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On the Nature of Weakness of Will

In the example of an individual following a hypothetical imperative, it is described as; 1. That individual has a certain desire that they want to X. 2. They also have the belief that the best way to X is through action Y, therefore if this individual is a rational being, then they have both a desire and a rational method to obtain that desire. But what if that individual does not act upon that reasoning, that instead of performing action Y, they instead perform action Z? The two possible conclusions from this is that either 'weakness of will' is involved and has influenced the situation such that they are unable to act in accordance with reason, or that they are not actually rational beings as they perform irrational actions.(Thesis) Further in this paper, I will be arguing against both of these positions, and instead focus upon the idea that weakness of will is not the correct designation of why this individual is performing the way it is as it is rather that their desires collectively constitute a rational process different from the one understood by that individual.

Frankfurt gives us a powerful tool to begin the dissection of weakness of will. His proposition on a deterministically compatible version of free will consists of: Persons are individuals who have all of the following: a will or a desire which will motivate action, desires of the first order, desires of the second order, as well as uniquely volitions of the second order(Frankfurt, Freedom of the will 7-9). This is substantial as it is an important separation of nonpersons to persons on the idea of freedom of the will. Under Frankfurt structure, those who

have freedom of will are those persons whose second order volitions desire that the desire for X becomes the will. If this comes to fruition ie. in the case of the volition above, the desire for X becomes the will, then this person would have freedom of the will. If this does not come to fruition, then the person does not have freedom of the will. This would happen if there were a case of Akrasia. Interestingly, I think it important to not ignore Frankfurt's example of a Wanton, or an individual who has a will, desires of the first order, as well as desires of the second order, but no second order volitions. While I won't touch upon them at the moment, I will introduce them later in this paper.

This case of akrasia seems to be the only situation which will cause a person to not act in accordance with one's second order volitions. Nomy Arpaly offers a useful criticism towards Smith, a philosopher who holds similar views on the structure of the but rather in terms of rationality. Smith argues that persons hold both beliefs and desires separately. Furthermore, this person can only act rationally if they act in accordance with their best judgment. For example if an individual were to believe that they should do X in circumstance C but then does not do so because they have no desire to X, then they are acting irrationally. In this situation, it is seen that the person's best judgment is telling them to X in circumstance C but, seeming because of akrasia, they act irrationally or against their best judgment. Arpaly argues against this general statement and argues that there are cases where it is actually acting against one's better judgment which constitutes a person into acting rationally. She does this by presenting the example of a college student preparing for their exams, which he is inexplicably unprepared for. "Alas, he thinks, too much time has been spent interacting with interesting people rather than studying. 'What I really should do,' Sam thinks, 'is restrict my social life to an absolute minimum until I finish my degree and find a job'... Sam, however, fails to become a hermit, as he cannot muster

the motivation. He does not manage, even as he tries, to develop an actual desire to live like a hermit. 'This is very irrational of me'... 'If I were rational, I know I would embrace the opportunity that being in this expensive, first-rate college presents to me and want nothing more than to become a hermit, doing nothing but studying for the duration of my student years'"(Arpaly, 496-497). Not only this, but upon further examination of Sam's situation we can see that this rationalization is actually something which is not in accordance with his other desires. When he isolates himself he tends to lower his productivity and binge on television. On top of this, he also becomes unhappy which conflicts with his larger desire to be happy. If Sam acts in accordance with what he deems to be his best judgment, it actually would cause him to act irrationally instead of rationally. If this is true, then Arpaly argues, Smith will have to agree that "an agent is, if not more rational, at least not less rational for acting against their best judgment"(Aparly, 499).

This view of rationality is one that focuses itself onto what would be the most internally consistent action among all relevant beliefs that a person may hold. Even if a person deliberates that desiring X may be one's best judgment, it is possible that the actual conglomeration of desires leads to that best judgment being an action which is not internally consistent with the desires held by the person. It seems that this case arises when a person incorrectly characterizes one's own desires. In Sam's case of whether he should ostracize himself in order to pursue better grades, we can see that he does not include many relevant factors in his deliberation, namely his psychological response to the action of best judgment. If we attempt to bring the argument back to Frankfurt, it seems as though his second order volition is not in line with what his own internal desire system supports. If this is the case then, Frankfurts second order volition is not actually what his second order volition is, rather it is what Sam believes his second order volition to be.

