

# The Weaker Reason

By Agnes Callard

**H**E GOES TO THE PARTY, THOUGH HE THINKS HE SHOULD STAY HOME AND study. What explains a weak-willed (or *akratic*) action like this one? One answer is that he is a pseudo-akratic: he doesn't *really* believe he ought to study. Either he never fully believed that he should study, or perhaps he believed this once but temporarily forgets or suppresses it at the moment of action. Another answer is that he is an unintentional akratic: his desire to go to the party is so strong that it compels him, carrying him against his will like a strong wind. If we do not think that it is always possible to give one of these two answers, we are faced with the problem of weakness of the will.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of weakness of the will is a problem because weak-willed action purports to be both intentional and irrational. But there is a certain way in which rationality is a criterion of intentionality: in order to act intentionally, the agent must act according to some reason. What reason does the akratic act on? Having determined that he ought to do one thing, the weak-willed agent does another. On the standard view, he fails to act on his all-things-considered (i.e., what he considers his best) reason, but he acts on a reason nonetheless.<sup>2</sup> He acts on his *weaker reason*, his (outweighed) reason to perform the akratic action. I call a philosopher who advocates this view a "weaker reasons theorist", and his view the "weaker reasons thesis."

Who is this "weaker reasons theorist"? Concluding his critical survey article on *akrasia*, Arthur Walker (1989) writes

With the notable exception of Wiggins, all the [28] philosophers we have discussed accept (i) that whatever reason the akrates has for performing his akratic action is overridden by his better judgment and (ii) that the akrates fully recognizes that his reason is thus overridden. Yet they maintain that the akrates acts on this reason. (p. 670)

So, according to Walker, nearly everyone who addresses himself to *akrasia* accepts the weaker reasons thesis.<sup>3</sup> Donald Davidson and Alfred Mele have, arguably, done the most to incite contemporary interest in the problem of *akrasia*; neither

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states the weaker reasons thesis explicitly, but we can find them relying on it. Davidson uses it here:

Weakness of will is a matter of acting intentionally (or forming an intention to act) on the basis of less than all the reasons one recognizes as relevant...He judges, on the basis of all his reasons, that one course of action is best, yet he opts for another; he has acted 'contrary to his own best judgment'. In one sense, it is easy to say why he acted as he did, since he had reasons for his action. (1985, p. 200)

Mele (1987) affirms the weaker reasons thesis in the context of a causal theory of reasons:

The agent who akratically does A, does A for a reason. That he took his reason to do a competing action, B, to be a better reason—even if he formed an intention to do a B—does not show that his having the reason for which he acted is not a cause of his action. (p. 47)

In this paper, I argue against the weaker reasons thesis. In §1, I clarify the formulation of the weaker reasons thesis by making a distinction between two kinds of reasons. In §2, I describe some non-standard cases of akrasia and argue that they are counterexamples to the weaker reasons thesis. In §3, I use the non-standard cases to shed light on the standard one; it, too, comes out as a counterexample. In §4, I attempt to make the weaker reasons thesis come out true by tailoring a scenario to fit it; I show that no such scenario can be one of akrasia. In §5, I explain why Wiggins' invocation of incommensurable goods cannot save the weaker reasons thesis.

### *I. Two kinds of reasons*

I want to distinguish the claim that the akratic *acted on a reason* from two other claims:

- (1) There is an explanation of the akratic action (the reason A  $\varphi$ -ed is ..)
- (2) There was a consideration counting in favor of the akratic action (A had a reason to  $\varphi$ )

Claims of the first type make sense of events (including, but not limited to, actions). They are answers to the question, "why did such-and-such happen?" They help fit an event into an explanatory whole by relating it according to certain rules to other events; I will call the reasons they cite "explanatory reasons."

The second kind of reasons-claim is a way of saying that an action has something to recommend it. There are reasons to stay, and reasons to go. Some reasons speak in favor of saving the world, others promote sunbathing. We can call such reasons "normative reasons;" they are considerations in favor of a given outcome. They differ from the first kind of reason in that explanatory reasons explain, while normative reasons endorse. The similarity between the two kinds of reasons, in virtue of which they are both called reasons, is that invocation of either involves the fitting in of a particular into an articulated whole.<sup>4</sup> A reason

in favor of an action recommends the action to an agent in a way that relates it to other actions. Pleasure, my reason for sunbathing, may also be a reason to go to the beach (if that is a means to sunbathing) or a reason to sit in the shade of a tall tree (if that is also pleasant, and sunbathing is impossible) or a reason to lie in the sun on a towel in a bathing suit (if that is what sunbathing *is*).

