

Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality, Edited by Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). ISBN 0-19-925736-1.

This volume is a collection of papers, all but one of which were presented at a conference on the same topic at the University of Montreal in 2001. The editors have also added a brief introduction, half of which is devoted to a very quick overview of some of the relevant background literature on weakness of will and practical irrationality, while the other half summarizes the main claims of each of the papers in the volume.

The contributors, in order of appearance, are Michael Smith, Richard Holton, Philip Pettit, Christine Tappolet, Sarah Stroud, Sergio Tenenbaum, Gary Watson, Ralph Wedgwood, Duncan MacIntosh, Joseph Heath, and Ronald de Sousa. As is common in reviews of collections such as this one, I will first briefly summarize each contribution, and then comment in more detail on one of the papers.

Michael Smith ('Rational Capacities') attempts to explicate our pre-philosophical intuitions about the differences between cases of recklessness, weakness, and compulsion in terms of the different rational capacities that the individuals in question either possess or fail to possess.

Richard Holton ('How is Strength of Will Possible') offers a précis of several chapters from a proposed book on the will. He argues that the resources provided by beliefs, desires and intentions are insufficient to account for the phenomenon of strength of will, and that instead we need to appeal to a distinct faculty of will-power.

Philip Pettit ('Akrasia, Collective and Individual') adopts the novel strategy of trying to illuminate individual cases of akrasia by first considering group cases. More specifically, he gives conditions for the kind of group (the 'self-unifying cooperative') that would be capable of exhibiting akrasia, and then proceeds to understand the individual case analogously as involving a kind of constitutional disorder.

Following on the renewed interest in philosophical accounts of the emotions, Christine Tappolet ('Emotions and the Intelligibility of Akritic Action') argues that emotions can make an action which is contrary to a normative judgement intelligible in a way that akritic actions which don't involve emotions are not. Emotions for Tappolet involve perceptions of value, and this allows her to endorse the claim made by Audi, Arpaly, and others that some akritic actions in which the judgement is false may actually be more rational than if the agent had succeeded in acting in accordance with the judgement in the first place.

Sergio Tenenbaum ('Accidie, Evaluation, and Motivation') proposes a novel and interesting strategy for defending the following claim:

To desire something is to conceive it to be good,
from the serious threat proposed by cases of accidie or general dejection and depression in which the agent seems to lack any motivation to do what she takes to be good or desirable.

Gary Watson ('The Work of the Will') distinguishes between internalist and externalist conceptions of agency, where the former are committed to the existence of a necessary connection between the will and the good. He then proceeds to argue against the thesis that there is no room on the internalist view for a conception of the will except as equivalent to practical judgement. Watson also discusses in some detail the question of what role, if any, the will has to play in theoretical reasoning.

In 'Choosing Rationally and Choosing Correctly,' Wedgwood attempts to advance the debate between broadly recognitional and constructivist views of practical reason by articulating and defending a novel version of the former approach. According to a simplified version of Wedgwood's proposal, a choice is rational iff it is rational for the agent to believe that the option chosen is a good thing to do, where the sense of 'good' is a purely formal rather than substantive concept.

In 'Prudence and the Temporal Structure of Practical Reasons,' Duncan MacIntosh responds to Nagel's well-known work on prudence in the context of defending a present-aim approach to rationality. Accordingly, MacIntosh rejects the claim that prudence is rationally obligatory.

Joseph Heath ('Practical Irrationality and the Structure of Decision Theory') provides an admirably clear discussion of decision theory in the context of arguing that it should be construed neither as purely descriptive of our actual reasoning, nor as purely normative for determining what people should do. Rather, what decision theory does according to Heath is 'work out the implications of the commitments that are implicitly taken on by an agent who occupies a certain position in the game of giving and asking for reasons' (p. 264).

Finally, in 'Paradoxical Emotion: On Sui Generis Emotional Irrationality,' Ronald de Sousa first distinguishes strategic rationality (which maximizes the likelihood of successful action) from epistemic rationality (which maximizes the likelihood of true belief). He then argues that disputes between these two kinds of rationality can be adjudicated by a third kind, namely emotional rationality.

