

The Folk Conception of Weakness of Will*

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Experimental philosophers (e.g., Mele 2010; May and Holton 2012) have recently begun to investigate the folk conception of weakness of will. Despite the fact that many philosophers have agreed that weakness of will consists solely in akrasia—i.e., in acting contrary to one’s better judgment—researchers have found that the violation of resolutions to act in particular ways also figures prominently in folk thinking about weakness of will. In light of these results some have proposed disjunctive or family resemblance accounts of the folk conception, in which akratic actions and resolution violations both figure as central elements. However, these accounts often fail to explain what unifies the folk conception and the set of actions that fall within its intuitive extension. In this article I report the results of three studies that investigate the folk conception of weakness of will and show how they support the view that weakness of will consists (at least in the minds of many ordinary Americans) in actions or decisions that violate the strongest available normative reasons.

keywords: weakness of will, akrasia, intention, experimental philosophy, folk psychology

1. Introduction

Philosophers have long puzzled over the phenomenon of weakness of will. Some (e.g., Socrates in the *Protagoras*; Hare, 1952, 1963; Watson, 1977) have questioned whether weak-willed

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action is genuinely possible, since it requires that agents do one thing while sincerely believing they ought to do something else.¹ Others have been skeptical about whether weak-willed actions can be free, since agents who display weakness of will sometimes seem to be overcome or enslaved by their desires or passions (cf. Watson 1977; Audi 1979; Pugmire 1982; Mele 1986). Many philosophers have considered weak-willed action to be morally iniquitous, while others (e.g., Davidson, 1970) have viewed it as merely irrational. More than a few philosophers (e.g., Aristotle, Aquinas, *inter alia*) have portrayed weakness of will as a matter of giving into temptations that stem from one's passions or desires, whereas others (e.g., Davidson, 1970, p. 102) have maintained that weak-willed actions can also stem from yielding to "principle, politeness, or sense of duty."²

Of central concern to the philosophical debate is the nature of weakness of will and the intrapersonal factors that comprise it. A widely endorsed perspective that dates back to the ancients is that weak-willed action consists primarily in acting in a manner contrary to what one judges to be the best course of action, all things considered. Plato's Socrates, for example, states that the common view about weakness of will is that "many people who know what it is best to do are not willing to do it, though it is in their power, but do something else" (*Protagoras* 352d). In a similar vein, Donald Davidson (1970, p. 93) writes:

An agent's will is weak if he acts, and acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgement; in such cases we sometimes say he lacks the will power to do what he knows, or at any rate believes, would, everything considered, be better.

¹ In the *Protagoras* (358b-c) Socrates declares, "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." According to Hare (1952, p. 20), "It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a... command addressed to ourselves, and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so."

² Aristotle, for instance, writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1150a11-13), "The self-controlled person is in such a state as ... to master even those [temptations] by which most people are defeated," and the weak-will person "is in such a state as to be defeated even by those ... which most people master."

Acting contrary to one's best judgment is customarily referred to as 'akratic action,' from the classical Greek term 'akrasia,' which denotes a lack of power or control (Mele, 2006). According to philosophical tradition, weakness of will can be understood as akrasia.

Recently, however, the identification of weakness of will with akrasia has been challenged by Richard Holton (1999; 2003; 2009). Holton (1999, p. 248) has argued that weakness of will should instead be understood in terms of revising certain intentions too readily:

[A]ctors show weakness of will when they revise an intention as a result of a reconsideration that they should not have performed; that is, when their reconsideration exhibits tendencies that it is not reasonable for the agent to have.³

Holton (1999, p. 250) adds the condition that the kind of intention the violation of which lies at the heart of weakness of will is one that is designed to defeat inclinations to the contrary. Holton (1999, p. 249) has suggested that it can be reasonable to reconsider one's intentions (i) if one believes that circumstances have changed in such a way that they defeat the purpose of having them, (ii) if one believes the intentions can no longer be carried out, or (iii) if one believes that great suffering might result that was not previously envisaged. However, he maintains that it is not reasonable "to have a tendency to reconsider intentions that were expressly made in order to get over one's later reluctance to act" (ibid.).

When Holton (1999, 262) originally put forward his challenge to the traditional view of weakness of will, he argued that understanding it in terms of the violation of contrary-inclination-defeating intentions (or 'resolution violations,' as he later (2003) calls them) better captures "our ordinary notion of weakness of will" than the traditional view that identifies it with akrasia. Commenting on the traditional view, Holton (1999, p. 241) wrote:

³ Holton (1999) credits Wiggins (1987) with defending a similar view. Cf. Rorty (1980) for an early, influential attempt to distinguish different varieties of akrasia and to distinguish akrasia from weakness of will.

I do not agree that this is the untutored view. Whenever I have asked non philosophers what they take weakness of will to consist in, they have made no mention of judgments about the better or worse course of action. Rather, they have said things like this: weak-willed people are irresolute; they do not persist in their intentions; they are too easily deflected from the path that they have chosen.

Holton (1999, p. 258) briefly considered the possibility that weakness of will may not consist in only one kind of thing:

Perhaps that is right. If so, I should rest content with the claim that many cases of weakness of will are captured by the account proposed here; I should offer it as a supplement to the traditional account, not as a replacement. But I cannot help thinking that the traditional account is not simply inadequate, but straight-out wrong. First, we have seen a number of cases in which people appear to be *akratic* without being weak-willed. Second, I doubt that there are any clear cases of weakness of will that can be captured by the traditional account and not by mine.

In light of recent experimental evidence, however, Holton has modified his view of the folk conception of weakness of will. Writing with Joshua May, Holton now endorses the following view:

Indeed, our findings suggest that no simple account phrased in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions will do the job. The ordinary notion of weakness of will is more like a prototype or cluster concept. There are core cases that possess a number of features. As these features are removed, people are less inclined to describe the resulting cases as ones of weakness of will. Akrasia and resolution-violation are indeed among these features. However, neither is sufficient on its own for an ascription of weakness of will; and other

features also play a role, such as the moral valence of the action. (May and Holton 2012, p. 342)

May and Holton (2012) base their claims on a series of experiments they performed, which they claim provides support for a prototype model of weakness of will.