A point of clarification: the word “consideration” is systematically ambiguous between a subjective and an objective reading. Something can be a consideration in favor of A’s  $\varphi$ -ing in the sense that it in fact counts in favor of A’s  $\varphi$ -ing or in the sense that A takes it to count in favor of his  $\varphi$ -ing. It is the second, subjective sense that is relevant to the explanation of action—I share the general consensus that reasons must motivate by being seen to count in favor of whatever they motivate. Louise Antony (quoted in Jones 2003, p. 188) gives a nice formulation: “Commitment to rationality involves, among other things, a norm that bids us make our reasons transparent to ourselves as we reason—arguably that is what reasoning is.” Henceforth, when I speak of normative reasons, it should be understood that I am referring to considerations an agent *takes* to count in favor of  $\varphi$ -ing. Thus I will sometimes speak of judgments, or beliefs, as reasons. This should not disturb those who prefer to think of reasons as facts, rather than as representations of facts.<sup>5</sup> For our interest here is in motivation, and insofar as reasons in the ‘fact’ sense purport to motivate us, they do so by giving rise to reasons in my ‘representations of facts’ sense—i.e., by being believed. This should not be obscured by the practice of citing facts, rather than beliefs, when we are asked for our reasons. “Why did you feed her?” “Because she was hungry.” *Not*, “Because I believed she was hungry.” (Unless I am speaking from a point of dissociation with my former self, having realized in the meanwhile that she was not hungry.) When we state our beliefs, we do so by simply reporting the facts as we see them—it is unnecessary to add, “and I believe it.”<sup>6</sup> But of course the fact at issue (her hunger) is only explanatory of my behavior insofar as I did indeed have the corresponding belief.<sup>7</sup>

To say that an intentional action is *done for a reason* is just to say that an explanatory reason can also be a normative reason. The idea of acting *on* a reason is the idea of an explanatory reason which explains in virtue of the fact that it is a normative reason. Let us consider some cases of normative reasons which are *not* explanatory reasons.

Sometimes, a normative reason is a *prima facie* reason which is negated by another consideration (e.g. I think I need to go to the store to get milk but then I realize I can just ask my neighbor for some).<sup>8</sup> Such merely provisional or apparent reasons are—if recognized as such—never motives, since their rational force is undermined by subsequent deliberation. The term “*pro tanto*” designates a normative reason that is, by contrast, a genuine reason. Nonetheless, a *pro tanto* reason may not get acted on: perhaps it is not the time and place to do so (standing reasons to cure cancer, end wars, relieve poverty) or perhaps it is outweighed (though not undermined) by another consideration, or perhaps I am weak of will or of body (I try and fail to act on it). And even if there is a *pro tanto* reason to  $\varphi$ , and it’s the time and place for  $\varphi$ -ing, and  $\varphi$ -ing in fact happens, the reason may not be responsible for the action: I have a reason to go to the store (I need milk), and I go there, but for another reason (to meet Sue). Nor, moreover, is it enough

to say that my need for milk caused me to go to the store. As many philosophers have pointed out, it could have caused my action in a deviant fashion: in her delicate state, the thought that she needs milk occasions in June a blind panic, causing her to run screaming from her house and, coincidentally, end up at the store.<sup>9</sup> When we *act on a reason*, it is the fact that it is a normative reason that makes the reason explanatory: our belief about how the reason counts in favor of the action (the rational relationship between the need for milk and going to the store) *is* our motive. To say that I went to the store for a reason is consistent with the possibility that there are also other, non-normative explanations of my action (for example neurobiological explanations): various kinds of explanatory reasons may or may not be consistent with one another, depending on one's theory of explanation. But insofar as we are to qualify as acting on reasons, they must motivate us in a distinctively rational way: I will call an explanation that cites a normative and an explanatory reason which are appropriately rationally connected a *rationalizing explanation*.

We are now in a position to understand the thesis against which I am about to argue. The akratic's weaker reason is a consideration which spoke in favor of the akratic action; it is this reason which the akratic weighed against what he eventually decided was his stronger reason, before he akratically failed to act on that stronger reason. We can now spell out the claim of the weaker reasons thesis as the assertion that this reason is a normative reason, *and* that it is an explanatory reason, *and* that its explanatory force comes from its normative force in such a way as to constitute a rationalizing explanation of his action. Recall the example with which we began: having weighed the consideration in favor of going to the party (fun) against the consideration in favor of staying home and studying (academic success), and having decided that, all things considered, success is a stronger reason for staying home than fun is for going out, our akratic (let's call him Will) nonetheless succumbs to the lure of the party. The weaker reasons theorist claims that Will went to the party *because it was fun*, where that constitutes a consideration in favor of partying (a normative reason) and an explanation of why he partied (an explanatory reason). Furthermore, the weaker reasons theorist claims that this explanation invokes Will's normative reason: Will was moved by the rational force of the fact that partying is fun (the rationalizing explanation). I will argue that this description of the typical akratic is incoherent. But before doing so, however, I would like to display the failure of the weaker reasons thesis to account for other, less typical cases of akrasia. In addition to supplying independently valid counterexamples against the weaker reasons thesis, the atypical cases will be helpful in shedding light on the standard case of Will, the akratic partygoer.

