The Rationality of Weakness of Will and the Role Emotions Play in Rational Decision-Making

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Introduction

Donald Davidson believes that all weak-willed actions\(^1\) are incontinent\(^2\) and irrational actions, and he thinks an agent must have no reason for doing akratic\(^3\) action when she judges doing another is better\(^4\) (Davidson 42). This thesis argues against Donald Davidson’s views that all weak-willed actions are irrational. That is, the thesis argues that *akrasia* can be partially rational, and the reason why an akratic agent has a weak will and cannot persistently carry out her rational decision has a lot to do with the presence of the unavoidable emotional factors.

In supporting that there is room for rationality in weak-willed action, I will divide this paper into two sections. Section 1 discusses what Alison McIntyre and Nomy Arpaly think about the possibility that weak-willed actions could be rational. I will discuss both McIntyre and Arpaly’s understanding of the possibility of the rationality of weakness of will and give a comparison of the two types of views by finding both the commonalities and the differences. Both McIntyre and Arpaly agree that a weak-willed agent’s so-called “the best judgment” is defective or faulty, so not all things are considered before the agent’s deliberation. Therefore, the agent could be rational in completing an akratic action. However, McIntyre understands that the problem of weakness of will a problem of how strong the agent’s will is and a problem of the presence or the lack of intention rather than that of rationality. While Arpaly understands the

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\(^1\) Donald Davidson defines an action that reveals the weakness of the will or incontinence as: In doing \(x\), an agent acts incontenently if and only if: (a) the agent does \(x\) intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action \(y\) open to him; and (c) all things considered, the agent judges that it would be better to do \(y\) than to do \(x\). See Davidson’s “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?” in *Essays on Actions and Events* (2001).

\(^2\) In this thesis, I use “incontinence” as a lack in moderation or self-control.

\(^3\) Akrasia is characterized by weakness of will resulting in action against one's better judgment.

\(^4\) Davidson never precisely says what makes one action better than another. In other words, we do not know what “the best decision” means, and we do not know what the criteria are to make one decision the best to Davidson. Because the problem of weakness of will is a problem with an agent’s particular will, and it is very personal, here I understand when the agent is evaluating the best decision, she is evaluating subjectively.
problem of weakness of will as a problem of distinguishing internality and externality of different beliefs.

Section 2 gives my supports on McIntyre and Arpaly’s claims such that weak-willed actions can be rational actions and emotions are the reasons why there are weak-willed actions. Furthermore, I will explain why agents cannot consider emotions when deliberating before the action. That is, agents do not have the specific experiences or equivalent transformative experience that can provide the agents specific and adequate knowledge or information for the agents to consider everything, such as emotions and how their emotions can influence their rational decision-making. I will discuss the three features of the nature of emotions (partial, arbitrary, and passive), and show that these features can inhibit an agent’s ability to bring back the reason(s) she makes before deliberation later in the decision-making process. Lastly, I will show that there are no normative reasons for emotions, and therefore, an agent cannot keep away from what the unavoidable emotions could potentially do to her rational decision-making.

Section 1 Alison McIntyre and Nomy Arpaly on Rationality of Weakness of Will

Davidson believes *akrasia* is irrational, and a weak-willed agent must have no reason for acting against what she judges to be the best action. However, not all theorists take *akrasia* as an example of practical irrationality. Among them, the most prominent are philosophers Alison McIntyre and Nomy Arpaly, who question whether akratic action is necessarily irrational and who subsequently suggest the possibility that akratic action can be rational. In this section, I will discuss both McIntyre and Arpaly’s understanding of the possibility of the rationality of weakness of will and give a comparison of the two types of views by finding both the commonalities and the differences.
Alison McIntyre and Nomy Arpaly each attack Davidson’s take on the irrationality of incontinence in weak-willed actions. Both philosophers think that a weak-willed agent is not necessarily irrational in completing an akratic action. They both agree that the agent’s so-called “best judgment” is defective or faulty. In fact, they believe the agent never forms the “best” reason because she does not indeed consider everything before her deliberation. However, the means each philosopher takes to address the issue of rationality are different.

McIntyre thinks that the problem of weakness of will is not a problem of rationality, but rather a problem of the strength of the agent’s will. When the agent considers everything and makes the so-called best judgment, she is being rational. When the agent later performs an akratic action, the agent is still rational. It is that she is not lucid when she acts. In other words, she is not aware that she is making the non-best decision. In this case, the agent ought to make the best decision, but she fails to form the intention to do it. Thus, her will to carry out the best decision is very weak. Because she lacks the motivation to do it, she then rationalizes doing the non-best decision in which she has a stronger will and a stronger motivation, and thus changes her judgment.

While Arpaly takes a different approach, she divides akratic actions into two levels. At an internal level, the agent fails to consider all things before she deliberates. Therefore, the agent never forms her best judgment, and she is considered irrational. At an external level, Arpaly responds to McIntyre’s concern that the lack of intention should not be linked to the agent’s judgment before deliberation because there are two intentions (whether weak or strong), and they belong to, or support, two separate beliefs. Thus, in that sense, the agent can be justified in making the non-best decision as a rational action.
What’s more, Arpaly takes a new perspective on the rationality of weakness of will that McIntyre does not. This is that the main reason agents act akratically has to do with the agent’s internal undeliberated desires, beliefs, motivations, intentions, etc. We call these emotions and psychology. And this argument of hers will later lead us to Section 2, where I will discuss the roles emotions, as psychological factors, play in rational decision-making when it comes to weakness of will.

Section 1.1 Alison McIntyre’s Understanding of the Rationality of Weakness of Will

McIntyre thinks that weakness of will is incontinent but not irrational. Even though she never directly argues that weakness of will is rational, she directly points out that weakness of will is not irrational. To McIntyre, the problem about weakness of will is never whether the will is rational or not; rather, the question about weakness of will is that “the best judgment” is not really the best judgement.

