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WEAKNESS OF WILL AND RATIONAL ACTION

Robert Audi

Weakness of will has been widely discussed from at least three points of view. It has been examined historically, with Aristotle recently occupying centre stage. It has been analysed conceptually, with the question of its nature and possibility in the forefront. It has been considered normatively in relation to both rational action and moral character. My concern is not historical and is only secondarily conceptual: while I hope to clarify what constitutes weakness of will, I presuppose, rather than construct, an account of it. My chief aim is to assess the bearing of weakness of will on the rationality of actions that exhibit it—*incontinent actions*. Philosophers have tended to assume that incontinent action is a paradigm of irrationality, and none to my knowledge has seriously criticised this assumption. I challenge it and in doing so try to clarify rationality in general.

I. A Conception of Weakness of Will

There is at best limited agreement on just what weakness of will is, but a common element in most recent accounts is the notion of action against one's better judgment. The idea underlying this notion is that to act against one's better judgment is to do something intentionally, such as take another drink, while in some sense aware of one's judging that doing something else would be better. More explicitly, an agent, *S*, acts against *S*'s better judgment, in *A*-ing, provided (1) *S A*'s intentionally (or at least knowingly), (2) there is at least one other action (type) *B* which *S* takes to be an alternative and with respect to which *S* has judged, or makes or holds the judgment, that it would be better to *B*, (3) *S* has not abandoned this judgment, and (4) *S* is aware of (2) and (3).[1] The relevant kind of awareness need not involve entertaining the judgment; but if there is no sense in which *S* is

[1] This is based on my 'Weakness of Will and Practical Judgment', *Noûs, XIII* (1979), p. 174. For a brief statement of many other views of and about weakness of will see Arthur F. Walker, 'The Problem of Weakness of Will: A Critical Survey of Recent Literature', *Noûs XXIII*, 5 (1989). Other recent treatments bearing on issues in this paper include David Wiggins, 'Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire', in Amélie O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1980); Frank Jackson, 'Weakness of Will', *Mind, XCIII* (1984); David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Alfred R. Mele, *Irrationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Alan Donagan, *Choice: the Essential Element in Action* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).

aware of holding the judgment, then *S* cannot be said to act *against* it in the way required for incontinence. The following contrast will help to explain this point.

Acting against a judgment is different from acting merely *inconsistently* with it, which is possible through sheer ignorance of what one is doing, as where, not realising someone's sensitivity on a touchy subject, one unwittingly offends despite judging one must not. An action merely inconsistent with one's better judgment may show folly, recklessness, or forgetfulness, but not weakness of will; that requires some awareness of one's judgment—the directive supposed to govern the will. One cannot act against a directive of which one is unaware, any more than one can oppose a foe of whose existence one has no idea.

Our better judgment need not be our *best*, in either of the senses of 'best judgment' most relevant to incontinence. *S*'s best judgment in the *attributive sense* is one to the effect that an option *is best*; such judgments attribute a kind of optimality to the action in question. *S*'s best judgment in the *epistemic sense* is simply *S*'s *best warranted* practical judgment concerning what to do in the situation, regardless of how the judgment rates any option *S* considers open: it might be just that one should *A*, or that *A*-ing is prima facie a good option. Incontinent action need not go against one's best judgment, in the attributive sense, because *S* can exhibit weakness of will in *A*-ing, against a judgment that *B*-ing would be better, even if *S* does not think that *B*-ing would be *best*. *S* may not even have a candidate for the best alternative. Nor must incontinent action contravene a judgment that is best in the epistemic sense (*S* may not even hold such a judgment, as opposed to two or more equally warranted ones). I can act incontinently in serving myself more beef even if my judgment that I should abstain is not only less than my best warranted but *un*warranted. A judgment can play the crucial *directive* role whether warranted or not, and I can exhibit weakness of will in failing to follow the directive even if the judgment is unwarranted. I might well exhibit it even if I *believe* the judgment is unwarranted, assuming that I can genuinely hold a practical judgment under this condition. This epistemic belief may challenge the appropriateness of the judgment's playing its normal directive role, but it does not eliminate that role; hence, acting against the judgment should still count as incontinent. To be sure, the incontinent action may be less criticisable in other ways, for instance morally; and *S* may be more criticisable in some respects, say for simultaneously holding both the judgment and the belief that this judgment is unwarranted. But these are different points.

