

Based on Davidson's "Weakness of Will": The Strength of Will is Irrelevant.

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Abstract:

As a significant figure in contemporary analytic philosophy, Davidson holds a prominent position in the discourse on the weakness of will. This paper offers an alternative perspective on the issue, using Davidson's views on the weakness of will as a reference point while challenging his approach. Diverging from the common analysis of the weakness of will in terms of specific behaviors to explain the concept, this paper delves into an analysis of the core issue itself: the will. By examining the rationality behind the concept of will rather than focusing solely on behavioral manifestations, this paper questions the validity of the problem of weakness of will. While it is commonly understood that the will guides behavior, final actions do not always align with the dictates of the will, giving rise to the problem of weakness of will. This paper raises doubts about this problem's legitimacy and concludes that the subject reflects on their rationality to generate the will. Thus, the will, distinct from desire, emerges after rationality and selects among the results of rational judgment. This choice is free, independent of the dictates of rationality, rendering the will a purely voluntary matter unaffected by strength or weakness.

Keywords: Weakness of will, Davidson, reflection, choice

1. Introduction

The problem of weakness of will is a significant issue, broadly concerning the connection between consciousness and action, involving the choices and judgments made between desiring to act and acting. Because seemingly better and actual actions are not always the same, the connection between will and action appears fragile. The viewpoint of this paper is not to analyze weakness but to focus on the will itself. This paper seeks to argue that the will is synonymous with free will, which is unconstrained by value judgments and originates from the subject's reflection on value judgments. Free will does not differentiate between strength and weakness. In explaining the process of weakness of will, Donald Davidson and others have focused on the analysis of weakness, attempting to prove and address weakness of will. This paper questions the effectiveness of this approach and refutes Davidson's viewpoint on the weakness of will. The significance of this paper lies in raising doubts about the concept of will in the weakness of will and proposing reflection as a means to make choices through the will. Rather than struggling to clarify the relationship between desire and rationality in the quagmire, it is better to elevate the discussion to the perspective of will and clarify the nature of free choice.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1 Davidson's Unique Perspective on Weakness of Will

"Weakness of will" refers to a person lacking determination or willpower, making it difficult to carry out their desires or goals steadfastly. In analytical philosophy, discussing "weakness of will" typically involves understanding the relationship between human will and behavior and the potential reasons why actions may not be steadfastly carried out.

Donald Davidson provides the following general description of the weakness of will or weak-willed behavior:

"An agent acts weakly willed in doing b if and only if: (a) the agent intends to do b; (b) the agent believes that there is an alternative action available to him; (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, doing a is better than doing b [1]."

The (c) part of Davidson's definition represents what we call the agent's "better judgment," which is the comprehensive evaluation of his choices contrary to the behavior of the weak-willed agent [2]. The term "better" in "better judgment" is too broad, lacking a specific stance, which seems to lead to subsequent issues. Due to the vagueness of the concept of "better," there is a neglect of the gap

between “better” and “to do,” resulting in the fallacy of “doing a is better, so it must be done,” meaning there is no necessary causal relationship between them. Later, there will be a detailed distinction of the interpretation of “better.” Davidson also acknowledges the “better judgment,” but his proposed viewpoint does not involve an explanation of “better” itself.

“If an action x is performed, but there are better reasons to do something else, then this action x can be called weak-willed. If the reasons for action x are defined as r , but a stronger reason r' exists, which contains r and more factors. According to this stronger reason r' , the agent judges that some alternative action y is better than x . Of course, y is not necessarily the best choice, and y may also be another weak-willed behavior.”

Davidson’s definition of weakness of will differs somewhat from the general definition, primarily reflected in his understanding of “better judgment.” Generally, weakness of will is defined as a person knowing or believing that a certain behavior is not the best choice but still choosing it. However, Davidson provides a more specific explanation of “better judgment,” understanding it as believing that there are other better choices and acting based on this belief. This explanation emphasizes the agent’s awareness of other possible behaviors and considers it a key factor in the weakness of will.