## II. Three nonstandard cases of akrasia

I shall now consider cases in which the weaker reasons thesis fails because an akratic's weaker reason is:

- A. Normative but not explanatory (epiphenomenal deliberation)
- B. Explanatory but not normative (prima facie weaker reasons)
- C. Neither explanatory nor normative (no weaker reason)

### A. *Epiphenomenal deliberation*

Consider the following variant on the standard case: having decided that the fun of partying is outweighed by the success promised by studying, Jack (akratically) attends the party, but, unbeknownst to himself—and this is where he departs from Will—he goes to the party not in order to have fun, but because he wants to fail at school, from fear of success. Fun had nothing to do with his motivation, though it did appear in his deliberation, and fear of success does explain his action, though it did not appear in his deliberation—nor could it, since he is unaware that he fears success. The weaker reason (“partying is fun”), outweighed in deliberations which led to the all-things-considered judgment (“I ought to study for the sake of success”), is a normative reason but not an explanatory reason. Fun counts in favor of partying: this fact has rational force which Jack appreciates, but it is not his motive because, *ex hypothesi*, fear of success is his motive. Therefore, the weaker reason is not, in Jack’s case, a rationalizing explanation for his action. Jack violates the weaker reasons thesis by acting akratically but not acting on his weaker reason.

How will the weaker reasons theorist respond? Maybe he will try to deny that the case is well described: how can we ever identify unconscious motives? True, specialized knowledge may be required to diagnose such a case correctly. Nonetheless, the scenario is easily understood by those of us without such knowledge. Is the weaker reasons theorist willing to go so far as to deny that there *could be such a thing* as a motive of which an agent was unaware? For that is what he would have to claim in order to rule out such a case in principle.

Perhaps the weaker reasons theorist will refuse to accept an action motivated by irrational fears as intentional action. But—and here there is nothing to go on but intuition—this agent does not seem to me to be compelled to act as he does. (Perhaps he is often faced with this choice, and he sometimes manages to buckle down and study, other times yielding to his fear of success and parties). I could imagine berating this agent for making the wrong choice, holding him responsible for it. And will every agent who is unaware of his motives be acting unintentionally? If so, it seems that much human behavior will be unintentional; if not, what principle is to distinguish the success-fearing akratic partier from everyday cases of habitual or quick or impulsive actions?

### B. *Prima facie weaker reasons*

I think a case can be made for the possibility of akrasia when the agent’s reason in favor of acting was undermined, rather than merely outweighed. Sometimes the act of deliberating reveals to the agent that the reason which seemed to count in favor of the akratic option does not in fact do so. In such a case, the weaker reason can still explain why the agent acts, but does not count in favor of so acting, since it has been shown to lack rational force.

Consider this case: the sailors are very thirsty, and tempted to drink the ocean water. Then they remember that salt water only makes one thirstier. Their reason not to drink (it is salt water) does more than outweigh their reason to drink (they are thirsty); it undermines the rational force of the latter consideration. The sailors conclude not only that they have most reason to refrain from drinking, but that they *only* have reason to refrain from drinking; nonetheless, they get so

thirsty that eventually they yield to temptation and drink.<sup>10</sup> Thirst is the sailors' motive for drinking, but, given that they no longer think that their thirst gives them reason to drink, it can *only* be an explanatory reason.

The weaker reason (thirst) motivates these agents, explaining their behavior, even though they cease to take it as counting in favor of their action. It is explanatory but not normative, and therefore cannot constitute a rationalizing explanation. The weaker reasons theorist could deny that these sailors count as akratic, but, as we pointed out above, this would not absolve him of explaining what is going on here. He could try to redescribe the cases, identifying other reasons by which these agents are motivated, or denying that their behavior is intentional. I won't rehearse these moves here; I will only remind the reader that the need for the weaker reasons thesis arose from a refusal to submit to the Scylla of redescribing akrasia (reducing it to a case of pseudo-akrasia, in which the agent is not fully aware at the time of action that he ought to be acting otherwise) or the Charybdis of classifying akratic behavior as a kind of compulsion by desire, and therefore unintentional. If the weaker reasons thesis is forced into redescription or re-classification when dealing with atypical cases of akrasia, its resistance to the same moves on the part of the deniers of (typical) akrasia is considerably less forceful.

### C. No weaker reason

Worst of all for the weaker reasons theorist are cases of akrasia in which the weaker reason is neither normative, nor explanatory, because there is no weaker reason. There is a class of cases of akrasia in which the agent sees *nothing* good in his akratic action, *no* reason (not even a weak one) to do what he is doing; he formed his all-things-considered judgment without the resistance of a consideration to the contrary. Late night T.V. provides a fountain of first-personal examples for many of us: we sit on the couch; there is nothing good on; we know we should go to sleep; we might even say we want to go to sleep but can't; yet we know we could, we just don't; we are not enjoying watching; we get more and more depressed as the pointless, joyless minutes in front of the T.V. turn into hours, yet we continue to flip the remote. In the throes of this kind of akrasia, we often think to ourselves that *anything* we could be doing would be better than this—which seems to be equivalent to the thought that *this* is no good at all.<sup>11</sup>

Michael Stocker and David Velleman have drawn philosophical attention to the importance of cases like these, in which the agent does not think what he does is (at all) good. Stocker (1979): "I have argued that what is (believed) good can fail to attract us and what is believed bad can attract us" (p. 749). Velleman (1992): "a tendency to desire things under negative descriptions is an essential element of various emotions and moods such as silliness, self-destructiveness, and despair" (p. 17—and Velleman explicitly rejects an "evil be thou my good" interpretation of such behavior).