What does it mean to have the best judgment? What are the judging criteria of the “best”? It seems to McIntyre that the definition of “the best judgment” is unclear. In other words, Davidson’s term “best” is equivocal. McIntyre gives an example: Dixon believes that he ought to do $x$, and judges doing $x$ is better than doing $\sim x$, all things considered. His action is incontinent, and therefore, he is akratic (McIntyre 292). Davidson would argue that because Dixon does not follow his best judgment, he has weakness of will. McIntyre thinks it is wrong to arbitrarily conclude that Dixon has akrasia because there are two understandings of “the best judgment”: (1) the first type of understanding of the best judgment is that of what Dixon can predict, evaluate and believe, that is, he has the most reason to do $x$. (2) the second type of understanding of the best judgment is, including what Dixon cannot predict or anticipate and therefore cannot
factor in before his deliberation, what Dixon should have the most reason to do, $x$. In other words, the reason Dixon does not conform to his best judgment (doing $x$) may be because her “best” judgment (to do $x$) is defective or faulty. Dixon may overlook some reasons or fail to consider all things/reasons before deliberating, without knowing that she does not consider all things. In that sense, Dixon may be wiser than her own best judgment without being fully aware of it.

McIntyre argues it is wrong for those who think weakness of will is irrational to conclude that Dixon is irrational in failing to form the intention to do $x$ since she believes that she ought to do $x$ (McIntyre 292). Her belief that she ought to do $x$ normatively requires her to form an intention to do it. She also believes that she cannot do $x$, and this belief normatively does not require her to form the intention to do $x$. Therefore, to McIntyre, akrasia is a dilemma, and we cannot merely say Dixon is irrational in failing to form the intention to do $x$ since she ought to do $x$ (because there is no intention!) Thus, weakness of will is not practically irrational.

In all, we can summarize McIntyre’s view into the following statements. McIntyre thinks that there could be two cases when an agent performs an akratic action. In the first case, the weak-willed agent is lucid when she acts. In the case of Dixon’s, Dixon believes that she ought to do $x$, and judges doing $x$ is better than doing $\sim x$, all things considered. In the end, Dixon did $\sim x$. To McIntyre, Dixon knows his action of doing $\sim x$ is weak-willed because she lacks the motivation to do $x$. In the second case, Dixon does not know that her action of doing $\sim x$ is weak-willed. Because Dixon lacks the motivation to do $x$, she then rationalizes doing $\sim x$ and thus changes her judgment. McIntyre thinks we should not assume that these structural and

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5 McIntyre argues that weakness of will should not be seen as theoretically irrational because it concerns deliberation and reasoning that support the formation and carrying out of intentions.
procedural elements in practical rationality are such that violating them necessarily counts as irrationality; instead, weakness of will is not a problem of rationality, but rather a problem of how strong the agent’s will is.

I agree with McIntyre that weak-willed agents are not necessarily irrational, but the question is, why don’t the weak-willed agents necessarily form an intention that corresponds to their judgment? Nomy Arpaly’s take on weakness of will could be helpful to answer this question.

Section 1.2 Nomy Arpaly’s Understanding of the Rationality of Weakness of Will

Adding on to McIntyre’s argument, Arpaly further explains why there is room for incontinent actions to have practical rationality, and therefore there are reasons why weak-willed actions can be rational. Arpaly divides an akratic action into two levels. At an internal level, Arpaly admits that the agent does not consider all things before deliberating. Therefore, the “best” judgment the agent made before deliberation may not be the best judgment after her deliberation. As the agent never forms her best judgment, she is said to be irrational. At this level, Arpaly is in agreement with McIntyre.

At an external level, the agent is rational in an akratic action because she has a deliberating manual of sorts that allows her to form a new belief (Arpaly 488). Because there is a new desire, there is a new intention that motivates her to do another thing that does not follow her previous judgment. To Arpaly, a manual contains advice by its nature, and so everything in a rational agent’s manual should consist of good, coherent advice (Arpaly 489). Thus, her manual instructs her to form a new belief, supported by her new desire, is just another belief from her
beliefs before deliberation. These two beliefs should exist independently, and they are not comparable to each other. Thus, in that sense, the agent is rational.

I use Arpaly’s example in her “On Acting Rationally against One’s Best Judgment” (2000) to illustrate the level of rationality versus that of irrationality in an akratic action. In her example, Susan deliberates and concludes that she should marry Todd (a). She fails to marry Todd (b) in the end, so she is acting against her best judgment, and therefore, displays her weakness of will (Arpaly 490). Traditionally, Susan acting against her best judgment would be considered as an irrational action. Davidson believes that “acting against one’s best judgment is never an instance of rational action.” Nevertheless, Arpaly believes it is not necessarily the case; she thinks that acting against one’s best judgment is not necessarily acting irrationally. Under certain circumstances, Susan’s action can be justified as a rational action.

Arpaly’s reason for why Susan is rational is that her desire is rational. Arpaly would argue that “a rational agent’s manual is a deliberator’s manual and acting against one’s best judgment is not the sort of thing one settles on doing as a result of good deliberation” (Arpaly 490). My understanding of this argument is that Arpaly thinks when an agent follows her manual when deliberating, this agent has the reason(s) to rationalize her action, and therefore her action should be rational. Since Susan, when deliberating, has a manual of sorts that allows her to follow specific instructions, and in this case, her desires, we should think of her as being rational.

However, to Arpaly, Susan is irrational in another sense. Susan mistakenly thinks that she has considered all things before her deliberation. However, the truth is that there are considerations she fails to take before her judgment of doing a—that is the considerations that cause her to want b. Arpaly suggests that Susan may deliberate imperfectly and forget to
consider one thing or two before she concludes that “all things considered, I should marry Todd (a),” such that she might forget to count her emotional resistance to such a decision. I think her emotional resistance could result from her perhaps still loving someone else but being unaware of this fact. Or, she may dislike the wedding plan Todd proposes, but she mistakenly thinks the particulars of the wedding are not important to her, so she does not take this issue into consideration when questioning whether she should marry Todd. Thus, Susan is irrational at an internal level but rational at an external level, even though she is acting against her best judgment.

**Section 1.3 The Summary: Why Weakness of Will Could be Rational**

Here we can see that both McIntyre and Arpaly think that a weak-willed agent is not necessarily irrational, and they agree that the agent’s “best” reason is, in fact, not the best, due to the lack of consideration before deliberation. While McIntyre thinks that there is a gap between the weak-willed agent’s intention (to do ~x) and her judgment (to do x before deliberation). Arpaly responds to this concern that such an intention should not be linked to the agent’s judgment before deliberation because there are two types of intentions, and they belong to or support two separate beliefs. This is to say there is reason x (maybe there lacks the intention x) that leads to judgment x before deliberation, and there is intention ~x (without the agent knowing she has this intention) that leads her to make judgment ~x, and therefore carry out the action that does not follow her judgment x.