As we will see below, May and Holton's (2012) prototype theory fits well with much of the available data concerning folk intuitions about weakness of will. However, it fails to explain what it is about the ideas of akratic action, resolution violation, and wrongdoing that enables them to constitute a single, unified conception of weakness of will. I wish to maintain that the following distillation of the folk conception of weakness of will provides such an explanation: actions or decisions that violate the strongest available normative reasons tend to count as instances of weakness of will. Normative reasons are considerations that count in favor of or justify certain courses of action. The reasons can be moral, prudential, conventional, legal, or otherwise. The stronger the reasons that are violated and the greater number of them there are, the more likely an action will count as weak-willed in the minds of ordinary individuals. How strongly an agent identifies with or endorses a normative reason can also affect such judgments. Thus, when an individual recognizes that one course of action is best but acts contrary to this recognition (i.e., when they act akratically), the normative reasons account has it that if the agent's action is judged to be weak-willed, this judgment will stem from the fact that she acted contrary to the reasons that pointed away from the target action. When agents unreasonably set aside contrary-inclination defeating intentions and are judged to be weak-willed, it is the fact that they rejected the reasons in favor of these intentions that led to this judgment.⁴

⁴ Thanks to three anonymous reviewers for *Philosophical Psychology* for assisting me in formulating this improved of the normative reasons account.

The normative reasons account is thus a generalization of the traditional akratic action account. On the latter view, an action counts as an instance or manifestation of weakness of will only when the agent judges that a different and incompatible action is the one that is best supported by the available reasons. The normative reasons account loosens this restriction and allows for weak-willed action even when agents fail to recognize the force of reasons against performing the target actions. A second loosening of traditional requirements on weakness of will is that the normative reasons account does not require that an action that is contrary to the strongest available normative reasons actually be performed. Merely deciding to set aside the normative reasons in favor it can be enough.

In Sections 2 through 4 I describe three studies that investigate the folk conception of weakness of will and argue that they provide support for the normative reasons account. Section 2 reports the results of an experiment that builds and improves upon May and Holton's (2012) experiments, combining akratic action, resolution violation, and moral valence into a single study. Because of the significant role that resolution violations were found to play in this experiment, two additional studies were constructed that investigated the effects of this factor in greater detail. These studies reveal (i) that descriptions of akratic actions, resolution violations, or morally bad actions are often sufficient for motivating attributions of weakness of will, (ii) that descriptions of akratic actions, resolution violations, and morally bad actions often have an additive effect, (iii) that descriptions of resolution violations can sometimes have a greater effect on attributions of weakness of will than descriptions of akratic actions, and (iv) that merely deciding to reject normative reasons can be viewed as weak-willed. Because the normative reasons account provides a straightforward and coherent explanation of these and other results, I suggest there is a strong empirical case for its claim to represent folk thinking on the matter.

2. Study 1

In an effort to investigate whether the folk conception of weakness of will is based upon the notion of akratic action, resolution violation or some combination of both, May and Holton (2012, sec. 3) presented participants with a series of vignettes in which the presence of these factors was varied and asked participants whether the protagonists displayed weakness of will. Unfortunately, however, May and Holton did not construct vignettes that differed from one another in only the respects of interest—i.e., in whether an agent acted contrary to his/her considered judgment or in violation of some resolution. For example, in May and Holton's first experiment, their example of someone who violates both an evaluative judgment and a resolution is someone who acts contrary to a weight loss diet, while their example of someone who acts akratically but does not violate a resolution is someone who commits adultery. Their example of an agent who violates a resolution but does not act akratically is a young boy who violates a promise to his mother not to play (American) tackle football, and their example of someone who neither acts akratically nor violates a resolution is another adulterer. These cases are quite different from one another. Yet in order to be confident that differences in participant responses to these cases are due solely to differences in the independent variables of akratic action and resolution violation, only the levels of these variables should have been changed from case to case. Other details should have remained the same.

Recognizing that the large differences between the vignettes they used in their first experiment made comparisons between the results they obtained difficult, if not impossible, May and Holton (2012, sec. 4) performed a second experiment in which they used vignettes that are “uniform” in the sense that they all involve an agent who is thinking about going skydiving.

However, the protagonist actually goes skydiving in only two of the vignettes, while in the other two he does not. And in the two conditions where he goes through with the jump, he acts akratically but violates a resolution in only one. In the two conditions where he does not go through with the jump, he does not act akratically in either and again violates a resolution in only one. Moreover, as Al Mele has pointed out (May and Holton 2012, n. 14), the agent exhibits courage in the two conditions where he jumps out of a plane but not in the conditions where he does not. Furthermore, in only one of the conditions where he jumps and only one of the conditions where he does not jump, the agent is described as “increasingly anxious” leading up to the jump and “terrified” when the time comes for the jump. Thus, the “uniform” vignettes of May and Holton’s second experiment involve an unequal distribution of action and emotion types. In other words, their vignettes again fail to differ only in the levels of the independent variables of interest.

In a third experiment, May and Holton varied the moral valence of the actions in question in order to see whether the factors characteristic of the ‘Knobe effect’ (cf. Pettit and Knobe 2009 and Alfano, Beebe, and Robinson 2012) might have an impact on participant attributions of weakness of will. Following the work of Joshua Knobe (2003a, 2003b), experimental philosophers have found that a variety of folk psychological attributions can be significantly affected by the goodness or badness of the actions agents are performing. However, in all four of the cases that May and Holton used to test for this effect, the protagonist failed to act in accordance with his resolution and nothing was said about whether he acted in accord with or in violation of his considered judgment. Consequently, their final study is unable to tell what kinds of interactions there might be between moral valence, on the one hand, and the variables of

akratic action and resolution violation, on the other—despite the fact that these variables are the primary items of interest in May and Holton’s experiments.⁵

In spite of the difficulties outlined above, the general idea behind May and Holton’s (2012) studies appears to be a sound one. If we want to know what the ordinary conception of weakness of will is, we should see how philosophically untrained participants respond to probes that vary factors such as whether an action was performed akratically, whether it violated a resolution, and whether the action was good or bad.

Therefore, for my first study I combined each of these factors into a single study where the variables of akratic action and resolution violation were varied within each vignette set and moral valence was varied between each set.⁶ The first vignette set featured a protagonist who performed an action that was morally good. Each vignette in the set began with the following description:

Franz, a Nazi soldier, has been charged with the task of searching every flat in a certain Jewish ghetto and imprisoning every Jewish intellectual he finds there. Franz, however, has been lax in carrying out his duties and has not imprisoned every Jewish intellectual he has found.

The story continued with Franz either (i) acting akratically and violating a resolution (AA/RV), (ii) acting akratically but not violating a resolution (AA/not-RV), (iii) not acting akratically but

⁵ In a third experiment, May and Holton (2012, sec. 5) once more employ what they think are “quite uniform” vignettes. However, in two of the vignettes the protagonist joins a neo-Nazi group, while in the remaining two he joins a French language class. In only one of the Nazi conditions and one of the French class conditions, the protagonist harasses local immigrant children. However, trying to start fights with immigrants with the help of members of one’s French class is a very different action from trying to start such fights with help from members of a neo-Nazi group. In the contrasting conditions, which elicited the lowest attributions of weakness of will, the protagonist stays home to eat pizza and watch a movie. The psychological processes involved in giving into the temptation to eat pizza and watch movies are very different from those involved in giving into the temptation to harass immigrants (particularly if one is a member of a hate group).

