, as it has been laid out, is incompatible with the position that all weak-willed actions are free.

One point that supports the incompatibility of Kant's view of free action with the view that all weak-willed actions are free is that Kant's view places substantive constraints on the act types that can be instantiated by free actions. The constraints that Kant's view places on the act types that can be instantiated by free actions come out of the idea that actions done from duty are always motivated by a state that represents the maxim of complying with the categorical imperative. It is a further feature of Kant's view that right actions are just those that conform to the dictates of the categorical imperative.

That all free actions are right actions according to Kant's view implies that accepting his view of free action and the position that all weak-willed actions are free would commit one to the claim that all weak-willed actions instantiate act types that are right. Since we have supposed that all candidate akratic actions (i.e. apparently akratic actions) are performed against an agent's better judgment, it is intuitively implausible that all akratic actions instantiate act types that are morally right. At least some intuitive cases of akrasia seem to involve agents failing to do the morally right thing, despite having made all-things-considered judgments that it would be best to do so. If this is right, Kant's view of free action logically excludes the position that all weak-willed actions are free.

So, we have seen that Kant's account of free action delivers that akratic actions that instantiate act types that are morally wrong are not free actions. In asking where to situate Kant's view of the relationship between akratic actions and free actions among the logically possible views discussed in the second section, there is a further question of whether Kant's view allows that any akratic actions are free. In other words, this is the question of whether an action done from duty, on Kant's view, can ever be weak-willed. One way to pose this question would be to ask whether it is possible for an action an agent does against her all-things-considered judgment that some other action would be better to be done from respect for the law.

Since 'respect' is a cognitive mental state that Kant says can only operate as a motive in the absence of non-rational motives and whose object is supposed to be objectively weightier than the objects of non-rational motives, it seems like most cases of actions done from respect for the law are not done against the agent's better

judgment. That the objects of respect always rationally outweigh the objects of inclination in decision-making is conveyed where Kant says “Only...what does not serve my inclination, but outweighs it, or at least excludes it entirely from calculations when we make a choice...can be an object of respect and thus a command” (Kant 1785 p. 16). That respect as a motive, when present, always motivationally outweighs inclination is conveyed where Kant says “an action from duty is to separate off entirely the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will” (Kant 1785 p. 16).

These points would seem to establish that an action done from respect could not be done against an agent’s ‘better judgment’ unless acting according to the ‘better judgment’ in question would itself also mean acting from a rational motive, or respect. To see why, note that a judgment, action in accordance with which would require an agent to act on a non-rational motive, could not be considered a “better judgment” (in the sense meaning objectively weightier) on Kant’s view due to his stance that the objects of rational motives objectively, rationally outweigh the objects of non-rational ones.

One could question whether it may still be possible for an agent to subjectively judge that the object of a non-rational motive is weightier than the object of a rational one and to nonetheless act from the rational motive in a way that could be considered akratic. Kant seems to rule out this possibility by taking it as a self-evident, descriptive fact that the objects of rational motives “exclude...[non-rational motives] entirely from calculations when we make a choice” (Kant 1785 p. 16).

It seems like the only case, therefore, in which an agent could akratically do the right thing on Kant’s view, would be the one where she faces a choice between two actions from duty, resolves to do one, and akratically does the other. If Kant would allow that this kind of situation is indeed possible, then his view might be classifiable as taking up (4) from the second section. Recall that (4) is the rarely endorsed position that some akratic actions may be compelled while others may not be, or the position that the set of analytically akratic actions is non-empty and overlapping with the set of compelled actions, such that some akratic actions are compelled while others are not.

VIII. Conclusion

This essay has argued that Kant’s view of free action poses a challenge to a certain view of the relationship between weak-willed actions and compelled ones: the view that the set of weak-willed actions is non-empty and non-overlapping with the set of compelled actions. One difficulty for reconciling Kant’s account of free action with the view of the relationship between weak-willed actions and compelled ones in question

comes out of the substantive demand of Kant's view that the set of free actions be a subset of the set of morally right actions. Since it is intuitive that not all weak-willed actions are right, it seems like it cannot be the case, either, according to Kant, that all weak-willed actions are free.

Ultimately, though, the criterion Kant gives for an action's counting as free neither automatically includes nor excludes all of the actions that seem pre-theoretically like candidates for explanation by an account of akrasia. It is plausible on Kant's view, that is, that the set of actions that are apparently akratic includes some actions in the set of actions done from duty and some actions that do not belong to the set of actions done from duty.

This conclusion is significant because it challenges the assumption of most commonly held views of akrasia that the set of akratic actions consists uniformly of actions that are one way in respect of their status as free: that is, that this set consists entirely of actions that are free or entirely of actions that are not free. In reaching it, the essay also offers a new way of framing the longstanding debate over the status of akratic actions in respect of their having been done freely.

Works Cited

- Davidson, D. (2001/1969). How is Weakness of the Will Possible? In Davidson D. (Ed.), *Essays on Actions and Events*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, W. (1984). The Two Senses of Desire. *Philosophical Studies*, 45(2): 181-195.
- Fischer, J.M. (2012). Semicompatibilism and Its Rivals. *J Ethics*, 16:117-143.
- Frankfurt, H. (1971). Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68(1): 5-20.
- Gorman, A. (2022). What is the Difference between Weakness of Will and Compulsion? *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 2023: 37-52.
- Kant, I. (2012/1785). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- McKenna M. (2011). Contemporary Compatibilism: Mesh Theories and Reasons-Responsive Theories. In Kane R. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will (2nd Edition)*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mele, A. (1987). *Irrationality: An Essay on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Self-Control*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pears, D.F. and Pugmire, D. (1982). Motivated Irrationality. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 56(1): 157-196.

Schapiro, T. (2021). *Feeling like it: a theory of inclination and will*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sidgwick, H. (1888). The Kantian Conception of Free Will. *Mind*, 13(51): 405-412.

Strabbing, J. (2016). Attributability, weakness of will, and the importance of just having the capacity. *Philosophical Studies*, 173(2): 289-307.

Watson, G (1975). Free Agency. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 72(8): 205-220.

Watson, G. (1977). Skepticism about Weakness of Will. *The Philosophical Review*, 86(3): 316-339.