Arpaly values taking into account the complete picture of the desires and beliefs of the agent. She describes the overall desires and beliefs of an agent, that is to say, overt psychology, as the main reason agents act akratically. The project of Arpaly seems concerned with divorcing
any significant association between rationality and deliberation. An agent who acts against her best judgment is following up on a craving which in some cases does not stick with the remainder of their wants and convictions; once in a while, the agent is following up on a longing which connects magnificently with all of her convictions and wants aside from a couple of them. Arpaly refers to the deliberate item, which seems not to hold any privileged position when compared with whatever undeliberated beliefs and desires might unavoidably occur. In addition, Arpaly believes that the reason that motivates akrasia is always internal, and she suggests that the overall desires and beliefs of an agent, that is to say, overt psychology, is the main reason agents act akratically. Hence, in the next section, I will discuss the roles emotions, as psychological factors, play in rational decision-making when it comes to weakness of will.

**Section 2 The Roles of Emotions in Weakness of Will**

Agreeing with Arpaly, I think that akratic actions are motivated by internal desires and beliefs. Just like McIntyre and Arpaly, I agree that the agent does not consider everything before deliberating, and the agent is not aware of this fact. This is because, at the internal level, the agent cannot factor emotions into deliberation before the action, but as discussed above, the agent can still make an action rational.

Here, I will break this section into two subsections and give two reasons an agent cannot factor emotions into deliberation before the action: (1) The agent does not have the transformative experience. When an agent does not have the specific experiences or equivalent transformative experience that can provide the agent specific and adequate knowledge or information, the agent cannot consider everything, such as her possible feelings about her decision and how those feelings may influence her rational decision-making. (2) If there are
emotions, they are unavoidable because there are no normative reasons for emotions. Emotions have three features: partial, arbitrary, and passive. These three features have silencing factors, and they can push away all the rational reasonings an agent makes before deliberation. Thus, the “best” decision is not in reality the best, because the agent does not and cannot consider everything before her deliberation.

**Section 2.1 Transformative Experience**

In this subsection, I will discuss philosopher L. A. Paul’s theory of the "Transformative Experience", and how that relates to decision-making. I will still use the Susan-marrying-Todd case as an example to illustrate the fundamental notion that it is extremely difficult for agents to make the decisions that are best for them without adequately knowing or understanding certain information that humans can access only when undergoing the specific experiences in question. And the lack of the specific experiences or equivalent transformative experience leads to this dilemma such that agents, who are asked to make “the best decisions,” cannot make the wisest decisions or the decisions those are the best for them. Furthermore, when it comes to emotions especially, it is exceptionally hard or even impossible for agents to rationally consider their emotions as influencing their decisions. This is because before deliberations, agents do not know what they may feel about their decisions unless they are committed to decision-making. In other words, agents do not consider everything before deliberations in weak-willed cases.

L. A. Paul, the author of *Transformative Experience (2015)*, raises questions about how we are to rationally and authentically make choices involving dramatically new experiences. According to Paul, there are three types of transformative experience: 1. Transformative experience is an experience that is epistemically transformative if the only way to know what it is
like to have it is to have it yourself. For example, trying the fruit durian, which you’ve never tried before. The only way to know what durian taste and smell like, and what you feel when eating them is to have a durian yourself. You can never know what it is like to have durian by listening others’ stories of eating durian. 2. Transformative experience is an experience that is personally transformative if it changes your point of view, including your core preferences. For example, you thought Professor Greenberg’s Kant’s Moral Theories Course could be dry and useless. However, a transformative experience of taking this course will change your view of Kant’s moral theories as useless; rather, you will see that these theories are, in fact, powerful and intriguing, so much so that it changes your opinion of both the philosopher and his views on morality. Furthermore, it might even change your thoughts about philosophy as a field in general and convince you to consider Philosophy as a major in college. You might also spontaneously choose to take more Kant-related courses or more morality-related courses over courses in Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Language, or Logic. 3. Transformative experience is an experience that combines experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative. For example, marrying someone and becoming a wife. The case of Susan marrying Todd, for example, perfectly combines epistemic and personal elements such that: (1). It would be epistemically transformative because the only way to know what it is like to marry Todd is for Susan to in fact marry Todd. (2). It would be personally transformative because being a wife, and potentially a mother, will change Susan’s point of view. It may change Susan’s view of marriage.

Paul argues that before we undergo the experience, we know very little about what these outcomes will be like from our first-personal perspective (Paul 15). Paul asks you to imagine that modern-day vampires do not drink the blood of humans but only drink the blood of humanely farmed animals (Paul 15). You have a one-time-only chance to become a modern-day vampire.
You want to be a vampire because you believe that you would gain immortality, incredible speed, strength, and power. You do not want to be a vampire because you do not want to become undead, become an immortal monster, and have to drink blood. Since you never were a vampire, you do not know what being a vampire is like, so you ask around for advice from current vampires. These vampires tell you it is fantastic, but you have to become a vampire to know what it is like. You cannot, as a mere human being, understand what it is like to become a vampire just by hearing other vampires talk about it. Until you are a vampire, you are just not going to know what the experience of being a vampire will be like. Knowing what it is like being a vampire, having that transformative experience of it, might somehow alter what matters to you, and hence change your reasons and decision to be a vampire or not.

In regard to becoming a vampire, the question you need to ask yourself is, how could you possibly make a rational decision about whether or not to become a vampire? You do not know whether you should, because you cannot know what it is like to be a vampire. You cannot know what you would be choosing to do if you became a vampire, and you cannot know what you are missing if you pass it up. This is a concrete instance of a potentially transformative experience. Without specific experiences, you probably cannot know or understand certain information. In other words, you cannot make rational decisions simply because you cannot know or consider everything.