Once again we see that the weaker reasons thesis fails to accommodate such a case, as long as we resist importing reasons ("actually, he hoped something good might come on") or the label, 'unintentional'. And notice that the dogmatic insistence that we *must* adopt one of these two options is just a pre-theoretical insistence on the weaker reasons thesis itself. I can only hope that the story

resonates enough with the reader's own experience to offer intuitive resistance against such redescription or reclassification. If it doesn't, all is not lost, for my case against the weaker reasons thesis has only just begun.

### III. *The standard case*

We have seen that the weaker reasons thesis cannot account for every form of akrasia. I will now ask, can it account for any? The standard case of akrasia is the best-case scenario for the weaker reasons theorist: the akratic partier, Will, has a weaker reason (that partying is fun) which counts in favor of his akratic choice (partying); this reason is outweighed, but not undermined, by his all-things-considered judgment; furthermore, it is plausible to claim that he attends the party because it is fun, so that this is his explanatory reason as well. In this standard case of akrasia, the weaker reasons theorist has the makings of a candidate for a rationalizing explanation—but that, we shall see, is all he has. I will argue that Will is no different from the three kinds of atypical akratics in the following respect: he fails to *act on his weaker reason*. If I am right that the weaker reasons thesis cannot be shored up against deviant or standard cases of akrasia, then those of us committed to explaining akrasia must find a new account of it.

Let's take a closer look at the case of Will. His weaker reason, that partying is fun, is a *pro tanto* normative reason to go to the party. As such, it is counted in the agent's deliberations about what to do, deliberations which lead him to conclude that, all things considered, he should stay home and study. The difference between the agent's representation of the stronger reason (I ought to stay home and study for the sake of academic success) and the final reason, the one connected to his all-things-considered judgment, (I ought to stay home and study for the sake of academic success even though this means missing the party, which would be fun to attend) reflects the agent's mental act of counting the weaker reason. It is at this point that the weaker reasons theorist wants to claim that, even *after* it has been outweighed by the stronger reason, the weaker reason counts as a reason to go to the party. He needs to say this because he takes the akratic to be motivated by the normative force of this reason *after* it has been outweighed. The weaker reasons theorist is thus saying more than that the party is still fun after Will has decided not to attend it. He is saying that this thought, that the party is fun, still counts as a reason to go to the party. Which is to say that the reason has rational force over and above its role in the deliberations concluding in the all-things-considered judgment. I claim that this is not so: once the weaker reason has been counted in the deliberations leading to the all-things-considered judgment, it cannot (in a sense to be explored below) be re-counted.

To see why, let us consider the following financial analogue: you deposit \$5 into your bank account. All else being equal, this means that you are now in a position to withdraw \$5: the \$5 that you deposited counts as \$5 the bank owes you. But assume other things are not equal: before making the deposit, you had owed the bank \$3. Now it no longer remains true that a deposit of \$5 allows for a withdrawal of \$5. When you deposit the \$5, your balance reads not \$5 but \$2. The fact that you deposited \$5 is not always a basis upon which to demand that the bank give you \$5. The weaker reasons theorist is, in effect, acknowledging that the balance is \$2 (the all-things-considered judgment), but claiming you still

have, somewhere, \$5 in your account (the weaker reason) to draw upon. The insistence that the bank still owes you something for that \$5 deposit even after it has been calculated into the \$2 balance exhibits the fallacy that undermines the weaker reasons thesis: I will call it the fallacy of *double-counting*.

In applying this to the case of explaining action, it is helpful to distinguish between a *net* and a *component* factor. If C and N stand to one another in the relation of component and net (i.e., C is a component of N), then C can only figure into an explanation insofar as N has not already been deployed. The component cannot play any role independent of the net into which it figures, otherwise it would be invoked twice in the same explanation. The weaker reasons theorist asks for the weaker reason to first be counted as a *component* of the all-things-considered judgment, and then as an independent consideration motivating the agent to act *against* his all-things-considered judgment. The all-things-considered judgment is the agent's net normative reason: what he has reason to do, given all his component (*pro tanto*) reasons.<sup>12</sup> Unless revised, rejected, superseded or forgotten—as, *ex hypothesi*, the akratic's isn't—an all-things-considered judgment is, to continue the analogy from above, the balance in the agent's rational bank account. Which means that it reflects *all* his (normative) reasons, in the way that a bank balance reflects all one's money. The point can be transferred from finance to physics: if multiple forces act on a body, the net force created by summing up all forces in question does *all* the work; the components don't have independent force. The all-things-considered judgment is the net (normative) rational force, and once you've cited a net factor, its component cannot play *any further* rational role. If the weaker reason moved the agent, it would have to be in virtue of the fact that it had already been reflected in the all-things-considered reason, just as a force on an object can move it only *via* the net force.