If incontinent action implies going against one's better judgment, it is not precisely equivalent to action against one's better judgment. Incontinent action must also be uncompelled. This is largely because compelled action is not criticisable in the way incontinent action is.[2] I believe, however, that we may take incontinent actions to be *uncompelled actions against one's*

[2] I argue for this in the paper cited in note 1, esp. on pp. 179-180.

better judgment. I rule out compulsion in part because 'the will' does not exhibit weakness (of the relevant kind) in not preventing a compelled act. In acting under compulsion, after all, one 'can't help oneself'. It is true that incontinence may imply some *pressure* to act, say from passion or appetite, and that the degree of pressure, for instance the severity of a threat, which compels one person might not compel another. One reason for this is different strengths of will. A threat that would compel Jim might simply annoy Jane or perhaps cause her to act (freely) against her better judgment, as where, to avoid embarrassment, she yields confidential information she judges she ought to withhold. Nonetheless, where an agent is genuinely compelled—which, to be sure, may imply that a person of *normal* will power relative to the situation would also be unable to forbear—the action is not incontinent.

The inclination to countenance compelled incontinent acts may stem from conflating *weakness of the will*—which is roughly a failure to conform to an appropriate directive of practical reason—with *weakness in the will*—which is a different notion: a low level of strength in the overall faculty of will, such that, as compared with people of stronger will, there are more deeds (or more deeds of relevant kinds) which one can be compelled to do even if one judges one should not.[3] Jim, who suffers from weakness in the will, might often be coerced into doing things he judges he should not, though given a phlegmatic temperament and good fortune he might never be incontinent. Jane, who is sometimes incontinent, might have a very strong will—but simply lack sufficient strength of will to resist her own powerful impulses. Compared with Jim, she would tend to be the harder to compel by threat; but neither would exhibit weakness of will proper—incontinence—through being brought, under *compulsion*, to do something they judged to be on balance wrong.

My final point in this section concerns the scope of weakness of will. If incontinent action is uncompelled action against one's better judgment, then it should not be surprising if incontinence extends beyond action. After all, if taking more beef against one's better judgment exhibits weakness of will, surely forming the *intention* to do so may indicate a similar failure, even if, because the supply has just run out, one cannot indulge. But forming an intention is at least not typically action. Similarly, if one judges one should go out in a storm to help someone free a stuck car, and one then *fails* to form the intention to go out, is this not incontinence in the same way as the (intentional) failure itself, the reprehensible *act* of omission? I think so, and I would argue that parallel points apply even to one kind of motivation that does not entail intention, namely, wanting on balance: wanting something more than one wants anything one believes incompatible with it. For if I want, in this way, to eat more beef, then I want it more than, say, to hold my weight. I am thus readily *disposed* to eat more when

[3] Someone *sufficiently* strong willed exhibits neither kind of weakness; but one can suffer from weakness in the will without being incontinent: circumstances being favourable, volitional weakness as a *feature* need not be reflected in volitionally weak *action*.

I get a chance; hence, in my forming such a want (or not preventing its formation), I exhibit some degree of volitional failure to direct myself in the correct path. The general idea is that not only actions, but also the sorts of motivational dispositions that typically yield them, can go against one's better judgment and thereby exhibit a kind of weakness of will.[4]

II. The Irrationality of Incontinence

The conception of weakness of will just articulated makes it easy to see why incontinent actions are *prima facie* irrational: they contravene one's judgment of what one should do and thus exhibit a kind of inconsistency between one's action and one's assessment—which is often backed by good reasoning—of what one's action should be. The same applies, of course, to other forms of weakness of will, such as incontinent intention. But this section considers only incontinent actions and leaves implicit how its points bear on other kinds of weakness of will. Moreover, while the conception of weakness of will sketched above will be presupposed, much of what is said about the rationality of incontinent action can be defended from the perspective of other views of weakness of will, particularly those taking it to imply going against one's better judgment or in some other way opposing 'reason'.