Let us take a look back at Susan’s case. Susan fails to marry Todd, when Susan is deliberating, she fails to consider that: (1) she may love someone else other than Todd, or (2) she may dislike the wedding plan Todd proposes, and she would not be willing to marry him if the plan is not fixed. Susan cannot factor her strong feelings against marrying Todd prior to her deliberation because it is hard to consider all things, and it is nearly impossible to consider
emotional and psychological factors in evaluating the reasons before deliberation. Emotions usually come after “all” things are considered before reasons. Her regular decision models break down when she lacks epistemic access to the subjective values for the possible outcomes. In this situation, Susan believes that whatever judgments she makes is the best, because she mistakenly believes that she has already considered everything.

However, epistemically, Susan has never married anyone before. Susan would never realize whom her true love would be until she is asked to marry Todd. Because Susan has never married before, she has no epistemic experience in marrying Todd. The only way that Susan can know what it is going to be like for her is to marry him. She cannot predict her emotions nor know her preference. Hence, she does not consider everything, and there is some corruption in the judgments that Susan makes.

In addition, personally Susan does not know whether what happens after her deliberation, internally or externally, will change her point of view, including her core preferences. Her emotional factors appear later after she makes a decision because the utility of an outcome cannot be defined before deliberation. If that is the case, then there is no way to make sense of determining how best to maximize an agent’s utility, or how best to respect an agent’s preferences in terms of picking whatever she would like the best. The idea of “the best” is absurd because an agent cannot assign a value to the things she has never done because of due to the lack of satisfying epistemic experience, certain information, or specific ability.

Furthermore, the merging of many different affective attitudes then changes her view of marrying Todd: She would not know that she may hate to host an extravagant wedding and to have many people present at her marriage until she is asked to have a big wedding ceremony with Todd. She would not know that she may be afraid of marriage until she is one-foot in. Before she gets
married, people may tell her marriage is fantastic, and that she and Todd will be happy forever. People who have married would tell her that she has to host an extravagant wedding because it is probably a one-time-only thing; otherwise, she will regret it. However, these people’s words are not going to give Susan the information that she might like to have, namely, what it is like to marry, specifically Todd. Thus, until she decides to marry him, she would not realize how strong her feelings against such a decision could be, and she cannot assign a value to the outcome of what it is like for her to marry Todd.

The role emotional factors play in an agent’s decision-making, or deliberation, is in some ways similar to that of transformative experience in an agent’s decision-making. Just like in Susan’s case, in many weak-willed cases, agents do not know what they may feel unless they are committed to decision-making. In the theory of transformative experience, we only learn what we really need to know after we have already committed ourselves. If we only learn what we really need to know after we have already committed ourselves, but we still face the opportunity to make choices that we have never experienced, such as whether to marry someone, or whether to try a durian, what can we do to make smart choices? It seems like it is a dilemma.

Let us imagine how babies make choices. Babies have no life experiences when they are born. As infants, they first make random choices, or they observe what others surrounding them do. When they get older and can think rationally and make judgements for themselves, they start to bring in their past experiences, values, beliefs, and emotions into their decision-making. However, as babies, they still lack the life experiences; the life experiences may be a bit richer than what they had when they were infants, but they are few compared to what an adult has. So how do babies make decisions, and how do they make the “best” decisions without the transformative experience or adequate information? If babies can make such decisions, and they
will have to do it millions of times in their way growing up, adults can do it as well. Babies, even without knowing what it is like to do something, often try to assess their options by imagining what different futures would be like if they would do or not do. In the end, we all still have to make decisions.

We all have to make decisions as life goes on. It is just that we can have an expectation but never a precise one because emotions, just like transformative experience, can change one’s preference as it changes one as a person. In all, this is because even if all things are considered, by judging that doing $a$ is better than doing $b$ before the arrival of your emotional influence, your emotions can change your preference, and therefore change you as a person. In that case, Susan’s fear of marriage and large-scale wedding, and her deep feelings for her true love may change her preference from marrying Todd to not marrying him.

Section 2.2 Emotions are Silencing

A weak-willed agent has two different independent beliefs, one before and the other after the deliberation. Emotions cause this dichotomy, as an agent cannot consider emotions as possible reasons for her action before deliberation—not only because of the lack of transformative experience but also for the nature of emotions—whereas she can do so after deliberation. That is, emotions have silencing factors, and sometimes they can cause the agent to push away certain reasons for action, including the reasons an agent came up with before her deliberation.

This section discusses five aspects of emotions. The first subsection raises the question whether the best decisions agents are asked to make are supported all by their moral judgements. The second subsection rejects the claim that all best decisions are supported by moral reason(s); rather they are all supported by agents’ normative reasons. I will split normativity from morality
and give clear definitions of what each means under the concept of weakness of will. The third subsection further discusses the issue of the best decisions, that is, I argue that the best judgement does not have to be ethically right, but it has to be normatively good. The fourth subsection touches on the three features—partial, arbitrary, and passive—of the nature of emotions. I will argue that all these three features show that emotions have silencing factors, and they affect agents’ decision-making by putting away their earlier normative judgments. The fifth subsection discusses the origins of emotions. Since emotions have silencing factors and are a big component of why people have weak will in many cases of weakness of will, it is essential to study where the emotions come from and why agents feel emotional when making decisions and carrying out their actions. In this subsection, I will argue that there are no normative reasons for emotions.

**Section 2.2.1 Is the Best Decision is Always Backed up by Moral Reason(s)?**

Emotions can easily change one’s decision, including one's judgement of the best decision one could make. It seems that the best judgment an agent usually makes before deliberation in an akratic action is always backed up by moral associations. That is to say, even though Davidson never gives a clear definition of what “a best decision” is in his understanding of weakness of will, I understand “a best decision” here as the decision that maximizes human flourishing in the eyes of the agent in question. For example, suppose that a person named Mary had a long day today. She finished her work at 12 a.m. She had to get up at 8 a.m. for her 9 a.m. team meeting. She really wanted to watch Netflix. All things considered, she judged not watching Netflix to be better than watching Netflix. Nevertheless, she ended up watching Netflix until 3 a.m. and went to bed very late accordingly. In this case, Mary judged not watching Netflix to be a better decision because she needed enough sleep before her crucial team meeting. She might have considered that being
late for (or even missing) a team meeting would be highly unprofessional and, in her judgment, morally wrong. Her decision to stay up watching Netflix was, thus, directly antithetical to her best judgement. As another example, let us revisit the scenario I used earlier, involving Susan and Todd. Susan concluded that marrying Todd was a better decision than the other option, reasoning that she loved Todd, and it would be morally right for her to marry someone she loves. Let us stipulate that Susan had been dating Todd for ten years. It would be morally wrong to break up with someone in that position for no reason. The fact Susan ended up not marrying Todd bolsters Susan's conviction. Therefore, considering these two akratic actions alongside other instances of weakness of will, it is not wrong to conclude—if not for all instances, then at least for most of them—that the judgement of what is best is a moral judgment.

