

On Strength of Will

1. Summary of the research plan

It is commonly said that we exhibit strength of will when we resist a temptation to have a smoke or eat certain foods, or when we stay home to finish a paper instead of going out for drinks. However, this natural way of speaking raises two puzzles. The first is that if – as the traditional conception of action has it – whenever we intentionally act, we do what we most strongly desire to do, then successfully resisting the temptation should be what we most strongly desire to do, since it is what we end up doing. Yet, there is a very intuitive sense in which in these cases the temptation is *also* the strongest of our desires. The second puzzle pertains to the motivation required to resist a temptation: how is it that some have it to a greater degree than others, while still others completely lack it? Does it take *further* strength of will to muster up the motivation to be strong-willed?

By means of careful conceptual analysis inherent to the methods of analytic philosophy, and with the insights of recent experimental data in psychology, this project's primary aim is to solve, *inter alia*, these two puzzles. I intend to do so by defending the following claims. The first is that resisting a temptation does not merely happen to us; it is something that we actively and *effortfully* strive to achieve. The second is that, as the verb 'resist' suggests, strength of will involves a *tension* between two contrary *forces*, namely the will's and the temptation's. In this regard, the project is expected to fuel the long-standing philosophical discussion surrounding what exactly characterizes the will, and what brings it into conflict with other motivations; relatedly, what determines the forces of our motivations is a thorny issue which will also be addressed. Finally, the third core idea that I will advocate is that exercising strength of will is a *process* over which we modify our motivations in order to attenuate, and thus resist, the temptation. Quite which mechanisms are at work when we manage, or fail, to do that is a question of utmost interest for both philosophers and empirical theorists studying conditions in which, purportedly, motivation is at fault – typically depression and addiction.

2. Research plan

2.1. Current state of research and own contribution to the topic

2.1.1. Current state of research

2.1.1.1. Orthodoxy regarding strength of will

It is commonly said that we exhibit strength of will when we get out of bed on a cold January morning, quit smoking, stay home to study late for tomorrow's test, or overcome our fear of public speaking to make a comment in a crowded class. But are we right in so ascribing this trait? What exactly do we mean when we judge an agent to be strong-willed?

Philosophical discussion about strength of will, otherwise called ‘self-control’ or ‘willpower’, dates back to Aristotle’s definition of *enkratēia* (‘temperance’ or ‘continence’) and its opposite property, *akrasia* (‘continence’, modernly referred to as ‘weakness of will’). It should be stressed at the onset that the expression ‘strength of will’ can refer to (at least) two distinct concepts. On the one hand, it can refer to a character trait which is ascribed (or denied) to an agent in light of his overall disposition to act in certain situations. It is in this first sense that Aristotle treated *enkratēia*. On the other hand, strength of will can be understood as the property of a punctual action: one can say that a particular action A is strong-willed, or alternatively that the agent exhibits strength of will *with regard to A*. Thus, although an agent may be a strong-willed person overall, he may from time to time indulge to act in a weak-willed manner. The fact that strength of will as a character trait is defined in terms of strong-willed actions shows that the latter is a more fundamental notion that needs analyzing in priority. Following the most recent literature on the topic, I shall therefore focus my research on strong-willed *actions*.

One can venture that an agent standardly exercises strength of will by intentionally mastering a ‘rebellious’ or ‘wayward’ motivational state. Although this motivational state was taken by Aristotle to broadly include ‘pleasures and pains and appetites and aversions arising through touch and taste’ (1915: 1150a9–10), it is nowadays understood more restrictively as a *conative* state, be it a want, an urge, a temptation, a drive, a craving, etc. For expository purposes, I shall generically label it a ‘desire’. For now, the following characterization of a desire will suffice: it is a disposition to act which can vary in motivational strength (Smith 1987; Schroeder 2004; Wall 2009). Consequently, if a desire inclines more toward action than another, it is said to be motivationally stronger (or simply ‘stronger’) than the other.