He further explains the agent’s behavior when holding the “better judgment” state in his work.

P1: If an agent desires to do a more than b, and he believes he can freely choose between a and b, then if he intentionally chooses a or b, he will intentionally choose a.

P2: If an agent believes that doing a is better than doing b, he desires to do a more than he desires to do b [1].

Because Davidson describes the agent who chooses b as holding, all things considered, a is better than b. However, “all things considered” must include consideration of a and consideration of b, at least two aspects. Because a and b are different things and do not include each other, if these are two different judgments, a person can adhere to the latter without adhering to the former. Weak-willed behavior is still possible even if P1 and P2 are correct [1]. The core of solving the problem of weakness of will lies in the conditional (surface) evaluative judgments and the comparison between evaluative judgments, perhaps a general characteristic of weakness of will can be given to avoid “considering all things. [1]” Thus, it can be seen that Davidson also attempts to distinguish between two judgments and recognizes that considering all factors is difficult to achieve.

In addition to distinguishing between two judgments, Davidson proposes an irrationality paradox. According to Davidson’s description: For any actor A, there is an action X related to him. If A desires to complete X and believes

in completing X simultaneously, then A will complete X. Assuming A desires to complete X and believes in completing X simultaneously. A does not complete X, then A falls into the irrationality paradox of action [3]. This paper believes that the assumption that A does not complete X is far-fetched. This is a forced assumption, not a deduction. There is no reason to prove that A when having both desire and belief simultaneously, will not complete X. If a person wants to quit smoking and realizes that quitting smoking is beneficial to him. He will take action to quit smoking. He may fail to quit smoking, but this is because desires or beliefs change during the process. If he does not take action from the beginning, it means he realizes the obstacles he will encounter in the action, and his beliefs change, so he does not execute it. It may appear to contradict the desire and belief not to take action because changes that may occur during the analysis process and the agent’s judgment of the process have not been analyzed. Therefore, this paper does not consider the irrationality paradox, and behavior remains the main reason.

This section mentions that Davidson emphasizes the subject’s awareness of better choices, which is considered innovative. However, even so, his analysis still follows the previous path; that is, it overlooks the analysis of the will itself and focuses on the analysis of behavior. Throughout, his assumptions are assumptions about behavior, assuming behavior exists first and then discussing how behavior corresponds to definitions. However, behavior analysis still relies on the behavior itself and the definitions of concepts involved in the behavioral process. Otherwise, it can only be a mere description. Therefore, in this paper’s view, Davidson’s innovation is still not thorough enough. Additionally, this paper questions Davidson’s irrationality paradox and does not analyze it based on the irrationality paradox.

2.2 The Definition of Moral Judgment and Practical Rational Judgment

Individual actions are motivated by complex and diverse reasons [1]. Suppose the predominant reason for an action is the primary reason rather than the abstract result of numerous reasons. In that case, the reasons for the dominant behavior can be distinguished from two aspects: practical, rational judgment, and the result of moral judgment.

Moral judgment generally represents idealized reasons because it points to the ideal outcome of actions, which aligns with moral standards but lacks direction toward the action process (better judgment).

The result of practical, rational judgment points to the process of practice, which is what the agent must face first.

However, the process of action takes time, so the interests of the agent and the outcomes are dynamically changing

during the process of action. Therefore, all judgments based on interests are also changing (here, the term “interest” is not external but internal, representing the agent’s behavioral tendency). The interest here can be interpreted as the source of motivation.

Action is about dealing with real connections, as it is a process of discovering connections from disorder to order, which is complex and consumes physical and mental energy. Practically clarifying relationships is contrary to the interests during the process. Therefore, there is a motivation to “not act.”

The action results derived from moral judgments benefit the agent’s interests after the action (better judgment).