Section 2.2.2 Doing Things for Normative Reasons

Some may argue that the best judgment is not always morally right because in some cases, an agent can consider her best decision to immoral, and she would still have no problem making the decision to carry out her action. For example, killing people gives me pleasure. Even though I judge it immoral, I consider the decision to kill people to be my best option now because I urgently need to feel pleasant. Therefore, like the case above, some best decisions are morally incorrect. Furthermore, in some other cases, there are no moral values behind the actions (for example, choosing a certain color as one's favorite). Some best actions, therefore, have nothing to do with morality. While it is true that not all best decisions are supported by moral reason(s), all of them are nevertheless backed up by normative reasons. This argument necessitates splitting normativity from morality.
All normative reasons contain ideas driven by norms and principles, and these norms make it right or wrong to do certain things. The variety of norms or values that underpin normative reasons requires some modification of the claim that reasons that favor actions make those actions right. In this sense, normative reasons are also called “justifying” reasons. Thus, one makes the best decision for reason(s), reason(s) that supports and justifies one’s action. To further explore the relation between the best judgments and their normativity, I will present two case studies to discuss the relation between the reasons for one’s judgements and the judgments themselves before deliberation.

In the first example, imagine that I am a serial killer, and my greatest passion in life is to kill people. One day I woke up early and decided to kill people. I wanted to start my killing process as early as possible so that I could kill as many people as possible. However, even though I judged killing people to be better than not killing people, I ended up not killing people. In this case, I exhibited a weakness of will. Some people might argue that killing people is never morally right, and as such my best decision—to kill people—is not morally right. I agree that it is true that my decision to kill people for fun and pleasure is morally wrong. However, my perception that killing was my best option is still strongly tied to my moral belief. I could be wrong in my own moral belief, but my wrong moral belief is my reason for my best judgment. Here, my moral belief is my ethical normative reason.

Some people might argue that I do not have any moral reasons of any sort—neither right nor wrong—that rationalize my decision in certain cases. Some examples are: if I do not gain any pleasure or fun from killing; if I am not passionate about killing; or if I simply have no reason to kill people. In that case, my best decision would merely be a practical action not supported by moral standards. In an extreme case, let’s say if I were a psychopath, and rather than being
passionate and thrilled about killing, I would not think it was a big deal to kill a lot of people and would simply want to kill because it was possible, I being unimpeded, due to a lack of empathy and remorse. In this case, it seems like I would not have the reason to kill people but would merely be okay with killing people. However, in fact I would have reasons to kill even without realizing it. I probably would not have a strong reason to kill people, but I would not have a strong reason not to kill people either. There are societal norms that make it wrong to kill, and part of psychopathy is a lack of adherence to those norms. When I know that I have two options, to kill or not to kill, I would need to decide between these two. These two options are exhaustive and mutually exclusive: I must choose one, but I cannot choose both. When I have to make a choice, I compare the two options and I choose one of the two because I like or want to do one more than the other. This is not a 50% versus 50% lottery, nor any type of gambling game. As a rational being, even as a rational psychopath (psychopathy is not a lack of rationality, but an absence of empathy), I would ask myself which option I like better—which option I have the most reason to select—and I would choose one of the options, as my best decision.

It is true that I might not have a reason to kill people when I think about killing people, but it must be true that I have a reason to kill people when I think about whether I should kill people. Herein lies a fundamental claim about decision-making: the choice of whether to act requires a reason, but speculation about the action itself does not. Indeed, everyone, regardless of their murderous proclivities, can imagine what it is like to kill people, and imagining this doesn't require a reason. Only once one is put in the position of deciding to kill or not does one require reasons. When I am asked to compare two options and make a choice, I am using both my capacity to recognize certain things as reasons to act, and also my capacity to act in a way motivated and guided by those reasons. My reasons to kill do not have to be good reasons, but there must
nevertheless be reasons, which combine my pro-attitudes such as desires, dislikes, fears, beliefs and so on, even if I am not fully aware of it.

In the case of killing people, no matter in which scenario—either the one in which I am a completely normal person with strong personal moral standards, or the one in which I am a psychopath—my reasons for action are all normative reasons. Moral reasons are not the same as normative reasons, but moral reasons can be normative reasons, and they are just ethically normative reasons. In other words, my normative reasons are morally related, they are just ethically normative. This tendentious example has its place; even the posited amoral person still necessarily engages in normative evaluations.

In the second example, suppose that I became extremely hungry at 9 p.m. I desperately needed to eat something, but there was no food left at home, so I decided to dine out. I had two options: I could either go to the café downstairs for sandwich, or I could go to the fine Italian restaurant that takes twenty minutes to reach by car from my home. I thought to myself, “I ought to eat now,” because I was extremely hungry, and so I judged that going to the café was better than going to the restaurant. However, my subliminal desire for Italian food took over, and I ended up driving all the way to the Italian restaurant. In this case, I was weak-willed because I went against my best judgment, but that best decision was not backed up by moral reasons. Rather, the reason was a utilitarian one: eat as soon as possible to minimize the pain from hunger.

People might argue in this case that my decision to eat the sandwich from the café, was motivated not by moral considerations but by my basic instinct to survive, that is, “must eat,” was the reason I judged going to the café to be the best decision. Even if my body is not in danger from my hunger, my will is suffering. My will tells me that I am not willing to starve during the long period of time required to reach the restaurant. Therefore, for my personal well-being, my best
decision in this case had nothing to do with my moral standards. Nevertheless, no one can argue that one can make a decision for no reasons at all, even if the reasons are not morally based. Again, my reasons to go to the Italian restaurant do not have to be good reasons, but there must be reasons that combine my pro-attitudes—for instance, that I desire for Italian food, I dislike cold food, or I subconsciously believe a long wait is acceptable.