Returning to our initial grasp on strength of will, for the agent to master a desire to perform action A is for her to attenuate, block or suppress it so as to prevent it from converting into A (Sripada 2014). Finally, the desire which is so mastered is deemed rebellious (it is what we commonly call a ‘temptation’) in that it clashes with the agent’s *better judgment*, that is, the evaluative judgment to the effect that all things considered, a certain course of action is better than any other available. Thus, strength of will is typically taken to serve the agent’s better judgment, which seems to be, at least in part, why we tend to praise strength of will. With this rough characterization in hand, a first issue to address is how strength of will is *possible*.

2.1.1.2. How is strength of will possible?

The idea that an agent can display strength (or weakness) of will in performing A runs on the assumption that at the time of her A-ing, she could have acted otherwise while entertaining the same better judgment. There are various grounds on which this assumption can be threatened; I choose to focus here on a challenge of *psychological* nature, which was first posed about *akrasia*, weakness of will. Disputing Aristotle’s view that being akratic is acting against one’s better judgment, Socrates declared that ‘no one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course’; accordingly, he claimed, the agent who appears to display weakness of will has actually changed her mind beforehand about what it is best to do (Plato 1976: 355d-358b-c). Underlying this skeptic stance vis-à-vis weakness of will is the view, nowadays labelled internalism, that an agent’s A-favoring better judgment is intrinsically motivating or, more strongly, that it is *logically* connected to action A. This view entails that cases where an agent acts against her A-favoring better judgment are cases where the agent is in fact *physically* or *psychologically unable* to A (Hare 1952: 111; 1963: Ch. 5; Watson 1977:336-8; Lemmon 1962:144-5). With that in mind, we can now see that what holds for weakness of will holds for strength of will. If, in virtue of the normative or logical

properties of an agent's better judgment, it is not possible for her to freely act against it, then there is no sense in which she can display strength of will: she just acts as her better judgment most strongly, and inevitably, motivates her to.

Defenders of the possibility of strength (and weakness) of will have two options to counter internalism. They can reject it *en bloc*, but then they must accept the costly implication that there is no motivational difference between an evaluative judgment and (say) a judgment to the effect that oranges are orange. Alternatively, and less problematically, they can endorse a weakened version internalism according to which an evaluative judgment provides sufficient motivation for intending and acting accordingly *unless* the agent commits a reasoning error (Bratman 1979) and/or is somehow irrational (Davidson 1970; Smith 1994; Mele 1995; Scanlon 1998).¹

2.1.1.3. *The paradox of synchronic strength of will*

Theorists standardly distinguish between two kinds of strength of will. *Diachronic* strength of will consists in the agent forming certain intentions and taking actions *prior to* experiencing a desire so as to block it when it later arises (Holton 1999: 246-7). This is what Ulysses famously displays when he has his crew tie him up to a mast in order to resist the Sirens' bewitching song (Elster 1984). Diachronic strength of will is generally regarded to be a fairly unproblematic exercise since it is exhibited in the absence of the desire to be mastered.

Synchronic strength of will, by contrast, is much debated. Indeed, since it consists in the agent exercising it *whilst experiencing the desire*, it appears to give rise to the following paradox: whenever we intentionally act, we try to do what we most strongly desire to do (Davidson 1970; Hornsby 1980). Yet by hypothesis, displaying strength of will consists in refraining from doing what we most strongly desire to do. Since refraining from doing something is also acting, and since it is what we do when we display strength of will, it follows that displaying strength of will is both what we most strongly desire to do and *not* what we most strongly desire to do (Mele 1987: ch. 5; Kenneth and Smith 1997: 123 ff.). Two broad strategies can be deployed in order to solve this paradox. The first, called 'non-actional', consists in rebutting the idea that the exercise of strength of will is an action. The second, called 'actional', is to retain this idea whilst arguing that for an agent to exercise strength of will, her desire to exercise it need not be stronger than the desire it is supposed to master.