It is natural to claim that the akratic partier, even after he has decided against it, still has a (normative) reason to go to the party. I am not denying this claim, but rather the weaker reasons theorist's *inference* from it to the conclusion that the akratic acts on this reason: "In one sense, it is easy to say why he acted as he did, *since he had reasons* for his action" (Davidson, quoted on p. 69 above). Consider, again, the financial analogy: there is a sense in which the agent with the \$2 balance still has the \$5 that he deposited, since that \$5 is working against the debt of \$3 to produce the \$2 in his balance. But this is not a sense which supports an attempt to withdraw \$5 from the account. It isn't as though the \$5 deposit disappeared—on the contrary, there is an entry of \$5 on the credit column of the account which goes into the figuring of total assets. The \$5 that you deposited counts, and is counted, in figuring your balance; but it does not, in this case, count towards your being owed \$5 by the bank. Similarly, it is possible to make sense of the claim that the akratic still had a reason to go to the party, even if I am right that he cannot *act on* this reason. Here are some ways to interpret the claim that "fun is still a reason to party" so that the latter comes out true:

- (1) Even after having been decided against, partying is still fun.
- (2) It would be rational for this agent to party if he did not have to study.
- (3) The fact that partying is fun is a consideration that it is rational for people in a position to go to parties to weigh and consider; the agent was not wrong



to weigh it in his initial deliberations. That is to say, its rational force has not been undermined: it is a *pro tanto* rather than a *prima facie* reason.

- (4) The all-things-considered judgment endorses studying more weakly than the stronger reason, since if he didn't have a party to go to he would have even more reason to study.

But none of (1)–(4) supports the claim that the fun-ness of partying can, under akratic circumstances, be a *motivating* normative reason. For that, the weaker reasons theorist needs the following claim: the fact that partying is fun can be counted by the akratic agent as a reason to go to the party, even after it has been outweighed. But this is not true, since *it has already been counted*.

But does the weaker reason need to count in favor of his action in order to explain it? Why, the weaker reasons theorist will ask, couldn't a mental item be weaker, *qua* reason, but nonetheless stronger, *qua* motive? Isn't it undeniable that someone in this position is typically motivated by the thought that partying is fun? After all, if you somehow caught him as he was leaving for the party, and informed him that this party would not in fact be fun (none of his friends is coming) he would, let us admit, turn back and study, or else akratically pursue some other fun option. I think that akratic partygoers of the type we have described typically *are* motivated by the thought that partying is fun—but it does not follow that they are acting on reasons. "Partying is fun" can be an explanatory reason without being a normative reason.<sup>13</sup>

The thought that partying is fun did appear as a reason in the akratic's initial deliberations, to be weighed against the fact that studying produces success; but it cannot emerge from these deliberations as a *further* reason to go to the party, because of the double-counting problem. Assuming the agent is not engaged in the act of reconsidering his all-things-considered judgment, the thought that partying is fun no longer has independent rational force: it can be an explanatory reason but not a normative reason. The agent's all-things-considered reason is the net (normatively) rational force, so within the space of reasons, it is the net motivational force: a normative reason, insofar as it motivates, motivates via its evaluative force. Conversely, insofar as the agent is not motivated by its evaluative force, he is not motivated by a normative reason. It is a commonplace notion that evaluation and motivation can come apart—but insofar as one is evaluatively motivated, they cannot.

To sum up: Will's weaker reason appears twice in his deliberations: in the original weighing, and right before he acts. The first time, it's a normative reason but not an explanatory reason (because there is, as yet, no action to explain). The second time, it's an explanatory reason but not a normative one (it can no longer be counted in favor of the action). In standard akrasia, the weaker reason is (first) a normative reason and (later on) an explanatory reason, but it is not an explanatory reason in virtue of being a normative reason: it is not a rationalizing explanation. If the epiphenomenal deliberator and akratics acting on *prima facie* weaker reasons are strange, the standard akratic, Will, is doubly strange: like the unconsciously success-fearing partygoer (Jack), he has a normative reason which fails to motivate him; like the sailors, he is motivated non-rationally. His weaker reason is a non-explanatory normative reason, and, then, a non-normative

explanatory reason. Recall June, who ends up at the supermarket as a result of a panic attack occasioned by the thought that she needs milk. It would be misleading, though not outright false, to say that she went to the store because she needed milk; it is similarly misleading to say that the akratic partier went to the party "because it was fun." And it *is* outright false to claim that either June or Will acted on that reason.

#### IV. Fixing the weaker reasons thesis?

The weaker reasons theorist admits that it is *irrational* of the akratic to act on his weaker reason—so why must he assert, as I insist he must, that the fact that partying is fun "can" be counted by the akratic agent as a reason? If the "can" is normative (means "can rationally") then the weaker reasons theorist will be right in denying that this is a standard the akratic need satisfy. For the weaker reasons theorist agrees that akrasia is irrational, and thus is happy to acknowledge that there are normative standards an akratic fails to meet. But the problem is not normative; it is constitutive. Imagine you come across someone counting pebbles. There are four, but he counts five. You point out that he has counted one of them twice. But he, like the akratic, says he was fully aware of this; he didn't mind that he'd already counted it. He *decided* to count it again. At this point, you have to conclude that, whatever activity he's engaged in, it isn't counting—at least not counting up the pebbles (he could be 'counting to five' and simultaneously touching his finger to pebbles). Part of what it is to count is to subject yourself to certain rules, and one of these rules is that you don't double-count. Once you know that you have already counted that pebble, if you are to qualify as counting at all you cannot count it again: it is a conceptual truth that there are certain kinds of mistake it is impossible to make.