Most philosophers writing on weakness of will have implied that incontinent action is at least prima facie irrational. Aristotle, for example, treats incontinence as a vice involving ignorance, speaks of it as both 'to be avoided and blameworthy', and says that, whereas the 'continent person seems to be the same as one who abides by his rational calculation . . . the incontinent person seems to be the same as one who abandons it'.[5] Granted that in speaking of incontinence as a vice he is thinking of weakness of will as a *trait*, he also takes its manifestations in action to merit the kind of disapproval he here expresses, and probably to be irrational. Another view is that 'Weakness of the will involves a failure to achieve full autonomy . . .' and that while weak-willed actions may carry out one's decisions, these decisions are not in accord with what on reflection one would have determined one ought to do.[6] For people want whatever success they have to be in part due to them: '*They* want to determine what happens to them'.[7] Incontinent actions, however, bespeak a failure to determine, in the relevant sense, what happens to one.

It has even been thought that incontinent action, conceived as intentional,

[4] This application of weakness of will to intentions and wants is developed in Audi, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-185.

[5] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b10-11; see also 1146b-1148b14. (The translation is T. Irwin's.) Wiggins remarks that 'Almost anyone not under the influence of theory will say . . . the weak-willed man acts not for *no* reason at all . . . but irrationally'. *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

[6] Norman O. Dahl, 'Weakness of the Will as a Moral Defect', Central Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, 1987.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

is impossible. For suppose that (1) if *S A*'s intentionally, *S*'s *A*-ing can be rationally explained by *S*'s reasons, (2) if *A*-ing is rationally explainable by the agent's reasons, then it is rational, and (3) it is *ir*rational to act against one's considered best judgment, as is implied by incontinence.[8] It follows that incontinent actions are, *qua* intentional, rational and, *qua* actions against one's considered best judgment, irrational. If we think there are incontinent actions, we must qualify at last one of these plausible assumptions.

There is a further, though related, reason for taking incontinent actions to be irrational. They seem to manifest a *malfunction*: the will is not carrying out its proper function—to produce conformity between action and practical reason. Since this is a basic rational function, incontinent action reveals a deficiency in the agent's rationality and as such is irrational. For convenience, I speak metaphorically in terms of a subagent, the will. But the functional view does not require such homuncularism: talk of the will here is simply a way to refer to a range of human capacities, and those, in turn, may function well or poorly.

There are other reasons to consider incontinence irrational, but the four specified enable us both to assess this view and to learn something about rational action in general. Appraising these reasons is the main business of the next section. Section IV will provide a wider treatment of the relation between weakness of will and rationality.

III. Incontinent Behaviour and Rational Action

We have seen four kinds of arguments to show that incontinent action cannot be rational: arguments from practical inconsistency, from impaired autonomy, from inexplicability, and from malfunction. Let me start with the argument from inexplicability, since, if it is sound, there *are* no incontinent actions. This argument is disarmingly simple: incontinent action cannot occur because it is intentional and thus rationally explainable, hence rational; yet, as going against one's considered best judgment, incontinent action is *ir*rational. The apparent simplicity conceals an ambiguity: the phrase 'an intentional action is rationally explainable' might mean that (a) an intentional action can be explained as performed *for* a reason, or that (b) an intentional action is explainable *by* a reason in a way implying that it is rational, e.g. explainable as based on a good reason for it. (a) is plausible, but something like (b) is needed to support the principle that what is rationally explainable is rational. (b) will not stand scrutiny, for at least the following reasons.