Although both interests belong to the same agent, they do not belong to the same agent simultaneously. And the two are contradictory. From the perspective of moral judgment, it is called a moral conflict, which refers to conflicting reasons for action.

Some viewpoints oppose this conflict. For example, “I shouldn’t eat dessert” and “I should eat dessert” seem to carry an atmosphere of self-contradiction. However, this perspective considers these contradictory states different types, so they are not logically contradictory. The former is seen as a holistic judgment, while the latter is seen as another judgment, intention, or decision [4]. However, this holistic judgment does not hold in the author’s view. The holistic judgment may be a summary of all judgments or an overall assessment of one’s interests. However, one’s interests exist not only in the outcome but also in the action process. Therefore, the so-called holistic judgment is a judgment of the outcome. At the same time, the latter intention or decision is based on the assessment of interests in the process of action. To achieve the outcome, one must go through the process; hence, the contradiction arises.

Due to this contradiction, the opposing motivations generated by conflicting reasons cannot abstractly guide specific, singular behavioral outcomes; the guiding reasons for behavior must be a primary reason.

As a result of the inherent differences in the positions of the two reasons, it is known that moral conflicts are universally present and are also causes of “weakness of will.” As mentioned above, motivations generated by moral judgments overlook the interests in the action process and are interpreted as “what should be done.” At the same time, the volition’s agency is manifested in “what I want to do.” Here, “want” differs from instinctual desires, emphasizing the existence and consciousness of “I.” Subsequent sections will provide a clear definition of volition.

Once the agent takes action based on moral judgment, it is when “what should be done” aligns with “what I want to do.” At this point, the will chooses “what should be done.” When the agent does not take action based on moral judgment, it is when “I don’t want to do ‘what should be

done.” Throughout, the will is not concerned with “what should be done” but only with “what I want to do.”

Moral and practical judgments are merely rational assessments, not choices of the will. The reason why these judgments are seen as choices almost becomes common sense because there needs to be a selection of one primary reason from the results of both judgments as the final reason for action. This seems like a choice, but in reality, there is no conscious choice by the agent; it is merely an objective game between two objective conditions, a matter of which one outweighs the other. The comprehensive judgment of the larger side determines the dominant action. This game is based on abstract evaluations of objective factors, which only rationality can assess but cannot choose. Assuming the larger number stays, because 2 is greater than 1, so 2 stays; no choice is involved. The choice is subjective, and only the will can choose. This objective evaluation is not the choice of the will; even a computer can make evaluations. Of course, this is just a quantitative analogy.

This section mentions that the direction of moral judgment and practical judgment constitutes rational components related to action. However, it can be seen that from rational judgment to actual action, the will does not intervene; it is not concerned with matters outside of the will. These purely rational factors make immeasurable comparisons, which are objective rather than subjective choices.

2.3 The Theory of Weakness of Will Associated with Davidson

Unlike Davidson’s viewpoint, some perspectives argue that individuals, when engaging in behavior, may not consciously perceive the logical contradiction between the two judgment results, thus smoothly completing the process from thought to action, concluding that there is no weakness of will. For example, Sartre’s theory of “Bad faith.” “Bad faith” suggests individuals protect themselves by avoiding making clear judgments [5]. This self-deceptive behavior can be seen as a self-protection mechanism, representing an evasion or resistance to reality. In this case, the individual is not acting against their best judgment but rather refraining from making judgments, attempting to set aside the factors of reality and let them achieve a “natural abstraction,” thereby maintaining a certain degree of freedom. However, the problem lies in the fact that the factors of reality do not undergo self-abstraction simply by being set aside. From this perspective, these factors are ultimately judged by reason amidst immense confusion, or actions would be based on instinct alone, never touching upon the choices of the will.