According to Kennett & Smith's (1996, 1997) non-actional, 'cognitive-dispositional' account, for an agent to display strength of will is for her to entertain certain *thoughts* that prevail over a wayward desire. For instance, a dieter exhibits strength of will by imagining the fat in her stomach when the desire to eat cookies arises (Kenneth & Smith 1996: 69). Thoughts of this sort are taken to bring to the agent's mind reasons to resist her desire and, as a result, to dampen the strength of said desire, thus causing her to desire more to refrain from indulging. On this view, the non-actional theorists claim, the paradox of strength of will dissolves since the having of this kind of thoughts is not, in itself, an intentional action; indeed, it is not caused by a desire but rather by certain cognitive skills like the disposition to entertain rational thoughts.

While strength of will may involve, in some cases, such rational thinking on the agent's part, one should question Kennett and Smith's stronger claim that strength of will is *always* non-actional (1997:129). In effect, it seems that in some (if not most) cases, the agent must actively redirect her thoughts so as to focus, for instance, on reasons not to succumb to the desire. Such displays of strength of will, therefore, are not 'cognitive' but rather actional: directing our attention is mental action (Mele 1997; Henden 2008; Kahneman 1973). This view is

¹ Multiple factors have been advanced as the cause of this defect in rationality: notably *emotions* (de Sousa 1987; Stocker 1979) and various *attentional phenomena* (Peacocke 1985: 72; Mele 1987: 92; Tappolet 2003: 108-111).

encouraged by a certain ‘actional phenomenology’ that a strong-willed agent is taken to experience: she commands herself to resist and this inner monologue is accompanied by an experience of *effort* or *struggle* (Holton 2009; Sripada 2014; Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998). Although the non-actional view just considered merits more careful assessment, I tentatively take these considerations to vindicate an actional strategy. I shall now sketch the two dominant actional views on the market.

Mele’s (1987; 1995; 2012) ‘motivational shift’ account is best grasped by means of an example. Suppose an agent is currently engaged in the activity of watching TV. As things stand, she pursues this activity because her desire D1 to watch TV is stronger than her competing desire D2 to go back to work. D1 and D2 are claimed to compete *directly* with each other in the sense that the satisfaction of either is incompatible with the satisfaction of the other. Mele argues that in such a scenario, the agent can exercise strength of will over D1 by entertaining a desire I2 whose satisfaction is instrumental, i.e. necessary, to that of D2, such as the desire to (say) utter the self-command ‘Turn it off!’ This is possible, Mele holds, because I2 does not compete *directly* with D1 – an agent can satisfy both D1 and I2. Then, provided that I2 is stronger than the directly competing desire I1 *not* to utter ‘Turn it off!’, the agent will act on I2. And since the satisfaction of I2 leads to that of D2, it is argued to operate the following motivational shift: D2 becomes stronger than D1 and the latter is thus mastered.

However, this rationale runs counter to the robust intuition that if D1 is stronger than D2, then I1 must be stronger than I2 (Kenneth & Smith 1996: 69; Mele 1987: 72 acknowledges this point).

Other theorists deploy a different strategy in order to account for synchronic strength of will. Contrary to Mele, they suggest that strength of will is possible only if we take the agent’s motivations to be partitioned into two distinct and independent sources, or systems, one of whom is designed to *regulate* the other. For lack of space, I shall exclusively focus on Holton’s (2003; 2009) influential application of this strategy.² Holton’s ‘will-power’ account states that an agent displays strength of will when she sticks to her resolutions, and that she does so by using a distinct, independent source of motivation, the *faculty* of will-power. He describes this faculty as a ‘mental muscle’ which can be strengthened, takes effort to use and whose energy is depleted by stress, fatigue and exercise. In this regard, not only does his conception sit well with our commonsense grasp on the notion; it is also bolstered by numerous empirical experiments (see e.g. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven & Tice 1998). However, it is not clear how this account can directly address the puzzle of synchronic strength of will at hand. Indeed, a resolution to A is (simplifying somewhat) a special kind of intention to A that the agent forms in order to withstand contrary desires that she expects will arise come the time to A (Holton 2009; Bratman 1987). Consequently, this conception bears on diachronic strength of will and cannot deal, as such, with seemingly common and plausible cases where the agent, at a given time, exercises strength of will absent any relevant resolution.

2.1.2. Limits of the present research

As the current state of research shows, none of the proposals on the topic is equipped to provide a satisfactory resolution of the paradox of synchronic strength of will.

