

REPLY TO KAI-YEE WONG AND CHRIS FRASER

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I thought the paper by Kai-ye Wong and Chris Fraser was fascinating and insightful. Two things I especially appreciated are the clarity with which they summarize my views. I think they are quite fair and accurate. Second, I appreciate their suggestion that the way to deal with the practical problem of weakness of will has much to do with the role of the Background in shaping our actions. I think they are especially on the right track when they say that the improvement of Background skills may actually narrow the range of real options for action, (p. 21) nonetheless, they do not decrease freedom. As they say, "It is a process of strengthening the self, and the agent is likely to experience the concomitant restriction of 'live' options not as a limitation but as strength of character." (p. 21). That seems to me very much on the right track. What they are suggesting, and it is a powerful addition to my own writings, is that we should not just think of the Background as facilitating languages, games and social practices generally, but for morality as well (p. 23).

The special philosophical puzzle about weakness of will has to do with a specific theory of human action and a specific conception of rationality that goes back to Aristotle. As they are aware, worries about the very possibility of weakness of will are the preserve of professional philosophers. These philosophers are confronted with a paradox: the prevailing theory of action is called a "causal theory" because it says an intentional action is defined in terms of its causes. A typical version of the story goes: actions are caused by reasons, but reasons for actions are beliefs and desires, but then an intentional action is an event caused "in the right way" by beliefs and desires. If the beliefs and desires set sufficient causal conditions, how is it possible that there could be such a thing as an incontinent or akratic action? If by definition actions are caused by reasons, and if a person has the right reasons and recognizes them as the right reasons for the right action, then how can he fail to act on those reasons? How can weakness of will be possible? But it is quite obvious that weakness of the will is not only possible, it is actual. It is very common in real life. And the fact that the standard theories

make it seem impossible or at least bizarre shows a weakness of those theories. Weakness of the will is a natural consequence of the existence of what I call the “gap.” There is a causal gap between reflecting on the reasons for action and actually making up one’s mind on the basis of those reasons; there is a continuation of this gap between making up one’s mind and actually initiating the action that one has decided to do; and in the case of actions extended over time there is a continuing gap between one’s commitment to the course of action and one’s actually carrying it out through to the conclusion.

When we face this problem, we realize that there is a distinction between what worries professional philosophers and what worries educators. The point I wish to make now is that the real life educators in the West have very much the same problem that philosophers in the Chinese tradition have. The problem is not to explain the possibility of weakness of will but to enable us to overcome it. I think it may be misleading to characterize the distinction between Western and Chinese philosophy in dealing with the problem of weakness of will as a difference between the *theoretical* problem of how weakness of the will is possible and the *practical* problem of overcoming weakness of will, especially in moral situations. The reason I think this is misleading is that of course the problem of overcoming weakness of will is very much part of the traditional moral education in Western culture, as it is in other cultures. In my youth, what religious people and school educators worried about is very much what the Confucians worried about: Strength of Character, Learning, Fortitude, Self-Control. All of this is part of the stock in trade of Sunday school teachers and school principals. Perhaps the school principals gave up. But in the United States the standard aim of moral education was to produce self-control. We were always taught that you have to learn strength of character and self-control. The effort to induce self-control in the young seldom worked, but it was traditionally the objective of much moral education.

Now, it is true that there are some things missing in the Western tradition. One is anything at all similar to the Confucian rituals. Another thing missing is the idea that there is “the way.” But with those qualifications, I think the educational philosophy and the religious philosophy in Western countries, is much like the way the authors characterize the Chinese problem.

I think it is an implausible and indeed unrealistic feature of technical philosophy in English speaking countries that weakness of will is made

out to be something bizarre or unusual. The idea is that it is puzzling that such a thing could ever happen. The idea that weakness of will is some weird anomaly, as Wong and Fraser are right to see, results from a failure to see the importance of what I call the gap. I want to say, in opposition to the prevailing Western tradition, that if you think weakness of the will is a remarkable problem, you have a mistaken theory of action, because weakness of the will is very common in real life.

Weakness of will is as common as tea in China. I think most ordinary people have cases of weakness of will several times a day. Perhaps they have not followed the Confucian disciplinary training well enough, but all the same, weakness of the will is not uncommon. For example, one thinks, "I should not drink another glass of wine, but the Cabernet tastes very good, so I will have a little bit more." This sort of thing occurs to me often.

Davidson's solution to the problem of weakness of the will, seems to me, a solution by fiat. He says that if the causes of the action in the form of reasons are satisfactory, it is impossible that weakness of will should occur. But it obviously does occur. Therefore, he stipulates that in any case where it occurs, there must have been something wrong with the antecedents of the action. The formation of the intention wasn't an unconditional all-out intention, but only a *prima facie* conditional intention. But that is simply a solution by fiat—I want to say: whatever the form of the intention, however strong and unconditional you make the intention, you can still have weakness of will and still have akrasia. The only way to avoid this is to make it a tautology that unless the psychological states in the form of reasons caused the action, then there was something inadequate or conditional about the psychological states.

I very much appreciate their suggestion that the practical problem of overcoming the weakness of the will is in large part a matter of developing Background abilities, and as they are right to see, this has theoretical implications both for our philosophy of action and for our philosophy of morality.