All these reasons that combine my pro-attitudes are my normative reasons for acting because they favor my action of going to the Italian restaurant. But what does it mean to say that these normative reasons favor my action? One way to understand this claim is that they justify my action. These reasons justify, or make right, my decision to go to the Italian restaurant even when that decision will make me stay in hunger for a longer period of time.

Section 2.2.3 Is being “Good” the Same as being Moral?

In the following sections, I argue that the positive valuations of “good/better/best” force an agent to think about reasons to do x or y, even if the agent does not have sufficient reasons to do x or to do y when these reasons are considered independently. That is to say, the agent must use positive valuations to form reasons to do things when presented with a choice. In this current section, I further analyze the weight of “good/better/best” and what they do in agents' reasoning. I argue that the best judgement does not have to be right, but it has to be good. The notion of “good/better/best” is not purely an ethical one, given that ethical notions are moral. I argue that the reasons based on which one acts ought not to be moral (i.e., evaluatively good), but they ought to be normatively good. This argument necessitates splitting normativity from morality.
First, as discussed above, all reasons are normative, which means all reasons are prescriptively relative to one’s norm or value, and by implication, all reasons concern correctness: what is right or wrong by reference to what is prescribed by the relevant norm, or what furthers the relevant value (Alvarez 9). The power of reasons is not that they potentially have or lack normative forces. Rather, a particular reason can make it right to do, believe, want, or feel something. Here, reasons can be said to produce the effect of right, or we might even say ‘the mode of right’ separate and apart from preexisting moral judgment. Second, the “good/best” normative context is the normative context in play here, otherwise there would be no reason for an agent to choose one over other options. When I would need to choose one and only one option, I would have to compare these options, and choose the one which I have the most reason to select. The processes of valuing and evaluating force me to come up with as many reasons — especially as many “good” reasons—as possible for choosing one action over others. Thus, motive precedes normative reasoning, which is the initial motive’s way of covering its tracks.

Now I apply these two reasonings to the two examples I gave earlier. In the imaginary case of the serial killer⁶, my best decision to kill people is not morally right, but it is a good decision based on my own values and principles. My reasons to kill people outweighed my reasons not to kill people, and all these “winning” reasons prescriptively apply to my norms or values. This means that when I was put in the position of choosing one over another, I chose the one which I had the most reason to select, which concerned (what I considered as) correctness: I think that it is right to kill people by reference to what is prescribed by the norm of murderous behavior, by the norm of killing behavior, or what furthers the value that it is desirable to kill people.

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⁶ I don’t think it is ever good to be a serial killer. I am not implicitly confessing to murders.
In the second example, my decision to go to a café outweighed my decision to go to the Italian restaurant because there is a normative value of the judgment of going to a café, that it is better to eat as quickly as possible when I am hungry in the moment. The normativity here is not the type of normativity with strong ethics in the descriptive sense, such that my value of “eating as quickly as possible when I am hungry” descriptively refers to certain codes of conduct put forward by the society or accepted by me for my own behavior. Normative, as in the café case, does not mean the application of ethics, but of norms more broadly construed, such that my value of “eating as quickly as possible when I am hungry” normatively refers to a code of conduct that, given a specified condition—“when I am hungry”—would be put forward by all rational persons. In other words, all rational persons, under the specified condition of being hungry, would endorse the idea of eating as soon as possible. Given the same exact options and comparison, all rational persons would choose to go to the nearby café rather than the distant Italian restaurant.

As we think of normativity in both the complex version—the application of ethics in the descriptive sense—and the simple version of normativity without the application of ethics only in the normative sense, the “not-the-best” judgments also become the normatively good or bad judgments. When the comparison forces an agent to come up with reasons to back up her “best” judgment in weakness of will setting, it also forces the agent to come up with normative reasons, either good/bad or not good/bad enough, to back up her judgment(s). The entire evaluation process is a normative process. Thus, in the serial killer case, my evaluation of the reasons to kill or not to kill in general includes a normative judgment. It means that I do not necessarily have to come up with descriptive and ethical reasons to decide to kill or not to kill. And in the café v.s. the Italian restaurant, I ended up going to the distant Italian restaurant, repressed my hunger, and waited for a long time, but I enjoyed the tasty rich authentic Italian food. My pleasure to eat the quality food
instead of quick food whenever I can is an additional, and perhaps stronger, normative principle. Again, normativity does not have to be as heavy as the most important code of conduct put forward by a society and accepted by the members of that society in peace. It can be something small, which under specified conditions applies to my own norm and values and would be endorsed by any rational being.

In all, the decision-making process in which an agent must engage in a weakness of will case sets a normative context for an agent. When an agent is asked to make a “good/better/best” decision, she is also asked to justify her decision with her normative reasons. Regardless of whether the agent has reasons to select or not select a given option, the agent would be made to come up with abstract reasons for selecting an option rather than the alternative(s) when asked to make the comparison and make a choice. And such reasons are “good/better/best” reasons as well as normative reasons.

Section 2.2.4 Three Features of the Nature of Emotions

In this section, I will introduce three crucial features of the nature of emotions—partial, arbitrary, and passive—which show that emotions have silencing factors that can interfere with agents’ rational decision-making in negative ways. These silencing factors strongly favor the things agents care about, they can temporarily put aside things or reasonings less favored or cared about, and they let emotions take the lead in driving decision-making.

Emotions usually play an integral role in the process of normative judgment, and traditionally, emotions are valued as being antagonistic to moral judgments. Pizzaro suggests that in *Phaedrus*, Plato argued that emotions have an irrational nature (Pizzaro 355). Even though I do
not totally agree with Plato that emotions are wholly irrational, I do agree with Plato and Pizzaro that emotional forces taint reasoning in decision-making.

Emotions are partial, in that they are aroused by things an agent cares about and they are absent from considerations of things for which the agent cares not. In contrast, moral judgment is impartial. Pizzaro makes this point: when “we” evaluate the actions of an individual who stole a car, it should be the case that our opinion would not change if we found out that the car thief in question was our brother (Pizzaro 356). In a moral judgment, no additional factor such as “the thief was our brother” or “Susan fears uncertainty in her romantic life” should change the agent’s best decision. However, emotions are partial, and they steer an agent in the direction of favoring those for whom she cares the most. As I mentioned earlier, McIntyre shows that in many cases of weakness of will, the agents lack the motivations to carry out what they judge the best before deliberations. However, many of them do have strong intentions to think about the other option(s) they have because they are motivated to do so (i.e., watching Netflix at midnight, or not marry someone due to the fear of uncertainty). Thus, in these weak-willed cases, it becomes extremely challenging for these agents to avoid letting their emotions drive decision-making.