Moreover, the accounts sketched above are all vulnerable to the problem of *diminished motivation* (Connor 2014). Up to this point, I have tacitly regarded displays of strength of will as being *successful* in fending off temptations. But strength of will is not essentially successful. There are intuitively three ways in which an agent can fail to successfully exercise strength of will: she succumbs to a desire without even thinking to resist it; she

² But see e.g. Metcalfe & Mischel (1999) and Sripada (2012, 2014) for other insightful two-system models.

does not exercise strength of will despite judging, at the time of succumbing to a desire, that she should (or could) do so; or she exercises strength of will but eventually fails to override the desire all the same (Mele 2012: 111). A natural explanation of these cases is that the agent isn't sufficiently motivated (if at all) to master the wayward desire. Indeed, since on the actional conception favored here exercises of strength of will are actions, agents can be apathetic about these actions too. But if this is so, strength of will requires further motivation on the agent's part in order to be exercised and successful. This opens up a troublesome regress of motivational sources.

Another shortcoming of the current state of research surrounding strength of will is that it leaves the seemingly central notion of *effort* broadly unexplained. Is effort an action, or a feeling? Is it a part or a by-product of the display of strength of will? In fairness to the theorists, the conceptual fuzz surrounding the notion of effort is pervasive across various disciplines, as Massin (2017b) extensively shows. Be that as it may, it must be characterized if it is to enlighten strong-willed action. Relatedly, the notion of a desire's motivational strength, to the degree of which the intensity of the agent's effort to master it is plausibly correlated, is underspecified. At best, philosophers are able to tell us what this strength does *not* amount to;³ but accounts of what it is, or at least what determines it,⁴ are not properly introduced in the current discussion about strength of will.

2.1.3. Own contribution to the topic

As most theorists (following Mele 1987: 54) now acknowledge, there exist 'unorthodox', and yet genuine, cases of strength of will in which the agent resists a desire to do what she judges best and actually acts against this better judgment. One may argue that the postulation of these so-called unorthodox cases stems from an equivocation of the notion of 'better judgment'; indeed, it seems that an action may be judged best on moral grounds, but not on prudential or hedonistic grounds, or vice versa. This is crucial, for the wayward desire which the strong-willed agent masters is precisely so named in virtue of its running counter to the agent's better judgment. Therefore, I will examine the hypothesis that *all* cases of strong-willed action (orthodox and unorthodox alike) actually involve the withholding of a particular sort of better judgment to be specified.

If this proves unfruitful, another option is to accept the reality of unorthodox cases, and to infer from them that serving the agent's better judgment is not an essential feature of a strong-willed action. Alternatively, strength of will may consist in the withholding of an *intention* (Holton 2009) or *agential commitment* (Mele 1995:71-4), provided that this commitment i) is at work in both diachronic and synchronic strength of will and ii) need not be in line with the agent's better judgment or reasons. I take this project to be supported by the fact that the phrases 'strength of will' and 'will-power' revolve around the apparently anormative notion of *will*.

As previously stressed, the effort (as well as cognate concepts of struggle and difficulty) inherent to strength of will stands in need of characterization. I hope to fulfil this need by exploring, following de Vignemont & Massin (2015) and Massin (2017b), the hypothesis that an effort equates with an *intentional exertion of force toward some goal*, and that this exertion necessarily encounters a *resistance*, in the form of a contrary force. If this is on the right track, the effort allegedly involved in exercises of strength of will may be understood as the exertion of the will's force against the resistive force of some contrary desire. This, again, squares nicely with the expression 'strength of will' and other related idioms: we say that an agent feels the *pull* of the desire, that she experiences an

³ Notably, they agree that a desire's strength is neither its 'felt violence or intensity' (Charlton 1988: 127-8; Thalberg 1985: 89, 99) nor its urgency (see also Mele 2003: 162-3).

⁴ For influential proposals on this matter, see e.g. Strawson (1994) and Oddie (2005). See also McInerney (2004) for a useful distinction between a desire's 'tendency to win in competition with other desires' and its 'energizing-action strength'.

inner conflict of motivations, that she *resists* a desire or that she otherwise cannot but succumb to an *irresistible* desire.