⁶ Thanks to MP for assistance in developing the materials for Study 1.

violating a resolution (not-AA/RV), or (iv) neither acting akratically nor violating a resolution (not-AA/not-RV):

(AA/RV) Franz believes that it would be best for him if he strictly carried out his duties, so one day he resolves to start imprisoning every Jewish intellectual he finds.

(AA/not-RV) Franz believes that it would be best for him if he strictly carried out his duties, but he has not resolved to start imprisoning every Jewish intellectual he finds.

(not-AA/RV) Franz has not decided whether he believes that it would be best for him if he strictly carried out his duties, but one day he resolves to start imprisoning every Jewish intellectual he finds.

(not-AA/not-RV) Franz has not decided whether he believes that it would be best for him if he strictly carried out his duties, and he has not resolved to start imprisoning every Jewish intellectual he finds.

Each story then concluded with the following action description: ‘The next morning, [however,] Franz fails to imprison a Jewish intellectual he encounters in the ghetto.’⁷ Participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following claim: ‘Franz displayed weakness of will in this case.’ Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, with ‘1’ marked ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘5’ marked ‘Strongly Agree.’

A second vignette set involved a protagonist performing a morally neutral action and began with the sentence ‘John has been reading a book on Buddhism and the benefits of meditating every day’ and ended with ‘The next night, [however,] John does not meditate before going to bed.’ In between these two sentences appeared one of the following descriptions of John’s internal states:

⁷ This action counts as morally good not because the agent deserves any moral credit for his action, since his motivational states are not praiseworthy, but simply because it was good that he failed to do something morally reprehensible.

(AA/RV) John believes that it would be best for him if he meditated thirty minutes every night before going to bed, so one day he resolves to meditate for thirty minutes every night.

(AA/not-RV) John believes that it would be best for him if he meditated thirty minutes every night before going to bed, but he has not resolved to meditate for thirty minutes every night.

(not-AA/RV) John has not decided whether he believes that it would be best for him if he meditated thirty minutes every night before going to bed, but one day he resolves to meditate for thirty minutes every night.

(not-AA/not-RV) John has not decided whether he believes that it would be best for him if he meditated thirty minutes every night before going to bed, and he has not resolved to meditate for thirty minutes every night.

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that John displayed weakness of will in this case, and their responses were recorded on the same kind of Likert scale as above.

The final set of vignettes used in Study 1 involved a protagonist who performed a morally bad action. In each case the character was introduced with the following description: ‘John cannot afford People Magazine, so he often steals one from a street vendor while walking to work.’ Each story concluded with ‘The next day, [however,] John steals a People Magazine from a street vendor.’ The middle portions of the story were varied in the following ways:

(AA/RV) John believes that it would be best for him if he did not steal, so one day he resolves to stop stealing People Magazine from street vendors.

(AA/not-RV) John believes that it would be best for him if he did not steal, but he has not resolved to stop stealing People Magazine from street vendors.

(not-AA/RV) John has not decided whether he believes that it would be best for him if he did not steal, but one day he resolves to stop stealing People Magazine from street vendors.

(not- AA/not-RV) John has not decided whether he believes that it would be best for him if he did not steal, and he has not resolved to stop stealing People Magazine from street vendors.

Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that John displayed weakness of will in this case.⁸

Unlike the cases used by May and Holton (2012), the three sets of cases above each combine the same action—e.g., failing to imprison Jewish intellectuals, failing to meditate, or stealing from street vendors—with variations in akrasia and resolution violations in a way that promises to provide greater illumination about the relative contributions these factors make to folk attributions of weakness of will. Because akratic action and resolution violation were hypothesized to be more central to the folk conception of weakness of will than moral valence, the latter was chosen to be represented using inter-vignette differences rather than intra-vignette differences.

The following hypotheses were formulated concerning the interactions between moral valence, akrasia, resolution violations, and ascriptions of weakness of will:

(H1) Participants will be more likely to ascribe weakness of the will to agents who are described as acting akratically than to agents who are not described as acting akratically.

⁸ Note to self: next time don't use the same name for different characters in the same experiment.

(H2) Being described as acting akratically will often be sufficient for participants to ascribe weakness of will to an agent.

(H3) Participants will be more likely to ascribe weakness of will to agents who are described as violating resolutions than to agents who are not described as violating resolutions.

(H4) Being described as violating a resolution will often be sufficient for participants to ascribe weakness of will to an agent.

(H5) Descriptions of akratic actions and resolution violations will tend to have an additive effect—i.e., the more reasons an agent violates, the more likely participants will be to count the agent's action as an instance of weakness of will.

(H6) Participants will be more likely to ascribe weakness of will to agents who perform morally bad actions than to agents who perform morally good or neutral actions.

(H1) through (H5) stem from the normative reasons account of the folk conception of weakness of will that was outlined above. (H6) is based upon the fact that almost everywhere experimental philosophers have looked for a Knobe effect, they have found one.⁹

To test these hypotheses, 600 undergraduate students (average age = 21, 54% female, 68% Anglo-American) from a large, public university in the northeastern United States were each given one of the twelve vignettes described above. Mean participant responses in each of our twelve conditions are reported in Figure 1. Of the cases that elicited the four highest mean responses ($M = 4.08, 3.76, 3.72, 3.40$), three involved resolution violations, two involved akratic actions, and three involved bad actions. Three of the four cases that elicited the lowest mean responses involved neither akratic actions nor resolution violations ($M = 3.08, 3.06, 2.72, 2.34$).

⁹ For helpful overviews of the Knobe effect, see Pettit and Knobe (2009) and Alfano, Beebe, and Robinson (2012).