Let me spend a bit more time on Sarah Stroud's contribution, 'Weakness of Will and Practical Judgement.' Stroud is concerned with two views about the relationship between practical judgements (especially those judgements of the form 'I have most reason to ϕ .') and intentional action or intention formation. According to her preferred view, practical judgements bear a necessary relationship to subsequent action or intention formation in rational agents. On this view, when an agent suffers from weakness of the will in failing to act in accordance with his practical judgement, he is invariably irrational. According to what Stroud calls the alternative 'Humean externalist' view, practical judgements issue in actions or intentions only with the help of an intermediate desire. While the Humean has several options to choose from, a natural choice for this desire is a general desire to do (or form the intention of doing) what we have most reason to do (p. 128).

Stroud attempts to motivate her view by arguing both that the Humean alternative is no better off when it comes to the 'structural elements' that it must make appeal to, and that when it comes to the phenomenon of global akrasia, it is in fact significantly worse off. Let me briefly raise a doubt about both of these arguments.

Stroud asserts that the Humean view is necessarily committed to the following instrumentalist principle:

(P1) Form an intention to ϕ when you want to ψ and believe that by ϕ ing you will ψ (p. 134).

Stroud goes on to claim that the Humean 'in effect makes a categorical structural claim about the transmission of reason-giving force from ends to means. The bindingness of the hypothetical imperative is itself categorical' (p. 135). This is then enough to show that both the practical judgement and Humean views are committed to categorical imperatives of practical reason (ibid.).

But it is not obvious to me that a Humean view about the connection between practical judgements and intention formation, needs to be committed to (P1). For one thing, as presented the Humean view is a view about the explanation of intention formation and action in cases of judgement formation, not about the way in which such formation and action should be carried out. In addition, (P1) looks to be a principle governing deliberation, and not the causal activities of the mental states which result once a practical judgement has been formed. There the relevant principle seems to be something like:

(P2) Form an intention to ϕ when you believe that you have most reason to ϕ and want to do (or form an intention to do) what you have most reason to do.

Something like this principle seems to be a far more natural choice to serve as the 'categorical imperative of practical reason' for a Humean view of the connection between judgement and action.

Stroud's actual objection to the Humean view concerns the possibility of global akrasia. Given that the Humean requires the presence of a distinct mental state in order to allow a judgement to issue in action or intention formation, it follows that it is at least possible for there to be a world in which we never act in accordance with our judgements in virtue of failing to have the requisite intermediary desire. But, says Stroud, such a world is not clearly conceivable or coherent (p. 144).

Stroud rightly notes that one way a Humean might respond is by arguing that what makes such a world difficult to conceive is that the agents in question are all in a permanent state of practical irrationality. But, she claims, the Humean does not have the resources to make this claim – '[t]hese beings who are completely uninfluenced by the conclusions they reach about what they have most reason to do are still practically rational agents; they are simply rational agents with a different inventory of desires than is typical of human beings hereabouts. On the Humean picture – in contradistinction to the practical-judgement view – it is not constitutive of rational agency to be influenced by such considerations' (p. 144-5, emphasis hers).

But again this is not obvious. Stroud seems to have (P1) in mind when asserting that according to the Humean, global akratics are not practically irrational. But as far as I can see, there is no reason given for thinking that (P1) is the only principle of practical rationality that the Humean can appeal to (if the Humean does so in the first place). And Stroud herself suggests some additional principles earlier in her paper which express 'uncontroversial and indeed compelling ideas about rational agency' (p. 137, emphasis mine):

(P3) It is constitutive of rational practical thought to be motivated by (your judgement of) good reasons.

(P4) Rational practical thought constitutively connects recognition of (practical) reasons with intention and action.

(P5) Reason-judgements have as it were automatic practical pertinence with respect to intention and action (p. 137).

As Stroud rightly asks, 'What is a rational agent, if not, in the first instance, one who perceives, responds to, and indeed acts on the basis of reasons?' (p. 138, emphasis hers).

The editors together with Oxford University Press have put together an attractive volume. Combining all the references together at the end proved to be very helpful, as did the fine index. The text itself is remarkably clean, with only one typo in the entire volume that I was able to spot (p. 124). However, one puzzling feature of the

volume turned out to be the rationale behind the ordering of the papers, as for example the two papers which focus directly on the emotions appear at almost opposite ends of the book.

As far as the overall content is concerned, the collection is a bit uneven. Many of the papers are of noticeably high quality (e.g., those by Holton, Watson, and Wedgwood, among others), but a few are significantly weaker, either because they do not display the same argumentative sophistication, or because they at times simply repeat arguments which are already familiar from the author's previous work on the subject. In general, however, this volume represents an important contribution to action theory, philosophy of mind, and moral psychology, and should be read by anyone who works in these areas.

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