More importantly, so conceiving of strength of will leads us to endorse the neglected and yet compelling view that the exercise of strength of will is not an action but an *activity*, i.e. a process stretching over time which consists of successive phases following one another (Vendler 1957). Indeed, this temporal structure best fits the phenomenology of strength of will, namely the lingering experience of resistance and inner conflict. If the present proposal finds resonance, it also offers the best prospects for resolving the paradox of synchronic strength of will. In effect, the wayward desire may be stronger *at the beginning* of this process but then grow weaker as the agent operates a motivational shift along the lines of Mele's (1987) account, through mechanisms which shall be properly characterized. However, I should emphasize that this framework crucially departs from Mele's in leaving completely open the possibility of motivational compartments advocated by Holton, which I shall thoroughly consider.

2.2. Objectives, data and method

As a philosophical undertaking in the analytical tradition, my project will primarily consist in conceptual analysis. Thus, my first main objective will be to carefully assess the existing accounts of strength of will in light of their argumentative support and logical implications. It is from these accounts' strengths and putative shortcomings, that I hope to lay the foundations for an innovative and conceptually sounder account of my own. That being said, one should not lose sight of the fact that current methodology in analytic philosophy makes it paramount to take into account our pretheoretical, commonsensical ways of ascribing strength of will in everyday contexts. To this effect, surveys conducted by Mele (2010) and May and Holton's (2010) will provide a helping hand in constraining my proposals on the subject.

Finally, as is now customary among theorists, I shall explore an important body of empirical literature, notably in the fields of psychiatry and social psychology, with the objective of shedding light on the *factors, processes and mechanisms* at work in strong-willed action and failures thereof: implementation intentions (e.g. Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006; Gollwitzer & Oettingen 2011), exposure therapy (Sripada 2014), personal rules and the proximity of rewards (e.g. Ainslie 1992: 144-174; 2001), delayed gratification (e.g. Metcalfe & Mischel 1999), effort and energy depletion (e.g. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven & Tice 1998), resistance and conflict (e.g. Knoch & Fehr 2007; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs 2012), irresistible desires and compulsion in addiction (Holton & Berridge 2013; Berridge, Robinson & Aldridge 2009).

2.3. Relevance of the project

The immediate relevance of this project lies in its providing much-needed solutions to the paradox of synchronic strength of will. Since the debate around strength of will is a fairly recent one, particularly with respect to the actional ‘partitioning’ views that have been advanced (Holton 2009; Sripada 2014), it still leaves ample room for improvement and innovative solutions, as my tentative personal contribution was intended to suggest.

At a *theoretical* level, my project aims to continue the ever-refining analysis of the concepts of desire and will, which are nothing short of fundamental in the philosophy of mind. Moreover, tackling the will from the standpoint of its strength rather than from its weakness not only breaks with tradition but paves the way for a finer understanding of the latter notion. In effect, since weakness of will is on my approach defined by a lack of strength – rather than the other way around –, being weak-willed may be failing to resist at all, or resisting but not strongly enough, or resisting but not long enough.

At a *practical* level, I hope to shed light on the *value* of strong-willed action; indeed, in defining strength of will as the overcoming of a resistive force, one ought to make sense of the fact that strong-willed action, *qua* action – that is, regardless of whether it serves the agent's better judgment –, deserves praise in that it derives from the agent's *perseverance*.

Finally, my discussion of strength of will shall bridge these various philosophical discussions with the objects of many relevant empirical studies, notably with regard to the strength and efficiency of an agent's intentions and other policies in the face of rebellious desires. The ever-growing interest in this topic, spreading far beyond academic research to the large public, is not surprising. In times when temptation (notably in the form of food, drugs and electronical devices) is nigh on ubiquitous, strength of will has never been so valuable, but also difficult to cultivate.

2.4. Schedule

My project will be divided into five phases, starting from the beginning of the grant in September 2018.

Phase I (months 1-6): I parry skeptical worries by defending a weakened internalist stance on motivation.