The main difference between Parfit and Davidson lies in their distinct understandings and evaluations of egoism and self-control. Parfit provides a detailed analysis of egoism (S theory), advocating that individuals should

pursue goals that maximize their well-being, considering this a rational ultimate goal. He also applies egoism to the reasons for action, suggesting that people have the most reason to do what is best for themselves. On the other hand, Davidson acknowledges that acting against self-interest is irrational behavior, but he does not emphasize egoism specifically. Instead, he focuses more on the issue of self-control, questioning why agents would engage in actions that contradict their best judgment (weakness of will). Self-control is a requirement for action, while egoism is a moral requirement [6]. However, this article argues that the criteria for judging actions will not depart from moral principles, even if they appear to be influenced by external constraints. Humans are rational beings with irrational aspects, but regardless of whether the final behavioral outcome is rational, it goes through rational judgment, namely judgments based on self-interest. Subjects can deconstruct their practical judgments through self-doubt, making rational decisions about their irrational states [7]. Unless it is a reflexive, instinctive behavior, this is not within the scope of consideration. Therefore, self-interest should be a moral judgment stance for self-control. As Watson proposed, only the evaluative judgment corresponding to the action intention can guide the final action. If the actor performs what appears to be a weak-willed action, it only indicates a change in their previous best judgment. Therefore, the weakness of will is merely a pseudo-concept [8]. Watson's recognition of the subject's change at the last moment presents a strong challenge to Davidson's notion of weakness of will.

2.4 Reflection and will

So, when does it emerge? Firstly, it's important to distinguish "will" from "intention" here. Will represents the subject's agency or "choice." Intentions are emphasized here as more aligned with motivations derived from desires and rational judgments, guiding actions as lower-level psychological activities.

The reason is the premise for the emergence of will. The subject's reflection on the existence of their rationality generates will. This reflection isn't about reflecting on the content of rational judgments but rather about holistic reflection on rationality itself. No matter how rational content is reflected upon, it's still within the realm of rationality. Rationality, as a tool for the subject's judgments, is a means external to the subject itself. This unconscious approach cannot self-contain, achieving super-rationality, and therefore, rationality cannot be reflected upon by rationality; reflection is the subject's task. To choose, one must transcend rationality. Inclusion implies transcendence, so the subject must engage in an activity that includes rationality itself, referred to here as reflection (it's important to note the specificity of reflection here. Reflec-

tion is not merely a reanalysis but rather a transcendent activity, crucial for the emergence of will). Reflection is a self-cyclic activity, an act of self-inclusion. Theoretically, the content of reflection on the last reflection is an infinite activity. In reality, the number of reflections is limited, but there is still a tendency for this cyclic process; otherwise, it wouldn't be an act of reflection.

Take, for instance, the activity of foraging. Once the body sends out signals of hunger, organisms instinctively generate the desire to forage. Unlike animals, humans may not immediately act on the desire to forage unless another signal generates a greater desire, such as a danger signal from a blizzard, creating a greater desire to protect life than the hunger signal's desire to forage. In other words, animals will always forage as long as there's no greater threat. Humans, however, may not. For example, in a home with abundant food and no danger on the path to food, a person may not necessarily engage in foraging behavior due to the conflict between moral judgment and practical judgment. If a person refrains from foraging and realizes it is the "better choice," it aligns with Davidson's definition of "weakness of will."

However, as mentioned above, there's no choice involved, so there's no intervention of will. When this person reflects and becomes aware that reason is making judgments and issuing instructions to continue waiting or immediately forage, it becomes a will choice. The key to whether a choice is made lies in whether the subject is conscious of the existence of reason. This is an abstract activity, as reflection transcends the realm of reason, so language can no longer describe its content. It can be explained that reason exists within the subject and is not subject to spatiotemporal influences; reason is a concept. The subject's awareness of reason is not continuous because, most of the time, under the standards of social values, the subject uses reason to make judgments. When consciousness is employing reason, the existence of reason is challenging to reflect upon. Note that it's not reflecting on the concept of reason but rather on the existence of reason. The subject exists in the present moment; thus, the reflection on reason's existence also occurs in the present moment. Therefore, the activity of reflection only occurs in the present. If the self is considered an entity, then the only metaphysical point that cannot be separated seems to be a point where some volitional effort can be made [9]. This article considers this metaphysical point to be the self-awareness of the present moment, only achievable through reflection. The subject first becomes aware of their current existence before reflecting on the existence of reason. This reflective activity is triggered by consciousness, but its content is not consciously produced; it's abstract. Ultimately, reflection is not an activity of reason.