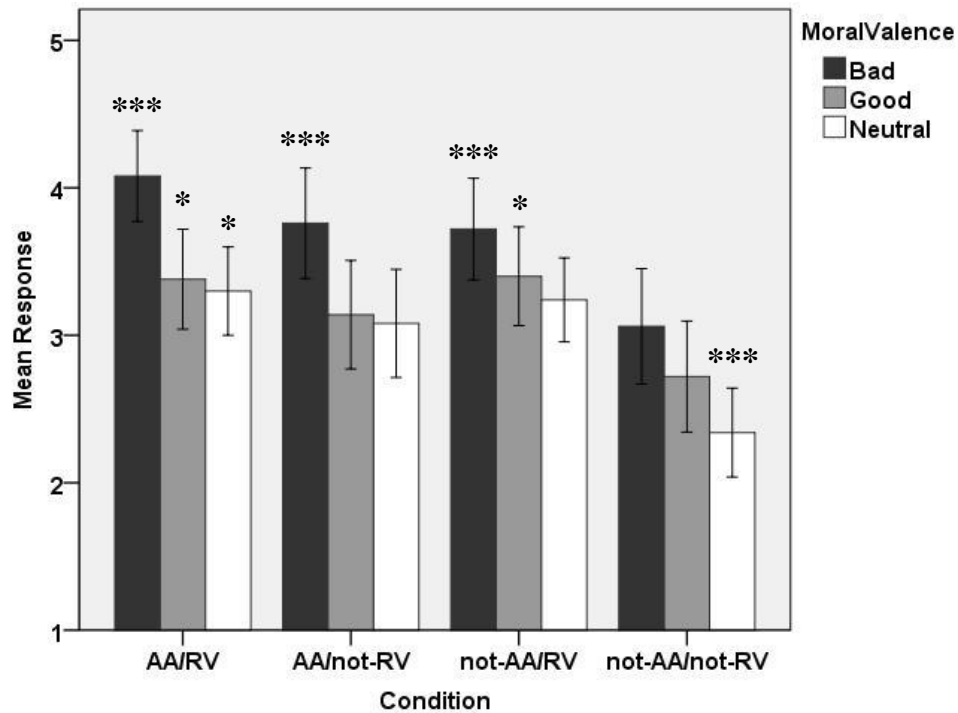


Figure 1. Mean participant responses in the twelve conditions of Study 1. An ‘*’, ‘**’, or ‘***’ by itself indicates that the mean differs significantly from the neutral midpoint at either the .05, the .01, or the .001 level. In each figure error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

A three-way ANOVA reveals a significant main effect for each of the akratic action, resolution violation, and moral valence variables.¹⁰ Participants were more likely to attribute weakness of will in the AA conditions than in the not-AA conditions and more likely to attribute weakness of will in the RV than the not-RV conditions. There was also a significant interaction between the AA and RV variables, which was due primarily to the small proportions of weakness of will attributions in the not-AA/not-RV cases.¹¹ Like May and Holton (2012), I also found that the lowest mean participant responses in cases that included neither descriptions of

¹⁰ AA: $F(1, 588) = 14.651, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .024$ (small effect size). RV: $F(1, 588) = 26.162, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .043$ (small effect size). Moral valence: $F(2, 588) = 16.434, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .053$ (small to medium effect size).

¹¹ $F(1, 588) = 6.115, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ (small effect size).

akratic action nor descriptions of resolution violations, and the highest responses when descriptions of both factors were present. Given the historical primacy of the akratic action account of weakness of will, it is notable that whether or not the protagonist violated a resolution explains 77% more of the overall variance than whether or not the protagonist acted akratically.

A post-hoc Tukey's HSD test reveals that the proportions of weakness of will attributions in the bad conditions were significantly higher than those in the good and neutral conditions but that proportions in the latter two types of conditions did not differ significantly from each other. These results are consistent with the findings of May and Holton's (2012, 355) third experiment in which they compared morally bad actions with morally neutral ones and found higher attributions of weakness of will in response to the former. The data are also consistent with data recently reported by Paulo Sousa and Carlos Mauro (forthcoming), who found that when factors such as akratic action and resolution violation are held constant, (i) participants attributed weakness of will to agents who performed immoral actions but not to agents who performed moral ones, and (ii) participants attributed strength of will to agents who performed moral actions but not to agents who performed immoral ones. Furthermore, the data are consistent with the more general finding that badness plays a more significant role than goodness or neutrality in driving the differences in folk psychological attributions associated with the Knobe effect. No main effect was found for gender.

The results of Study 1 provide confirmation for all of the hypotheses listed above, except for (H5). In accord with (H1) and (H3), participants were more likely to ascribe weakness of the will to agents who were described either as acting akratically or as violating resolutions than to agents who were not described as such. In accord with (H2) and (H4), mean participant responses in the AA/not-RV and not-AA/RV conditions fell significantly above the neutral

midpoint, revealing that the presence of only one of the factors can be sufficient for motivating attributions of weakness of will. Mele (2010, pp. 401-402; 2012, pp. 28-29) obtained a similar finding with an AA/not-RV case. According to hypothesis (H5), descriptions of akratic actions and resolution violations will often have an additive effect. Although the results of Study 1 do not provide support for this hypothesis, we will see that the results of Study 3 do.¹² Hypothesis (H6)—the claim that participants would be more likely to ascribe weakness of will to agents who perform morally bad actions than to agents who perform morally good or neutral actions and to agents who perform morally good actions than to agents who perform morally neutral actions—was clearly confirmed by Study 1. It is unsurprising that the features characteristic of the Knobe effect should be found in one more area.¹³

May and Holton were prodded to enter the experimental arena by Mele's (2010) attempt to use empirical evidence to show that the notion of akrasia lay at the heart of folk thinking about orthodox instances of weakness of will and that resolution violation does not. Although Mele (2010, 394, 397) believes that akratic actions constitute the "traditional" or "orthodox" instances weakness of will, he allows that there may be some "untraditional" or "unorthodox" cases of weakness of will that do not involve akrasia:

In traditional akratic action, the commitment is an evaluative one. In unorthodox akratic action... it is an executive one.... [W]eakness of will can be displayed both in acting contrary to an evaluative commitment and in acting contrary to an executive commitment.

¹² It should be noted that in the present context failing to find confirmation for a hypothesis is not the same thing as succeeding in finding disconfirmation for it.

¹³ There are a variety of theories that purport to explain the full range of Knobe effects. Cf. Pettit and Knobe (2009) and Alfano, Beebe, and Robinson (2012) for helpful overviews of the relevant literature.

An evaluative commitment to *A-ing* stems from judging that *A-ing* would be the best thing for one to do. An executive commitment to *A-ing* results from resolving to do *A*. May and Holton (2012, 342) provide the following gloss on Mele's view:

As we understand him, Mele claims that the ordinary notion of weakness of will is disjunctive—one exhibits weakness of will *either* by acting contrary to one's evaluative judgment *or* by acting contrary to one's plan.¹⁴

May and Holton (2012, 351) take their results (i) to disconfirm the disjunctive conception of weakness of will proposed by Mele (2010), (ii) to disconfirm the 'resolution violation only' account of Holton (1999), and (iii) to provide confirmation for the view that weakness of will is a prototype concept:

Perhaps then we should think of the ordinary concept of weakness of will as a proto-type or cluster concept (Rosch 1975). Contra both theorists [i.e., Mele 2010 and Holton 1999], there doesn't appear to be a simple notion here with necessary and sufficient conditions for its application—disjunctive or otherwise. Rather, each variable plays contributory roles in the application of the concept of weakness of will. Each counts to some extent toward application of the concept, but neither is sufficient on its own. We don't want to commit ourselves to a general proto-type theory of all concepts; but these data do provide some evidence that the ordinary notion of weakness of will is operating this way.