Phase II (months 7-12): I evaluate the existing conceptions of strength of will; although the non-actional strategy is fully considered, it is expected to be jettisoned in favor of a more compelling actional model.

Outputs: a commented bibliography on the topic; Ch. 1 of the dissertation, which sets the theoretical background for strength of will; Ch. 2, on the state of the art.

Phase III (months 13-24, with one semester at the Institut Jean Nicod): I search for a particular kind of better judgment which may be involved in all cases (orthodox and unorthodox) of strength of will; I also explore the hypothesis that strength of will is *anormative*, i.e. it involves the withholding of a special kind of agential commitment, which is linked to the agent's will but is decoupled from her evaluative judgments.

Outputs: Ch. 3, on normative conceptions of strength of will; Ch. 4, on agential commitments, their nature and an *anormative* approach of the topic; a paper on this novel approach.

Phase IV (months 25-36, with one semester at the University of Cambridge): I conciliate the results of the previous phases with the initial hypothesis that displaying strength of will stretches over time. I provide solutions to both conceptual conundrums initially highlighted. i) To solve the paradox of synchronic strength of will, I argue that the force of the agent's will and that of her desire change in *magnitude* and/or *direction* during the span of the activity. I consider the role of effort in this shift. In parallel, I review the vast empirical literature so as to pinpoint the exact mechanisms at work in the process. ii) To put a stop to the looming regress of motivational sources, I treat the will as a *basic action* which is a *part* of the exercise of strength of will.

Outputs: Ch. 5, on the temporal structure of strength of will; a paper on my proposal; Ch. 6, on efforts and other mechanisms involved in motivational shifts; a provisional draft of the dissertation.

Phase VI (months 37-48): I tie some loose ends and ready my thesis for submission (in Spring 2022). I revise and harmonize the written chapters of my work, and enhance them with inputs and amendments gathered in colloquia and workshops.

Outputs: the final draft of the dissertation; two publications in peer-reviewed journals.

2.5. Importance of the work places

Prof. Olivier Massin will be the first co-supervisor of my thesis, and I could not think of a philosopher better suited to do this job for the following reasons. Firstly, he will soon (Fall 2018) undertake at the University of Zürich a project on the concept of effort (SNF professorship « The Nature and Value of Efforts »), which is of the utmost relevance to my own since, as I have mentioned, it is commonly assumed that an agent's display of strength of will involves an effort on her part. I cannot hide that my tentative contribution to the topic of strength of will draws inspiration from Prof. Massin's (2017b) proposals on effort. What is more, Prof. Massin has made influential contributions in various fields, including metaphysics, the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of action, which are likely to fuel my project in that they tackle concepts that seem inextricably connected to strength of will: namely, the concepts of *trying* and of *want*, which he forcefully analyzes in terms of action (Massin 2014), and that of *force* (Massin 2009; 2011; 2015 with de Vignemont; 2016). Hence, I would immensely benefit from his research.

Moreover, I will likely gain insight from University of Zürich's psychologist Prof. Brandstätter and economist Prof. Fehr, who have worked respectively on goal implementation (see e.g. Brandstätter, Giesinger, Job & Frank 2015) and resistance to temptation (Knoch & Fehr 2007).

Prof. Richard Holton, from the University of Cambridge, will be my second co-supervisor. With his ‘will-power’ account, he is one of the few theorists, and a highly prominent one at that, who have directly and abundantly addressed strength of will. Moreover, his (2013) collaboration with world-class neuroscientist Kent Berridge on addiction, together with his thorough acquaintance and use of the experimental data in his (2009) treatment of strength of will, make him an ideal supervisor on both philosophical and methodological grounds. I will be in frequent contact with him via Skype and e-mail, and he has agreed to host me for a semester at Cambridge.

Finally, I have been invited to spend one semester at the prestigious Institut Jean Nicod, where the Team Agency, composed notably of Prof. Frédérique de Vignemont and Prof. Elisabeth Pacherie, make tremendous contributions to the philosophy of action. Prof. Pacherie's areas of expertise, namely intentions and the sense of control and agency (Pacherie 2006, 2008, 2015), are particularly pertinent to my project.

3. Selective bibliography

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