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Weak-willed Animals?

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to contribute to answering the conceptual question whether there can be weak-willed non-human animals. After some preliminary clarifications concerning the phenomenon of weakness of will three different accounts are examined for the conditions a being has to fulfill in order to be in a position to display weakness of will. It is argued that these conditions are very strong and that there are good reasons to assume that, e.g., only language users can be weak-willed. This is taken as an independent argument for Davidson's thesis that non-human animals which are not language users cannot act intentionally.

1. Clarifications

The title of my paper invites three connected preliminary questions: 1) What kind of question is it? 2) What is meant by 'animals'? 3) What is weakness of will? I shall comment on these questions in turn.

1) What kind of question is that? Although the title ends with a question mark, 'Weak-willed animals?' is at best a fragment of a question. Spelling it out properly leaves one with at least two options, viz. (i) 'Are there weak-willed animals?' and (ii) 'Can there be weak-willed animals?'. The first question 'Are there weak-willed animals?' can be characterized as an empirical question concerning the population of the world and the second 'Can there be weak-willed animals?' as the conceptual question whether animals are of such a kind that they are in principle capable of displaying weakness of will.[1]

It is only worth investigating, whether the empirical question is true, if the conceptual question has been answered affirmatively. Therefore, but not for this reason alone, I shall concentrate on the conceptual question. But even that would be too ambitious. Instead, I shall only try to point out some conceptual requirements that must be met if a creature is to be weak-willed. Once the conceptual requirements have been clarified one could, first, ask whether animals, or rather, what kind of animals, if any at all, can meet these requirements, and after that one could, as a final step, find out whether there are in fact any animals which show weak-willed behaviour. Then one would have answered the

[1] For the relation between *being* weak-willed and *displaying* weakness of will see below.

empirical question, too, but, as indicated, I shall here restrict myself to the conceptual question.

2) What is meant by 'animals'? There is a wider as well as a narrower meaning of the term 'animal'. Taken in its wider meaning the term names "the class whose members include spiders, bees, chimpanzees, dolphins *and* humans—among others, but not plants, inanimate beings, angels and God" (McIntyre 1999, 11). If we understand the title question in this sense, then we can without further ado even an answer the empirical question, and we can answer it affirmatively. Yes, there are weak-willed animals, viz. weak-willed *human beings* as probably most of us know from personal experience. For the title question to have a good point, the term 'animal' should therefore be understood in its narrower sense as meaning only 'non-human animal'. So by now we have arrived at the following more precise rendering of my paper's title 'Can there be non-human weak-willed animals?', or, even more precise, but pretty stilted, 'What are the conceptual requirements that non-human animals must meet for being able to be weak-willed?'. To simplify matters a little let's take it as read that from now on 'animal' always means 'non-human animal'.

3) I now turn to the third of the preliminary questions, viz. 'What is weakness of will'? Weakness of will has only fairly recently, viz. for the last, say, four decades, been tackled as a problem in its own right. Before, i.e. from Plato onwards, the preoccupation with this phenomenon was mostly just a means to an end. As one should expect, there is no agreement as to what *the* correct description of the phenomenon is, and that obviously makes it very difficult to determine the conceptual requirements of that phenomenon.

Surprisingly enough, hardly any of these descriptions makes use of the concept of the will. As a first approximation one should have thought that weakness of will is just that: although the agent has decided what to do, her will is too weak to make her act accordingly or put her into motion. And quite often you get something like this as an answer, when you ask, not philosophers, but ordinary people what weakness of will is. Anyway, many philosophical and non-philosophical accounts of weakness of will have something in common, viz. that they point to a sort of gap between what the agent really thinks, believes, or judges what it would be *best* to do, and what she really *does*, so that weakness of will can be understood as a weakness to *carry out* one's will or to put it into action, and this type of weakness of will is the most prominent one in philosophical literature.

However, if one is interested in weakness of will in its own right, then one must realize that the class of the relevant phenomena is much wider. Let me give you two examples:

A) Amy "often deliberates and makes resolutions concerning her future conduct. Each year, for example, she makes a list of New Year's resolutions about dieting, jogging, reading good books, etc. But often the resolutions are half-hearted even when they are made. She says, quite sincerely, that she intends to keep them, and by announcing them she puts herself in the position of being embarrassed and a bit ashamed if she does not. [...]

She makes charts for daily reminders and feels good about the 'new direction' she is giving her life; but [...] [t]hese resolves do not usually last long, sometimes giving way to considerations that seem more important at the time and sometimes simply fading into insignificant memories." (Hill 1986, 95f.)

B) "Earlier, when she was less reflective," Betty "kept changing her projects. One day she was 'determined' to be a musician; but the next day she was enthusiastic about being an athlete; another time, she decided to be a great surgeon. Each time she worked hard on the project, bought instruments, running shoes, dissecting kit, etc., and gave up parties to study and practice; but, lacking a good sense of the sacrifices required, she never anticipated the temptations to give up and so never made any explicit resolutions to overcome them. For a while she had a will to do each of these things; but it was a fragile and unstable will, easily 'broken' by parental ridicule and readily changed when new role models captured her imagination." (Hill 1986, 97)

Hill calls Amy's case an example for weak resolves, and Betty's an example for an unstable will. I think, that is perfectly alright, but I also think, one could equally well understand cases of weak resolves as examples for a weakness in properly *forming or shaping* one's will, and cases of an unstable will as examples for a weakness to *maintain or perpetuate* one's will.

So if one accepts these examples and my description of them, we should distinguish between three types of weakness of will:[2]

1. a weakness to *form* or *shape* one's will,
2. a weakness to *maintain* or *perpetuate* one's will, and
3. a weakness to *carry out* one's will or to *put* it *into action*.

The last type (3) is the one which is, not only philosophically, most demanding. It is this type that has been at the centre of philosophical analysis, and it is this type, too, that I shall concentrate on for the rest of this paper.

One additional remark is required. That I have been speaking and will go on speaking of being weak-willed on the one hand and of displaying weakness of will on the other should not lead to any confusion. Saying of a person that she is weak-willed is ambiguous: It may mean that her behaviour in a concrete situation is weak-willed behaviour, and that means nothing but that she displays weakness of will. Alternatively, it may mean that she has a weak-willed character. It is definitely worth investigating what the exact relation is between having a weak-willed character and displaying weakness of will, but I won't go into that here. I take it, however, that one cannot have a weak-willed character without ever displaying weak-willed behaviour. So being weak-willed in the sense of having a weak-willed character is not just a disposition like being fragile. For an object to be fragile it is not necessary that it ever breaks, yet for a person

[2] Cf. "Whenever I have asked non-philosophers what they take weakness of will to consist in, they have said things like this: weak-willed people are irresolute; they don't persist in their intentions; they are too easily deflected from the path that they have chosen." (Holton 1999, 241)

to have a weak-willed character it is necessary that at some time her behaviour *is* weak-willed.

2. Three Different Accounts of Weakness of Will

Even if we may have agreed on paradigm cases of weakness of will and on there being different types of weakness of will, that does not amount to an agreement on an account of this phenomenon or this bundle of phenomena. Yet only by examining a clear description and explanation of this kind of weakness will it be possible to find out which abilities a creature must have so that it could rightly be called weak-willed. As I said, though, there is no agreement as to how weakness of will is described and analysed correctly. Therefore I shall now present—in a pretty much condensed form—three different accounts of weakness of will, and with respect to each of them I shall try to clarify some special requirements which a creature must meet so that its behaviour could count as a case of weakness of will.

It is useful to mention right at the beginning a couple of prerequisites which must definitely be fulfilled according to any account of weakness of will. For a creature to display weakness of will in the sense in question it must have concepts and propositional attitudes like beliefs and wishes. This, I take it, is beyond dispute. What is very much in dispute, however, is what the conditions are, under which it is true that a creature has concepts or beliefs or wishes. Some follow Hume who maintained: "[N]o truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant." (Hume 1987, 176) If Hume were right and beasts were really endowed with thought and reason *as well as men*, then there seemed to be no problem in attributing weakness of will to them *as well as* to men. Others, however, follow Davidson in claiming that being a speaker of a language, being an interpreter of the speech of others, and having the concept of belief are necessary conditions for having any propositional attitude at all (cf. Davidson 2001c, 157). If that were true, then it seemed to be pretty clear right from the start that animals don't have propositional attitudes and a fortiori that they can't be weak-willed. These are issues I'm not able to address here, but at least for the purpose of this talk I shall accept the moderate thesis that Glock has repeatedly argued for, viz. that even though animals can't have any kind of belief, they can have some. E.g., nothing is wrong in thinking that "[a] dog believes his master is at the door" (Wittgenstein 1999, 174) as Wittgenstein suggested.

As I said, I don't want to offer yet another contribution to the long debate whether animals can have propositional attitudes. So what more special requirements are connected with weakness of will? Let us look at some accounts of that phenomenon. However, since presenting these accounts is only a means to an end and not an end in itself, I shall sometimes disregard many relevant details. This holds true especially for the first account.

(i) According to Aristotle, in a case of weakness of will the agent is faced with two practical syllogisms, viz. the syllogism of reason and the syllogism of appetite.[3] Although there is some dispute about it, the example which Aristotle gives can be described in the following way: the syllogism of reason consists of a universal premise like 'no man ought to taste anything sweet', a singular premise 'this is sweet' and the conclusion 'I ought not to taste it'. The syllogism of appetite consists of the universal premise 'everything sweet is pleasant', the singular premise 'this is sweet' and the conclusion 'this is pleasant'. Reason says 'Avoid this', but appetite drives on, overrules reason and so the agent tastes it. Weakness of will can therefore be seen as a conflict between reason and appetite in which appetite takes the lead. Appetite is, as Aristotle says, contrary to the right rule, i.e. to the universal premise in the syllogism of reason.

The aspect to which I want to draw attention is that according to the Aristotelian account only those creatures can be weak-willed that have a mastery of the universal quantifier. Part of any practical syllogism which is supposed to lead to action is a universal premise, and every weak-willed creature must have considered such a premise in its reasoning. And for this reason Aristotle himself makes it very clear that "the lower animals are not incontinent [i.e. weak-willed], [...] because they have no universal beliefs but only imagination and memory of particulars" (Aristotle 1991, 1147b4f.). If we accepted this verdict without reservation that would be reason enough to stop here, because the case concerning weak-willed animals would then be settled. Since Aristotle's analysis implies that in every case of weakness of will there is practical reasoning which has the form of a practical syllogism, we had better proceed, though.

(ii) The next account to be considered is the one which Donald Davidson presented. He tackled the problem of weakness of will not as a problem in moral philosophy, as it had mostly been done before, but he took it to be a general problem in action theory.

Davidson characterizes an action x that reveals weakness of will in the following way:

> "(a) the agent does x intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action y open to her; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do y than to do x." (Davidson 2001b, 22)

As will become clear shortly, Davidson's proposed solution of the problem of weakness of will crucially depends on a distinction between two types of evaluative judgements, viz. conditional or prima facie evaluative judgements on the one hand and unconditional evaluative judgements or evaluative judgements sans phrase on the other hand (cf. Davidson 2001b, 40).

In a concrete situation an agent who wants to make up her mind concerning what she should do, must first of all evaluate the different courses of actions which she takes to be open to her with respect to their properties and their

[3] Cf. Aristotle 1991, Book VII.

expected consequences. Imagine an agent were to decide whether to eat yet another piece of cake or a carrot. Then she could start with evaluating the different properties and consequences of eating a piece of cake. This action could be seen, among other things, as an eating of something sweet, as an action which contributes to her putting on weight, as an action by which she would please her host who is offering her a piece of cake, and as an action which contributes to the deterioration of her teeth. Once the agent has realized the properties and consequences of a certain course of action, she must evaluate this action with respect to all these properties. In the example given, she could hold, e.g., insofar as the action is an eating of something sweet, it is desirable, yet insofar as it contributes to putting on weight, it is undesirable.

In a second step the agent must aggregate all these single evaluations concerning the different alternatives of acting and form a more general evaluation, viz. one which is based on all the properties and consequences of a potential action which the agent has taken into account. The agent must, e.g., attach relative weight to the fact that eating a piece of cake is, indeed, eating something, results in putting on weight, and contributes in that her teeth deteriorate. The question then is, whether taking into consideration *all* these different aspects with their respective weight makes it desirable to eat a piece of cake or not.

Once this is clear for each alternative which the agents takes to be open to her, she must in a third step weigh these different alternatives against each other, and decide which course of action is the most preferable. In doing this, the agent reaches an all things considered judgement, in our example, maybe, that on the basis of all the available relevant evidence it is better to eat a carrot than a piece of cake.[4]

All the evaluations or judgements mentioned so far are *prima facie* or *conditional* evaluations. They are all of the form 'Insofar action x has the property F (and G and H etc.), x is desirable' or 'Insofar action x has the property F (and G and H etc.) and action y has the properties S (and T and U etc.), it is better (for me) to do x than y'. No conditional evaluation or judgement is action guiding in the sense that it leads directly to acting, or so Davidson holds; this is only true of *unconditional* or all out judgements like 'I should do x' or 'x is better (for me) than y' lead to acting.