Surely there is such a thing as an intentional action performed for a bad reason. One might also fail to act rationally because, though one has an adequate reason to do what one does, say to buy a certain stock, one is culpably overlooking a much better reason to do something else which, on even slight reflection, one would much prefer. There are several cases

[8] David Charles, 'Weakness of the Will: Ancient and Modern Approaches', Central Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, 1987.

of acting for a bad reason. *S* may, for instance, *A* in order to bring about an end, say to alter a corporation's policy in South Africa, while only *irrationally* believing the action will contribute to this end. Alternatively, the end may be one *S* would not pursue except on the basis of an irrational belief, as where *S* would not want to alter the corporation's policy except on the foolish assumption that doing this would undermine apartheid. The end itself may also be one that *S* should, on the available evidence, see *cannot* be realised; thus, devoting hours to trying to square the circle might be intentional action for a bad reason. Arguably, a morally outrageous end might be still another kind of bad reason for acting. But it is clear that people can intentionally act to realise such ends. To be sure, we might take 'rational' so minimally that any action intelligible enough to be seen as intentional is thereby automatically rational; but in that case, incontinent actions will cease to seem irrational. The term 'irrational' is a contrary of 'rational', not the contradictory; and there are surely many actions—doubtless including admirable spontaneous expressions of affection or delight—which, while not rational, are also not irrational.

The argument from impaired autonomy also fails. Granted that typically action against one's better judgement violates one's autonomy, it is not self-evident that going against one's autonomy is always irrational. Supposing that is so, however, we must still bear in mind that the judgment against which one acts is—at its strongest in directive content—one's best only in the attributive sense and not necessarily in the epistemic sense. This raises the possibility that one might be unwarranted in holding the judgment. Ironically, it might itself represent a kind of *doxastic incontinence*, in the sense (roughly) that it goes against one's assessment of what, on one's available evidence, one ought to believe: one believes against one's better evidential judgment. Perhaps here, i.e., in acting against one's doxastically incontinent better judgment, one's autonomy would *not* be well served by the continent action, the action in favor of which one judges. Much depends on what constitutes autonomy, of course, and I shall return to this issue. My point here is that considerations of autonomy yield only prima facie reason to think that an incontinent action must be irrational.

Once we see that there is nothing sacrosanct about a practical judgment simply in virtue of its providing a directive whose violation is incontinent, we can also question whether the discord between such a judgment and action against it must make the action irrational. There is *something* amiss when incontinence occurs, but why must the action be the locus of our main criticism, or deserve the charge of irrationality? The action may, after all, yield the agent great pleasure—or, in less typical cases, a high degree of conformity with some cherished ideal—in a very efficient way and with no foreseeable bad effects. If it does, and if the judgment (however firmly held at the time) is itself one the agent would not accept on careful reflection, why must the action be, on balance, irrational? I cannot see that it must be.

Similarly, even if the normal and proper function of practical judgment

is to guide action, why must every action against it be irrational? We can agree that one who acts incontinently is not functioning normally, or even that such agents are not functioning at all well. But it is a further step to the conclusion that the action itself is irrational. Practical judgment is, after all, fallible, even when 'considered'; and the function it serves may be impaired *before* one makes it—say, by an intellectual error in reasoning that underlies the judgment—as well as later in behavioural deviance from it. Again, we get only an argument for the prima facie irrationality of incontinent action.

IV. Three Models of Rational Action

In framing a general conception of rational action, I want first to consider a related standard for the rationality of forming intentions: given the desires on the basis of which *S* thinks it most desirable to *A*, the 'acquisition of new intentions is rational only if their satisfaction is consistent with the satisfaction of this set of desires'.[9] This principle can help us understand why certain incontinent actions are irrational; for the very intention to perform them is not consistent with the satisfaction of the desires, say moral desires, grounding one's practical judgment, e.g. that one should keep an onerous promise.