Another aspect of emotions is that they often arise due to the presence of arbitrary factors. These factors are usually random and have little or nothing to do with moral judgments. Let’s again take a look at Susan’s case. Susan, in the end, decided not to marry Todd because she was afraid of what her married life could possibly be like. She did not know what marriage could be like, nor could she imagine what marriage would be like. All she knew was that her mother and her sister both ran into quarrels with their husbands frequently, and it seemed to her that they were both unhappy in their marriages. In that case, Susan’s emotion—that is, her fear of potential quarrels with Todd, of potential housework, and so on—arose due to her observation of others’
marriages. Even if Susan knew for a fact that her marriage could or would be different from these other marriages, and that her mother’s and her sister’s marriages might be better than they looked, she was still influenced by her emotive reaction. Her emotions could be capricious, depending on what she observed from their marriages, and she might find different things from their marriages on different days, under different moods. In other words, she was functioning reactively and drawing on an incomplete data set, but neither of these things kept her from deciding based on her fear, rather than deciding through reasoning. Therefore, because emotions are erratic, they cannot play a role in reasoning when an agent makes a moral judgment.

Pizarro suggests another reason the influence of emotions over judgments cannot be accounted for in moral reasoning. In the Subtlety of Emotions, Ben Ze’ev points out that emotions are events that we have experienced, and they are truly passive and involuntary. Thus, making their influence on judgment lies outside the realm of voluntary control. He suggests that:

1. Responsibility entails free choice; if we are not free to behave in a certain manner, then we are not responsible for this behavior.
2. Free choice entails an intellectual deliberation in which alternatives are considered and the best one is chosen. Without such consideration we cannot clearly understand the possible alternatives and are not responsible for preferring one of them.
3. Since intellectual deliberations are absent from emotions, we cannot be responsible for our emotions (Pizarro 357).

Despite the cases in which we lack the transformative experiences, our emotions’ influence upon our evaluations is not based upon true choice, but rather it is based on what happened to us in the past. For that temporal reason, emotions are beyond the will.

Emotions are partial, arbitrary, and passive. Because the nature of emotions strongly favors the things an agent cares about, emotions put aside things less favored or cared about by the agent. And because of their nature of being easily influenced by arbitrary factors, an agent’s attention in the moment of arising emotions is mostly or even only based on these arbitrary factors. In addition,
emotions also put aside the seemingly irrelevant stuff—which is, in view of reason, often the most consequential. Because emotions are passive, an agent cannot voluntarily choose what emotions to have and what influence of these emotions may have on her decision-making. For example, let us imagine that Susan was a survivor of domestic abuse. If all the other conditions remain the same, she still judged marrying Todd as better than not marrying him, but she ended up not marrying Todd. In this case, the likely reason Susan could not marry Todd was that she experienced negative emotions triggered by a terrifying event she experienced in the past. Her emotions were passively aroused, but she had no control over their arrival. In this case, she could not voluntarily choose not to hold negative emotions when making her decision, even if she had other reasons to marry Todd. It seems that we are endowed with the capacity to regulate our emotions. However, no matter how morally right these reasons are, or how strong those other reasons are, when people confront the negative emotions their past experiences bring to them, they tend to become powerless over these emotions.

One may argue that humans are endowed with the capacity to regulate, induce, or suppress our emotions (Gross and Keltner 467). However, the key here is not whether one can voluntarily control one’s emotions; instead, the key here is whether emotions are powerful enough to put aside the reasons one considered previously. Let us return to the case of Susan in which is Susan is not a survivor of domestic abuse. Susan ended up not marrying Todd mainly because she was afraid of unknown events that could happen in her marriage, such as potential quarrels with her husband, pregnancy, financial struggles, and so on. In this case, Susan might be able to regulate her restlessness and anxiety by coming up with some tactics to calm herself down and suppress her emotions. There is no doubt that she might be able to achieve that successfully. However, whether or not she can suppress her negative emotions has nothing to do with the silencing factors her
emotions had, by then, already achieved. That is, the influence of emotions casting aside her earlier decisions had already occurred.

In all, the three features (partial, arbitrary, and passive) of the nature of emotions all show that emotions play an integral role in influencing or changing agents’ rational decision by putting away their earlier normative judgments, and therefore, creating silencing factors.

Section 2.2.5 No Normative Reasons for Emotions

Where do emotions come from? Why do we feel emotional when making decisions and carrying out our actions? In this section, I argue that there are no normative reasons for emotions based on two theories, and that reasons are the wrong notions to apply when we feel. First, emotions are just evaluative feelings, and the feelings one can have are not necessarily associated with normative justification. Second, reasons are individually impotent, and they are gradable and contributory, while only non-gradable, non-contributory facts can help justify one’s emotional reactions fitting.

Emotions are sometimes evaluative feelings. People have emotions because they are responding to their feelings. These feelings are not necessarily backed up by normative reasons. For instance, many people do not believe that flying is dangerous, given the aviation death rate is extremely low. However, many people continue to fear it. The reasons people continue to fear flying are not the facts that favor and guide responses in their emotions. Feeling fear about flying does not mean holding the preference to avoid flying. There are people who favor and enjoy what they are afraid of. The feelings do not necessarily have normative justifications. The feelings can come from the past experiences people have, and they can come from the cognitions of beliefs and perceptions people have previously received when they encounter the world, even
without the agents themselves realizing it. These cognitions are beliefs that are coherently reflected in changes of the emotions. As Peter Goldie, in his *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*, states, “emotional feelings are inextricably intertwined with the world-directed aspect of emotion, so that an adequate account of an emotion’s intentionality…will at the same time capture an important aspect of its phenomenology” (Goldie 242). In other words, emotions are sometimes evaluations of intentional feelings that people respond to given what the world imports to them. Thus, emotions can simply be natural responses of what’s going on externally.