The results of Study 1 appear to provide further disconfirmation of Holton's (1999) resolution violation only account, since akratic action was found to play a significant role in folk

¹⁴ Despite the fact that Mele's talk of orthodox versus unorthodox cases of weakness of will might suggest that he thinks the former are more central to the concept of weakness of will than the latter, Mele (personal communication) is actually quite happy with his view being characterized as a disjunctive account that gives equal weight to each factor.

attributions of weakness of will. However, the results challenge the following claims from May and Holton (2012, p. 350) regarding the disjunctive theory of weakness of will:

However, Mele should also predict that the average level of agreement in the middle [viz., AA/not-RV and not-AA/RV] conditions would be relatively high, at least close to the mean of Condition 1 [AA/RV]. After all, if the disjunctive account is true (i.e. if cases involving either kind of violation are sufficient for exhibition of weakness of will according to ordinary folks), then we would expect competent speakers to tend to agree with the relevant attribution. Yet cases involving only judgment-violation or only resolution-violation produced means very near the midpoint (neither agree nor disagree). So our subjects tended to be neutral with respect to such cases.

On the disjunctive account, either akratic action or resolution violation is sufficient for weakness of will. In Study 1, being described as acting akratically or violating a resolution was found to be sufficient for an agent to be ascribed weakness of will.

On the normative reasons account of the folk conception of weakness of will, akratic and resolution-violating actions count as weak-willed because they violate the strongest normative reasons that agents have for acting in certain ways. As noted above, the strength and number of the normative reasons available contribute to motivating judgments of weakness of will. To see how this account provides a unified explanation of the data, consider the set of practical reasons facing Franz the Nazi, John the meditator, John the magazine thief, and the agents represented in Sousa and Mauro's (forthcoming) research materials. Franz has prudential, conventional, and legal reasons for following the orders of his superiors, and although he has overriding moral reasons not to obey these orders, it is the first and weaker set of reasons that he violates when he fails to imprison Jewish intellectuals. John the meditator violates prudential reasons of modest

strength that tell in favor of meditating every night before bed. John the thief has selfish reasons for wanting to steal copies of People magazine, but these reasons are not justificatory. He has both moral and legal normative reasons to refrain from stealing, and it is these latter, stronger reasons that he violates. Because the reasons that John the thief violates are stronger than the ones Franz or John the meditator violate, the normative reasons account predicts that John the thief's action will be viewed as a clearer instance of weakness of will. The data from Study 1 confirm this prediction.¹⁵

In the AA conditions where Franz and the two Johns come to believe that one course of action is the best one for them to take, the recognition and endorsement of one set of normative reasons makes their violations of these reasons appear more weak-willed than the actions they perform in the not-AA conditions where they do not recognize or endorse such reasons. In the RV conditions, the three agents have additional normative reasons to act in certain ways because of what they have resolved to do. Just as promising to perform *A* gives one a prima facie duty to perform *A*, resolving to oneself or others to perform *A* gives one a reason for doing so. In accord with the normative reasons account, participants were significantly more likely to attribute weakness of will to agents in any of the AA or RV conditions than to agents in the not-AA/not-RV conditions.

In a companion article [reference omitted for the sake of blind review], I report data that confirm Holton's (1999, 249-50) prediction that agents who resolve to perform certain risky and foolish actions but then set these resolutions aside would not taken to be weak-willed. The

¹⁵ One complicating factor with the above explanation is that the actions of both Franz and John the meditator are omissions, while John the thief's action is a commission. It may be that—other things being equal—actions that are commissions are more likely to be viewed as weak-willed than omissions. However, the reason omissions may be less likely to be viewed as weak-willed actions might be because they are less likely to be viewed as actions in the first place. If so, the omission/commission distinction may not play a substantive role in determining which actions (granting that they are indeed actions) are weak-willed. Further investigation is obviously required to fully sort out this issue. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophical Psychology* for bringing this issue to my attention.

normative reasons account can explain why these agents are not viewed as weak-willed, but those who set aside resolutions to perform actions that are supported by the bulk of available normative reasons are. It is not the violation of a resolution that is the fundamental factor that drives ascriptions of weakness of will. Rather, it is the violation of the normative reasons underlying the resolution that does so. If the relevant reasons are weak, setting the resolution aside will tend not to be viewed as weak-willed. But if they are strong, judgments of weakness of will are more likely.

The normative reasons account can also explain the data reported by Sousa and Mauro (forthcoming) noted above. Because their participants applied the concept of weakness of will when moral blame was appropriate and not otherwise, and they applied the concept of strength of will when moral credit was appropriate and not otherwise, Sousa and Mauro conclude that a moral evaluation of an agent's action may be built into the concept of weakness of will. It is not clear, however, how this account might generalize to cover the data from Study 1 and May and Holton (2012), in which varying the AA and RV variables while holding moral concerns constant generated differences in attributions of weakness of will. The normative reasons account, however, can easily explain Sousa and Mauro's data. The weak-willed agents in their experiments simply performed actions that ran contrary to the strongest available normative reasons, which in this case were moral ones.

As we can see, then, the normative reasons account intuitively explains a variety of data. In the sections that follow, we will see that the empirical case in its favor strengthens as additional data are obtained.

3. Study 2

The results of Study 1 suggest that the traditional view of weakness of will as consisting solely in akrasia may fail to represent the folk conception of weakness of will. As we noted above, May and Holton (2012) were motivated to perform their experiments by Mele's (2010) attempt to provide empirical disconfirmation for Holton's (1999) claim that weakness of will was solely a matter of resolution violation. In one study Mele (2010) asked participants "What is weakness of will? Please answer this question and briefly describe one example of weakness of will." Roughly 15% of participants gave answers that cited typical features of akrasia, but only 1.4% (i.e., one participant) gave an answer that mentioned failing to do what one resolved or intended to do. In a second study Mele asked participants which of the following descriptions of weakness of will they thought was more accurate:

- (A) Doing something you believed or knew you shouldn't do (for example, going to a party even though you believed it would be better to stay home and study).
- (B) Doing something you decided or intended not to do (for example, going to a party even though you decided to stay home and study).
- (C) Neither. The descriptions are equally accurate or inaccurate.

49% of participants chose the first (akratic) option; 33% chose the second (intention violation) option, and 18% chose "Neither." Mele (2010, p. 397; 2012, p. 22) draws the following conclusions from these studies:

[T]hose studies provide evidence that lay folk are more inclined to think of weakness of will in terms of doing what one knew or believed one should not do than in terms of doing something that one decided or intended not to do.¹⁶

¹⁶ Mele (2010, 401-402) also reports two other experiments, which I do not discuss. Cf. May and Holton (2012) for critical analysis of these experiments.

But the studies I reported indicate that this ordinary notion is much closer to a relatively standard conception of akrasia than Holton would have us believe.

However, despite the fact that Mele takes (B) to provide a fair representation of Holton's (1999) resolution violation only account, it fails to do so for a number of reasons.