The principle that rational intention must be consistent with standing desires on the basis of which one forms it is plausible and often holds true. It is a practical expression of what we might call a *fidelity to premises model of rationality*. The parallel view of theoretical reason would be (roughly) that acquisition of a belief is rational only if the belief is consistent with any beliefs one already holds on the basis of which one forms it. But what if the desires grounding the practical judgment are themselves highly irrational, or not representative of one's overall desires, interests, or ideals? After all, even in acting reflectively we may not take adequate account of our overall perspective, our perspective as determined by certain of our basic beliefs and desires, especially those crucial in our world view. Could there be, then, an action against one's better judgment which, through its accord with (the relevant parts of) our overall perspective, *is* rational? If so, we should reject the common assumption that incontinent actions are all irrational. Let us puruse this issue in relation to moral decision.

Consider John, a practised and conscientious retributivist. He believes that he should punish his daughter for talking hours on the phone when she knew she should study. On reflection, he judges that he should deny her a Saturday outing. But a day later, when it comes time to deny her the outing, he looks into her eyes, realises that she will be quite upset, decides to make do with a stern rebuke, and lets her go. He feels guilty and chides himself. It is not that he changed his mind; he was simply too uncomfortable with the prospect of cracking down. Suppose, however, that he also has

[9] Charles, *op. cit.*

a strong standing belief that he must be a reasonable parent and is well aware that the deprivation would hurt the child and cause a rebellious reaction. He might be so disposed that if he had thought long enough about the matter, he would have changed his mind; but that is perfectly consistent with the assumption that if his will were stronger, he would have punished her. Thus, his letting her go may still be incontinent. But is it irrational? I cannot see that it is. The following considerations indicate why it need not be.

To begin with, note that John's action is not *passional incontinence*—the most typical kind—and is not in any other way tainted by irrational appetitive influences. Moreover, it is backed by good reasons rooted deep in his character, e.g. his desire not to hurt his daughter and not to provoke a rebellion so severe as to undermine the good moral effect of the punishment. But even though his incontinent action accords with a civilised and generally admirable compassionate desire, it *does* go against his standing better judgment and its underlying retributive desires. Still, the overall rational basis of that judgment is too narrow and is outweighed by the larger rational considerations producing the incontinent action and apparently rendering it rational.

It might be objected that John must have made another practical judgment favouring mercy; hence, what we really have is a conflict of (presumably *prima facie*) practical judgments, and the action is continent with respect to one but not the other. Since the epistemically better judgment is the merciful one, John's merciful action is rational, and, as according with that judgment, not incontinent. This is a possible case and important in its own right. But continence does not follow from the action's being based on an *epistemically* better judgment: the punitive judgment might, e.g., be ingrained and far stronger, and so represent the overall disposition of practical reason at the time of action.

Moreover, John *need not* have made two judgments: desire and other motivational features can produce action *without* the mediation of practical judgment,[10] and that is my case. Particularly when one acts in the service of passional or appetitive influences, one can act intentionally without doing so on the basis of practical reasoning or even forming a judgment which favours the action in question. If, in anger over his child's headlong assertion of independence in planning a dangerous trip, John reminds her of a deeply embarrassing misbegotten venture that he had agreed never to mention, he may do so intentionally and for a reason: to shame her into backing down. But he need not have judged that this was a good thing, or in any way reasoned to a conclusion favouring it. Indeed, the most common incontinent actions are not reasoned at all, nor favoured by any kind of evaluative judgment. In the case of the waived punishment, if John had reflected enough to form the opposing, merciful judgment, he would probably

[10] This is controversial, and what follows goes only part way toward an adequate defence. For further supporting considerations see E.J. Bond, 'Reasons, Wants and Values', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, III* (1974), e.g. pp. 333-336.

no longer hold the judgment against which he acts, and so would not have acted incontinently at all. In general, even intentional action need not await reflection or reasoning, and if it did there might be much less incontinence in the first place.

It is also instructive to ask whether John's waiving the punishment is autonomous. Here we are pulled in two directions. It is not *directly autonomous*, since it goes against the present deliverance of his practical judgment; but perhaps it is *indirectly autonomous*, since it is grounded in central elements of John's character which, had he been sufficiently in touch with them, would have led him to a different practical judgment. We might also distinguish between actions that are *judgmentally autonomous*—grounded in what, at the time, one judges, or would on briefly considering the matter judge, one should do—and actions that are *holistically autonomous*: grounded in what, given a correct understanding of one's overall relevant desires and ideals, such as moral and parental desires and standards, one would judge one should do. Incontinent action need not violate one's overall autonomy, holistically conceived.