A question may arise here: what determines whether a rule is constitutive or normative for a given activity? It is, for instance, possible to violate rules of grammar, and even do so knowingly, but still count as speaking the language in question. If it is possible to knowingly talk badly, why isn't it possible to knowingly reason badly? Without attempting to come up with a general criterion on the basis of which this distinction rests, we can show that the double counting of a reason is like arithmetical double-counting and unlike ungrammaticality. Imagine an agent deliberating about the pros and cons of a given action, *S*. On the one hand, he might say, there's *A* and *B* which count in favor of *S*, but *C* and *D* that count against it. If all these considerations are of roughly equal weight, he might be stymied as to what he should do. Imagine that he now says "then let me count *A* again, so we have *A* and *B* and *A* counting in favor, and these now outweigh *C* and *D*." This is simply not a kind of mistake it is conceivable to self-consciously make. He could *say* *A* again, even say it to himself, but he could not *count* it again. This is a case of deliberation, but its results can straightforwardly be translated to the case of motivation (acting on a reason). In order for the double-counted weaker reason to be able to be part of a rationalizing explanation, it must explain in virtue of being a *normative* reason. But it is a condition on something's being a normative reason that it could have appeared in the agent's deliberation (a normative reason *is* a consideration in favor). Thus, if the rule against double-

counting is constitutive for normative reasons as they appear in deliberation, it is also constitutive for normative reasons acted on.

The weaker reasons theorist wanted to describe the akratic's action as rational, insofar as he acts on a reason, but irrational, insofar as he acts on the wrong reason. He is like the pebble counter who wants to describe himself as deliberately miscounting the pebbles: in the case of akrasia there isn't logical space for acting on a reason other than one's all-things-considered judgment. Is there ever such space? The weaker reasons thesis cannot account for akratic action—can it account for some other kind of action? The pebble case gives us a hint as to how to design a case for which the weaker reasons thesis will work: double-counting is possible when the agent doesn't realize that is what he's doing. Someone can act on a bad reason, so long as he doesn't take the reason to be a bad one.

Let us call "pseudo-akrasia" the scenario in which the agent unknowingly acts against his better judgment. The pseudo-akratic either doesn't fully believe his all-things-considered judgment, forgets it, or changes his mind. (Perhaps he is self-deceived, or acting in bad faith.) In any of these cases, the agent is free to act on his (weaker) reason, because he doesn't see it as his weaker reason: his better judgment has been conveniently ushered into the wings. The pseudo-akratic's local rationality (acting on his reason) is shielded from his global irrationality (stifling his all-things-considered judgment). If I forgot that I counted A already, I can count it "again;" if my all-things-considered judgment is inaccessible to me, then what were once its components can again come to have independent rational force.

If all cases of akrasia were in fact pseudo-akrasia ("he must have changed his mind at the last minute," "he was lying to himself all along," etc.) there would be no motivation to invoke the weaker reasons thesis. Pseudo-akrasia allows a mental distance between the all-things-considered and the weaker reason, rendering it possible to coherently describe the akratic as acting on (what is in fact, though not at the time of action acknowledged by him as) his weaker reason. But recall that the problem we are engaged with comes from a conviction that not all cases of apparent akrasia can be redescribed or explained away as cases of pseudo-akrasia—and it is to this problem that the weaker reasons theorist purported to address himself.

#### V. Wiggins' *incommensurabilism*

David Wiggins attacks accounts of rational choice that take all deliberation to consist in the maximizing, or ranking, of goods in terms of one property. He says that on such a theory, which he labels "commensurabilist," "it will be harder than it ought to be to understand weakness of the will as *having reasons of its own*" (fn. 13, 1997). He is thus proposing that the concept of *incommensurability* can be of service in saving the weaker reasons thesis.

Wiggins thinks that incommensurability is manifested in the failure of our better judgment to compensate us for the loss of the goods featured in our "weaker" reason; akrasia, he asserts, is the occasional result of this incommensurability. Because success is no compensation for the loss of fun (they cannot, he insists, both be represented as quantities of some good, e.g. pleasure), fun remains a motivating consideration even after we have decided it's best to

succeed. We can see this as an attempt to respond to the double-counting problem: if success cannot compensate one for the loss of fun, then maybe fun was not fully 'counted' in the all-things-considered judgment—and if fun was not counted the first time around, it can rationally motivate after the all-things-considered judgment is formed.

There are several problems with this approach, but the one that interests me is this: *ex hypothesi*, the akratic agent *has* taken the fact that partying is fun into account when forming his all-things-considered judgment.<sup>14</sup> He compared the goods in question (say, success and fun), and decided that he ought (at least, for now) to pursue one and not the other. It may be true that success and fun are incommensurable, in the sense that the goodness of fun is not reducible to some other kind of goodness (say, pleasure) to which success is also reducible; thus it may be that the skipping the party entails an uncompensated-for loss of fun, and the akratic agent knew this would be the case. But how is this relevant to explaining akrasia? Presumably these are all things he took into consideration, before deciding that, all things considered, he ought to stay home and study.

