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ALFRED R. MELE, *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will*, Oxford University Press, 2012, £30 hardback, pp. x + 145. ISBN 978-0-19-989613-4

Alfred Mele here caps, or continues, an impressive sequence of well-argued monographs on connected topics by one that is commendably brief. It offers at once a reconsideration that touches on recent developments, and a summing-up that resumes past discussions. The result will be welcome, and can be widely recommended. It includes well-developed arguments against what can seem two plausible claims, that backsliding is always compulsive, and that one cannot be effectively motivated to adopt a strategy to weaken the force of what is currently one's strongest motivation. Here I shall focus upon an issue that has become salient through the recent work of Richard Holton, notably in his *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (OUP, 2009). 'Backsliding' is a good label, being at once idiomatic and free of associations. Yet what is the topic?

Familiar but less innocent alternatives are 'akrasia' and 'weakness of will'. Writers who look back to Plato and Aristotle may well embrace the first, and be embarrassed by the second; for both of them lack a term for the will, and fail to focus upon intentions. Hence they conceive of a failure to stand by a decision as a failure to act upon a judgment of how best to act. It is within this tradition that Mele sums up his own conception as follows (118): 'I have defined *core weak-willed* action as free, sane, intentional action that, as the nondepressed agent consciously recognizes at the time of action, is contrary to his better judgment, a judgment based on practical reasoning.' But does assimilate two different things? Holton argues for a distinction between failure to act on judgment, which he terms 'akrasia', and failure to stand by a decision, which, with refinements that I shall come to, he terms 'weakness of will'. Mele reminds us that he had made the substantive distinction already (16). There are *evaluative* commitments, and *executive* ones. If, in a kind of case that both he and Holton illustrate memorably, I think it best not to take a dive from the top board, and yet decide to do so, and then fail to do so out of funk, I act in accordance with judgment but out of weakness of will. This they broadly agree about; but Mele also counts as weakness of will a failure to form an intention that accords with one's better judgment.

Who is right about the connotations of the phrase 'weakness of will'? Holton claims to be respecting 'our ordinary notion' (2009: 94), and Mele accordingly appeals to surveys of philosophical novices. One may doubt how well these promise to resolve the issue. Compare J.L. Austin's distinction, in 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', between performing an act 'deliberately' or 'intentionally'. A questionnaire handed out on a Clapham omnibus, or in a first-year lecture, is unlikely to elicit anything like Austin's finesse; and yet one may find it persuasive. It is important to distinguish between *conceptions* and *concepts*. It is hard enough to identify the first by circulating questionnaires, for the answers may be contaminated by implicit background assumptions; even where a conception is identified, it is unlikely to fix the exact connotations of the concept. Mele's data are interesting, but in no way decisive. There is no shortcut here to doing philosophy, in the hope (however uncertain of fulfilment) that our understanding of the concept may be refined and not distorted by suggested analyses.

That was a point of terminology (though a significant one). More substantively in need of scrutiny is Mele's conception of agents' 'better judgment, a judgment based on practical reasoning'. If their 'better judgment' is a judgment better than some other judgment of theirs that is worse, we may have Plato's picture of a synchronous conflict of judgments; if it is their faculty of judgment operating optimally, it cannot be 'based on' reasoning, though it will reason. Yet

this may not differentiate it. As Aristotle is aware, even reliable judgments can be intuitive, and even akratic ends may feed into means-end reasoning. Can it really be the role of better judgment, in the faculty sense, to assess what is best, all things considered and all options weighed? Agents may reasonably have little confidence that they can identify that. (It might be best to drop everything, and change one's life; who can tell?) So Mele is wise to allow a limitation: we may understand 'best' as 'relativized to options envisioned by the agent' (6). What commonly links these to motivation? As he well notes, it is all too easy to conceive of action contrary to judgment if one thinks of the judging as 'a purely academic exercise that has no interesting connection to the agent's motivational condition' (24). Yet this easy possibility misses our target: 'When an agent feels no pull at all toward the course of action he judges best, the claim that he displays weakness of will seems out of place' (ibid.). One can go further: if I say to myself 'I really ought to do so-and-so', sincerely but irresolutely, and don't even try, this is rather half-heartedness than weakness of will. What we plausibly need in addition, for that variety of weakness of will that is also akrasia, is 'motivation to settle on what to do' (64), and a lively concern, if the question is what it is best to do, 'to *do* what it would be best to do' (67). Supposing that agents define their options by reference to some end or ends, foregrounded or backgrounded, we should think of a reflective agent as concerned above all else to do what is best in relation to some set of ends, and deliberating with an eye to that. So long as this concern remains dominant, he can be expected to try to enact whatever way or means he identifies as best.

If this is right (and I have quoted from Mele things that suggest it), it has interesting implications. First, we need not follow him in imputing to agents a 'default' mechanism that leads them to act on judgment if nothing interferes (64-6); for what they are acting on are their own purposes. Secondly, a failure to act on judgment only counts as akratic if it is at the same time a weak-willed failure to pursue one's own goals. I have already set aside indifference and half-heartedness. Different again is fickleness: an agent may capriciously forsake an end even as he forms a view of how best to achieve it. In cases of akrasia, he discards, or at least disregards, the intentions that initiated and focused his deliberations (or otherwise underlay his decision) not through losing or gaining reasons, nor through fickleness, but because he finds it too difficult or disagreeable to act on his conclusion. It is agreed that not all weakness of will is akrasia: when I fail out of funk to keep to what I knew to be a rash resolve to dive off the top board, I display weakness of will without akrasia. Yet if akrasia is to be distinguished from fickleness, and indifference, and half-heartedness, it may be that it must always involve weakness of will.

It is possible that, when half of Mele's Florida freshmen identified weakness of will with 'doing something you believed or knew you shouldn't do', they were not disagreeing with those who opted, also or instead, for 'doing something you decided or intended not to do' (19), but assuming an orientation towards a goal that doing the act would frustrate. They are unlikely to have had in mind cases of complacent amoralism, or of 'purely academic' thinking, or even of idle aspiration. However, Holton is more restrictive: he holds that weakness of will involves an over-readiness to revise a *resolution*, i.e. an intention of a special kind 'involving both an intention to engage in a certain action, and a further intention not to let that intention be deflected' (2009: 11). This gives a clear sense to the phrase at the cost of restricting its application: there can be no weakness of will where the agent (whether innocently, thoughtlessly, or idly) forms no such 'contrary inclination defeating intention' (2009:77). It is implied that one cannot display weakness of will without an awareness of the danger of contrary inclinations, and the will-power to resolve to resist them. On this view, a demoralized agent who forms an

intention to achieve some goal, but adds no supplementary resolution, since he is aware that he is bad at keeping resolutions, will not count as acting out of weakness of will even if he discards his original intention not for some good reason, nor out of caprice, but in conflicted evasion of the difficult or disagreeable. And yet it is more plausibly a role of resolutions to make weakness of will less likely than to make it conceptually possible.

Such is the kind of reflection invited by Mele's succinctly thought-provoking book.

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