First, Holton's view is not that weakness of will consists in the violation of any kind of decision or intention. Resolutions, for him, are specific kinds of intentions that are designed to defeat contrary inclinations. Furthermore, as we noted above, the kind of resolution violation Holton thought was central to weakness of will is again a specific kind of violation. Holton (1999, p. 241) writes:

Not every case of a failure to act on one's intentions is a case of weakness of will.

Sometimes, we realize that our intentions were ill-judged, or that circumstances have changed to make them inappropriate.

Resolution violations become matters of weakness of will when the resolutions are given up too quickly and unreasonably.¹⁷ May and Holton (2012, 5) write, "Holton [1999] thinks violating a resolution isn't sufficient for being weak-willed—one must also do so *unreasonably*." Thus, it is problematic that there is a salient normative component to Mele's answer (A) but not to answer (B)—at least insofar as Mele hopes to be testing folk intuitions about Holton's (1999) view. (A) concerns doing what you know you shouldn't do. To A when you know you shouldn't A is to violate a normative requirement of some kind. There is no comparable normative component in answer (B)—or at least whatever normative component Mele takes there to be in (B) is not likely to be immediately apparent to ordinary participants. (B) concerns doing what you intended not to do. But this leaves open the possibility that by doing what you intended not to do you

¹⁷ Holton (1999, p. 250) also argues that revising one's intentions can be a matter of caprice rather than weakness of will: "If someone overreadily revises an intention that is, at least partially, contrary inclination defeating, that is weakness of will; if they overreadily revise an intention that is not, that is caprice."

nevertheless did what you ought to have done. Because Holton included the constraint that a normative requirement be violated in order for an action to count as an instance of weakness of will, his earlier resolution violation only account is not well represented by Mele's option (B).¹⁸

In Study 2, I replaced 'decided or intended' in Mele's (B) with 'resolved' because the latter seems to have normative implications that the former lacks. Resolving to *A* suggests that one has reflected upon whether one should *A* and is steeling oneself to do *A*, perhaps against contrary inclinations or other potentially defeating factors. This subtle change of wording led to the surprising results represented in Figure 2.

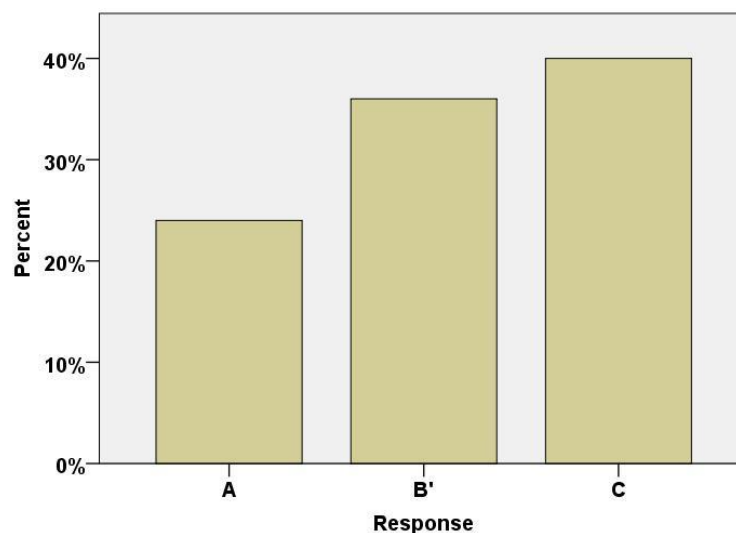


Figure 2. Percentages of participants ($n = 50$) who chose A (24%), B' (36%), or C (40%) in Study 2.

¹⁸ As May and Holton (2012, 344-345) note, an important feature of Mele's study is that he does not simply ask participants to deploy their ordinary concept of weakness of will. Rather, he asks them to provide an explanation of its central features. However, because the acquisition of a concept does not necessarily (or even ordinarily) give one the ability to explain the central features of that concept, Mele's studies wind up examining folk theories of weakness of will more than the folk concept itself. In his defense, Mele (2012, p. 20) notes that he had previously suggested (in Mele 2001) that folk judgments about concrete cases would be more useful than folk judgments about theoretical propositions in gaining understanding of folk concepts. Mele (ibid.) then asks rhetorically, "What should be taken *more* seriously—these results or the anecdotal evidence offered by Holton that prompted me to conduct the surveys?"

Using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (<https://www.mturk.com/>), 50 adult participants from the United States (average age = 33, 52% female, 72% Anglo-American) were asked 'Which of the following descriptions of weakness of will is more accurate in your opinion?'¹⁹ Significantly more participants chose the reformulated answer (B') than chose (A).²⁰ Note, too, that a higher proportion of participants chose (C) in Study 2 than in Mele's study.

In order to gather additional support for the hypothesis that using a more accurate description of the resolution violation view will make participants more likely to endorse it, I gave a second set of 50 participants (average age = 32, 58% female, 65% Anglo-American) the following answer choices that involved giving into temptation but that mirrored the answer choices in the first part of Study 2 in other respects:

- (A) Giving into the temptation to do something you believed or knew you should not do (for example, going to a party even though you believed it would be better to stay home and study).
- (B) Giving into the temptation to do something you resolved you would not do (for example, going to a party even though you resolved to stay home and study).
- (C) Neither. The descriptions are equally accurate or inaccurate.

As we can see from Figure 3, participants once again chose the second option more than the first, although in this case a chi-square goodness of fit test failed to return a verdict of significance.

¹⁹ Thanks to MA for assistance in setting up the Mturk study.

²⁰ $\chi^2(2, N = 168) = 12.517, p < .01$, Cramér's $V = .273$.

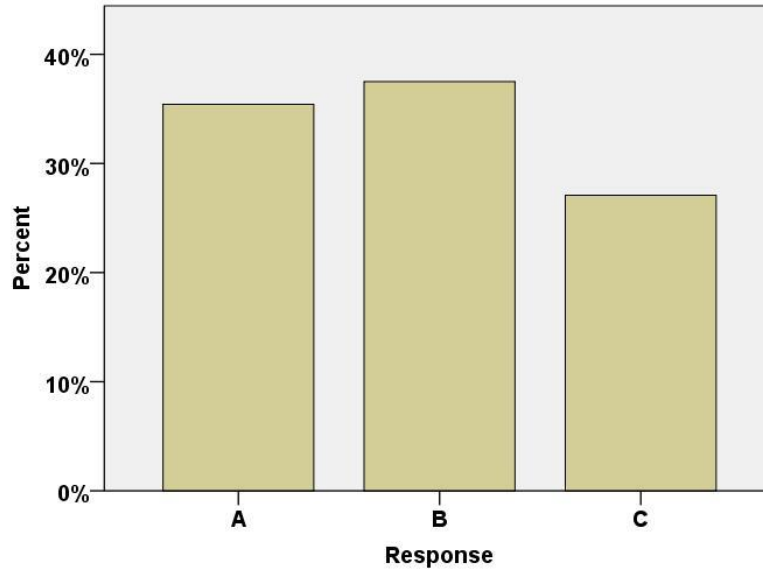


Figure 3. Percentages of participants ($n = 48$) who chose A (35.4%), B (37.5%), or C (27.1%) in Study 2.