The notion of reflection here differs fundamentally from

Hegel's concept of reflection. In his work, Hegel emphasizes a kind of objective, external mode of reflection on the self [10]. This form of reflection adopts an objective stance based on universal rational standards of judgment, asserting them as correct judgments. This differs from the reflection discussed in this article, which is an activity detached from reason.

In most cases, subjects do not engage in this form of reflection because their actions face no obstacles, and the absence of willful choice does not affect the outcome. However, the absence of willful intervention does not determine the strength or weakness of the will. This strength or weakness merely pertains to which of the two factors mentioned earlier is dominant.

Once reflection on the existence of reason occurs, it inherently encompasses reason itself, viewing the content of reason from a higher perspective. Consequently, moral and practical judgments are no longer compared; they simply involve making choices. What guides this choice? As the subject's standpoint is no longer confined to reason alone, the content of rational judgments is not constrained by conflicts at the level of reason. Therefore, the choice is based on the abstracted results of rational judgments.

Based on Davidson's "Reasons as Causes" theory and the conclusions drawn in this article, it can be inferred that individuals first form an intention to act, followed by moral and practical judgments. In most cases, this is where the action begins. However, suppose there is further reflection on the existence of one's rationality and a choice between the results of the two judgments before initiating action. In that case, the will becomes involved in the action. The will only makes the choice, while the intention determines its strength or weakness, distinguishing which judgment prevails.

The complexity of the weakness of will involves various cognitive processes: first, the intention, followed by the two judgments, and then the will. Therefore, this article focuses primarily on analyzing the will rather than, like Davidson and others, emphasizing the analysis of external behavior. Starting from external behavior makes clarifying the relationships among these components difficult.

3. Conclusion

Through an in-depth exploration of Davidson's theory of weakness of will, it becomes apparent that Davidson's approach to identifying corresponding theories in human behavior encounters significant challenges. Behavior, being tangible and real, defies easy categorization within theoretical frameworks. The quest for clear, demonstrable logical pathways within the complexities of real-life behavior resembles the daunting task of extracting a single unbroken thread from an endlessly tangled web. Even when seemingly clear patterns emerge, the infinite nuance

of reality render their verification elusive. This paper contends that the genesis of free will lies in the subject's reflection on their rational existence. Free will, embodying the essence of unrestricted choice, inherently lacks the attribute of weakness.

Moreover, as this choice operates independently of the conflicts inherent in pursuing personal interests, it transcends any impediments between decision and action, obviating the notion of weak will and precluding the necessity for contrasting notions of strong will. This perspective suggests that a more fruitful approach may involve initially defining key concepts before correlating them with observable phenomena. By prioritizing the analysis of the will within the framework of conceptual discourse, this methodological shift can circumvent the pitfalls of psychological biases often associated with inquiries into the weakness of will, thereby broadening the horizons for future scholarly endeavors in this area. However, it's essential to acknowledge the limitations of this paper. The concept presented here, albeit insightful, adopts a narrower scope compared to the comprehensive framework proposed by Davidson and other scholars.

Additionally, the paper fails to delve deeply into the intricate motivations underlying the exercise of free will, an aspect deserving of further exploration. Furthermore, elucidating the concept of reflection appears lacking, presenting an avenue ripe for future theoretical development. Conversely, the interplay between free will and reflection warrants further investigation, promising valuable insights into the complex dynamics of human agency and decision-making processes.

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