Here's the problem: the issue is not commensurability but comparability.<sup>15</sup> Fun may not be commensurable with success, but it is certainly comparable, as is illustrated by the akratic agent, who compares them. The difference between commensurability and comparability is best illustrated by the arena in which these concepts are at home, geometry. The hypotenuse of a right triangle is incommensurable with the side, meaning that one cannot find a unit of measurement small enough that it will fit without remainder into both line segments. But the two line segments are, of course, comparable: the hypotenuse is longer. The corresponding ethical distinction is between whether or not one good is greater than another (comparability) and whether or not the agent who chooses the greater over the smaller is compensated in kind for the loss of the smaller (commensurability). The question on which the double-counting problem focuses our attention is whether the akratic has taken the reason in favor of partying (fun) into account when deciding to study, and this is the question of comparison, not measurement. The fact that A is incommensurable with B is not grounds for claiming that our reasons for pursuing A were not taken in to account in our all-things-considered judgment to pursue B.

This suggests a way of modifying Wiggins' position in order to save it: perhaps we could say that fun and success are *incomparable* goods. Two goods are incomparable if a determination of relative value cannot be made between them. But in the standard case of akrasia it is part of the setup of the scenario that there is comparability of fun and success—they are not only comparable, but in fact compared. Some agents are stymied, unable to compare their available options ("Which is better? Perhaps I'll never know!"), but the akratic is not one of them. How can incomparability be useful to explaining akrasia if, *ex hypothesi*, the akratic *has compared* fun and success?

Perhaps we need to look outside the fun/success dichotomy to explain what motivates Will. Let us suppose there is some good or value other than fun that we might take his akratic action to be aimed at. The job of this value, call it X, is to be incomparable with success, so as to be able to serve as the basis for the Will's reason to go to the party without running afoul of the double-counting

problem.<sup>16</sup> But now, let us ask of X: is it relevant to the action of going to the party? It must be, or it cannot be the basis of a (normative) reason to go to the party. In this case, Will must have weighed X, when he was coming up with his all-things-considered judgment, and decided that he had less reason to pursue X than success. How did he decide this, if success and X are incomparable? Perhaps he decided to flip a coin to decide between them, and then had a procedural reason, of the sort explored by Bratman (1987, ch. 5), to follow through on the plan and select whichever of the goods “wins” the toss. Perhaps he decided that, given some facts about the circumstances he is in, it was not the time and place to worry about X (this is not the same thing as saying success has more value than X). However he made the decision, he must have done it *somehow* if he formed an all-things-considered judgment that he had most reason to go to the party. But in this case the *reason* which advocates partying in the name of the value X has been counted in the deliberations that produced the conclusion that he had most *reason*, under these circumstances, to pursue a different value, success, by staying home and studying. If we try to describe Will as acting on the *reason* to party for the sake of X, we will be double-counting once more. The point is this: incomparable values can give rise to comparable reasons.

There seems to be one move remaining for the incomparabilistic explainer of akrasia: claim that the *reason* motivating the akratic action was subjectively incomparable with the *reason* the akratic thinks he ought to act on. But at this point we hit a wall: for even if we could make sense of incomparable reasons (and I doubt we can) seeing oneself as torn between such reasons would preclude the formation of an all-things-considered judgment.<sup>17</sup> An all-things-considered judgment just is the judgment that, given all the considerations I take to be relevant, this is what I ought to do. The agent faced with incomparable reasons relevant to her decision would have to conclude that it was impossible to take all relevant considerations into account and give up on forming an all-things-considered judgment.

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I conclude that whatever it is we are doing when we act akratically, it is not acting on an acknowledgedly weaker reason.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In saying this, I am stipulating that if the agent is not fully aware at the time of action that he ought to be acting otherwise, he does not count as akratic; likewise, I exclude from consideration agents who act unintentionally against their better judgment. I am concerned, in what follows, with the agents who are fully aware that they ought to be acting otherwise and who act intentionally. For these are the cases which give rise to the interesting philosophical puzzles traditionally associated with the phenomenon of weakness of the will.

<sup>2</sup> A nonstandard move is to yield to the pressure of this dilemma and deny that akrasia is a genuine phenomenon, or, equivalently, to maintain that all apparent akrasia is really pseudo-akrasia—these are the moves I suggest in my opening paragraph. Another interesting nonstandard move is to resist the equation between "better judgment" and "reason" (Arpaly 2003, McIntyre 1993, Jones 2003).