The tension we feel in deciding whether John's action is autonomous is closely related to the question of its rationality. The fidelity to premises model of rationality has been suggested as one relevant line of inquiry, and it can help us understand the tension. For insofar as we take as decisive for rationality the premises John *consciously uses*, his action is inconsistent with them and as such *prima facie* irrational; yet insofar as we interpret the model more broadly and take as decisive the premises—in the wide sense of 'grounds for action'—that he *has* by virtue of believing the relevant propositions, his action is consistent with them and thereby prima facie rational. As this suggests, one trouble with the fidelity model as I am describing it is its unclarity about what premises are decisive for rationality: just those used, those *S has* in one or another sense, or some combination. I thus want to set out another model of rationality (though I here apply it only to action) that can capture what is plausible in the fidelity model, but does not have its main deficiencies. I begin with a narrower model that contrasts with both.

On this narrower model of rational action—which I shall call *the executive model*—rational actions are those grounded in one's practical judgment (or at least all such actions are rational). Practical reason delivers a guiding judgment; behaviour conforms. Autonomy, on this model, is proportional to the extent to which one's overall conduct is under executive control, and it is thus easy to see why incontinent action is neither rational nor autonomous. Indeed, this model makes it easier than any I am aware of to see why incontinent action might be thought irrational. But there is another, broader model which yields a better account of rational action, whether incontinent or not. I describe it briefly here and develop it in Section V.

This third, *balance of reasons model*, is holistic: a rational action is one that is grounded, in the right way, in sufficiently good reasons of the agent, regardless of whether they figure in premises leading to the making of a

judgment that favours that action. Here are three points central to the associated conception of (objectively) rational action: these reasons must meet minimal objective standards (e.g. in terms of the quality of the agent's evidence for the belief(s) involved); they must motivationally explain the action (so that they do not just provide a rationalisation for it); and they must be sufficiently harmonious with the agent's overall framework of beliefs and wants, since action based on reasons, such as certain fleeting emotional desires one disapproves of, discordant with the agent's overall makeup, even if not irrational, is not clearly rational. To take a simple illustration, suppose that John wants above all to be moral, and that this desire expressses a carefully considered set of ideals and principles to which he is single-mindedly devoted. A paradigm of a rational action on his part would be one he performs on the basis of this desire and in the reasonable belief that it is his overall obligation. If one takes his governing ideal to be rationally acceptable and his belief that it requires the action to be in some way objectively justified, one may consider the action rational in some objective sense. If one takes the ideal or belief (or both) to be acceptable only from his point of view, one may regard the action as rational only in some subjective sense. The model is neutral between various kinds of objective and subjective conceptions of rationality.

Often the executive and balance of reasons models agree; for we are so constructed that commonly our practical judgments do appropriately reflect our overall system of reasons. But even when we take time to reflect, we can make a practical judgment which is out of line with our most important beliefs and wants relevant to the action. If these beliefs and wants, in an appropriate way, then determine action against our better judgment, we may thereby exhibit incontinence without irrationality.[11]

V. Generalisation of the Holistic Model

Much can be learned from exploring how rational incontinent action is possible. In part, the explanation is that the rational authority of practical judgment derives from the agent's overall set of beliefs and desires in the same way as does the rationality of actions themselves. Given that point, it should be expected that where an action accords with those overall grounds of rationality better than does a practical judgment it contravenes, the action may be rational despite its incontinence. Here, incontinent action, far from a failure to do what is better or best, may be the best option, and may eventually be seen by the agent to be so.