Thus, Study 2 lends further support for the contention that the notion of resolution violation figures more prominently in folk thinking about weakness of will than philosophers seem to have recognized. The results also provide additional confirmation for the normative reasons account of the folk conception of weakness of will, since it was only by setting aside (or at least not making salient) normative considerations that Mele was able to get participants to view intention violations as not being good instances of weakness of will.

4. Study 3

On Holton's (1999) view, if an agent revises or sets aside an intention not to do *A* too readily and then performs *A*, it is not so much the doing of *A* as the unreasonable and hasty setting aside of the resolution that is the instance of weakness of will. This account predicts that participants should agree that unreasonably setting aside a resolution can be an instance of weakness of will, even if no action is actually undertaken. According to the normative reasons account, weakness

of will is found when the strongest available normative reasons are set aside. Like Holton's, this view allows for weakness of will without requiring an explicit action. To test the predictions of these views, I took the AA/RV and not-AA/RV versions of the vignettes employed in Study 1 and modified them. None of the not-RV versions were employed, meaning that Franz always resolves to start imprisoning every Jewish intellectual he finds, the John the meditator always resolves to meditate for thirty minutes every night, and John the thief always resolves to stop stealing People Magazine from street vendors. As before, Franz, John, and John fail to act in accord with these resolutions. However, before participants were given these final pieces of information about the protagonists' ultimate actions, they were told one of the following things:

The next morning, however, Franz decides to set aside this resolution and to continue being lax in carrying out his duties.

The next day, however, John decides to set aside this resolution and to continue with his ordinary bedtime routine.

The next day, however, John decides to set aside this resolution and to continue his habit of stealing magazines.

Each participant was then asked two questions. Those who read about Franz were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

(Q1) When Franz changes his resolution, he displays weakness of will.

(Q2) When Franz fails to imprison a Jewish intellectual he encounters in the ghetto, he displays weakness of will.

Participants who read about the two Johns were asked analogous questions. All participant responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale with '1' labeled as 'Strongly Disagree' and '5' labeled 'Strongly Agree.'

In Study 1, participants were simply asked whether the protagonists “displayed weakness of will in this case.” But this question obviously leaves it open as to which part of the case is the locus of the putative weakness of will. The questions in Study 3a, by contrast, directed participants to consider particular aspects of the cases. Two additional features of the vignettes used in Study 3a are important to note. First, the protagonists do not, strictly speaking, act in violation of their previous resolutions, since the resolutions are set aside before the actions are undertaken. Secondly, no reasons are given for why the protagonists set aside the resolutions. If the case involves akratic action (i.e., if the protagonist believes it would be best to perform or not perform the action in question), nothing is said to indicate that this belief has changed when the resolution is set aside. Similarly, in the non-akratic cases where the protagonists have not decided whether it would be best to perform or not perform the action, no indication is given that a new all things considered judgment has been made or is the cause of setting aside the resolution.

Using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, 180 participants (average age = 36, 67% female, 79% Anglo-American) were each given one of the six vignettes described above. The overall results are represented in Figure 4. In five out of the six cases, mean participant responses to Q1 fell significantly above the midpoint, whereas mean participant responses to Q2 fell significantly above the midpoint only three out of six times.

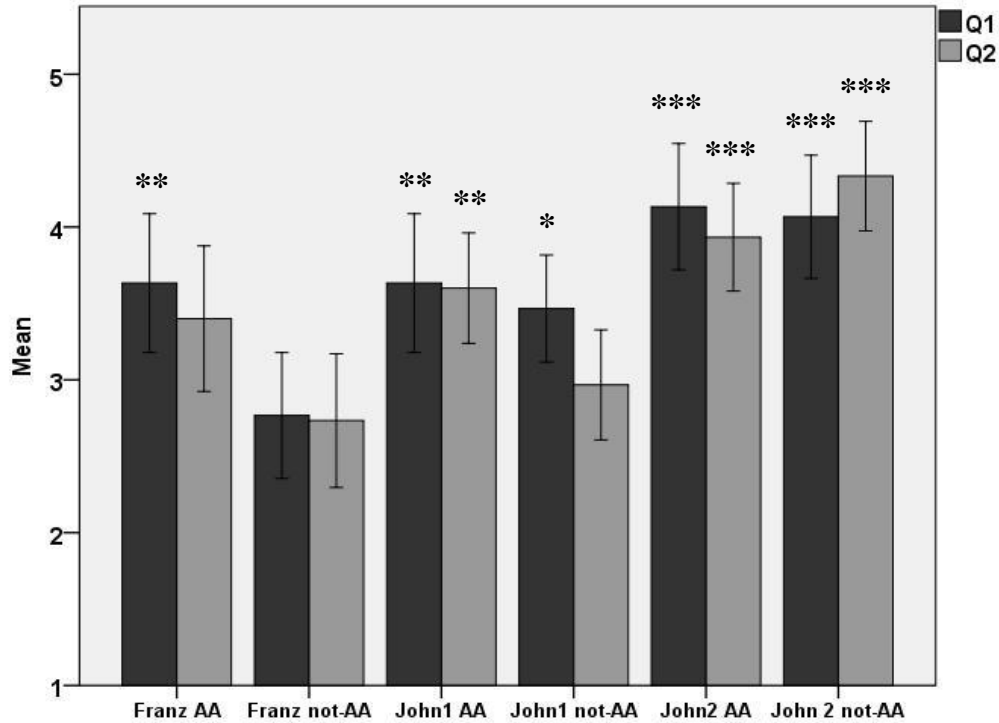


Figure 4. Mean participant responses in Study 3a. John1 is the would-be mediator. John2 is the magazine thief.

Contrary to my initial expectations, a mixed ANOVA revealed no significant difference between the mean Q1 and Q2 responses. However, there were significant main effects for the AA and moral valence variables. That is, participants were more likely to attribute weakness of will in the AA conditions than in the not-AA conditions and in the bad rather than good or neutral conditions. The AA result is theoretically significant because it marks an instance where the difference between the mean attribution of weakness of will in an AA/RV condition was significantly higher than in a not-AA/RV condition²¹—a result we failed to find in Study 1 but that is predicted both by May and Holton’s (2012) prototype theory and (H5) above. On the normative reasons account, an agent in a not-AA/RV case has a reason not to perform an action (the agent has resolved not to do so), but in an AA/RV case, the agent has an additional one as

²¹ Remember that all conditions in Study 3 involve resolution violations.

well (the agent has concluded that refraining from performing the action is the best thing for the agent to do). Thus, in going through with the action, the agent is violating more normative reasons than in the not-AA/RV case. In accord with (H5), we find that the more reasons an agent violates in performing an action, the more likely participants are to categorize it as an instance of weakness of will.