Second, reasons are individually impotent, gradable and contributory, and they cannot help to justify one’s emotional reactions “fitting”. Barry Maguire suggests that there are no reasons for affective attitudes such as admiration, fear, gratitude, disgruntlement, Schadenfreude, or amusement, and the so-called reasons of the right kind for affective attitudes are facts that make those very attitudes fitting (Maguire 1). These fit-making facts are not reasons, but they justify one’s reactions and emotion in certain circumstances.

These facts, the so-called reasons, have a different nature from the real reasons. First, these facts are not gradable. This means they have absolute qualities and cannot be used in the comparative or superlative. Reasons, however, are gradable, and they have different levels of that quality. Second, these facts are not contributory, and they do not explain “ought” facts. Unlike facts, reasons have weights. Reasons are incomplete parts of a specific kind of explanation of overall normative facts, such as facts about what you ought to do. Facts themselves are a kind of ought fact which makes a different attitude fitting. Third, these facts justify one’s reactions and why one favors one than others, while reasons cannot. Taking Peter Singer’s famous example:

If you are walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, you ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting your clothes muddy, but
this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing (Singer 231).

You have two options here. First, you walk past the pond and ignore the child. In that way, you prevent your clothes from getting muddy, but you let the child die. Second, you stop by the pond, wade in and pull the child out. In that way, you save the child’s life, but you get yourself muddy. The reason not to wade in and pull the child out is to avoid getting your clothes muddy, and the reason to wade in and pull the child out is to save that child’s life. Each of these reasons has some gradable property. The weights of these reasons can interact in different ways. In this example, reasons compete with each other, but sometimes reasons combine together. In that sense, reasons have a contributory feature.

Agents take actions based on normative reasons. Normative reasons explain why an agent does something, but they do not explain why the agent favors this action over the others. The weights of the reasons can be compared with each other, but the mere fact that some fact is a reason to do something does not make it the case that the agent overall ought to do it. The reasons fail to justify the action they favor. Going back to the example, the fact that the child will drown would fail to justify selecting the alternative option, wading into the pond. Some people would argue that is not true, that anyone one would save the child over keeping their clothes clean. For example, according to Peter Singer, there is no question about what you ought to do: you ought to save the child and you are acting badly if you do not do so. Singer thinks the reason you should choose to save the child rather than your clothes is based on a simple idea—effective altruism. Put in short, this idea suggests that a fully ethical life necessitates that you should do the most good you can. So should everyone else. Singer thinks that you should use your time, money, and efforts as effectively as possible to make the world a better place. However, this way of looking at the matter still cannot be justified. First, life is not effective altruism, and the world
is not fully ethical. Why would you live in that way, anyway? Second, most importantly, this reason of being an effective altruist does not justify your complex reactions “fitting”. This reason does not explain questions like why you are feeling what you are feeling, and why you favor your choice.

Imagine that among your clothes is the newest Gucci jacket, which costs you approximately two thousand U.S. dollars. You worked 100 hours per week for four weeks in order to get this jacket. This piece of clothing proves your hard work, your dedication to your work, and your capability of achieving goals. It means a lot to you. In this case, you have more reasons not to wade in and pull out the child, don’t you? Imagine again that you are dressing formally for your new job interview. The COVID-19 hasn’t ended yet, and many of your friends who got job offers had their offers withdrawn, and thus, lost their jobs even before they began their jobs. The unemployment rate rises sharply. You were lucky even to get this job interview. You are confident that if you can perform well in the behavior test, the company will hire you. A secured job is essential and lifesaving under this circumstance. You only have one chance, this chance for this interview. You walked past the pond on your way to the interview. Will you save the child, get your clothes muddy, and therefore, very much likely become unemployed and have to face financial difficulties, or will you secure your job in order to save yourself, and let the child die. In that case, will you make the sacrifice? It seems you have more reasons here to consider in making your decision. It will be a tough choice. We can say that reasons are individually impotent.

An individual reason is essentially contributory, which explains how much each reason weighs in an overall normative fact. However, individual reasons do not explain why you favor saving the child rather than keeping your clothes clean, and it does not explain why your
affective attitudes are not supported by reasons that are fitting. In responding to this pond incident, you feel pity and sadness for the child, and you feel worried, uncertain, and anxious about certain possibilities. The facts that made the pithiness and sadness fitting do not make the anxiousness and uncertainty unfitting, nor do the facts that made the anxiousness and uncertainty fitting make the pithiness and sadness unfitting. These facts don’t participate in any kind of ‘weighing explanation’ as reasons do. Each of them directly makes a specific response fitting. Thus, if not reasons, there must be some non-contributory and non-gradable fitting-making facts other than reasons for affective attitudes to exist.

Section 2.3 The Summary of the Roles Emotions Play in Rational Decision-Making

As we discussed in the first section, weakness of will is rational. In weakness of will, it is not that the will is irrational, but that it is weak. The role of emotions is that emotions are the reason why agents are weak-willed. Emotions cause the gap between the two independent beliefs a weak-willed agent has before and after her deliberation. In addition, the three features (partial, arbitrary, and passive) of the nature of emotions have silencing factors, and they push away the reasons an agent makes before her deliberation.

However, the presence of emotions is appropriate even though it seems irrational. An agent cannot consider emotions as possible reasons for her action before deliberation, just as she lacks the transformative experience. Therefore, in this sense, the “best” decision is never the best decision because the agent does not consider everything, which includes her transformative experience, transformative emotions, and the ways these experiences and emotions may change her judgments and core preferences. What’s more, there are no normative reasons for emotions.
Therefore, an agent cannot escape what emotions could potentially do to her rational decision-making.

**Conclusion**

Alison McIntyre and Nomy Arpaly demonstrate that weak-willed actions can possibly be rational. The so-called “the best judgment” of a weak-willed agent is defective or faulty because not all things are considered before the agent’s deliberation. The akratic agent’s acting for the non-best decision can be justified as rational under this specific circumstance. The main reason a weak-willed agent cannot consider everything is her unavoidable emotions. The emotions are unavoidable because there are no normative reasons for emotions. The agent cannot factor emotions into deliberation before the action because she does not have the specific experiences or equivalent transformative experience that can provide her the specific knowledge to consider everything, which includes her emotions and what emotions could potentially do to her rational decision-making. Furthermore, the three features of the nature of emotions have silencing factors and they put away whatever rational reasonings the agent makes before deliberation.
References:


