

Willpower is Not a Thing

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Willpower¹ seems to play an important role in the minds of humans. Both our commonsense notions of willpower and the scientific discipline of psychology give reasons to believe there is some faculty² of mind that is willpower. Consider a few example cases: When Whitney wakes up on a winter's morning under her covers, her options are get up and prepare for the day or stay in bed, warm and cozy under the covers. She knows she should get up, and if you were to ask her the right course of action the day before or later in the day, she'd agree, getting out of bed is the obvious right option. But when she's in the moment lying in bed, she might choose anyway to stay in bed. In this case we would say she's exhibited a weakness of will; she lacked the willpower to get out of bed. Now consider Chester the chain smoker. He has strong compulsions to smoke a cigarette at least once an hour. Presumably, if he had enough willpower, he could choose to not smoke sometimes, and if he had even more willpower, he could stop smoking altogether starting now. Finally, consider Spyra, a spy devoted to her country. She gets captured by the enemy who tortures her for information. To remain steadfast in her secrecy for her country would, we say, require a substantial amount of willpower.

The current psychology literature also considers willpower a subject worthy of inquiry. In the 1960s, an experiment was conducted on four year old children to see how well they delay gratification for a greater reward. They were placed in a room with a marshmallow and told they could eat the marshmallow or wait until the experimenter returned fifteen minutes later and receive a second marshmallow.³ Years later, the ones who managed to make it fifteen minutes

1. In various sources the terms "willpower," "will-power," and "will power" are all used by different authors. I treat these all as the same and will use "willpower" in this paper regardless of source.

2. I use the term "faculty," though it's disputed. See Rebekka Hufendink and Markus Wild, "Faculties and Modularity," in *The Faculties: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) for an argument in favor of modularities instead of faculties. My paper does not substantially hinge on whether faculties or modularities are the real things at work. While depth into the matter is outside the scope of this paper, the primary motivation for a modularity view is that brains do not have neat parts corresponding to faculties. I would argue faculties need neither be at the "hardware" level nor inherent. What we know about neuroplasticity suggests the brain changes anyway, and physical proximity is not critical for a faculty at the "software" level. Whether these are bona fide faculties or collections of modularities does not affect my argument.

3. Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human*

scored higher on the SATs, had low BMIs, had higher salaries, and experienced more popularity with peers and teachers. Meanwhile the kids who couldn't make it past the first thirty seconds got into more trouble growing up. This is particularly worthy of note because only very rarely do any results from early childhood have a high rate of predictive power regarding adulthood.⁴ Perhaps, then, there is a faculty of mind facilitating this. Just as responding to light has vision to thank and doing algebra has some sort of abstract thinking to thank, perhaps these forms of self-control are due to some power we have in varying degrees. If someone can't see the board from very far, the power of their vision, so to speak, is lacking. Someone may also lack the ability to think abstractly enough to manipulate variables meaningfully. Both of these powers can also be developed to some degree.

Seeing and abstract thinking can also be tired out, and willpower seems to be the same. After a day of reading, one may have some deficiency in seeing. After a day of complex mathematics, one may be too fatigued to continue while still able to commit to other tasks. Likewise, experiments have shown willpower can also be tired out.⁵ In one revealing experiment, two groups of hungry students were placed in a room with delicious-smelling cookies and radishes. One group was invited to eat whatever they wanted—and they ate the radishes. The other was forbidden from eating cookies, left with only unappealing raw radishes while the cookies taunted them. Some went so far as to pick up and drop a cookie, but none actually succumbed to temptation. Clearly, though, to resist the urge was challenging, possibly invoking some sort of power of will to not eat the cookies. Then each group was given geometry puzzles to try to solve. The puzzles were actually impossible, but the ones who didn't have to use up their willpower resisting the cookies tried for twenty minutes before giving up while the radish-eaters only persisted for eight minutes.⁶ Psychologist Roy Baumeister describes willpower then as something that seems “to be like a muscle that could be fatigued through use.”⁷ Another experiment subjected participants to a sad film clip with dying sea turtles. One group was allowed to cry, the other commanded to remain stoic. Then they were given hand strength grips to squeeze as long as they could. The ones who were allowed to cry did as well as those not shown the clip. The ones who had to remain stoic did significantly worse; their willpower had presumably been used up on holding back their tears.⁸

Willpower may not need to be itself a particular faculty. Given we have a will, the degree of strength it has would be another reasonable understanding of what willpower is. In this case, if Whitney stays in bed, she just lacks the level of strength of her will to get up. Likewise, the children who held out for the second marshmallow must have had a stronger will, i.e. more willpower. So then we have two theories to consider: one with a faculty of willpower and one

Strength (New York: Penguin, 2012), 10.

4. Baumeister and Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, 10-11.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

6. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

7. *Ibid.*, 23.

8. *Ibid.*, 24-25.

with a faculty of will with some level of strength. Given these, that it can tire out leaves us with the options of the willpower being analogous to a muscle that tires out or the will being analogous to a muscle that tires out, that tiring out being a reduction in willpower.

Given these two kinds of things willpower could be, we have two rough models of the process of intentional action in agents. Each includes the mental conditions prior to the choice, the choice, and the intentional action. Willpower could be the power involved in getting from the prior conditions to any of the various choices. In this case, how much willpower one has determines what choices they can make. If willpower is itself a faculty, the chain goes prior mental conditions to willpower to choice to action. If it's the strength of the will, the will determines which choices are available just given the prior mental conditions.

The other option is willpower is the power to turn choices into actions. Then a deficiency of willpower would result in choices that are made but not turned into action. If willpower is an independent faculty then the chain goes prior mental conditions to choice to willpower to action. If willpower is the strength of the will, then the will determines whether any given choice will manifest in activity.

In each of these the distinction between the work of the willpower as a faculty versus the will with a variable strength becomes blurry again. The questions may be rephrased, then, for the sake of clarity. Whether there is a power is choosing, regardless of whether willpower is a faculty or strength of a faculty, is whether there is any will-related limit on what choices one is able to make. The use of "limit" is in a strict sense. Something being immoral or difficult or scary does not constitute a limit unless the choice is absolutely impossible to make. The question of whether willpower is a power in acting is to ask whether the will or willpower is involved in the success of our decisions becoming actions.

In this paper I will argue:

1. If there such a thing as willpower, it's a power in choosing or a power in acting.
2. Willpower is not a power in choosing. (Our choices are unlimited.)
3. Willpower is not a power in acting. (Our will(power) is uninvolved in the success of decisions.)
4. So, there is no such thing as willpower.

In the following sections I will defend each premise, and then conclude with the implications of there being no such thing as willpower. While I have made an assertion of the first premise already, the concept of willpower has other notions that need to be cleared away to make the idea clear. Thus I will present the other possibilities and explain why they do not work. For the latter two premises, I will present arguments for willpower not being a power of choosing or acting, respectively. In each I will make an argument that willpower, whether

distinct faculty or strength of will, is not a thing. Then I will conclude that willpower is not a thing, and when we talk about it we're actually talking about other things. Nonetheless, the absence of willpower is not merely a conclusion about proper use of language but rather something with substantial payoffs, which I will outline thereafter.

1 Narrowing the Options

Of all the things willpower might be, I first intend to clear out everything besides a power in choosing and a power in acting. First I will recall back to the three characters from the beginning of this paper to draw out our intuitions and then for each either explain them away or categorize them into power in choosing or power in acting. Following this, I will look at experimental results to consider a public consensus on what willpower is and give those ideas the same treatment.

Let's now go back to Whitney, Chester, and Spyra. In the cases of Whitney and Spyra, resoluteness seems to be a critical factor of their willpower. If either went back on their earlier resolutions to get out of bed and show national loyalty, they would be exhibiting a weakness of will. Why they are or are not resolute determines how we should interpret this. If there's a willpower question as to whether they are able to decide to keep their resolve in the first place, it's a power in choosing. If we know they can choose to keep their resolve but still don't know if they can succeed, then it must be a power in acting.

A similar element is resistance to compulsion. Laziness, nicotine addiction, and torture are all compelling factors in decision making. Someone who can be compelled easily to bend their actions exhibits a weakness of will. If the power of Chester's will determines whether he can even choose to not smoke, we again have a power, or deficiency thereof, to choose. On the other hand, if he can choose to not smoke but then his actions betray his decision, and not because he made another contrary decision, then his power to act is in question.

We also have the Aristotelian idea of *akrasia* common in the weakness of will literature. *Akrasia* is acting in such a way that betrays one's better judgment. Its opposite, *enkrateia*, is acting in accord with one's better judgment. The same string of reasoning used for the previous two examples applies just the same here. Continnence and self-control are yet two more concepts associated with willpower, but each, too, must fall into either of the same two categories.

Resoluteness, resistance to compulsion, *enkrateia*, self-control, and continence all come in both long-term character trait and short-term situational varieties. For example, someone may generally exhibit self-control, but any given situation may also call for self-control which can be exhibited even by those who do not exhibit self-control in other situations. Then likewise we may see willpower as a generalized, long-term thing or a specialized, short-term thing. The two options are not exclusive. Just as someone can be physically strong in general but weak when ill, someone can have a generally strong or weak will that changes given the circumstances.

A radically different idea of willpower is that willpower is the power of one's

mind to be efficacious in affecting the non-mental or that which is not oneself. This is a clear case of willpower being the power to enact choices. Whatever is mentally responsible for intentional action, will or a will-willpower combination, would have to have competitors. There may be further complications such as consciously willing one choice while unconsciously vying for another, both competing at the level of enacting choice. Depending on the metaphysics, the wills of agents may even compete directly with each other with willpower being at least in part a measure of ability to overpower other wills. Some further physical facts can complicate our understanding of this possibility. Consider lifting a weight near the limit of your strength. If you try hard enough, you can lift it. If given a weight you don't know the weight of, but it seems to be around your limit, and you fail to lift it, whether you could have tried hard enough to lift it remains unknown. Maybe you need stronger arms, but maybe you need a stronger will. This illustrates another kind of power to enact choice through willpower, and perhaps a clearer kind at that.

Having looked through some intuitive examples, perhaps a study of the popular idea of willpower will reveal other options. At Florida State University, Alfred Mele asked seventy-two undergraduate students in the first week of a basic philosophy course questions about their ideas regarding weakness of will.⁹ When asked what weakness of will is and to give an example, eleven said it's doing something you believe or know you should not do. Four others mentioned not standing up for your beliefs. Nine said doing something you do not want to do, such as intentionally having undesired sexual intercourse.¹⁰ Any of these can be explained in terms of being unable to make a choice or unable to enact a choice. They may also be explained as a will able to make any choice and enact it, but the wrong choice being made, regardless of whether the wrongness is moral, rational, or preferential.

Important to any of these is that the relevant beliefs are held by the agent, and these beliefs demand certain choices from the agent. For example, Whitney may have a belief that her best choice available is to get out of bed and then choose to not get out of bed, but she could have chosen to get out of bed and then successfully gotten out of bed. The correctness of the beliefs is unimportant. If Carol the Catholic believes blasphemy is a sin and Alex the antitheist thinks church attendance is morally bad, Carol would not be showing weakness of will in attending church while Alex would not be showing weakness of will in blaspheming. This account of weakness of will translated to terms of willpower is that willpower just is one's acting in accordance with one's beliefs. Unique thus far to this account is that it's not even a power; it's just a description of behavior. In this case it's a thing only in the way that the amount one thinks about tables is a thing. We can identify it and talk about it, but it's just a construction we make of other things with no basic ontology of its own.

Likewise, one may construct a similar account wherein willpower is acting in accordance with one's character. These correspond roughly with *enkrateia*

9. Note, weakness of will was not a topic of the class.

10. Alfred Mele, "Weakness of Will and *Akrasia*," *Philosophical Studies* 150 (2010): 391–404.

and resolution.¹¹ The important alternative is that the willpower just is the acting's being in accordance rather than the ability to do so. If this alternative is an accurate account of willpower, then indeed willpower is not a thing, only a description of a tendency. The tendency is interesting and poses several puzzles, but it is indeed a tendency. Given this kind of willpower, one with strong willpower or a high level of willpower doesn't actually have some level of power within the will that coordinates these choices and actions, they merely have actions that happen to follow a certain pattern. Now, of course, if there is such a thing as willpower, we should expect this pattern to obtain, but that's more than there just a being a pattern. This is similar to how if someone can see, we'll expect certain reactions to light-based stimuli, but those reactions themselves do not constitute vision. If someone blinded you but also seized control of your bodily movements and controlled you as those you could see, you still would not be seeing even though you would display the actions of seeing. Likewise, if someone seized control of your actions and acted in accordance with your beliefs or character or best reasons, you would not be using any sort of willpower despite fulfilling this meaning of willpower. Thus, this cannot be what willpower is, if willpower is anything.

Continuing this examination of the popular conception of willpower, we can look at a second survey Mele conducted regarding weakness of will, this time in a multiple-choice format. Participants were asked for their understanding of the expression "weakness of will" with the options of "Doing something you believed or knew you shouldn't do," "Doing something you decided or intended not to do," or "Neither. The descriptions are equally accurate or inaccurate." The first two results had their order randomized to no significant effect. Forty-nine percent answered the first, thirty-three percent the second, and eighteen the third.¹² Again, these are merely properties of decisions. The willpower involved might be the ability to be making these decisions or not, but this returns us to the two options I've presented.

Thus, the results surveys give for what willpower is point to a tendency rather than some thing that is willpower, whether faculty or strength. They may be getting at what the exhibition of willpower would look like, but if there is no willpower then they simply describe a certain sort of character. A simple catch-all for these is that to have a stronger willpower is just to choose relatively independent of external influences, akin to Spinoza's idea of what a freer will is.

After an examination of both our intuitions and popular opinion, we still have only willpower as a power in choosing or a power in enacting choice. There are several varieties of each, so if willpower were either of these, a further investigation into what it's like could be done, but I will instead show it cannot be either, thus concluding that willpower is not a thing.

11. Depending on which interpretation of *enkrateia* one considers, either may actually be *enkrateia*. A robust discussion of what *enkrateia* itself is is outside the scope of this paper.

12. Mele, "Weakness of Will and *Akrasia*."

2 Willpower Cannot Be Power to Choose

Recall the causal chain of intentional action from before: there are some mental states, then a choice is made, and from that choice comes intentional action. If willpower is the power to choose, then there's some limitation on what choices are available coming out of the mental states, and willpower is responsible for the limitation. This may come across as counterintuitive since a power of will suggests something positive rather than a negative limitation. Here I am considering an unlimited willpower to not be a thing since there's simply the will, and it's unrestricted in its choice. One may object that we still refer to unlimited powers as powers. For example, the omnipotent God still holds power. However, in cases like this God's powers are comparable to finite powers. In the case of will, there are no limited wills, so what we would call unlimited willpower is just as willpower is. To call it unlimited would be like saying a nine ball is unlimitedly yellow. No, it's just yellow. Of course, the unlimited choice of the will is what I will argue for here.

I can now move to a regress argument against willpower as a power to make a choice. Assume for the sake of argument that there is a power to make a choice. One comes to a situation where one must make a choice. One then must choose something. However, since they have to have the power to choose their choice, first they must choose to choose so the power to make the choice can take affect. To choose to choose they must choose to choose to choose so that the power to make the choice to choose can take affect. The regress is apparent.

We can use Spyra the spy as an example again to make this clearer. She's being tortured for information, but she has a desire to remain loyal to her country. Let's assume the torture is the force that would be overwhelming if either one is.¹³ However, for the will to be in the question at all, the question must be presented to her. So Spyra is presented with the choice to defect or not.¹⁴ Say she's weak-willed since whether she can be limited is the crux of the argument. Say then she tries to choose to not defect and fails. To try requires choosing to try. Thus she would have to try to choose to try. For this she would have to choose to try to choose to try which requires trying to choose to try to choose to try. The regress is clear.

The reader familiar with arguments about freewill may find this regress argument familiar. The argument in the freewill literature says to choose you must try to choose and thus try to choose to try and so on. Gideon Yaffe offers a solution to this regress, drawing out our intuitions from the legal system. When someone is charged with, say, murder, if they completed the murder, they are not also charged with attempted murder. Likewise, if they fail at the murder and are charged with attempted murder, they are not charged with

13. This example could be conceivably reverse so a weak-willed Spyra remains loyal to her death because she lacks the willpower to save her own life.

14. In reality we of course have more than two options before us at any time. Spyra could defect at a variety of times, or not at all. If she defects, she has plenty of degrees of defection to choose between. She may try to trick the torturers. In any case, she will have to at least choose something within the realm of defection or else not.

attempted attempted murder. Instead the attempt collapses into the murder, or the attempted attempt collapses into the attempt. In the same way, if you do something, you do not also try to do it since the trying is just the doing.¹⁵ The question here then is whether this works for choosing with willpower as power to choose. That is, can we say trying to choose if successful is just the choosing? In fact we can. Then can we say choosing to choose is just choosing? Here is where the problem lies: between each choice now lies a power disconnecting them. In a case where there is no question whether you can choose, they can all collapse into one. If there is a question as to whether you can choose, i.e. willpower is a thing, then the regress stands.

There are of course cases where an epistemic deficiency prevents a choice from being made. After all, you cannot choose something if you don't know it's an option. These are not particularly pertinent as whether there is willpower only matters in cases where willpower would do the job, not epistemic virtue.

What of the radish experiments? Did the participants who were only offered radishes who ran out of willpower earlier in the geometry portion of the experiment not have the choice to continue? Introspectively, we can consider ourselves in a situation similar to this. Perhaps you're up working late, battling exhaustion, and at a certain point your willpower seems to run out or else be defeated by the growing influence of your exhaustion. The alternative account of this would be that you in fact have the same ability to choose throughout the night, but your reasons change and since you act for reasons, when your reasons change enough your actions change, too. This reasons-based account has experimental backing as well, and it's consistent with the experimental data showing willpower can be depleted. Job et al ran a series of experiments to determine whether one's belief about willpower and its ability to be depleted had an impact on their behavior. In the four studies they found one's beliefs about willpower predict whether one exhibits signs of its depletion and one's beliefs about willpower predict self-control in goal-directed action, procrastination, and eating. They conclude that rather than any actual thing that is willpower being depleted, the real factor in play is one's beliefs regarding willpower.¹⁶ This better fits the reasons explanation of the data as if one believes they are running low on willpower, that belief acts as a reason to act in a way they understand as the weak-willed way. This belief-based limitation of choice falls back into the category of epistemic deficiency rather than a lacking in power of will.

So, we have a regress argument against willpower being a thing. It is similar in structure to regress arguments against freewill, except because of power-checks between each choice of choice, the choices cannot collapse into a single choice as they do in the freewill defenses. Given this argument, willpower as a power in choice does not make sense.

15. Gideon Yaffe, *Manifest Activity: Thomas Reid's Theory of Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154.

16. Veronika Job, Carol S. Dweck, and Gregory M. Walton, "Ego depletion—is it all in your head? implicit theories about willpower affect self-regulation," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 11 (2010): 1686.

3 Willpower Cannot Be Power to Act on Choice

Since willpower is not the power to choose, if it is anything, it's the power to act on choices. Recall again the chain from mental states to choices to intentional actions. The question then is whether there is some faculty or strength of will relevant to whether the choices are enacted as intentional actions. Obviously not all of our choices become actions. However, if the connection between choice and action can be explained without appeal to some extra faculty, then including willpower in a theory is extraneous. Thus my task here is to explain how choices become actions or fail to become actions without involving willpower. To do so, I will examine theories that do include willpower and show how willpower can be excised.

Consider for example Whitney the sleepyhead again. If this account of willpower is correct, then she may be able to choose to get up but then her choice fails to move her body. Thus there must be something stronger than her will in play preventing her. Perhaps it's something like the weight of her body itself being too much for the will to move, somehow. Or maybe there are other faculties of mind standing between her willings and her actions. The former would be a factor regarding the strength of mental causation on the physical. The latter would be a factor within the mind itself. The confound in investigating either is the possibility of the rest of the mind being responsible for either or both of these, leaving nothing for willpower to do. Though, if willpower is the ability of the mind to change the physical, willpower might be said to be a sort of measure of mental power overall. I will investigate the possibilities in which the faculty of willpower or strength of will is in question, for now leaving aside the power of the mental over the physical

The first account of intentional action on the table is the Humean or belief-desire account. On this account all action is explained in terms of the agent's beliefs and desires. An augmented form of this account, the belief-desire-intention account, adds intentions as a third mental kind, but the central idea is the same: whichever of these is the strongest determines action.¹⁷

A similar account could be made wherein one freely chooses, but the reasons for choosing are all either beliefs or desires. I call this a belief-desire-choice account for it is based on beliefs and desires, but leaves open the possibility of agential choice. Any account of willpower that is more than a description of behavioral tendencies has to include choice, anyway, so the turn to belief-desire-choice over a fully deterministic belief-desire account is in accordance with an assumption the believer in willpower wants.

Richard Holton presents an account of a third kind, a willpower account. In his account he keeps the three kinds from the belief-desire-intention account, but also holds there is an independent mental faculty of willpower that enables one to hold to their resolutions even in the face of strong desires. In "How is Strength of Will Possible," he explicitly seeks to show there is an explanatory

17. Richard Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," in *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 40-41.

need for it,¹⁸ which I here seek to undermine. Holton's account is different from the belief-desire-choice account both because it includes intentions and because it involves a resource of willpower. While I collapse intentions into desires, that is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the problem is with this resource of willpower to turn intentions into actions despite desires.

Holton's account at first appears to collapse choice and action. How, then, is willpower as a power to enact choice in question? The problem he poses that he argues demands willpower relies on intentions or long-term goals being our "true selves" and thus those being our true choices. Consider Chester the smoker again. If Chester chooses to stop smoking but then fails to not smoke, an explanation according to Holton's theory would be that he lacked the willpower to have his intentions overcome his desires. Here willpower is a mental power to overcome mental obstacles.

Holton's idea is similar to Descartes's idea of the will being our ability to do something or not.¹⁹ Holton notes that how strength of will is possible is a better question than how weakness of will is possible; understanding how our desires can overpower our rationality or resolutions is relatively easy. The hard question is how to overcome them.²⁰ Suppose Chester has resolved to quit smoking altogether. Despite this resolution, he will still feel cravings from time to time, and he will need to somehow overcome the desire to smoke if he is to stick to his resolution. According to Holton, given the belief-desire account, Chester will want to quit smoking soon rather than not quit smoking soon, but he will also prefer not resisting any given cigarette to resisting. Thus he's doomed to the time to quit being after his next smoke. However, he can salvage this by resolving to quit after a certain date. The actual date doesn't matter; that he has the belief he's made the resolution and a desire to keep his resolution are doing the work. Alternatively, if Chester acquires the belief that if he smokes the next cigarette he won't be able to quit (he can do the induction that creates this problem and come to believe his only choice is to cut it off), then he has a belief that plays into his strong desire to quit, thereby cutting out the need for anything else to explain the situation.²¹

The problem with these, Holton argues, is that phenomenologically they fail to capture the experience of struggling. If the belief-desire account were right, Chester shouldn't feel struggle when he resists the urge to smoke. Whichever belief-desire combination is strongest should enact, and that's the end of it. Moreover, the empirical evidence shows when you make people resist their inclinations, such as by regulating their emotions, expressions, thoughts, or attitudes, they exhibit the physiological response associated with exertion of effort. But, if the belief-desire account is right, then the effort in choosing to maintain a resolution should be the same as, say, choosing from a menu of delicious foods with no prior resolution. While both require some effort in choosing, the former obviously requires more. Furthermore the regret felt from what might

18. Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," 40-41.

19. Nick Byrd, "The Network Theory of Will-power," (*unpublished*):2.

20. Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," 39.

21. *Ibid.*, 43-47.

have been given the other choice were made is different from the regret from abandoning a resolution.²² He makes a brief note about this critique showing a need for consideration of the role of the choosing agent,²³ but the role of the choosing agent may offer another way away from the belief-desire account that does not require willpower. The role of the choosing agent forms the basis of my rejection of Holton’s theory.

From the belief-desire account Holton builds to the belief-desire-intention account. Resolutions are then a variety of intention rather than a mere desire. Importantly, agents can act on intentions even in spite of their strongest desires being contrary. The simplest account here is the same as the belief-desire account but with intentions competing against desires in strength. This account has the same phenomenological problems as the belief-desire account—we feel an exertion of effort when we make hard choices to stay resolved in the face of strong desires otherwise. Holton’s preferred alternative is to introduce willpower as a distinct, active faculty. Moreover the empirical psychological appears to indicate something akin to a muscle that tires on short timescales but can be developed over the long term.²⁴ The empirical psychology showing the belief in the ability of the will to tire may be the real reason for the changed behavior²⁵ undermines this, pushing back towards the belief side of a belief-desire account. That is, the belief-desire account alone can handle the tiring of the will by categorizing it as a belief. Our experiences bear this out, as well. When we do something enjoyable in a certain kind of way, we do not find ourselves struggling to continue, even if we have to use our will frequently. On the other hand, activities that we believe to be strenuous tire us out and feel harder to complete. For example, when we choose to read something pleasurable, we tend to find no difficulty in doing it for a prolonged period of time. However, if the same reading is mandated by some outside influence, it can become difficult or strenuous to complete. The only difference in situation is a belief.

Holton’s description of how we come to keep to our resolutions relies primarily on rehearsal. In contrast to reconsidering the resolutions, we can remind ourselves of them and refuse to reconsider them via an effortful struggle.²⁶ While this gives a clearer picture of what he’s doing, involving rehearsal also aids the explanatory power of a belief-desire-choice account: by rehearsing, one may reinforce one’s beliefs or mold one’s desires. One has to have the relevant beliefs and desires (and intentions, if they indeed are a third category irreducible to the other two) to choose the rehearsal, but one without beliefs or desires (or intentions) obviously wouldn’t choose to rehearse, anyway. Then remains the problem of the choice being effortful, but rehearsal answers this as well. The phenomenology of struggle is just the phenomenology of the rehearsal. Choosing agents simply exert something that feels like effort when making choices.

22. Holton, “How is Strength of Will Possible?,” 43-47.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 49.

25. Job, Dweck, and Walton, “Ego depletion—is it all in your head? implicit theories about willpower affect self-regulation,” 1687.

26. Holton, “How is Strength of Will Possible?,” 55.

Return to the optional vs. mandated reading example. If a reading is optional and enjoyable, the choice to read is generally made once and then the text is read. In the mandated case, the choice to go on with completing the task is made over and over. One must also choose to remind oneself of the less proximal desires repeatedly, reminding oneself of the effort involved, adding to the beliefs that add fuel to desires to quit.

Given an explanation of short-term tiredness and the phenomena of effort, we have remaining the long-term development of the will. Confidence in oneself is a sort of belief, though not the only sort, that would explain the long-term development of what Holton calls strength of will. Just as one may in the short term convince oneself of the difficulty of a situation, one may in the long-term convince oneself of one's abilities to persevere or not be challenged by some things.

With Holton's belief-desire-intention account with willpower handled, I turn to another theory of willpower. Nick Byrd's account of willpower considers willpower a network rather than some individual faculty.²⁷ In another justification for an account with willpower as an independent faculty Holton considers that many features such as tiredness, anxiety, and so on impact one's ability to abide by one's resolutions.²⁸ Considering this same line of reasoning, Byrd arrives at his network theory of willpower. Via introspection and reflection, he argues, we can find our willpower seems to depend on many factors. When we try to control our diets, we have greater success if we are well-rested and destressed. How hungry we are also seems to play a role.²⁹

Psychological research by Gailliot et al backs up Byrd's claims. Their research shows acts of self-control reduce blood glucose levels, low blood glucose inhibits self-control, and drinking a sugary beverage in between feats of self-control increases success in the later feat. The sorts of self-control include thought suppression, emotion regulation, the Stroop task,³⁰ and attention control.³¹

Continuing our reflection with Byrd, mood seems to play a role, too. It's easier to remain resolved in some situations in a good mood than a poor mood. On the other hand, some negative emotions like anger increase one's motivation.³² For example, a boxer who is fatigued may not have it in her to keep fighting, but after learning her opponent wronged her, she overcomes her fatigue. Byrd also reposes the problem of our will seeming to get tired with use that Holton argued from. All of these factors also have further empirical results indicating they affect one's self-control. Another study found over the long-term an exercise regimen increases willpower. Due to these myriad factors involved in willpower, a theory relying on a single resource for willpower is insufficient.

27. This may be more agreeable to a modularity view.

28. Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," 56.

29. Byrd, "The Network Theory of Will-power," 2-3.

30. The Stroop task is a test in which a participant is presented with names of colors written in different colors and asked to read the name rather than say the color. It's surprisingly tricky.

31. Matthew T. Gailliot et al., "Self-Control Relies on Glucose as a Limited Energy Source: Willpower Is More Than a Metaphor," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 2 (2007): 325-336.

32. Byrd, "The Network Theory of Will-power," 3.

Other empirical work related to willpower shows yet more factors. Images of the brain taken via functional magnetic resonance imaging show areas of the prefrontal cortex are involved in intentional action. Additionally, studies using positron emission topography, movement-related cortical potentials, and transcranial magnetic stimulation indicate that in addition to the prefrontal cortex, the thalamus and basal ganglia are also involved.³³ If the mental faculties correspond to parts of the brain, then intentional action is evidently spread across multiple faculties or the faculties may be more holistic in nature. Additional studies show circadian rhythm, perceived-goal achievement, gut biochemistry, hormones, type of intention, social support, and ingestion of the amino acid tyrosine all also play a role.³⁴

This does not defeat the single-faculty theory as someone like Holton could hold that these are all factors which merely contribute to the power or weakness of the will. The belief-desire-choice account, too, has room for these as factors influencing the strength of beliefs and desires. Holton argues from the systematicity of the influences on resolution-holding that the simplest and best explanation is some sort of faculty rather than a clunkier collection of influences on collections of desires.³⁵ Given the complexity presented by Byrd, though, a single faculty seems inadequate to explain the seeming interconnectedness of these factors. Goal-attainment is related to positive mood which is related to social support, all of which influence willpower. Additionally, the complexity spans several fields of inquiry, and a network theory unifies the various findings and approaches around their shared features. Finally, a network theory of willpower has room for unconscious nodes while a single faculty would seem to be either conscious or unconscious, but there appear to be both conscious and unconscious elements to willpower, the unconscious including things like blood glucose levels.³⁶

With all of this evidence, the network theory of willpower seems particularly compelling. In places, it could be read as sprawling over the lines of choice and action, providing an account that does both. We've already established that willpower cannot be the power to choose in the first place. If rehearsals are in fact responsible for a lot of the phenomenology of struggle, then while we may choose each rehearsal, the success of enacting each rehearsal may be subject to a networked faculty of willpower. Thus if a willpower-free picture of how we will things is to be drawn, it must handle all of the work the network does in converting choices to actions.

What exactly willpower is supposed to be is critical here. Given an account according to which there is no metaphysically deep agency, actions are just localities of movements. When Chester picks up a cigarette, there's a series of movements which we carve out as Chester's action, but those movements being the ones we carve out is pragmatic rather than anything deeper. Likewise, the choices, too, are sorts of localities of movements from which some actions.

33. Byrd, "The Network Theory of Will-power," 5-8.

34. *Ibid.*, 8-10.

35. Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," 55.

36. Byrd, "The Network Theory of Will-power," 14-15.

Some neurons firing in Chester's brain combined with perhaps some of the other factors in the bodily network is his choice to pick up the cigarette.³⁷ Some actions, like reflexes, do not have choices from which they come. However, from them can come other actions. What, then, distinguishes Chester's picking up a smoke coming from his neural activity and his pulling his hand away from a hot iron coming from his neural activity? Consciousness of the predication appears to be the only delineator available, so willpower would have to be there. Without a conscious agent in the picture, his consciousness is causally inefficacious, so willpower is thus powerless.

A critical difference between willpower and other faculties (i.e. faculties we actually do have) is that absent a real type difference between choices and actions, the work of willpower is already done. Vision and rational thinking, for example, can be mental faculties under a physicalist picture because if you lop out the relevant parts, you lose the connection between the inputs and outputs. For example, if you cut out the visual processing of the brain, or just cut the connection to the eyes, the person won't respond to visual stimuli anymore. The possibility doesn't even extend to willpower. Sensory processing, motor control, rational faculties, emotions, etc. all already do everything.

This leaves remaining only the possibility of willpower being a sort of power of the mind to affect other things. That is, just as we can talk about how much power your arm muscles have to move things about in the world, we may also be able to talk about how much power your mind has to cause changes in the world. To be coherent with the evidence and arguments thus far, an account of this has to take into account a myriad of physical inputs, unconscious inputs, conscious inputs, and be apparently relatively predictable. Most accounts of will already hold agents acting for reasons. All of these inputs may then fall into the category of reasons for acting. Any of them could plausibly manifest in the consciously willing experience, even if not phenomenologically obvious. In fact, the evidence already indicates it does: the actions being made are consciously present. If, say, blood glucose is already manifesting in which choice is being made, it's entirely reasonable to suspect the blood glucose is doing work in one's attitudes or influencing the interpretation of experience. This explains how choice is preserved and can fit the inputs into the model, but more can be done. When the choice is made, just as muscles work in conjunction with the rest of the body and world, the choice may as well. The choice then inputs into the rest of the body which may have further impacts on how the choice manifests in action.

While having a theory that fits the evidence without willpower provides a nice option, without further evidence to tip the scales one may still believe in willpower as a wholly mental and nonphysical faculty or power of such a will that determines whether choices manifest in the world. I turn then to phenomenological description to finish the job. Consider now lifting your arm. When you do, you don't turn up your will until it's on high enough to lift your

37. One may wish to resist here with something nonphysical, but so long as it's not some sort of agency, it makes no difference to this argument.

arm. Either you decide to or decide not to. You might think about it really hard or flex your arm muscles, but whether you choose to lift is itself up to you, and whether it goes up is a factor beyond the circumstances of your willing. Likewise, to get out of bed in the morning requires not adequate willpower to move your body but a choice and physical ability. If you are disabled or chained down, you'll fail, but these are obviously beyond the scope of willpower. As Sartre argues, the body must be the limit on what we can do or else our desires and willings would be indistinguishable. When we choose to do something, that choice is itself pushing past the level of desire towards action, and the body is itself the limiting factor. Though, the body is also necessary for action, the body just being whatever is the limiting factor, as without it the will would be unbounded. What we gain is a set of rules by which we must willingly navigate to achieve our goals.³⁸ These cases can continue to be considered, and in each ultimately the choice is made and then attempted, the attempt relying on external factors.

Conscious choices in general feel effortful and tiring. Even a series of low-importance choices can be draining. In the case of something more stressful, even as ultimately low-stakes as getting up, the struggle lies in a series of choices. Every additional moment awake in the getting up example requires another conscious decision until staying awake becomes automatic. To quit smoking requires a series of decisions to choose other reasons over desires that present themselves. After all the desires that challenge our so-called strength of will are not tacit. They nag at us, forcing us to continually make further choices. Regret over poor or later-undesired choices may come over us later, but in the moments of decision, there is no arbiter of whether the choices become tryings.

Thus, willpower is not doing any explanatory work and should be excised from theories of mind and action. The evidence in favor of Holton and Byrd's theories fit into a belief-desire-choice theory when the effort inherent in choosing as an agent is taken into consideration.

4 There is no Such Thing as Willpower

Given willpower is neither the power to choose nor the power to act on a choice, nor can it be anything besides those two, it must not actually be anything in itself. Of course when we talk about willpower, we do mean things in our talking, but we refer in a less literal way. Instead of any kind of actual faculty of mind, we instead have something more akin to a character trait or behavioral trend. This is in stark contrast to things like our senses and emotions which can be described in themselves. The payoff here is that there is no willpower muscle to train. Epistemic and preference factors still play a role. You can only make choices you know about, having good beliefs can lead to better choices, and your preferences of course influence what you choose. In every example, changing beliefs and desires can bring about good reason to make the better choices. From these good choices, enacting them is a matter of handling the

38. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 1989), 327.

usual factors involved like physical strength. Nowhere is there a mental faculty of willpower.

Let's return to our three examples from the beginning to see how this plays off for each of them. Whether Whitney gets up is ultimately her choice to make for whatever reasons she wants. No faculty is restricting her. Say she chooses to get up. Then only possible physical restraints lie in the way—she'll certainly at least try. Now say Chester has committed to quitting smoking. When the urge comes, the options of smoking and abstaining are both open to him. Given there's nothing stopping him from either choice, the decision to smoke or not is his unrestricted choice. Finally Spyra has a similar story before her. She really can choose either defection or loyalty. In all of these we see no restriction on their ability to make choices, and once they make their choice, nothing in their will is left to determine the success or failure of their action.

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