Another theoretically significant aspect of the results from Study 3a is that in the not-AA cases, the agents are not acting contrary to either their considered judgment or their resolutions. The agents' prior resolutions have been set aside, and they are described as having not yet decided what course of action is best. However, because they hastily revised their resolutions, participants were more likely to view them as displaying weakness of will. This result comports well with Holton's (1999) view and the normative reasons account.

A significant interaction was also found between the AA/not-AA and moral valence variables.²² Responses to both Q1 and Q2 in the not-AA/RV conditions were more strongly influenced by the moral valence of the protagonist's actions than in the AA/RV conditions. No such interaction was found in Study 1. In the not-AA cases used in Study 3a, each of the protagonists forms no opinion about which course of action is best and has set aside an earlier resolution. Thus, two potential sources of information that could have indicated to participants that the action in question was an instance of weakness of will do not do so in these cases. All that remains is for information about the moral valence of the actions to guide participants' judgments. Participants may be more likely to judge the bad actions to be instances of weakness

²² $F(2, 174) = 3.858, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .04.

of will than the good or neutral ones because the fact that an action is morally bad and generally recognized as such gives one a reason not to perform that action.²³

Although no significant difference was found between participants' responses to Q1 and Q2, I suspected that if the issue were approached from a different angle, an interesting different might be obtained. Therefore, I reran Study 3a using different prompt questions. Instead of asking participants to respond separately to two questions about the weakness of will displayed in either the setting aside of a resolution or the resulting action, I combined the intended contrast between these questions into a single, forced-choice question for each case:

Franz. Please indicate which of the following options you think best describes Franz's situation:

Franz displayed weakness of will the moment he decided to set his resolution aside and continue being lax in carrying out his duties.

Franz did not display weakness of will until he encountered a Jewish intellectual in the ghetto and failed to imprison him.

Franz did not display weakness of will in this story at all.

John1. Please indicate which of the following options you think best describes John's situation:

John displayed weakness of will the moment he decided to set his resolution aside and continue with his ordinary bedtime routine.

John did not display weakness of will until he failed to meditate before going to bed.

²³ No main effect was found for gender, but a small but significant interaction was found between the independent variables of AA and gender and the dependent Q1 and Q2 variables ($F(1, 168) = 3.959, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .023). Males displayed slightly more sensitivity on Q1 to whether the action was AA or not-AA, and females displayed slightly more sensitivity on Q2 to the same variable.

John did not display weakness of will in this story at all.

John2. Please indicate which of the following options you think best describes John's situation:

John displayed weakness of will the moment he decided to set his resolution aside and continue his habit of stealing magazines.

John did not display weakness of will until he stole another People Magazine from a street vendor.

John did not display weakness of will in this story at all.

120 workers (average age = 31, 52% female, 77% Anglo-American) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in Study 3b by responding to two of the six vignettes from Study 3a, along with the new questions described above. The order of both the questions and the answer choices was counterbalanced. Responses are summarized in Figure 5.

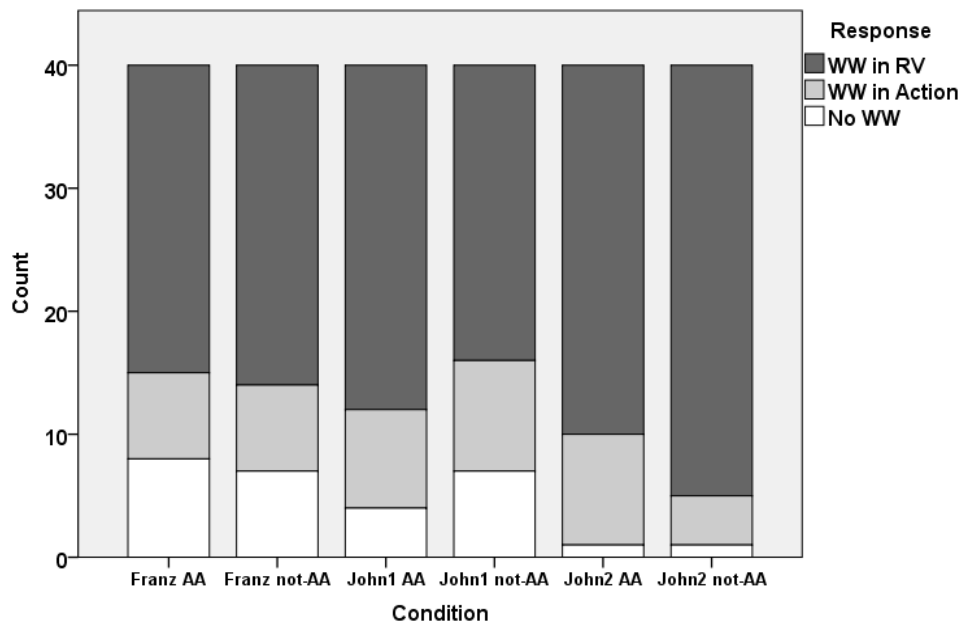


Figure 5. Proportions of participant responses in Study 3.

Participants overwhelmingly chose to attribute weakness of will to the protagonists in the Study 3b vignettes at the moment each decided to set his resolution aside rather than at the time they acted or failed to act in accordance with their prior resolutions. These data are consistent with Holton's (1999) predictions and the normative reasons account. It is the rejection of normative reasons—whether displayed in actions or mere decisions—that defines the folk conception of weakness of will.

5. Conclusion

Studies 1 through 3 reveal (i) that descriptions of akratic actions, resolution violations, and morally bad actions are often sufficient for motivating attributions of weakness of will, (ii) that descriptions of akratic actions, resolution violations, and morally bad actions often have an additive effect, (iii) that descriptions of resolution violations can sometimes have a greater effect on attributions of weakness of will than descriptions of akratic actions, and (iv) that the mere rejection of normative reasons can be sufficient for ascriptions of weakness of will. These results fail to be consistent with accounts of the folk conception of weakness of will that claim weakness of will is solely a matter of akratic action or solely a matter of resolution violation. Like the accounts of May and Holton (2012) and Mele (2010; 2012), the normative reasons account gives equal weight to akratic actions and resolution violations. However, unlike these accounts, it seeks to explain the unity of the folk conception of weakness of will.

I have not assumed that the philosophical debate about weakness of will is exhausted by getting clear on the folk conception of weakness of will. However, to the extent that philosophers want their theories to capture, be consistent with, or otherwise interact with the folk conception,

it is important to obtain a solid and empirically-based understanding of its central features. I hope that the studies reported above constitute a useful contribution toward that end.

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