One would expect an agent, who holds the conditional judgement that all things considered action y is better than action x, to form the corresponding unconditional judgement 'action y is better than action x'. This would be justified, and in normal cases this is exactly what happens. In cases of weakness of will, however, the agent who holds that all things considered action y is better than action x proceeds to the unconditional judgement 'action x is better than action y'. To be sure, something went wrong with this agent, yet the two judgements, the conditional and the unconditional one, do not contradict each other logically. But what did go wrong? According to Davidson there is a principle which every "rational man will accept in applying practical reasoning: perform the action

[4] I don't want to claim that prior to every action each agents performs these different tasks. It is rather that acting rationally presupposes that these conditions are fulfilled.

judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons" (Davidson 2001b, 41). This principle, Davidson suggests, may be called the *principle of continence*, and it is this principle that the weak-willed agent does not obey.

The conceptual framework I have just presented allows Davidson—at least so he thinks—to give a consistent description of weak-willed action: the weak-willed agent, indeed, judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do y than to do x, and she does x intentionally, since she acts on her unconditional judgement that it is better to do x than it is to do y. So the weak-willed agent has indeed a reason for doing x, yet she has *no* reason for acting against her *better* reasons, which are in favour of doing y.

What can be said about the special criteria which must be fulfilled for a creature to act weak-willedly? Let me start with the so called principle of continence 'perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons', which as Davidson claims is accepted by every rational creature, i.e. by every creature which is at all capable of acting intentionally. On the face of it, it seems as if that meant that according to this account mastery of the universal quantifier was a necessary condition for weakness of will. After all, does accepting a *principle* not presuppose an understanding of the fact that it holds for *all* cases? Davidson does not require that much, though. He argues that "it makes sense to imagine that a person has the principle without being aware of it or able to articulate it" (Davidson 2001a, 203),[5] and he takes it to be sufficient that the creature simply acts *in accordance* with this principle. However, there is one step in Davidson's analysis where the potentially weak-willed creature *must* make use of the universal quantifier, and that is in forming the all things considered judgement, that on the basis of *all* the available relevant evidence action x is better than action y.

So we can sum up the conditions which must be fulfilled by any creature for displaying weakness of will, if we accept the Davidsonian account: it must be able 1) to somehow use the concept of a universal quantifier, 2) to evaluate a potential action with respect to their properties and consequences, 3) to aggregate these different evaluations, 4) to weigh the alternative actions against each other, and 5) to make use of two different types of judgements, viz. conditional and unconditional ones.

However, as far as I understand Davidson's theory of action, these conditions are not special conditions for weak-willed actions, they are very general conditions for acting intentionally. Only a creature which can act intentionally can act weak-willedly in the specified sense. I shall come back to this later.

(iii) The last account of weakness of will which I shall present has been proposed by George Ainslie. It may have more affinities to economics than to philosophy, but it will turn out to be helpful in two respects. First, it draws attention to an aspect of this phenomenon which I have neglected so far, viz. the relevance of time, and second it is characterized by a completely different view concerning

[5] Even though in this passage Davidson talks about the requirement of total evidence, his claim may rightly be understood in a more general way, i.e. to cover the principle of continence as well as other principles of rationality.

what stands in need of being explained. One of Davidson's core theses is that being largely rational is constitutive for having thoughts or any other propositional attitudes. Obviously, people are not completely rational, yet a person's being irrational is best understood as her *locally deviating* from a rational pattern of attitudes or actions (cf. Lanz 1987, 105), since in cases of irrational thinking or acting the respective person just does not think, reason, or act in accordance with some basic principles to which everybody is said to ascribe who has any propositional attitudes at all. It is not necessary here to go into this further. It is only important to keep in mind that according to Davidson not a person's being largely rational but her being sometimes *irrational* needs to be explained, and that is part of why is famous article is titled *How is Weakness of the Will Possible?*.