Let us consider the example of Sarah, who is a tennis player. She desires immensely to be the best tennis player, but recently she finds herself plateauing and is unable to improve herself better than she currently is. After further deliberation, she decides that her best judgment tells her the only way for her to improve is to take steroids, which stimulate her muscle growth, allowing her to take on higher levels of competition. But when comes the case to actually take those steroids, she fails to do so which in turn causes her to act against her best judgment or, in Frankfurt's case, against her second order volition. What Sarah failed to include in her deliberation: if she were to act upon this best judgment, she would be acting against her desire for herself to compete fairly against others which outweighs her desire to be the best tennis player. In this case, Sarah would be acting against what Sarah thought to be her second order volition, while actually acting in line with another more powerful second order volition which she is unaware of. If this is the case, then Sarah would not be without free will as her second order volition would become the will giving her, under Frankfurt's terms, free will.

To return to the example of the Wanton mentioned earlier in the essay, it is interesting to see how this new formulation of unknown second order volitions can affect actions of those who seem to not attain any. If Sarah was in fact a Wanton, then she would have no second order volition which would drive her to desire a certain desire to become the will over any other. Nonetheless, it seems that the fact that Sarah is a Wanton would have no apparent effect on the actions which she performs in the example above. She would still desire to become the best tennis player, as well as it would be her best judgment to take the steroids. Regardless, in the end she would still choose to not take the steroids in the end as it would conflict with the internal consistency of her beliefs. In this situation, Sarah would act the same as if she did have second order volitions. What seems more likely to say is not that the Wanton does not have second order

volitions but rather that the Wanton is not aware of any of the second order volitions which they hold.

If it truly were the case that the Wanton does not have second order volitions, then it would seem that what would manifest would be whatever is the easiest desire to achieve, ie. the desire with the highest strength and the lowest cost. But if the only difference between the Wanton and the person is the fact that the Wanton is does not have those second order volitions and yet acts the same as a person who does, then it seems reasonable to say that there will be outcomes where an desire becomes the will which is not the easiest desire to achieve.

Following from this let us summarize our argument so far. Using Frankfurt's framework, we do believe that there is a distinction between persons and nonpersons and that distinction is the existence of second order volitions. We categorize a second order volition as one which desires that our desire to X becomes the will. If our second order volition aligns with the will then we have free will, and if we do not then we do not have free will. This is when we begin our departure from Frankfurt. We can have second order volitions which we are unaware of. If we believe that X is our second order volition and X does not align with our will, then we actually have a second order volition Y which does align with our will. Since we falsely believe that X is our second order volition, then we believe that we do not have free will while we are acting in free will without realizing that we are. This is because our actual second order volition is Y which does in fact align with the will. In the case of the Wanton, it does not matter if a person is aware of their second order volitions or not, since it does not change the fact that we will act in accordance with them.

A possible objection to this argument will be an attack upon our usage aligning free will with unknown second order volitions as it seems as if it is missing the spirit of Frankfurt's

argument. In the example of Sarah, she believes that she wants her desire to take steroids to become the will, this desire does not escape her even after she fails to take the steroids. In this case it seems incredibly strange to say that, even though she wants to take the steroids, she is acting in her free will as she denies taking those steroids which she wants. It seems much more prevalent to paint her as having free will.

A response to this objection is on the nature of second order volitions themselves. In this situation, it is important to realize that there is a distinction between what she actively thinks and to what truly her second order volition is. Sarah thinks that she is not acting in accordance with her second order volition, but this is only because she is unaware of the more predominant second order volition which is directing her to not take the steroids. She only thinks that she is not acting in accordance with her second order volition because she is mistaken about what her second order volition actually is. This leaves Sarah in the seemingly awkward situation of believing she is acting without free will, while in actuality does indeed have free will.

Works Cited

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