

Emotions and Strength of Will

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Article abstract

Emotions often lead to akrasia and practical irrationality but can also help us respond to our practical reasons for action. If we think there exists an important distinction between akrasia and weakness of will, how should we then rethink emotions' contribution and threats to practical rationality? By drawing on recent work on willpower, I invite Tappolet to consider this question.



EMOTIONS AND STRENGTH OF WILL

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ABSTRACT:

Emotions often lead to akrasia and practical irrationality but can also help us respond to our practical reasons for action. If we think there exists an important distinction between akrasia and weakness of will, how should we then rethink emotions' contribution and threats to practical rationality? By drawing on recent work on willpower, I invite Tappolet to consider this question.

RÉSUMÉ :

Les émotions conduisent souvent à l'akrasie et à l'irrationalité pratique, mais elles peuvent aussi nous aider à répondre à nos raisons pratiques d'agir. Si nous pensons qu'il existe une distinction importante entre l'akrasie et la faiblesse de la volonté, comment devrions-nous alors repenser la contribution des émotions et les menaces qu'elles représentent pour la rationalité pratique ? En m'appuyant sur des travaux récents sur la volonté, j'invite Tappolet à réfléchir à cette question.

Emotions are often involved in akratic actions—namely, actions performed in spite of the agent’s best judgment (Stroud and Svirskey, 2021, p. 135). Take, for instance, the case of someone who believes in light of all the relevant moral considerations that they ought to jump into a lake to save someone in danger, but who, out of fear, refrains from jumping. As Christine Tappolet insists when discussing similar examples in chapter 8, we may still view the fearful person’s inactivity as free and intentional in the sense that matters for attribution of responsibility, and yet as tantamount to a form of “practical incoherence” and thus of practical irrationality. Fear and other emotions that enjoy a strong motivational influence can make us focus on some of the relevant facts of our situation at the expense of others. When our emotions motivate actions and omissions that stand in tension with our “all-things-considered” judgments as to what we should do (be it from a moral or prudential perspective or both), we are akratic.

Tappolet argues that cases of akrasia are also often cases of “emotional recalcitrance” (p. 142). Both an agent’s normative judgments as to the best course of action and her judgments about which evaluative properties are at play in her situation (for instance, her judgment that the jump is actually not that dangerous) can indeed stand in tension with her emotions, understood as motivationally efficacious, evaluative representations (for instance, of something as dangerous or “fearsome”). But to avoid giving the impression that emotions can influence our practical rationality only by corrupting it, Tappolet also discusses cases of “inverse akrasia” (Arpaly, 2000), in which an agent’s evaluative judgment is in fact flawed or misguided because it is unsupported by the normative reasons that agent actually possesses.¹ Tappolet explains that agents in such situations can be most rational by rejecting their judgments and following their emotions instead. Many will agree with her treatment of these cases. It involves accepting, though, that an agent’s normative belief has no special claim to constitute “where she stands” (Watson, 1977), and thus no special significance when it comes to evaluations of rationality (see, for instance, Tenenbaum, 2007, for dissent).

My own philosophical interests lie more in phenomena that are in the vicinity of what Tappolet calls “strict akrasia” and “inverse practical akrasia,” but that are distinct from them and had, until quite recently, received less philosophical attention. I would like to suggest some directions for thinking about the role of emotions in practical rationality that go beyond the classic debates masterfully summarized in chapter 8.

Following Richard Holton (2009), we may distinguish between “strict akrasia” and weakness of will. Weakness of will involves an overreadiness to revise one’s resolutions in the face of temptation—in other words, an irrational tendency to repudiate one’s prior resolutions and conclude that one should now instead succumb. Holton argues that because resolutions are specifically designed to overcome the anticipated pull of temptation, abandoning a resolution in response to the very inclinations it was supposed to help us resist is self-defeating and a form of practical irrationality (2009, ch. 5). Holton concedes that if one reopened

the “deliberative question” of what one should do and came to a new conclusion once in the presence of temptation, one would then be irrational and akratic if one acted in line with one’s previous resolution but against one’s current judgment (2009, pp. 145-146). However, he claims that practically rational agents have a disposition *not* to reopen the deliberative question in this way when confronted with temptation. On his model, strength of will is construed as an ability to “think less” and to simply follow through on one’s prior resolutions (2009, ch. 7). Once confronted with temptation, agents with strength of will maintain awareness of their resolution and the considerations supporting it, experience a shift in their perception of the normative considerations at play in their situation, and yet do not reopen the deliberative question (Paul, 2011, pp 891-892).

Introducing a distinction between “strict akrasia” and weakness of will raises several questions for the philosophy of emotion. Can emotions play a role in inducing the kind of temporary judgment shift that Holton describes? And if so, which ones and how? Chapter 7 aims to explain how emotions can not only influence our motivations, but also shape our evaluative judgments: emotions are described by Tappolet as involving distinctive evaluations and attributions of evaluative properties, and as being apt to provide *prima facie* justification for evaluative beliefs (such as the belief that something is dangerous). With this in mind, we may then go on to imagine a case where emotions, due to their constitutive attentional patterns, provide *prima facie* justification both for erroneous evaluative beliefs and mistaken normative judgments as to what one should do (for instance, for the judgment that something is highly dangerous when it is not, and for the judgment that one should therefore not jump when, in fact, one should). If, as we may put it, emotions’ corrupting influence can reach all the way up to one’s normative judgments concerning the best course of action (as opposed to being restricted to one’s beliefs concerning evaluative properties, such as the “dangerous”), then emotions could play a key role in inducing the kind of self-defeating judgment shift characteristic of weakness of will. Put succinctly, it seems to me that taking emotions’ epistemic role seriously should lead Tappolet to attribute to them an even greater power to produce practical irrationality than she does in chapter 8.

We may also wonder whether the weak-willed could somehow use their emotions to get out of their predicament. If we accept that emotions are sometimes part of the story of why people are too quick to revise their resolutions, we may then be led to hold that developing willpower is partly a matter of exerting some specific kind of control over one’s emotional dispositions, or even a matter of developing new emotional tendencies altogether. Eugene Chislenko (2023), for instance, has recently developed an account of willpower as a complex capacity involving “volitional modesty,” understood as state enabling us to successfully manage overexposure to volitional strain, temptation, and “emotional triggers.” It seems to me, however, that future attempts to understand how emotions could be involved in strength of will should take into account an important difficulty: in order to count as truly being at the heart of willpower, emotions should not simply be states that must be suppressed. To be

able to confidently claim that manifestations of emotional dispositions can count as exercises of strength of will, we would need to know more about which positive emotional tendencies could favour resoluteness and act as counterweights to a self-defeating disposition to reopen the deliberative question. I see this as an open avenue for future research, paved by the comprehensive discussions of chapter 8.

NOTES

¹ One famous such case is that of Huckleberry Finn (Bennett 1974; see also Arpaly and Schroeder 1999), discussed by Tappolet on p. 43: “Huck has helped a slave, Jim, to escape from his owner on a raft down the Mississippi River. As they come close to where Jim will become a free person, Huck has second thoughts. Turning Jim in to the authorities, he thinks, is the right thing to do. However, when the opportunity to do so arises, Huck finds himself lying to slave hunters in order to protect Jim.” In this case, Huck makes the misguided evaluative judgment that he should turn his friend in but is rightly moved by his compassion for Jim and ends up lying.

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