<sup>3</sup> On my reading of a few of those philosophers, the assent is not quite as universal as Walker takes it to be: I think Kubara (1975) and Pugmire (1982) take the option of denying akrasia. David Pears (1984) seems to me hold a view on which one is motivated by a "recalcitrant desire." Still, none of these philosophers specifically criticize (or even mention) the weaker reasons thesis, and the vast majority of those he discusses do accept it, as do many influential and important philosophers who have talked about the problem since then. I will cite a few here. T.M. Scanlon (1999) describes an (epistemic) akratic as thinking to himself, "I know this is not a good reason in this case, but it can serve as my reason nonetheless" (p. 36). Susan Hurley (1989) offers this elegant affirmation of the weaker reasons thesis: "The capacity of *pro tanto* reasons to influence what an agent does is no more exhausted by their contribution to his deliberated all-things-considered evaluations than the capacity of interest groups to influence what a democratic society does is exhausted by their contribution to its government and laws: each may go on trying to get its way in the face of legitimate authority" (p. 137). R. Jay Wallace (2001) says, "the [akratic] agent accepts that there is something that is *pro tanto* good about the action that is performed. Furthermore, it is the fact that the action is believed to be genuinely good in some way that renders it an eligible candidate for choice, from the agent's point of view" (p. 5). Wallace also argues persuasively (p. 4, and fn. 6) that that Christine Korsgaard, if she can countenance weakness of the will at all—and, I add as an aside, she had better, considering her criticism of Hume is that he can't (Korsgaard 1997, pp. 228–234)—must take a similar line on such cases. Some other philosophers who accept the weaker reasons thesis: Michael Bratman (1979, pp. 156–157), David Velleman (2000, p. 28 fn. 34), John Searle (2003 pp. 233–234), and Ingmar Persson (2005 p. 181).

<sup>4</sup> *Reason* comes from the Latin *ratio* which is related, among other words, to the word *artus* (limb), also the root of *articulate*. Scanlon (1999) describes this feature of reasons: "In general, a given consideration counts in favor of a certain belief only given a background of other beliefs and principles which determine its relevance. Because of these connections, accepting a reason for or against one belief affects not only that belief but also other beliefs and the status of other reasons...My claim is that reasons for action, intention, and other attitudes exhibit a similarly complex structure. I do not mean to deny that deciding what to do is sometimes a matter of deciding which of several competing considerations one wants more or cares more about. My point is rather that when this is so in a particular case it is because a more general framework of reasons and principles determines that these considerations are the relevant ones on which to base

a decision. Much of our practical thinking is concerned with figuring out which considerations are relevant to a given decision, that is to say, with interpreting, adjusting, and modifying this more general framework of principles of reasoning" (pp. 52–53).

<sup>5</sup> see, e.g., Kolodny (2005) p. 509, "...the relation being a reason for...is a relation between a fact and an attitude."

<sup>6</sup> This is the other side of the same phenomenon that gives rise to Moore's paradox: we cannot assert, "p but I don't believe that p," because under ordinary circumstances, the way for an agent to assert his belief that p is to assert p.

<sup>7</sup> I echo Bernard Williams (1982): "The difference between true and false belief on the agent's part cannot alter the form of the explanation which will be appropriate for his action" (p. 102). One standard argument for this principle has recently been called into question by Eric Wiland (2003). See also Arthur Collins (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Following Kagan (1989), "A *pro tanto* reason has genuine weight, but nonetheless may be outweighed by other considerations. Thus, calling a reason a *pro tanto* reason is to be distinguished from calling it a *prima facie* reason, which I take to involve an epistemological qualification: a *prima facie* reason appears to be a reason but may actually not be a reason at all, or may not have weight in all cases it appears to. In contrast, a *pro tanto* reason is a genuine reason—with actual weight—but it may not be a decisive one in various cases" (p. 17).

<sup>9</sup> see, *inter alios*, Davidson (1980); Frankfurt (1988); Mele (1992, ch. 10).

<sup>10</sup> "then the men who could stand it no longer took first a little drink, then a bigger one, and a still bigger one. It is a horrible death, but it comes quickly enough." (Newcomb, 1958, p. 126)

<sup>11</sup> This formulation sounds overly strong, and it is, since there are things much worse than watching TV. That is, there are things with disvalue (e.g., pain) rather than no value at all. Still, I claim that this hyperbolic statement is an accurate reflection of the way this kind of akratic puts the point to himself—he does not consider cases of disvalue, the better to berate himself.

<sup>12</sup> I assume, for the purposes of this argument, that what an agent takes himself to have reason to do and what he in fact has reason to do are one and the same. The possible gap here introduces an unnecessary complexity to the argument, and one which is not traditionally relevant to the standard case. It is, however, relevant to the case Arpaly, Jones and McIntyre (see footnote 2) want to make for rational akrasia, since they think that an akratic can (unbeknownst to himself) act on a reason when his deliberations about his best course of action are mistaken.

<sup>13</sup> There is a problem here: however non-rational the genesis of the thought "because partying is fun" may be, its role in guiding subsequent behavior (taking the bus, buying a bus ticket, etc.) seems rational. For a discussion of the problem of instrumental reasoning in the service of akratic goals, see Wallace 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Stocker (1992, ch.7) argues that we can make sense of akrasia in a situation of fully commensurable goods.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Chang distinguishes between the two concepts on the same grounds in the introduction to Chang (1997, p. 1–2); she puts the point in terms of the difference between cardinal numbering (commensurability) and ordinal numbering (comparability) of goods.

<sup>16</sup> I overlook the fact that this answer to the problem of akrasia would be handicapped not only by the thesis that there are incomparable goods (a claim contested by, among others, Chang 1997), but by the implausible contention that such goods figure in every case of akrasia.

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Putnam (2002, pp. 80–83), who argues that we can make sense of incommensurable reasons, grants the relevant point. For he says the agent in such a position "has not decided."