In contrast, George Ainslie urges us rather to investigate how people can and do behave *rationally*, and he emphasizes we had better asked "How is Strength of Will Possible?". In his opinion there is nothing mysterious in acting in a way weak-willed agents do, yet there is much to explain as to how one can act rationally. Empirical research confirms that people indeed try to maximize their prospective rewards, but, contrary to the assumption of utility theorists, "they discount their prospects using a different formula from the one that's obviously rational" (Ainslie 2001, 28). Discounting expected values *exponentially* would conform to our standards of rationality, but if Ainslie is right, people usually discount *hyperbolically*. As Ainslie argues, how people are by nature predisposed to evaluate future events, e.g., getting certain goods at some time in the future, is a function of their distance in time. One of Ainslie's examples may be helpful for clarification:

> "If I ask a roomful of people to imagine that they've won a contest and can choose between a certified check for $100 that they can cash immediately and a postdated certified check for $200 that they can't cash for three years, more than half of the people usually say they would rather have the $100 now. If I then ask what about $100 in six years versus $200 in nine years, virtually everyone picks the $200. But this is the same choice seen at six years' greater distance." (Ainslie 2001, 33)

This result shakes up a basic assumption of economic decision theory and utility theory, since people should have made the same choice in both cases: In both cases not only the payoffs are the same, viz. $100 and $200 respectively, but also the temporal distance between the payoffs, viz. three years. Traditional utility theory presupposes that our preferences are in this respect constant, but in fact they seem to be inherently instable.

The consequence of this finding for the problem of weakness of will can be understood best, when we think of situations where at t_1 an agent knows that she must choose at some future time t_2 between a minor, but at t_2 present good x and a major, but at t_2 still future good y. If at t_1 she evaluates x less than y, this shouldn't have changed at t_2—at least ceteris paribus and according to a

standard assumption of utility theory. However, due to the hyperbolic character of her discount curves, i.e. due to the fact that hyperbolic discount curves are more bowed than exponential discount curves, there may be an interval of time during which the agent actually evaluates x more than y. That is perfectly compatible with the fact that at time t_3 the agent again evaluates x less than y.

So because of the hyperbolic function for evaluating future events it is to be expected that people act in a way which is traditionally called irrational, e.g., that an agent prefers the present but smaller pleasure to the later but bigger pleasure, even though she will have reversed preferences when she evaluates the situation with a temporal distance later on.

According to Ainslie's model, weakness of will is, as he puts it, "just maximizing expected reward, discounted in highly bowed curves" (Ainslie 2001, 39), and the fact that the preferences of a weak-willed agent oscillate is nothing to be surprised about. Weakness of will, therefore, must neither be described as a case of psychological inability or compulsion, nor as being overwhelmed by or yielding to a desire. In displaying what we call 'weakness of will' the agent acts exactly according to the desires she has at the time of action. To avoid weakness of will, the agent must learn not to be led astray by the temporal proximity or distance of a good. As Socrates said in the *Protagoras* (cf. 356e) it is the right art of measurement, viz. the right art of measuring the size of present and more importantly future goods, which saves our life, and that may be pretty hard to learn.

3. Consequences

Although in my opinion it is very much disputable whether Ainslie's view is correct, his account is very helpful in that it emphasizes the importance of the role of time for weakness of will, and to this I shall now turn in more detail.

That time is of importance for weakness of will becomes clear when one considers how an agent at the time of her action evaluates some future events, and how an agent retrospectively evaluates her former (weak-willed) action. Consider the following example: On Wednesday, Hartmut went to a very entertaining party, and he didn't really want to leave. At midnight he thought to himself 'Well, I'd better go now, for if I don't, I'll end up boozing the night away, and then I'm going to have such a terrible hangover tomorrow morning that I won't be able to finish my paper for the conference.' However, against his better judgement he stayed on and got a terrible hangover. Although against all his expectations he did finish his paper in the end, he cursed himself all Thursday long. He kept mumbling to himself 'Why didn't I leave earlier? I knew what it would be like today; I knew how bad I would feel.'

I take this to be a typical case of weakness of will.—Over and above the conditions mentioned so far, which further conditions must be fulfilled so that a creature can display such weakness? First of all the creature must have a consciousness of time. It must be able to distinguish between the present or

the close future on the one hand and the more distant future on the other. In the example given, Hartmut distinguishes between the pleasure he feels at the time of the party and the pain he expects to feel the next day. Yet that does not suffice. Hartmut does not only need a consciousness of time but also a form of self-consciousness. It is not enough for him to expect that *somebody* will suffer from a terrible hangover the next day; he needs to expect that *he himself* will suffer then. Moreover, for thinking something like 'I knew how bad I would feel' Hartmut needs a consciousness of the past as well as a second-order belief. He has to believe something about what he knew or believed the day before, viz. that he would feel bad the following day. And on the Wednesday in question he most likely had a second-order belief, too, viz. the belief that on the next day he would believe that it had been a serious mistake to stay on at the party. Obviously, either case involves self-knowledge, since Hartmut must believe that *he* himself *will* feel bad and that *he* himself *did* know how he was going to feel.

So Hartmut must be able to distinguish between the past, the present, and the future.[6] He must also be able to distinguish between the sequence of events in the world on the one hand and his expectations as well as his memories on the other. Having an appropriate consciousness of time means, among other things, that one is able to situate oneself at a place in the course of time. One must be able to relate oneself to certain events in time, e.g. as prior to or contemporary with them. And for to understand that the event oneself once *expected* to happen is happening to oneself *right now* or that it happened to oneself at some *former* time, one must have a consciousness of one's identity over time.

So for a creature to show weakness of will in the same way as Hartmut allegedly did, it must be able to "consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places". And if I am right that every such creature "is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection", then only a creature that is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places" can display weakness of will in just the way Hartmut did. Such a creature is a person according to Locke's definition of the term (cf. Locke 1984, 335). It seems to take pretty much to be weak-willed!

Take Hartmut again. As is so typical in cases of weakness of will, being at the party he was torn between two alternative courses of action, viz. between staying on and leaving, and on the next day he was full of remorse at how he had behaved. Feeling remorse or repenting is, as Wittgenstein emphasized, something which "[o]nly someone who can reflect on the past can" (Wittgenstein 1967, §519) do. And it also seems that repenting is, as Wittgenstein claimed with respect to hoping, a mode of the complicated form of life of those who have mastered the use of language (cf. Wittgenstein 1999, 174). But why is that so? Why should repenting be restricted to language users? Repenting implies having counterfactual thoughts like, in our example, 'If I had not stayed at the

[6] For this paragraph cf. Bieri (1986).

party, I would easily have finished my talk in time'. And for having these kind of thoughts language seems to be indispensable (cf. Searle 1994, 19).

So should we come to the conclusion that weakness of will can only be displayed by creatures that are language users and persons in the Lockean sense of the term? This might mean to focus too much on the last example. Although I claimed that the fictitious story about Hartmut was a *typical* example of weakness of will one must ask whether in all cases of weakness of will time and remorse play such an important role.

What if Hartmut had not felt remorse on the day after the party? Had his behaviour then not been a case of weakness of will? I don't think so. Even if he had felt no remorse he would have acted against his better judgement, and this is the essential characteristic of weak-willed behaviour of the kind in question. However, remorse is *one indicator* for having acted against one's better judgement, though obviously not a decisive one, since it is of course possible to realize only after the action that one shouldn't have performed it.

What about the aspect of time? Recall the above example from Aristotle: There is at least no explicit mentioning of the future. The only relevant point in time is the time of the action itself, since no *consequences* of the action seem to be relevant. Yet, although that is true, those properties of the action that are exemplified at the time of acting, namely, e.g., that an action is an eating of something sweet or a going out into the cold, are always relevant. That these aspects of an action are relevant is due to the nature of evaluating possible courses of action and weighing alternatives, a process which I sketched in connection with Davidson's account of weakness of will.

It seems to me that some kind of deliberation, as well as some kind of inner conflict before or during the action, are essential elements of weak-willed behaviour. And even though the inner conflict is not always due to the *consequences* of one's alternatives for acting, it seems always due to the agent's expectations with respect to her alternative courses of action—more specifically, with respect to those aspects of her alternatives which, as she thinks, concern herself.

Therefore it seems to me that in all these cases the agent must consider herself as herself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places, and so I come to the conclusion that the standards which a creature must meet for being able to display this type of weakness of will are very high, indeed. It must be able to evaluate potential actions, it must be able to reflect about alternatives, and it must obviously have self-consciousness.

And what about the role of language? Is to have a language a necessary condition of being weak-willed? As I argued, if remorse were an *essential* element of weakness of will the answer would be clear. Then only language users could be weak-willed. Yet since there is reason for assuming that remorse is only *typical* for this kind of weakness of will, the answer may not seem to be that clear, although I think it must be affirmative.