If, following the executive model, one thinks that the business of the will is to obey the intellect and that practical judgment represents the proper

[11] The appropriate way must be non-wayward. Attempts to clarify wayward chains and to show how actions are non-waywardly rooted in agents are given in Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) and my 'Acting for Reasons', *The Philosophical Review, XCV* (1986).

disposition of the intellect, action against one's practical judgment will of course seem irrational. This impression is reinforced if one thinks of the judgment as *closer*—as it normally in some sense is—to the overall grounds just cited as crucial for rationality. But the executive model is mistaken; and even if what is closer to the proper grounds of rationality tends to be more rational than what is further, this correspondence does not always hold. Indeed, a practical judgment may itself be passional, foolish, or even incontinent, in the sense of going against one's assessment of what the total evidence bearing on one's options indicates one should do. However, even where the judgment is warranted by the premises on which it based, they themselves may be defective from the overall point of view central to the agent's rationality, and in that case an incontinent action may turn out to be rational. Like the executive model, the fidelity model yields the right results only where—as in the most usual case—the premises underlying practical judgment are consistent with the overall thrust of the agent's system of reasons as it bears on the context of action.

Nothing I have said is meant to deny that when a rational action is incontinent, its incontinence counts to *some* degree against its rationality. But without being rational to the highest degree, an action may still be rational on balance. I also grant that incontinence counts against the rationality of *the agent*: one is not fully rational at a time at which one acts incontinently, and Aristotle was right to conceive the trait of incontinence as uncharacteristic of rational agents. Moreover, even though an incontinent action can be rational, it is not rational to *cultivate* incontinence as a trait or disposition; for it tends to undermine one's rational self-control. But these points are consistent with my main thesis: that rationality must be holistically conceived and that when it is, some incontinent actions may be seen to be rational.

What has emerged concerning the possible rationality of incontinent actions also applies to that of incontinent intentions and desires, and to incontinent failures to form intentions or desires. For the rationality of these items too should be understood in the same holistic way. Furthermore, as doxastic incontinence shows, the balance of reasons model also applies to the domain of belief better than does its executive counterpart. Just as a practical judgment may poorly represent one's overall reasons bearing on one's options, one's assessment of the weight of evidence may be inadequate to guide one's beliefs. If, in such a case, one believed a proposition that one's overall grounds *do* best support, despite one's appraising some other proposition as better supported by them, the spontaneous belief may be not only rational but also an expression of one's rational nature—perhaps a triumph of habitual responsiveness to good reasons over a self-conscious assessment of what, in the light of arguments, one ought to think.

Similar points apply to desire and valuation, indeed to all the propositional attitudes. For in every such case there may be a disparity between one's assessment of the states of affairs to be desired, valued, or whatever, and the desires or valuations actually best supported by one's grounds. Nature has given us the capacity to appraise our alternatives and to judge what,

in the light of our appraisal, we should do, or want, or value. She has so constructed us that normally we abide by such judgments; and typically, we stray from them at our peril. But she has not entirely trusted us to our own judgment, and our natural reasonableness can sometimes prevail over even our careful assessments.

A great deal remains to be said to develop the balance of reasons model, the fidelity to premises model, or even the executive model, fully. I would speculate that it may be in part the influence of the Platonic notion of the tripartite soul, with sovereign reason issuing authoritative directives, that makes the executive model plausible, and, in turn, makes incontinent action appear intrinsically irrational. Similarly, it may be in part the influence of a naive linear foundationalism that gives plausibility to the fidelity to premises model and so makes incontinent actions seem invariably to deviate from reason. But I do not think they need be irrational, and I suggest that a holistic conception of rationality of the kind set out here helps us both to understand how weakness of will is possible and to assess the actions, intentions, desires, and other propositional attitudes that manifest it.[12]

The University of Nebraksa, Lincoln Received January, 1989

[12] Part of this paper developed from one given at the 1987 Central Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, where I benefited from discussions with the other symposiasts, David Charles, Norman Dahl, and Deborah Modrak. Earlier versions were given in 1988 at Calvin College, Loyola University of Chicago, and Memphis State University. These audiences provided valuable criticism. I also thank Hugh J. McCann and readers for *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* for helpful comments.