

**Alfred R. Mele.** *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will*. Oxford University Press 2012. 160 pp. \$47.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199896134); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780199366644).

Alfred Mele, the William H. and Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University, constitutes something of a philosophical industry. He has produced 10 monographs and dozens of papers on human action. This work has partly led to, partly been the product of, two massive grants from the John Templeton Foundation, one on the *Big Questions: Freedom of the Will*, and the other on *The Philosophy and Science of Self Control*. These must involve the collaboration of many, since the sums granted amount to around nine million dollars. The conclusions Mele offers are attractive to many of us. He maintains that there is a defensible understanding of free agency which is agnostic between libertarian and compatibilist efforts to construe the springs of that action. Moreover, while there is some sort of close link between our best judgements (well or not-so-well informed) about the course of action to be taken at a decision point and the intention that arises thereafter, it is possible to form an intention contrary to that best judgement, and to act on it, freely, without compulsion or changed judgement about the better course of action. We can freely act in ways that are not self-controlled, while a more controlled response is available to us.

The focus of Mele's discussion is on what he calls *core akratic (weak-willed) action*, described as 'free, sane, intentional action that, as the nondepressed agent consciously recognizes at the time of action, is contrary to his better judgement, a judgment based on practical reasoning' (8, 33). His account extends to cases where the action intended runs contrary to an action commitment of the agent, though it ends up consistent with the agent's better judgment, for example any case of "chickening out" of a decision to do something imprudently dangerous.

In making his case, Mele rejects Richard Holton's view that akratic action involves a too-ready revision of judgement (Chapter 2) and confronts a host of difficulties raised in the literature, while using small scale empirical studies as a corrective to opponents' claims about supposed ordinary notions, and larger-scale empirical work on the availability of techniques of control to those managing their own weaknesses. Also guiding the discussion are a range of well-designed hypothetical examples which serve as crucial thought experiments.

Key to Mele's case is his answer to two sceptical arguments about the possibility of core weak-willed actions. If we assume both that some intentional actions are free and that some intentional actions are contrary to an agent's better judgment (in a properly refined sense of the term), it is still possible to maintain that 'UF. All intentional actions contrary to an agent's *J* [better judgment in a properly refined sense of the term] are unfree'. The first argument to defend UF uses three premises (36):

A1. Holding at *t* a judgement that it is best to *A* at *t* is conceptually sufficient for intending at *t* to do *A* at *t*.

A2. Any agent who intends at a time to do *A* then but does not *A* then is unable to do *A* at that time.

A3. Such an agent, being unable to A, is compelled to perform—and therefore unfreely performs—whatever pertinent intentional action he performs.

Since ability plus intention does not guarantee performance, given the intervention of accidental factors (the sudden gust of wind that disturbs the trajectory of the archer's arrow), A2 would need modification, to be both true and support the conclusion, but many possible modifications would threaten A1. Since the argument is proposed by the sceptic, the burden of adequate modification remains there. Moreover there are easy-to-provide examples where the failure to perform an intended action (even if the result of an inability) does not imply a compelled alternative. When I do not order the salad I judge to be the better lunch option, I am not compelled to select what I do choose if there are other options available (37).

The second sceptical argument is attributed to Gary Watson (38):

B1. An agent's succumbing to a desire contrary to his better judgment cannot be explained by his choosing not to resist, nor by his making a culpably insufficient effort to resist.

B2. Only one explanation remains: the agent was *unable* to resist.

So UF. All intentional actions contrary to an agent's better judgment are unfree.

A response to this argument will be effective if we can resist B2. It can be resisted if there is a way to sufficiently disconnect the better judgment that A from the choice that A, otherwise a choice contrary to a better judgement can only happen if the judgment has itself changed. Mele offers an extensive discussion to support just such a disconnection, and equally extensive discussion of ways of distinguishing between compelled actions and weak-willed actions contrary to one's better judgement (39-55).

While this conceptual work disarms objections to the theory of free weak-willed actions, explaining its possibility requires something more. Mele draws on a theory of motivation. He distinguishes two perspectives on intentional actions, with two distinct ways of explaining them (60 ff). The *motivational perspective* applies to members of any species judged capable of intentional action, while the *intellectual perspective* applies only to beings capable of weighing options and making judgments as to which are better or worse. Better judgments can be opposed by competing motivations, and when strong enough (they are variable in strength) these motives can block ordinary routes from judgment to intention and even overcome whatever resources for self-control are available to an agent, producing, as a result, a weak-willed intention (65-6). Mele maintains that although our better judgments are based at least in part on our evaluations of our objects of desires, the motivational strength of those desires need not match the evaluation of their objects (73). When the motivation to an action is sufficiently strong, the execution of that action becomes likely despite an evaluation that cautions against it. Powerful, contrary-to-reason motives can explain how there can be intentional actions against one's better judgement.

Another step is needed to explain how the actions can be free in such a case. If a compelled action can also be an intentional action, what supports the view that cases where desire outstrips evaluation are nevertheless free actions? An old test identifies free actions as ones where the agent could have done otherwise. Could an agent actually have done other than to succumb to judgment-

defying desires? According to Mele that answer is yes, once we consider that we can also have desires about our motivational conditions and techniques for acting on them. If I could change my motivations (in the direction of my better judgments about an action), and I have enough time and opportunity to employ the techniques when I desire to A, despite powerful reasons not to do so, then I *could do otherwise* than simply A, since I can engage my motivational management routines instead. I can exercise techniques of self-control. Since they are techniques, one can become better at using them. Since control can be difficult, efforts to achieve it may fail sometimes, even when the techniques are well-developed.

The situation of struggle, trial and error this suggests matches many common understandings of what goes on when one learns, then uses, self-control. Still questions remain. While arational factors such as temperament and habit may join with our judgments about the value of self-control to explain why the techniques are engaged (or are easier to engage) in some cases rather than others, it is not clear what we should say about the cases where a motivation overwhelms the judgment that attempting a technique of self-control is for the best now. In that case, do we see the enacted intention to ignore the technique as unfree? Could we say that we could have done otherwise by falling back on the techniques for managing our employment of self-control techniques? Moreover, what about the cases where we try to control our actions in order to match our better judgments, but fail? People sincerely trying to deal with addictions who fall off the wagon report this experience. Sometimes the skill is not yet developed enough, or the desire outstrips the capacity to manage it. On other occasions new external factors interfere. Someone struggling with an addiction with some success to date, may find the news of the death of a daughter disrupts those efforts. In those cases can we say that a compulsion has taken over since in some sense those unfortunate strugglers could not have done otherwise, or is there some other interpretation to make of their backsliding then? Mele tells us that his treatment of core weak-willed actions in the book is incomplete (120). This is one gap he does not mention.

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