I have two reasons for this. First: If, as I argued, it is true that showing weakness of will presupposes having the concept of a universal quantifier, then one must ask whether a creature could fulfil this condition without having a langua-

ge. I very much doubt that, but I can't argue for that here. My second reason is related to our practice of *attributing* weakness of will. How do we distinguish between a weak-willed person and a person who simply has changed her mind? Or to put it more pointedly, how do we know that there are weak-willed actions at all? As Davidson once put it: "There is no *proving* such actions exist; but it seems to me absolutely certain that they do." (Davidson 2001b, 29) The attempt to prove it by giving an example is doomed to failure, for if one refrains from making a petitio principii, every description is open to rival interpretations. However, it seems to me that there is universal agreement with respect to at least one point. Quite often the way people act is not the way they *claim* to be best. So the question is how serious we can take these verbal announcements. To my mind, they are the best indicators for weakness of will that we have, if not the only ones.[7]

Just imagine small children and ask yourself whether you would attribute to them weakness of will, and if not why not. One reason might be that they lack the necessary capacity for reasoning but clearly another seems to be that without verbal behaviour we wouldn't have any basis for attributing weakness of will to them.

"The primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*" Anscombe wrote in *Intention* (Anscombe 1963, 68), and the saying goes "actions speak louder than words". But if that were the full story, we could only attribute evaluations to an agent that fit with her behaviour. However, that would mean to deny the occurrence of weakness of will. So if we want to allow for weak-willed actions we must concede that there are cases in which we give more weight to an agent's words. But when are we justified to do this? I don't think that there is a general answer to this question. But when we know the agent well, when we know that she is a sincere and honest person, when we have never caught her lying, when we can rely on her promises, then we can take seriously what she tells us, even though she doesn't act accordingly. And thereby we can allow for occurrences of weak-willed actions.

"My own view," John Searle says, "is that weakness of will in rational beings is as common as wine in France." (Searle 2001, 10)[8] I think, he is perfectly right, and to my mind, all these considerations concerning the role of language and of self-consciousness indicate that weakness of will is deeply embedded in a form of behaviour and in a form of life which is typical to human beings. Therefore I am not just deeply sceptical but rather very confident that there is no such thing as a weak-willed non human animal.

Considering what I argued with respect to weakness of will, its conceptual prerequisites, and what that means with respect to animals, one might wonder whether this had not been an unnecessary detour, since the result was pretty clear right from the start. I don't think that the effort was totally futile. I rather think that we can learn something else from it. Recall the general outline of the

[7] To be sure, if a person regularly acted in a way that is not compatible with what she claims to be best in the respective situation, it would be hard or even impossible to understand her behaviour.

[8] Searle uses the term "akrasia".

Davidsonian account, not its details, and suppose that it is true that weakness of will is a genuine case of intentional agency and that the differentia specifica only consists in that the agent *neglects* to do something which is an essential ingredient of *rational* agency, viz. to apply the principle of continence correctly. Under this assumption all considerations which indicate that animals can't act weak-willedly by the same token indicate that animals can't act intentionally at all. To be sure, Davidson defends the same thesis but his reasons are completely different. He argues that animals cannot act intentionally, because for a creature to act intentionally it must have propositional attitudes, and this in turn presupposes among other things having second-order beliefs as well as the concept of belief, or so Davidson argues. However, I didn't make use of this line of argument. As I said earlier on I accept that animals may have certain simple beliefs. My conclusion rests on other characteristics which I take to apply not only to weak-willed behaviour but to *intentional action* in general, viz. the need to evaluate the multitude properties and consequences of different courses of action, to aggregate these evaluations, to weigh alternative options against each other, and last but not least the aspect of time for acting intentionally.

In closing I'd like to quote from Daniel Dennett. It is not a literal quotation, though. In the original he speaks about minds, but I have taken the liberty of changing it so that he seems to speak about actions: "Whatever else an action is, it is supposed to be something like *our* actions; otherwise we wouldn't call it an action. [...] So our actions, the only actions we know from the outset, are the standard with which we must begin. Without this agreement, we'll just be fooling ourselves, talking rubbish without knowing it." (Dennett 1996, 4)[9]

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[9] My emphasis. 'Actions' substituted for "mind".—Many thanks for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article are due to Ralf Stoecker.

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